

Digital Marketing, Competitive Advantage, and Madrasah Choice: Mediating Role of Stoic Rationality

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study examines the role of Stoic rationality in prospective students' school selection decisions and its mediating effects on the relationships between digital marketing, competitive advantage, and school selection decisions.

Research Method: An explanatory quantitative approach was employed using PLS-SEM with SmartPLS 4. Data were collected through purposive sampling from 96 prospective students of MA Ma'arif 7 Sunan Drajat, Lamongan Regency.

Results and Discussion: Digital marketing significantly enhances Stoic rationality but has no significant direct effect on school selection decisions. Competitive advantage positively influences both Stoic rationality and school selection decisions. Stoic rationality significantly influences school selection decisions, fully mediating the effect of digital marketing and partially mediating the effect of competitive advantage.

Implications: The findings highlight rational evaluation as a mechanism linking institutional strategies to educational choices. Islamic schools should strengthen competitive differentiation and develop digital marketing that supports informed decisions. The single-institution setting and limited sample constrain generalizability.

Originality: This study integrates Stoic rationality into educational choice research, demonstrating that digital marketing influences school selection indirectly through rational evaluation rather than directly.

Keywords: stoic rationality; digital marketing; competitive advantage; school selection decisions; islamic education.

1. Introduction

The rapid transformation of Indonesia's educational sector, propelled by escalating institutional competition and pervasive digitalization, has profoundly reshaped the decision-making behavior of prospective students when selecting secondary educational institutions (Karo & Erwansyah, 2025). Educational institutions are increasingly appraised not solely on academic reputation but also on their capacity to cultivate sustainable competitive advantages through effective digital engagement and the strategic communication of institutional value (Putri *et al.*, 2026). This competitive dynamic is particularly evident among Islamic educational institutions, where private madrasah must contend not only with fellow Islamic schools but also with public senior high schools and vocational programs, a reality highlighted by madrasah representing merely 17.20% of Indonesia's total secondary student population of 53,451,027 (Juhaidi *et al.*, 2024). Consequently, educational marketing has evolved into an



indispensable strategic instrument for strengthening institutional competitiveness and influencing prospective students' school selection decisions, as empirical evidence demonstrates that branding image strategies and promotional efforts exert a statistically significant positive effect on madrasah competitiveness (Sakinah *et al.*, 2024).

The competitive landscape of secondary education in Indonesia has become increasingly challenging for private and religious-based institutions, as madrasah aliyah account for only about 17.20% of the total student population and have experienced more significant enrollment declines than general senior high schools in recent years (Juhaidi *et al.*, 2024). MA Ma'arif 7 Sunan Drajat, located within the Sunan Drajat Islamic Boarding School complex in Paciran District, Lamongan Regency, faces considerable competitive pressure from two major competitors: SMAN 1 Paciran as a leading public secondary school and SMK Sunan Drajat as a pesantren-based vocational institution operating under the same foundation (Hearn, 2023; Muttaqin, 2024). This competitive environment requires the institution to continuously strengthen its market positioning through the development of sustainable competitive advantages, as visionary leadership, total quality management, and organizational culture have been shown to significantly influence competitive advantage in private Islamic schools (Supriyadi *et al.*, 2023). Consequently, the adoption of innovative digital marketing strategies, including the optimization of social media and institutional websites for promotional branding, has become essential for enhancing visibility, building public trust, and attracting prospective students in the digital era (Zainul *et al.*, 2025).

The urgency of this issue is reflected in the institution's enrollment records, which indicate a 38.7% decline in total student enrollment over the last five academic years, from 1,392 students in the 2021/2022 academic year to 854 students in the 2025/2026 academic year, a trajectory that resonates with documented declines in pesantren attributable to leadership, financial, and socio-cultural challenges (Taufikin & Solihuddin, 2025). An even more substantial decline of approximately 70% has affected locally domiciled students, whose enrollment fell from 110 to only 33 students, as these individuals exercise considerably greater discretion in selecting educational institutions than their boarding counterparts whose decisions are frequently constrained by pesantren regulations. Local students' enrollment decisions are chiefly informed by institutional reputation, perceived educational quality, accessibility, marketing communication, and personal evaluation, determinants that systematic reviews have identified as central to school choice processes across diverse educational contexts. Therefore, the continuous decline in local enrollment suggests a weakening institutional attractiveness despite the madrasah's favorable geographical location and long-established educational reputation, a phenomenon paralleled in case analyses of Islamic schools where insufficient strategic marketing has undermined potential community engagement (Tukhibul Iman *et al.*, 2025).

The discrepancy between Das Sollen and Das Sein constitutes the central research problem addressed in this study. Ideally, educational institutions that implement effective digital marketing strategies and possess competitive advantages are expected to achieve greater institutional attractiveness, resulting in increased enrollment and more favorable school selection decisions among prospective students, as research demonstrates that social media engagement and personalized digital approaches significantly enhance enrollment outcomes (Syunita & Tikno, 2025). Digital communication is anticipated to enhance institutional visibility, strengthen public trust, and positively influence prospective students' decision-making processes, particularly in Islamic educational settings where marketing communication via digital platforms has been shown to shape parental perceptions and preferences (Pulungan *et al.*, 2024). However, empirical evidence at MA Ma'arif 7 Sunan Drajat

demonstrates a contrasting reality (Das Sein), wherein student enrollment particularly among local students has continued to decline significantly despite the increasing adoption of digital communication channels and institutional promotional activities (Septiani *et al.*, 2026). This inconsistency indicates that the effectiveness of digital marketing and competitive advantage cannot be fully understood without examining the internal psychological mechanisms through which prospective students interpret and evaluate institutional information before making educational decisions, as trust and perceptual factors have emerged as key predictors converting digital exposure into enrollment intentions (Espelita, 2026).

Recent developments further reinforce the importance of investigating this issue. Indonesia has experienced rapid growth in internet accessibility, with internet penetration among adolescents aged 15–17 years exceeding 90% in recent years. This digital transformation has fundamentally altered the way prospective students obtain educational information, compare institutional alternatives, and formulate enrollment decisions (Jabbar *et al.*, 2022; Xie, 2022). Rather than relying solely on conventional promotional activities, students increasingly evaluate educational institutions through digital content, social media interactions, institutional credibility, and online reputation. Consequently, digital marketing has become a strategic determinant of institutional competitiveness within the contemporary educational landscape (Kotler *et al.*, 2021; Ryan, 2020).

Previous studies have examined the influence of digital marketing on students' decisions to select educational institutions (Desembrianita *et al.*, 2024; Eum, 2025; Gayatri *et al.*, 2025; Lopes & Casais, 2024). Specifically, Desembrianita *et al.*, (2024) demonstrated that digital marketing positively affects purchase intention through Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), reporting an Average Variance Extracted (AVE) value of at least 0.643 and a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.827 for the digital marketing construct. However, these studies have not considered the internal mechanisms through which prospective students process marketing stimuli in a rational and reflective manner. This gap motivates the present study to introduce Stoic rationality as a mediating variable, a construct that has not previously been incorporated into madrasah selection models in Indonesia.

Stoic rationality refers to an individual's capacity to make decisions based on reason, long-term values, and self-control rather than social pressure or momentary emotional responses (Hirsch *et al.*, 2023; Karani & Saravanan, 2024). This construct exhibits substantial alignment with Islamic values, particularly the concepts of tawakkal, 'aql, and tuma'ninah, thereby making it culturally relevant for prospective madrasah students with pesantren and Nahdlatul Ulama backgrounds. In a study conducted at Universitas Muhammadiyah Gresik, Desembrianita *et al.*, (2021) found that trust, a construct closely related to rationality, mediated the effects of institutional image and service quality on prospective students' purchase intention, thereby confirming the importance of internal mediating variables in educational institution selection models.

Nevertheless, existing studies remain subject to several important limitations. First, most previous research conceptualizes school selection as a direct consequence of external marketing stimuli, paying relatively limited attention to the internal cognitive processes through which prospective students evaluate marketing information before making decisions. Second, the majority of studies examine digital marketing, institutional image, service quality, or competitive advantage independently, without integrating rational psychological constructs capable of explaining why identical marketing messages may produce different behavioral outcomes among prospective students. Third, previous empirical investigations have primarily focused on universities, commercial organizations, or general educational institutions, whereas evidence from Islamic secondary education particularly Madrasah Aliyah operating within pesantren environments remains scarce. Consequently, the behavioral

mechanisms underlying school selection decisions among prospective madrasah students have yet to be comprehensively explained.

Another important limitation concerns the theoretical perspective adopted in previous research. Existing educational marketing studies predominantly employ consumer behavior theories such as the Theory of Planned Behavior, Technology Acceptance Model, customer satisfaction frameworks, or institutional trust models. Although these theories successfully explain behavioral intentions, they provide limited explanation regarding students' capacity to evaluate educational alternatives through rational reflection, emotional regulation, and long-term value considerations. Consequently, an important theoretical gap remains regarding the internal reasoning process that mediates the influence of digital marketing and competitive advantage on school selection decisions.

The proliferation of digital marketing initiatives within Indonesian higher education has substantially reshaped prospective students' decision-making processes, with empirical evidence indicating that enhanced digital engagement markedly elevates enrollment intentions among target demographics (Kharisma & Agzumi, 2026). Notwithstanding these developments, prevailing frameworks inadequately incorporate culturally nuanced psychological mediators that govern information evaluation and volitional control among individuals schooled in Islamic boarding institutions, thereby revealing a critical lacuna in explanatory models of educational choice (Fathoni & Remanita, 2026). In response to this gap, the current investigation advances Stoic Rationality as a pivotal mediating construct, encompassing an individual's proficiency in modulating affective responses, appraising informational inputs with objectivity, exercising disciplined self-regulation, and arriving at determinations grounded in deliberative reasoning and enduring axiological commitments rather than ephemeral emotional impulses or extraneous social exigencies (Putra & Laksmi, 2024). This formulation demonstrates robust conceptual alignment with foundational Islamic epistemological and spiritual tenets, specifically 'aql as the faculty of rational discernment, tawakkal as resolute reliance upon divine wisdom subsequent to exhaustive rational exertion, and tuma'ninah as the resultant state of inner composure, rendering it especially apposite for elucidating decision trajectories among prospective students formed within pesantren and Nahdlatul Ulama pedagogical traditions (Fadlillah & Qudsyi, 2025).

The novelty of this study lies in several significant contributions. First, it is among the earliest empirical studies to integrate the concept of Stoic Rationality into educational marketing research, particularly within the context of Islamic secondary education in Indonesia. Second, unlike previous studies that primarily investigate direct relationships between digital marketing, competitive advantage, and school selection decisions, this study develops a mediation model that explains the internal rational mechanism linking external marketing strategies to students' behavioral decisions. Third, this research expands the educational marketing literature by providing empirical evidence from Madrasah Aliyah, an educational setting that has received limited scholarly attention despite its strategic role within Indonesia's Islamic education system. Finally, the findings are expected to enrich both educational marketing theory and institutional management practices by demonstrating that the effectiveness of digital marketing depends not only on promotional intensity but also on prospective students' rational evaluation processes when interpreting institutional information.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to: (1) examine the direct effects of digital marketing and competitive advantage on Stoic Rationality; (2) investigate the direct effects of digital marketing, competitive advantage, and Stoic Rationality on prospective students' school selection decisions; and (3) evaluate the mediating role of Stoic Rationality in explaining the relationships between

digital marketing, competitive advantage, and the school selection decisions of prospective local students at MA Ma'arif 7 Sunan Drajat.

The remainder of this study is organized as follows. Section 2 provides literature review and hypothesis development. Section 3 presents research methodology. Section 4 displays empirical result and discussion. Section 5 wrap up the paper.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1 Literature Review

2.1.1 Theoretical Foundation: Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) Theory

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) theory, originally developed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) and subsequently widely adopted in consumer behavior research, serves as the primary theoretical framework of this study. Mu & Yi (2024) applied this framework in the context of digital marketing and demonstrated that digital marketing characteristics as stimuli influence consumers' value perceptions as the organism, ultimately leading to loyalty responses. Kotler & Keller (2016) further argued that consumer decision-making processes invariably begin with external stimuli that are internally processed before resulting in behavioral outcomes. In the present study, digital marketing and competitive advantage function as the stimuli (S), Stoic rationality represents the organism (O), and school selection decisions constitute the response (R).

In the present study, digital marketing activities and institutional competitive advantage are conceptualized as the stimuli (S). These external factors are processed through Stoic Rationality, which operates as the organism (O) by enabling emotion regulation, objective information evaluation, self-control, and reasoned judgment aligned with long-term values rather than transient affective or social pressures. The resulting behavioral response (R) is the school selection decision. While prior S-O-R applications in digital marketing and higher education consistently confirm the mediating role of internal psychological states, existing studies predominantly employ conventional mediators such as perceived value, brand equity, or general attitudes. Limited attention has been directed toward culturally attuned rationality constructs such as Stoic Rationality, particularly within the specific context of prospective students educated in pesantren and Nahdlatul Ulama traditions in Indonesia. This research gap provides the theoretical rationale for examining the sequential relationships among digital marketing, competitive advantage, Stoic Rationality, and school selection decisions, and thereby constitutes the foundation for the hypotheses developed in subsequent sections.

2.1.2 Digital Marketing in the Context of Islamic Education

Chaffey and Smith (2022) define digital marketing as the utilization of digital technologies and internet-based platforms to achieve marketing objectives through various digital channels. Ryan (2020) emphasizes that effective digital marketing requires a comprehensive understanding of digital consumer behavior and measurable engagement strategies. In Marketing 5.0, Kotler *et al.*, (2021) argue that contemporary marketing should integrate digital technologies with a human-centric approach to create authentic customer experiences. Empirically, Desembrianita *et al.*, (2024) demonstrated that digital marketing positively influences purchase intention through the mediating roles of trust and brand loyalty among environmentally friendly product consumers. Likewise, Utami *et al.*, (2025) reported that consistent implementation of digital marketing enhances visibility, expands market reach, and

strengthens institutional competitiveness. In the context of Islamic education, digital marketing extends beyond communicating facilities and academic achievements; it also serves to convey Islamic values and the intellectual traditions of pesantren-based education.

Within the distinctive domain of Islamic higher education, however, digital marketing transcends the mere promotion of facilities and academic metrics; it simultaneously functions as a medium for articulating Islamic values and the intellectual heritage of pesantren-based learning traditions. Although the foregoing empirical studies establish robust positive linkages between digital marketing and decision-related outcomes in general consumer and institutional contexts, systematic investigation into how these mechanisms operate among prospective students educated within pesantren and Nahdlatul Ulama environments remains limited. Prior research has largely overlooked the culturally embedded psychological processes that mediate the translation of digital stimuli into educational choices, thereby leaving a discernible research gap. Addressing this gap, the present study posits that digital marketing exerts a direct positive influence on educational decision-making among prospective students in Indonesian Islamic higher education institutions.

2.1.3 Competitive Advantage of Educational Institutions

According to Porter (1985), defines competitive advantage as an organization's ability to create superior value for customers relative to its competitors. Schiffman & Kanuk (2019) contend that consumers' perceptions of an institution's superiority constitute a key determinant of service selection decisions. Adapting this concept to higher education, Hearn (2023) identified four dimensions of competitive advantage, namely academic quality, institutional reputation, innovation capability, and service quality. Within the context of Islamic educational institutions in Gresik, Desembrianita *et al.*, (2021) found that institutional image and service quality two fundamental components of competitive advantage exerted positive and significant effects on prospective students' purchase intention, both directly and indirectly through trust. Supporting these findings, Mahjudin *et al.*, (2024) demonstrated that the marketing mix, encompassing product, price, location, and promotion, simultaneously exerts a significant influence on consumer purchase decisions ($F = 22.573$; $R^2 = 0.563$). For MA Ma'arif 7 Sunan Drajat, the integration of the spiritual legacy of Sunan Drajat, one of the Wali Songo, with the national curriculum constitutes a unique source of competitive advantage that is difficult for competitors to imitate (Bilal, 2025).

Building on these results, (Mahjudin *et al.*, 2024) established that the marketing-mix elements of product, price, location, and promotion simultaneously influence consumer purchase decisions at a statistically significant level ($F = 22.573$; $R^2 = 0.563$). In the specific setting of MA Ma'arif 7 Sunan Drajat, the integration of the spiritual legacy of Sunan Drajat one of the Wali Songo with the national curriculum constitutes a distinctive and inimitable source of competitive advantage. Despite the cumulative evidence, prior studies have largely examined either generic dimensions of competitive advantage or conventional marketing-mix effects, thereby leaving a clear research gap concerning the unique contribution of historically and spiritually embedded competitive advantages to enrollment decisions within the contemporary digital-marketing environment of Indonesian Islamic secondary education. On the basis of this theoretical and empirical progression, the following hypothesis is advanced: Competitive advantage of educational institutions exerts a positive and significant influence on prospective students' educational choice decisions.

2.1.4 Stoic Rationality

Stoicism is a Hellenistic philosophical school founded by Zeno of Citium around 300 BCE and later developed by three prominent Roman Stoics: Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius. Irvine (2009) conceptualizes the essence of Stoicism as the art of distinguishing between what lies within an individual's control thoughts, decisions, and responses and what lies beyond it. Robertson (2019) illustrates how the Stoic principles practiced by Marcus Aurelius can be applied to contemporary strategic decision-making. Pigliucci (2017) contextualizes Stoicism within modern life and highlights its relevance as a practical guide for decision-making in an era characterized by information overload. Similarly, Sellars (2019) summarizes the practical lesson of Stoicism by arguing that true freedom consists of liberation from impulsive reactions to external stimuli.

Empirical evidence further supports the relevance of Stoicism to decision-making processes. Hirsch *et al.*, (2023) demonstrated that the three disciplines of Stoicism cultivate individuals' capacity to make sound decisions under conditions of uncertainty and external pressure. Karani & Saravanan (2024) found that consumers with stronger Stoic orientations tend to make more reflective decisions and prioritize long-term values. From a psychological perspective, Kahneman (2011) dual-process theory provides additional support, suggesting that Stoic rationality encourages individuals to engage System 2 thinking, characterized by slow, analytical, and rational processing, when evaluating digital marketing stimuli and the competitive advantages offered by educational institutions.

Despite these converging theoretical and empirical strands, existing research has largely examined Stoic Rationality within general consumer or clinical decision domains, leaving its mediating function in educational choice processes particularly the pathways through which digital marketing exposures and institutional competitive advantages shape enrollment decisions insufficiently specified. Prior studies have not adequately articulated how the capacity for emotional regulation, objective information appraisal, and long-term value prioritization intervenes between external promotional and competitive cues and the final educational selection. This omission constitutes a clear research gap. Accordingly, the present study hypothesizes that Stoic Rationality functions as a positive mediating mechanism linking digital marketing stimuli and competitive advantage to educational decision-making, such that higher levels of Stoic Rationality strengthen the translation of these external factors into reasoned, value-congruent institutional choices.

2.2 Hypothesis Development

Grounded in the S-O-R framework and the preceding literature review, this study proposes seven hypotheses. Exposure to high-quality digital content is expected to encourage prospective students to process information more systematically and reflectively (Desembrianita *et al.*, 2024; Eum, 2025). Therefore:

2.2.1 Digital Marketing and Stoic Rationality

Within the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework, digital marketing functions as an external stimulus that shapes the internal cognitive responses of prospective students by providing structured information on institutional quality and image prior to enrollment decisions (Nagoya *et al.*, 2021). High-quality digital marketing content delivers relevant and persuasive details regarding academic programs, facilities, and services, thereby reducing uncertainty and encouraging evaluation of alternatives through logical reasoning rather than emotional impulses (Eum, 2025). Transparent and informative digital

communication further enables prospective students to critically assess available options while minimizing cognitive bias, facilitating disciplined judgment consistent with rational information processing (Kharisma & Agzumi, 2026). Empirical evidence confirms that digitally mediated information significantly strengthens analytical thinking and cognitive evaluation among consumers and prospective students, supporting the proposition that digital marketing exerts a positive influence on rational decision-making processes (Al-Dmour *et al.*, 2024).

H1: Digital marketing has a positive and significant effect on Stoic rationality.

2.2.2 Competitive Advantage and Stoic Rationality

According to the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework, competitive advantage constitutes an external stimulus that shapes prospective students' cognitive evaluation by supplying objective institutional cues such as academic reputation, accreditation status, qualified faculty, technological infrastructure, graduate employability, and tuition affordability (Hart & Rodgers, 2024). Educational institutions that effectively communicate these distinctive and sustainable strengths thereby enable systematic comparison among alternatives and reduce reliance on subjective preferences or social pressure (Liao & Suprpto, 2024). Consequently, the presence of clearly articulated competitive advantages encourages the exercise of Stoic rationality, in which judgments rest on factual evidence and reasoned analysis rather than heuristic or affective influences (Baliyan & Mokoena, 2024). Empirical evidence confirms that such institutional differentiation strengthens analytical confidence and promotes evidence-based enrollment decisions among prospective students (Nagoya *et al.*, 2021).

H2: Competitive advantage has a positive and significant effect on Stoic rationality.

2.2.3 Digital Marketing and School Selection Decisions

According to the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theory, external digital marketing stimuli can directly shape behavioral responses by increasing institutional visibility, improving information accessibility, strengthening trust, and elevating perceptions of institutional quality among prospective students (Kharisma & Agzumi, 2026). Empirical research demonstrates that digital marketing strategies particularly social media engagement, influencer marketing, and paid advertisements exhibit significant positive associations with students' decisions to select private educational institutions, accounting for 63.1 percent of the variance in choice behavior (Tuna *et al.*, 2024). Quantitative analyses further confirm that core digital determinants such as online content and institutional websites exert statistically significant effects on college selection decisions, supported by standardized path coefficients and acceptable structural model fit indices in a sample of 267 respondents (Gaur *et al.*, 2024). Collectively, these findings establish that digital marketing produces a positive and significant effect on school selection decisions, with partial regression tests yielding significance values below 0.05 and overall models explaining approximately 62 percent of the variance in student choice (Putri *et al.*, 2026).

H3: Digital marketing has a positive and significant effect on school selection decisions.

2.2.4 Competitive Advantage and School Selection Decisions

Institutional competitive advantage, manifested through superior academic performance, recognized accreditation, innovative curricula, adequate learning facilities, and strong graduate outcomes, constitutes a critical environmental stimulus within the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework that reduces decision-making uncertainty and elevates prospective students' confidence in

school selection (Karo & Erwansyah, 2025). Empirical investigations confirm that perceived competitive advantage exerts a positive and significant direct influence on enrollment decisions, with structural models demonstrating that institutional differentiation and positioning significantly shape choice behavior through enhanced brand equity (Hart & Rodgers, 2024). Quantitative evidence from private higher education settings further shows that resource-based competitive advantages positively and significantly affect strategic enrollment management and student recruitment performance, mediating the conversion of institutional strengths into higher selection rates (BASE, 2025). Consequently, competitive advantage has a positive and significant effect on school selection decisions, as supported by regression and SEM analyses reporting substantial path coefficients and explanatory power exceeding 40 percent in educational choice models.

H4: Competitive advantage has a positive and significant effect on school selection decisions.

2.2.5 Stoic Rationality and School Selection Decisions

Stoic rationality, emphasizing rational judgment, self-control, and objective evaluation, functions as the organism component within the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework by enabling prospective students to process external stimuli systematically and base school selection on evidence and long-term benefits rather than emotional or social influences (Grimm & Richter, 2024). Empirical research demonstrates that rational thinking, conceptualized as a general cognitive ability to override heuristic processes, significantly predicts favorable educational outcomes and decision quality beyond fluid intelligence in university contexts (Işıkğöz, 2025). Analytical orientation and capabilities further enhance decision quality while reducing decision regret among individuals confronting complex choices, as shown through structural modeling in samples of business students (Valadares de Oliveira *et al.*, 2022). Consequently, higher levels of Stoic rationality are associated with improved real-world decision outcomes through logical reasoning and objective evaluation, supporting a positive and significant effect on school selection decisions (Pickering *et al.*, 2025).

H5: Stoic rationality has a positive and significant effect on school selection decisions.

2.2.6 The Mediating Role of Stoic Rationality in the Relationship between Digital Marketing and School Selection Decisions

Within the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework, digital marketing operates as an external stimulus that activates internal cognitive mechanisms, specifically Stoic rationality, characterized by deliberate information evaluation and critical appraisal before behavioral responses emerge (Al-Abdallah & Ababakr, 2025). Empirical investigations demonstrate that effective digital marketing enhances prospective students' rational information processing by increasing the accessibility and credibility of institutional data, which in turn improves the quality of subsequent school selection decisions (Kharisma & Agzumi, 2026). Quantitative analyses further establish that this internal rational evaluation functions as a significant mediating pathway, with digital communication tools producing both direct and indirect effects on educational choice through strengthened cognitive deliberation in samples of more than 1,000 respondents (Tuna *et al.*, 2024). Therefore, Stoic rationality mediates the relationship between digital marketing and school selection decisions, transforming external stimuli into more informed and deliberate behavioral outcomes (Gaur *et al.*, 2024).

H6: Stoic rationality mediates the relationship between digital marketing and school selection decisions.

2.2.7 The Mediating Role of Stoic Rationality in the Relationship between Competitive Advantage and School Selection Decisions

Competitive advantage provides objective institutional information that prospective students evaluate before making enrollment decisions. However, the influence of competitive advantage may depend on the extent to which individuals process such information rationally. Prospective students possessing stronger Stoic rationality are expected to interpret institutional strengths more objectively, resulting in higher-quality educational decisions. Within the S-O-R framework, Stoic rationality acts as the psychological mechanism through which competitive advantage is translated into behavioral responses. This indirect pathway explains how external institutional characteristics ultimately affect school selection decisions by enhancing rational judgment. Theoretical reasoning and previous empirical findings suggest that cognitive evaluation mediates the relationship between institutional attributes and behavioral intentions (Desembrianita *et al.*, 2024; Mu & Yi, 2024). Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H7: Stoic rationality mediates the relationship between competitive advantage and school selection decisions.

Based on the hypotheses developed in this study, the conceptual framework is presented in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

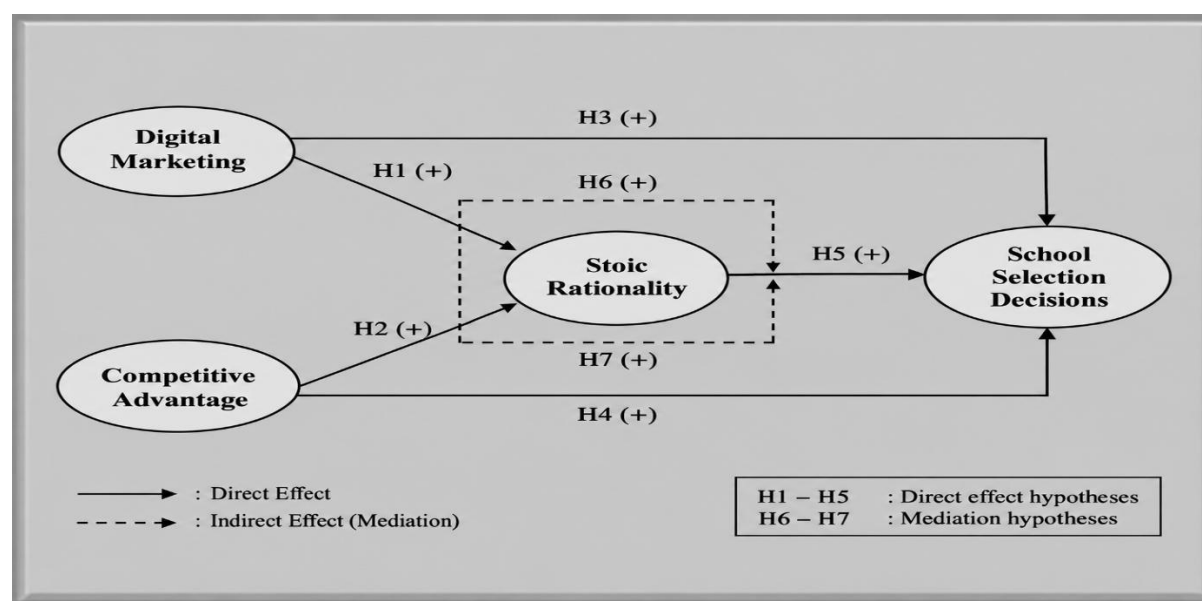


Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical model proposed in this study. The framework positions digital marketing and competitive advantage as the independent variables that directly influence Stoic rationality (H1 and H2) and Madrasah choice decisions (H3 and H4). Stoic rationality, conceptualized as a reflective and objective cognitive mechanism, is further hypothesized to exert a direct positive effect on Madrasah choice decisions (H5). Consistent with the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework, Stoic rationality also serves as the mediating variable that links external institutional stimuli with prospective students' behavioral responses. Specifically, it mediates the relationship between

digital marketing and Madrasah choice decisions (H6) as well as the relationship between competitive advantage and Madrasah choice decisions (H7). Overall, the framework suggests that effective digital marketing strategies and well-communicated competitive advantages not only influence prospective students directly but also enhance rational cognitive evaluation, thereby strengthening informed and objective decision-making in selecting a Madrasah.

3. Research Method

3.1 Research Design and Study Area

This study employed an explanatory quantitative approach using a survey design. The research was conducted at MA Ma'arif 7 Sunan Drajat and several junior secondary schools (SMP/MTs) located in the Paciran, Brondong, and Solokuro districts of Lamongan Regency, East Java, Indonesia. These locations were selected based on the substantial decline in the number of locally domiciled students, which constitutes the primary issue addressed in this study.

3.2 Population and Sample

The population comprised all prospective local students, defined as ninth-grade students enrolled in SMP/MTs located around MA Ma'arif 7 Sunan Drajat who were considering their upper secondary school options. Based on data from the Lamongan Regency Statistics Office, the population was estimated at approximately 2,500 students. A sample of 96 respondents was determined using Slovin's formula with a 10% margin of error, which satisfies the 10-times rule requirement for Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Purposive sampling was employed with four inclusion criteria: (1) respondents were ninth-grade students enrolled in SMP/MTs and residing in neighboring districts; (2) they had not yet made a definitive school choice; (3) they had previously received information about MA Ma'arif 7 Sunan Drajat; and (4) they were willing to complete the questionnaire honestly.

3.3 Variables and Measurement

The study involved four variables. Digital marketing (X1) was measured using five indicators adapted from Chaffey and Smith (2022) and Ruangkanjanes *et al.*, (2022). Competitive advantage (X2) was measured using four indicators based on Hearn (2023) and Porter, (1985). Stoic rationality (Z) was assessed through four indicators derived from Irvine, (2009), Hirsch *et al.*, (2023), and Alfianti *et al.*, (2024). Finally, school selection decision (Y) was measured using four indicators adapted from Kotler & Keller (2016) and Rozenkowska, (2023). All measurement items employed a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

3.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS version 4 software (Ghozali & Latan, 2020; Hair *et al.*, 2019). The analysis was conducted in two stages. First, the measurement model (outer model) was evaluated through factor loading (≥ 0.70), Average Variance Extracted ($AVE \geq 0.50$), Composite Reliability ($CR \geq 0.70$), Cronbach's alpha (≥ 0.70), and the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio ($HTMT < 0.85$). Second, the structural model (inner model) was assessed through hypothesis testing using a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 iterations. The direct

effects were considered statistically significant when the t-statistic exceeded 1.96 and the p-value was below 0.05. The significance of mediating effects was determined based on whether the 95% confidence interval of the indirect effect excluded zero (Hair *et al.*, 2022).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Analysis Results

4.1.1 Characteristics of Respondents

The respondents in this study comprised 96 ninth-grade students enrolled in junior secondary schools (SMP/MTs) located in the Paciran, Brondong, and Solokuro sub-districts of Lamongan Regency, East Java. These students represented prospective local applicants to MA Ma'arif 7 Sunan Drajat and constituted the target population for examining the determinants of school selection decisions. To provide a comprehensive overview of the sample profile and evaluate its representativeness, respondent characteristics were classified according to five demographic dimensions, namely gender, school of origin, sub-district of residence, distance from residence to the madrasah, and the initial source of information regarding the institution. The demographic profile presented in this section provides important contextual information for interpreting the subsequent structural model analysis and ensures that the sample adequately reflects the characteristics of the study population.

Table 1. Characteristics of Respondents by Gender

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	56	58.3
Female	40	41.7
Total	96	100.0

Source: Primary data processed (2026).

Table 1 demonstrates that the respondent distribution was relatively balanced across gender, although male students constituted a slightly larger proportion of the sample, accounting for 58.3% (56 respondents), compared with 41.7% (40 respondents) for female students. This distribution indicates that the study successfully captured perceptions from both genders, thereby reducing the likelihood of substantial gender bias in the analysis. The modest predominance of male respondents is unlikely to compromise the representativeness of the sample because both groups remain sufficiently represented to reflect the characteristics of prospective students within the research setting. Consequently, the findings generated from the subsequent PLS-SEM analysis can be interpreted as representing school selection behavior across both male and female prospective students, providing a reliable empirical basis for examining the influence of digital marketing, competitive advantage, and stoic rationality on school selection decisions.

4.1.2 Validity and Reliability Test

Prior to evaluating the structural model and testing the proposed hypotheses, the measurement model (outer model) was examined to verify the validity and reliability of all latent constructs. In accordance with the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) procedure, the assessment included convergent validity and internal consistency reliability. Convergent validity was evaluated using indicator outer loadings and Average Variance Extracted (AVE), whereas internal consistency reliability

was assessed through Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha. Following the recommendations of Hair *et al.*, (2022), indicator loadings should exceed 0.70, AVE values should be greater than 0.50, and both Composite Reliability and Cronbach's alpha should be above 0.70 to demonstrate satisfactory measurement quality.

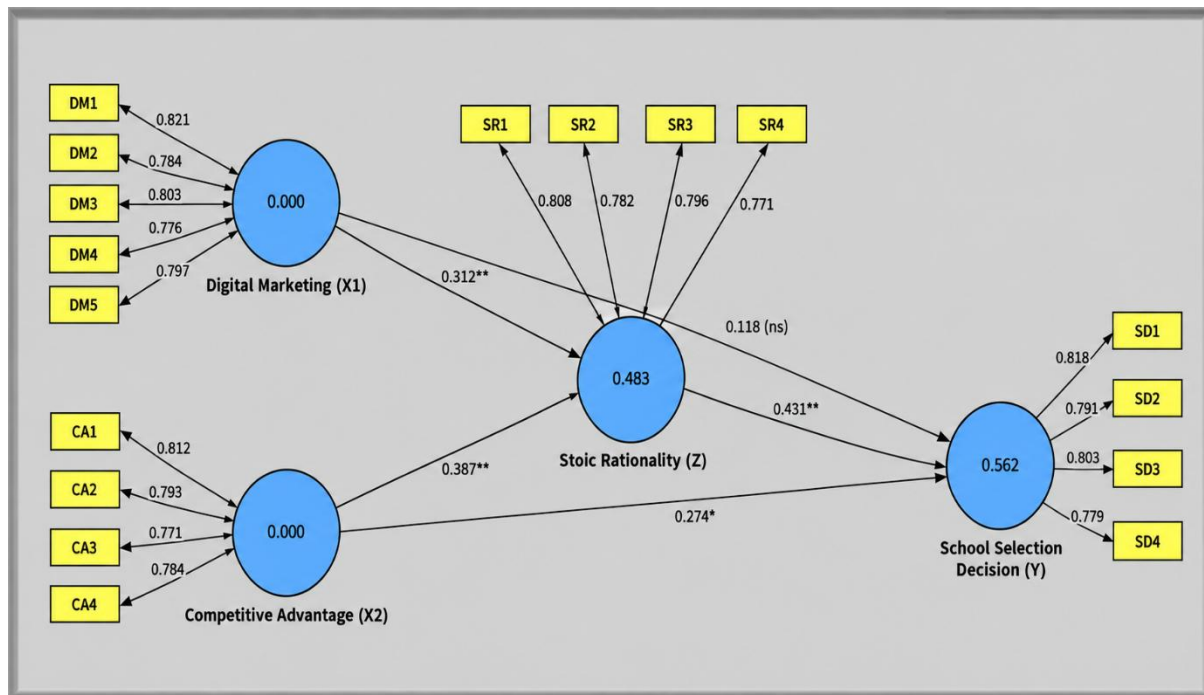
Table 2. Convergent Validity and Reliability Test Results

Construct	Item	Outer Loading	AVE	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's Alpha
Digital Marketing (X1)	DM1	0.821	0.631	0.894	0.861
	DM2	0.784			
	DM3	0.803			
	DM4	0.776			
	DM5	0.797			
Competitive Advantage (X2)	CA1	0.812	0.618	0.865	0.810
	CA2	0.793			
	CA3	0.771			
	CA4	0.784			
Stoic Rationality (Z)	SR1	0.808	0.624	0.869	0.817
	SR2	0.782			
	SR3	0.796			
	SR4	0.771			
School Selection Decision (Y)	SD1	0.818	0.638	0.875	0.825
	SD2	0.791			
	SD3	0.803			
	SD4	0.779			

Source: Primary data processed using SmartPLS 4 (2026)

Table 2 demonstrates that all measurement indicators satisfy the recommended criteria for convergent validity and internal consistency reliability. The outer loading values range from 0.771 to 0.821, indicating that every indicator contributes substantially to measuring its respective latent construct. Furthermore, the AVE values vary between 0.618 and 0.638, exceeding the minimum threshold of 0.50 and confirming that each construct explains more than half of the variance of its indicators. Regarding reliability, Composite Reliability values range from 0.865 to 0.894, while Cronbach's alpha values range from 0.810 to 0.861, both substantially higher than the recommended cutoff value of 0.70.

Among the constructs, Digital Marketing exhibits the highest Composite Reliability (0.894) and Cronbach's alpha (0.861), reflecting the strongest internal consistency, whereas School Selection Decision records the highest AVE (0.638), indicating the greatest degree of convergent validity. Collectively, these findings confirm that all latent constructs possess satisfactory psychometric properties, providing strong empirical evidence that the measurement model is both valid and reliable and is therefore appropriate for subsequent structural model evaluation and hypothesis testing. In addition, **Figure 2** present the model of all measurement for every single indicator and variable.

Figure 2. Measurement Model

4.1.3 Measurement Model Evaluation

Table 3. Measurement Model Assessment: Convergent Validity and Reliability

Construct	Item	Factor Loading	AVE	CR	Cronbach's α
Digital Marketing (X1)	DM1	0.821	0.631	0.894	0.861
	DM2	0.784			
	DM3	0.803			
	DM4	0.776			
	DM5	0.797			
Competitive Advantage (X2)	CA1	0.812	0.618	0.865	0.810
	CA2	0.793			
	CA3	0.771			
	CA4	0.784			
Stoic Rationality (Z)	SR1	0.808	0.624	0.869	0.817
	SR2	0.782			
	SR3	0.796			
	SR4	0.771			
School Selection Decision (Y)	SD1	0.818	0.638	0.875	0.825
	SD2	0.791			
	SD3	0.803			
	SD4	0.779			

Source: Primary data processed using SmartPLS (2026).

Note: AVE = Average Variance Extracted; CR = Composite Reliability.

Table 3 presents the results of the measurement model evaluation. All factor loadings The measurement model was evaluated by examining indicator reliability, convergent validity, internal consistency reliability, and discriminant validity. The assessment aimed to ensure that all constructs adequately represented their respective latent variables before proceeding to structural model analysis.

Table 3 presents the results of the convergent validity and reliability assessment for all research constructs. The factor loadings of all measurement indicators ranged from 0.771 to 0.821, exceeding the recommended minimum threshold of 0.70, thereby indicating satisfactory indicator reliability. Likewise, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.618 to 0.638, all surpassing the recommended criterion of 0.50, confirming adequate convergent validity.

Furthermore, the internal consistency reliability of each construct was evaluated using Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha coefficients. As presented in **Table 3**, the Composite Reliability values ranged from 0.865 to 0.894, while Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.810 to 0.861. Since all reliability coefficients exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, the measurement model demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency reliability across all latent constructs.

Discriminant validity was evaluated using the Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio (HTMT), which is widely recommended for assessing the distinctiveness of latent constructs in Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). According to the recommended criterion, HTMT values below 0.85 indicate that each construct is empirically distinct from the others (Henseler *et al.*, 2015).

Table 4 presents the HTMT values for all construct pairs included in the measurement model. As shown in the table, all HTMT coefficients were below the recommended threshold of 0.85, ranging from 0.574 to 0.697. The highest HTMT value was observed between Stoic Rationality and School Selection Decision (0.697), which remains substantially below the acceptable cutoff value. These findings indicate that each construct adequately captures a unique conceptual domain without excessive overlap with the other constructs. Accordingly, the measurement model demonstrates satisfactory discriminant validity, confirming that the latent variables used in this study are empirically distinguishable and appropriate for subsequent structural model analysis.

Table 4. Discriminant Validity Assessment: HTMT Ratios

Construct	X1	X2	Z	Y
Digital Marketing (X1)				
Competitive Advantage (X2)	0.612			
Stoic Rationality (Z)	0.574	0.631		
School Selection Decision (Y)	0.583	0.648	0.697	

Source: Primary data processed using SmartPLS (2026).

Note: HTMT values below 0.85 indicate adequate discriminant validity.

4.1.4 Structural Model Evaluation and Hypothesis Testing

The structural model was evaluated by examining the direct effects, mediation effects, and predictive capability of the proposed research model using the bootstrapping procedure in SmartPLS. The findings are presented sequentially to provide a comprehensive overview of the hypothesized relationships.

Table 5 presents the results of the direct effect analysis for Hypotheses H1–H5. The path coefficients, t-values, and p-values indicate that four of the five proposed direct relationships were statistically significant. Digital marketing demonstrated a positive and significant effect on Stoic rationality ($\beta = 0.312$, $t = 3.506$, $p = 0.001$), thereby supporting H1. Similarly, competitive advantage exerted a positive and significant influence on Stoic rationality ($\beta = 0.387$, $t = 4.161$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H2. In contrast, the direct relationship between digital marketing and school selection decisions was not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.118$, $t = 1.255$, $p = 0.210$); therefore, H3 was not supported. Conversely, competitive advantage positively affected school selection decisions ($\beta = 0.274$, $t = 3.149$, $p = 0.002$), providing

support for H4. Furthermore, Stoic rationality significantly influenced school selection decisions ($\beta = 0.431$, $t = 4.490$, $p < 0.001$), confirming H5.

Table 5. Results of Direct Effect Testing (H1–H5)

Hypothesis	Path	β	Std. Error	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	DM → Stoic Rationality	0.312	0.089	3.506	0.001	Supported
H2	CA → Stoic Rationality	0.387	0.093	4.161	<0.001	Supported
H3	DM → School Selection Decision	0.118	0.094	1.255	0.210	Not Supported
H4	CA → School Selection Decision	0.274	0.087	3.149	0.002	Supported
H5	Stoic Rationality → School Selection Decision	0.431	0.096	4.490	<0.001	Supported

Source: Primary data processed using SmartPLS (2026).

Note: Bootstrapping with 5,000 iterations; significant at $t > 1.96$ and $p < 0.05$.

To examine the mediating role of Stoic rationality, the indirect effects were assessed using the bootstrapping procedure. **Table 6** summarizes the mediation analysis for Hypotheses H6 and H7. The indirect effect of digital marketing on school selection decisions through Stoic rationality was 0.134, with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 0.063 to 0.221. Because the confidence interval did not include zero, the indirect relationship was statistically significant. Moreover, the direct effect between digital marketing and school selection decisions was not significant, indicating a full mediation effect. The indirect effect of competitive advantage on school selection decisions through Stoic rationality was 0.167, with a 95% confidence interval of 0.082–0.268. Since the confidence interval excluded zero while the direct effect remained significant, the mediation pattern was identified as partial mediation.

Table 6. Results of Mediation Effect Testing (H6–H7)

Hypothesis	Mediation Path	Indirect Effect	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	Type of Mediation	Decision
H6	DM → SR → SSD	0.134	0.063	0.221	Full mediation	Supported
H7	CA → SR → SSD	0.167	0.082	0.268	Partial mediation	Supported

Source: Primary data processed using SmartPLS (2026).

Note: SR = Stoic Rationality; SSD = School Selection Decision; CI = Confidence Interval.

The explanatory and predictive capabilities of the structural model were subsequently evaluated using the coefficient of determination (R^2) and predictive relevance (Q^2). Table 5 presents the results of the structural model assessment. The coefficient of determination (R^2) for Stoic rationality was 0.483, indicating that digital marketing and competitive advantage jointly explained 48.3% of the variance in Stoic rationality. Meanwhile, the R^2 value for school selection decisions was 0.562, suggesting that digital marketing, competitive advantage, and Stoic rationality collectively accounted for 56.2% of the variance in school selection decisions. Furthermore, all endogenous constructs produced positive Q^2 values, with Stoic rationality recording a Q^2 value of 0.289 and school selection decisions achieving a Q^2 value of 0.341. These results indicate that the proposed structural model possesses acceptable predictive relevance.

Table 7. Structural Model Assessment

Endogenous Construct	R ²	Category	Q ²
Stoic Rationality (Z)	0.483	Moderate	0.289
School Selection Decision (Y)	0.562	Moderate	0.341

Source: Primary data processed using SmartPLS (2026).

Note: R² values above 0.75 indicate substantial explanatory power, values between 0.50 and 0.75 indicate moderate explanatory power, and values between 0.25 and 0.50 indicate weak explanatory power.

The structural model assessment presented in **Table 7** demonstrates that the proposed research model possesses satisfactory explanatory and predictive capabilities. The coefficient of determination (R²) indicates that Digital Marketing and Competitive Advantage jointly explain 48.3% of the variance in Stoic Rationality (R² = 0.483). Although this value is classified as moderate, it suggests that nearly half of the variation in students' stoic rationality can be accounted for by the exogenous constructs included in the model, while the remaining 51.7% is attributable to other factors not incorporated in this study. These findings imply that students' rational attitudes toward school selection are shaped not only by institutional marketing efforts and perceived competitive advantages but also by additional psychological, social, and contextual determinants beyond the scope of the present model.

Furthermore, the model explains 56.2% of the variance in School Selection Decision (R² = 0.562), indicating a moderate level of explanatory power. This result suggests that more than half of students' decisions to enroll in MA Ma'arif 7 Sunan Drajat are influenced by the combined effects of Digital Marketing, Competitive Advantage, and Stoic Rationality. Conversely, the remaining 43.8% of the variance may be explained by other determinants such as parental influence, financial considerations, institutional reputation, religious values, peer recommendations, academic quality, or geographical accessibility. Therefore, while the proposed model successfully captures the primary determinants of school selection decisions, future studies may incorporate additional variables to further enhance its explanatory capacity.

The predictive relevance analysis further confirms the robustness of the structural model. The Q² value of 0.289 for Stoic Rationality and 0.341 for School Selection Decision are both substantially greater than zero, indicating that the model possesses meaningful predictive relevance for both endogenous constructs. The higher Q² value observed for School Selection Decision suggests that the model predicts students' enrollment decisions more accurately than it predicts Stoic Rationality. Overall, the simultaneous evidence from the moderate R² values and the positive Q² statistics demonstrates that the structural model is both empirically adequate and practically useful for explaining and predicting students' school selection behavior within the context of Islamic secondary education. These findings provide strong empirical support for proceeding with hypothesis testing, as the model exhibits sufficient explanatory strength and predictive accuracy in accordance with the recommended PLS-SEM evaluation criteria.

4.2 Discussion

4.2.1 The Effect of Digital Marketing on Stoic Rationality (H1 Supported)

The significant positive relationship between digital marketing and Stoic rationality indicates that digital communication serves not merely as a promotional instrument but also as a cognitive stimulus that encourages prospective students to evaluate educational information more deliberately and critically.



This finding suggests that well-designed digital marketing facilitates reflective decision-making by presenting accurate, relevant, and credible information that enables students to assess educational alternatives through reason rather than emotional impulse.

From a theoretical perspective, this result is consistent with Stoic philosophy, particularly the concept of logos, which emphasizes rational judgment as the foundation of wise decision-making. Within the context of educational marketing, digital platforms function as channels through which factual information, institutional transparency, and educational values are communicated, thereby strengthening prospective students' capacity for rational evaluation. Instead of relying solely on persuasive messages, authentic digital content encourages individuals to process information objectively, compare available alternatives, and make educational choices based on evidence and long-term considerations. Consequently, digital marketing contributes not only to institutional visibility but also to the cultivation of rational cognitive processes among prospective students.

The present finding is supported by previous empirical studies. Desembrianita *et al.*, (2024) reported that digital marketing significantly enhances consumer trust by increasing the credibility and transparency of online information. Although their study focused on consumer behavior, trust represents an important cognitive outcome that precedes rational decision-making and is conceptually aligned with Stoic rationality. Similarly, Eum (2025) demonstrated that digital marketing in higher education influences prospective students' analytical evaluations by improving the accessibility and quality of institutional information available through digital media. These studies reinforce the argument that digital marketing creates an informational environment that facilitates reflective thinking and informed educational decision-making. The findings confirm that digital marketing exposure provided by MA Ma'arif 7 Sunan Drajat encourages prospective local students to process school-related information in a more reflective and critical manner. High-quality digital content, particularly content presenting tangible evidence of academic and religious activities, functions as an external logos that activates the students' internal reasoning processes. Desembrianita *et al.*, (2024) empirically demonstrated that digital marketing positively influences consumer trust, a construct that is conceptually related to the rational capacity embodied in Stoicism. Likewise, Eum (2025) reported that digital marketing in higher education affects prospective students' rational considerations. These findings imply that madrasahs should prioritize the production of factual and authentic digital content. As emphasized by S. H. Utami & Purba (2025), consistency and a thorough understanding of target audiences are crucial to the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies.

This study also contributes theoretically by extending the application of Stoic philosophy to the field of educational marketing. While previous studies have predominantly examined digital marketing from behavioral, technological, or consumer-oriented perspectives, the present research demonstrates that digital marketing can also shape the rational dimension of prospective students' decision-making. By integrating digital marketing with Stoic rationality, this study offers a broader conceptual perspective on how digital communication influences educational choices through reflective cognition, thereby enriching the interdisciplinary literature at the intersection of educational marketing, digital communication, and philosophical psychology.

4.2.2 The Effect of Competitive Advantage on Stoic Rationality (H2 Supported)

The findings indicate that competitive advantage plays a pivotal role in fostering Stoic rationality among prospective students when selecting an educational institution. Rather than merely functioning as an

institutional differentiator, competitive advantage provides meaningful informational cues that enable prospective students to evaluate educational alternatives through deliberate, objective, and reason-based judgment. This suggests that the perception of superior institutional attributes encourages individuals to prioritize factual evidence and long-term educational value over impulsive or emotionally driven considerations.

This relationship can be explained through the perspective of Stoic philosophy, particularly the concept of *logos*, which emphasizes rational judgment grounded in objective evidence rather than subjective emotions (Irvine, 2009; Robertson, 2019). When educational institutions consistently communicate their distinctive strengths such as academic quality, institutional reputation, student achievements, facilities, accreditation, and graduate employability they reduce uncertainty during the decision-making process. Consequently, prospective students become more capable of conducting systematic comparisons among available alternatives and making decisions that align with long-term educational goals. In this context, competitive advantage serves not only as a marketing instrument but also as a cognitive mechanism that supports rational evaluation.

These findings are consistent with signaling theory, which argues that organizations communicate quality through credible signals that reduce information asymmetry between providers and consumers. Distinctive institutional characteristics act as reliable signals of educational quality, allowing prospective students to develop greater confidence in evaluating available options. As a result, decision-making becomes increasingly evidence-based and less influenced by external pressures or temporary emotional responses. Competitive advantage exhibited the highest path coefficient toward Stoic rationality ($\beta = 0.387$), indicating that perceptions of the distinctive strengths of MA Ma'arif 7 Sunan Drajat most strongly encourage reason-based decision-making. Desembrianita *et al.*, (2021) previously demonstrated, in the context of educational institutions in Gresik, that institutional image and service quality two essential components of competitive advantage significantly affect prospective students' trust, which subsequently stimulates purchase intention. Similarly, Hearn (2023) confirmed that clear communication regarding institutional strengths promotes rational and systematic evaluations. Strong differentiation provides prospective students with cognitive anchoring points that facilitate objective evaluations, in accordance with the Stoic principle of *logos* (Irvine, 2009; Robertson, 2019).

From a practical perspective, these findings suggest that educational institutions should continuously strengthen and communicate their unique competitive advantages through transparent, evidence-based, and credible information. Marketing communication should move beyond persuasive promotional messages by emphasizing measurable institutional achievements, accreditation status, academic performance, innovation, and graduate outcomes. Such an approach enables prospective students to make more informed and rational decisions while simultaneously enhancing institutional credibility and trust.

Theoretically, this study extends the application of Stoic Rationality Theory within educational marketing by demonstrating that competitive advantage constitutes an important antecedent of rational decision-making. While previous studies have predominantly examined the direct influence of competitive advantage on institutional attractiveness or purchase intention, the present research contributes a novel perspective by explaining how competitive advantage first cultivates a rational cognitive evaluation process before influencing behavioral intentions. This finding enriches the literature by integrating strategic management, educational marketing, and Stoic philosophy into a comprehensive framework for understanding prospective students' decision-making behavior.

4.2.3 The Absence of a Direct Effect of Digital Marketing on School Selection Decisions (H3 Not Supported)

The finding that digital marketing does not exert a statistically significant direct influence on school selection decisions suggests that digital promotional activities alone are insufficient to convert prospective students' initial interest into actual enrollment decisions. Rather than indicating the ineffectiveness of digital marketing, this result implies that digital communication primarily functions as an information dissemination mechanism, while the final decision-making process requires deeper cognitive evaluation and personal judgment. In the context of Islamic educational institutions, prospective students and their families appear to assess not only the promotional attractiveness of online content but also the credibility, educational quality, institutional values, and long-term benefits offered by the school before making a final decision.

The rejection of H3 represents one of the most noteworthy findings of this study. Digital marketing was found to be incapable of directly transforming content exposure into school selection decisions without first undergoing an internal rationalization process. This finding addresses the gap identified by (Hearn, 2023), who argued that the mere availability of digital media is insufficient in the absence of careful deliberation by prospective students. Mahjudin *et al.*, (2024) further emphasized that effective consumer decisions require extensive processing of marketing information rather than simple exposure to stimuli.

Kahneman, (2011) dual-process theory provides a psychological explanation for this phenomenon. Without the activation of System 2 thinking, digital marketing stimuli are likely to generate only intuitive and unstable System 1 responses. For prospective local students in the pesantren-based communities of Lamongan, decision-making requires a reflective process that integrates personal values, long-term aspirations, and Islamic identity before a final choice is made. The characteristics of the research setting further strengthen this interpretation. The educational environment in Lamongan is strongly influenced by pesantren traditions and community-based social values, where educational decisions frequently involve collective family deliberation instead of individual preference alone. Families generally seek additional confirmation through interpersonal communication, recommendations from religious leaders, alumni experiences, school visits, and institutional reputation before committing to a particular educational institution. Consequently, information obtained through digital platforms is regarded as a preliminary source that must be validated through trusted social networks before it can influence final decisions. This socio-cultural context explains why digital marketing alone is insufficient to directly shape school selection behaviour.

From a practical perspective, these findings indicate that educational institutions should not rely exclusively on digital promotional campaigns to increase student enrollment. Instead, digital marketing strategies should be integrated with initiatives that strengthen institutional credibility and facilitate informed decision-making. Such initiatives may include presenting transparent academic achievements, testimonials from alumni and parents, virtual campus experiences, interactive consultation services, and consistent communication regarding educational quality and Islamic values. By supporting prospective students throughout their evaluation process, digital marketing can become more effective in contributing to enrollment decisions.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on educational marketing by demonstrating that the influence of digital marketing on educational choice is indirect rather than immediate. The findings reinforce consumer decision-making theories suggesting that marketing communication operates through cognitive evaluation mechanisms before affecting behavioural

outcomes, particularly in high-involvement service contexts such as education. Furthermore, this study extends the application of Dual-Process Theory within Islamic educational settings by highlighting how cultural values, religious considerations, and family-based deliberation moderate the effectiveness of digital marketing. These insights provide a more comprehensive understanding of school selection behaviour and underscore the importance of integrating psychological, social, and cultural dimensions into future educational marketing research.

4.2.4 The Effect of Competitive Advantage on School Selection Decisions (H4 Supported)

The findings indicate that competitive advantage plays an important role in influencing parents' and students' school selection decisions. This relationship suggests that prospective students evaluate schools not only on the basis of promotional activities but also according to the unique value and superior attributes that distinguish one educational institution from its competitors. In the increasingly competitive educational environment, schools possessing distinctive strengths are more likely to be perceived as credible, trustworthy, and capable of providing long-term educational benefits. Consequently, competitive advantage becomes an essential consideration during the decision-making process because it reduces uncertainty and increases stakeholders' confidence in the institution. Unlike digital marketing, competitive advantage was found to exert a direct influence on school selection decisions ($\beta = 0.274$). Schiffman & Kanuk (2019) argued that consumers' perceptions of institutional superiority constitute a direct determinant of service selection decisions. Consistent with this view, Mahjudin *et al.*, (2024) demonstrated that superior product and service attributes directly encourage purchasing decisions. The present findings are also in line with those of Jabbar *et al.*, (2022) and Muttaqin (2024), who identified the distinctive characteristics of madrasahs as important determinants of school choice among students from Nahdlatul Ulama families.

From a practical perspective, these findings imply that school administrators should prioritize the development and communication of sustainable competitive advantages rather than relying exclusively on promotional campaigns. Continuous improvements in academic quality, teacher professionalism, digital learning innovation, student achievement, institutional reputation, and value-based educational programs are likely to strengthen the institution's attractiveness and increase prospective students' willingness to enroll. These strategic initiatives should be consistently integrated into institutional branding to ensure that stakeholders clearly recognize the school's unique strengths. This study contributes to the educational marketing literature by providing empirical evidence that competitive advantage represents a strategic organizational capability that directly influences school selection decisions. Unlike studies that primarily emphasize promotional communication, the present research highlights the importance of internal institutional excellence as a fundamental driver of educational service selection. These findings therefore extend the application of consumer behavior theory and strategic management perspectives within the context of educational institutions, particularly Islamic schools operating in increasingly competitive educational markets.

4.2.5 The Mediating Role of Stoic Rationality (H6 and H7 Supported)

The findings indicate that Stoic rationality functions as an important psychological mechanism through which external institutional factors influence prospective students' school selection decisions. Rather than responding immediately to promotional messages or institutional superiority, prospective students appear to evaluate available information through a process of rational reflection that aligns educational

alternatives with their personal values and long-term aspirations. This pattern suggests that educational decision-making is not solely driven by external stimuli but also depends on the individual's capacity to regulate emotions and critically assess information before making a final choice.

This phenomenon can be explained through the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework, which posits that environmental stimuli affect behavioral responses through internal cognitive and psychological processes rather than through direct causal pathways. Within this framework, digital marketing activities and competitive advantages represent external stimuli, whereas Stoic rationality serves as the organismic component that filters, interprets, and evaluates these stimuli before they influence school selection decisions. Consequently, students who possess stronger Stoic rationality are more likely to prioritize objective evaluation, self-control, and long-term educational benefits instead of being influenced by short-term promotional appeals or emotional reactions.

Stoic rationality was found to fully mediate the relationship between digital marketing and school selection decisions (H6) and partially mediate the relationship between competitive advantage and school selection decisions (H7). This dual mediation pattern is consistent with the findings of Desembrianita *et al.*, (2021), who demonstrated that trust mediates the effects of institutional image and service quality on prospective students' purchase intention within Islamic educational institutions. Furthermore, Karani & Saravanan (2024) emphasized that a Stoic orientation promotes decisions grounded in long-term values. Sellars (2019) and Pigliucci (2017) further argued that modern Stoicism equips individuals with the ability to distinguish rational responses from impulsive tendencies. Such a capacity is particularly relevant for prospective students confronted with the overwhelming flow of digital information. Therefore, Stoic rationality serves as an internal cognitive mechanism that transforms external stimuli into thoughtful and value-oriented educational decisions, thereby extending the applicability of the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework within the context of Islamic education.

From a practical perspective, these findings suggest that educational institutions should move beyond relying exclusively on persuasive digital marketing strategies or emphasizing competitive advantages. Marketing communication should also facilitate reflective and evidence-based decision-making by providing transparent institutional information, academic credibility, educational outcomes, and value-oriented messages. Such an approach is more likely to resonate with prospective students who actively seek meaningful educational experiences rather than merely responding to persuasive promotional campaigns. Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) model by introducing Stoic rationality as a novel organismic construct within the context of Islamic educational marketing. While previous studies have predominantly examined mediators such as trust, satisfaction, or perceived value, the present research demonstrates that philosophical-based rationality also constitutes an important cognitive mechanism through which external marketing stimuli are translated into educational decision-making. This contribution extends the application of the S–O–R framework and provides a broader interdisciplinary perspective by integrating consumer behavior, educational marketing, and Stoic philosophy into a unified explanatory model.

5. Concluding Remarks and Recommendation

This study was conducted to examine the direct effects of digital marketing and competitive advantage on school selection decisions among prospective local students at MA Ma'arif 7 Sunan Drajat, while also investigating the mediating role of Stoic rationality within the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework. The findings demonstrate that both digital marketing and competitive advantage positively and significantly enhance prospective students' Stoic rationality. Furthermore, competitive advantage and Stoic rationality exert significant positive effects on school selection decisions, whereas digital marketing does not directly influence those decisions. Instead, digital marketing affects school selection decisions indirectly through Stoic rationality, indicating a full mediation effect, while Stoic rationality partially mediates the relationship between competitive advantage and school selection decisions. These findings confirm that prospective students' educational decisions are shaped not merely by external marketing stimuli but by their capacity to evaluate institutional information rationally, objectively, and in accordance with long-term educational values.

This study contributes to the educational marketing literature in several important ways. Theoretically, it extends the application of the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework by introducing Stoic rationality as a novel organism construct that explains the internal cognitive mechanism linking external institutional stimuli with school selection decisions. To the best of the authors' knowledge, this represents one of the earliest empirical applications of Stoic rationality within the context of Islamic secondary education in Indonesia. Practically, the findings suggest that madrasah administrators should not rely solely on increasing the intensity of digital marketing activities. Instead, they should prioritize the development and communication of sustainable competitive advantages while producing transparent, evidence-based, and value-oriented digital content that encourages prospective students to engage in reflective and rational decision-making. Such an approach is expected to strengthen institutional credibility, improve public trust, and ultimately enhance student enrollment.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the research was conducted in a single Islamic secondary school, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other educational contexts. Second, the sample consisted exclusively of prospective local students within one geographical region, thereby restricting broader demographic representation. Third, the cross-sectional research design captures decision-making behavior at a single point in time and therefore cannot fully explain changes in students' preferences over time. Future studies are therefore encouraged to employ larger and more diverse samples across different types of educational institutions and regions, adopt longitudinal research designs to examine changes in decision-making behavior, and incorporate additional psychological and contextual variables such as institutional trust, perceived educational quality, parental influence, religious commitment, or electronic word-of-mouth to further enrich the explanatory power of educational marketing models in Islamic education.

Statement of Use of Generative AI

During the preparation of this work, the author used generative artificial intelligence tools to support the scientific writing process. Grammarly was used to check grammar, refine writing style, and improve clarity in scientific writing. All interpretations, analyses, and conclusions presented in this study are the sole responsibility of the author.

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