

The Role of Interest in Mediating the Influence of Digital Promotion on Students' Decision to Choose a School at SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar

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Abstract

The development of information technology and digitalization has changed the way schools promote themselves and attract prospective students. Social media, websites, and other digital platforms are now the primary channels through which schools convey information to the public. This study aims to analyze the role of interest in mediating the influence of digital promotion on students' decisions to choose SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar. The digital promotion carried out by the school is expected to increase student interest, which in turn influences their decision in choosing a school. This study uses a quantitative method with Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) analysis to test the direct and indirect effects between the variables studied. The results show that digital promotion has a positive and significant effect on student interest, which then has a positive and significant effect on the decision to choose a school. Student interest was also found to act as a mediating variable between digital promotion and the decision to choose. These findings contribute significantly to the development of digital promotion strategies in vocational schools and provide a basis for managerial decisions to improve the effectiveness of promotion and the school's image in attracting prospective students.

Keywords: Digital Promotion, Interest, Choice Decision

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Introduction

The development of information technology and digitalization in recent years has brought significant changes in various sectors, including education. One aspect that has been affected is how schools attract prospective students and convey information about their schools. Social media, websites, and other digital platforms are now the main channels for school promotion, replacing traditional methods such as brochures or direct visits. Digital promotion allows schools to reach a wider audience and build more interactive relationships with prospective students and parents. Dwivedi et al. (2021) state that digital promotion is "a series of marketing activities that utilize digital media to convey value, build relationships, and influence audience behavior."

However, even though digital promotion can introduce schools to prospective students, students' final decisions in choosing a school are not only influenced by the information they receive, but also by psychological factors such as interest. Student interest is an important factor in the decision-making process, which is reflected in students' interest, attention, and desire to enroll in a particular school. Restarie et al. (2025) revealed that "interest in choosing a school is reflected in students' interest, attention, search for information, and desire to enroll in a particular school compared to other schools." Therefore, student interest serves as a psychological bridge that connects exposure to digital promotion with their decision in choosing a school.

In the context of SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar, this school faces fierce competition with various other vocational schools that also utilize digital promotion to attract prospective students. However, it is not yet known exactly how the digital promotion carried out by SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar can influence students' decisions in choosing a school, as well as the extent to which student interest plays a role in mediating the influence of digital promotion on these decisions. This study aims to analyze the role of interest in mediating the influence of digital promotion on students' decisions to choose SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar. It is hoped that the results of this study can provide a better understanding of how digital promotion strategies can be optimized by increasing student interest, as well as provide a basis for decision-making in designing school communication and promotion strategies.

This study will examine whether the digital promotion received by students can increase their interest in the school and how that interest influences their decision to choose SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar. Thus, this study is expected to make an important contribution to the planning and implementation of digital promotion strategies in vocational schools, particularly in attracting interest and increasing the number of applicants.

Literature Review Theoretical Framework School Selection Decisions Definition of School Selection

The decision to choose a school is the result of an evaluation by students/parents of several educational institution options. Nurohman et al. (2025) explain that "the decision to choose a school is a decision-making process that involves identifying needs, searching for information, evaluating alternatives, making a decision, and post-selection behavior."

Factors Influencing School Selection Decisions

Factors influencing students in choosing a Vocational High School (SMK) can be divided into internal factors (from within the student) and external factors (from the surrounding environment).

1. Internal Factors (From Within the Student)
 - a. Interests and Talents
 - b. Learning and Career Motivation
 - c. Perceptions of SMK Graduate Prospects

2. External Factors (Surrounding Environment)
 - a. Influence of Parents and Family
 - b. Peers
 - c. School Image and Reputation
 - d. The Role of Guidance Counselors
 - e. School Promotion and Information
3. Social and Economic Factors
 - a. Family Socioeconomic Status
 - b. School Location Accessibility

In general, students' decisions in choosing a vocational school are the result of the interaction between personal factors (interests, talents, career perceptions) and environmental factors (family, friends, school image, economy). Schools that are able to build a positive brand, provide facilities relevant to industry needs, and strengthen relationships with the community will be more attractive to prospective students.

a) Indicators of School Selection Decisions

School Selection Decision Indicators According to Nurohman et al. (2025)

1. Recognition of Needs

Parents/students recognize the need to choose a school that suits the educational needs, character, and future of their children.
2. Information Search

Parents/students seek information about schools through the internet, brochures, social media, friends, alumni, or direct visits.
3. Evaluation of Alternatives

Parents/students compare several schools based on factors such as teacher quality, facilities, costs, achievements, distance, and school image.
4. Selection Decision

The stage of determining the most suitable school and making a final decision to enroll.
5. Post-Selection Behavior

Satisfaction or dissatisfaction after students enroll in school, including whether parents would recommend the school to others.

Interest in Choosing a School Definition of Interest

Interest is a psychological drive that influences a person's tendency to choose. **Restarie et al. (2025)** state that "interest in choosing a school is reflected in the student's attraction, attention, search for information, and desire to enroll in a particular school compared to other schools." The higher the interest, the greater the chance that the student will decide to enroll.

Interest Indicators

Indicators of Interest in Choosing a School According to Restarie et al. (2025)

1. Interest

The level of liking and interest of students/parents towards a particular school because of the values, programs, or characteristics offered.
2. Attention

The level of seriousness in paying attention to information about the school, such as reading brochures, following the school's social media, or attending Open House events.
3. Desire to Choose

The tendency to prioritize that school over alternatives indicates a clear preference.
4. Information Search

The efforts of students/parents to delve deeper into the school through the internet, alumni, friends, or direct visits.

5. Decision to Enroll

The actual action of wanting to enroll, filling out the new student admission form, or taking the school's selection test.

Digital Promotion Definition of Digital Promotion

The development of information technology has changed the marketing landscape, including in the education sector. Dwivedi et al. (2021) state that digital promotion is "a series of marketing activities that utilize digital media to convey value, build relationships, and influence audience behavior." Thus, digital promotion not only serves to disseminate information but also builds closeness and engagement with prospective students and parents.

Another opinion is expressed by Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick (2022), who explain that digital promotion is "marketers' efforts to achieve marketing objectives through the application of technology and digital media on online communication channels such as websites, email, social media platforms, and search engines." In the context of schools, digital promotion is an important tool for communicating the advantages, flagship programs, and competency profiles of graduates.

Thus, it can be concluded that digital promotion is a marketing communication process that utilizes various digital platforms to attract attention, build relationships, and influence public interest in choosing a school.

Digital Promotion Indicators

Digital Promotion Indicators according to Dwivedi et al. (2021)

1. Entertainment

Promotional content must be enjoyable, engaging, creative, and provide a positive experience so that the audience feels comfortable interacting.

2. Interaction

Digital promotion should allow for two-way communication, such as comments, messages, live chat, polls, and discussions.

3. Trendiness (Up-to-date/Active in presenting the latest information)

Content must be up-to-date, follow trends, and be quick in delivering the latest information about products or services.

4. Customization (Adaptation/Alignment with customer needs)

Promotions should be personalized, tailored to the interests, preferences, and characteristics of consumer segments.

5. Word of Mouth (User-to-user conversations / Reviews and Recommendations) Digital promotions encourage the spread of recommendations, reviews, testimonials, or sharing from consumers to other consumers.

Conceptual Framework

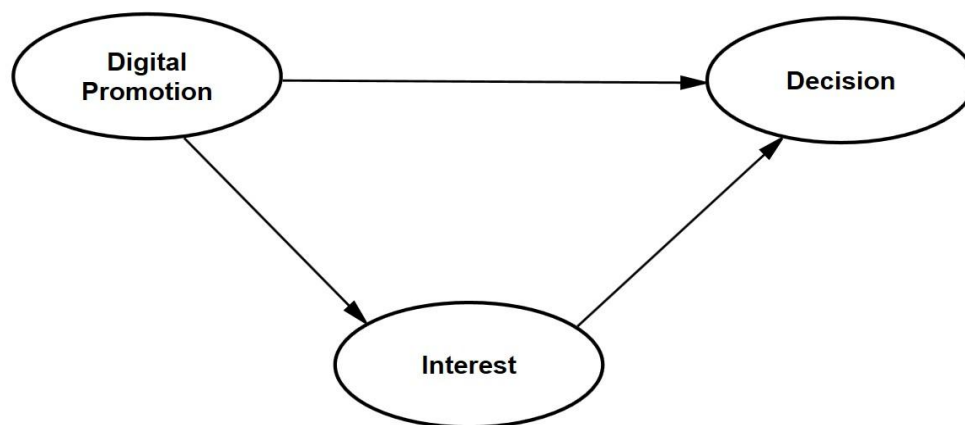


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Research Hypothesis

- H1: Digital promotion has a positive and significant effect on purchasing decisions at SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar.
- H2: Digital promotion has a positive and significant effect on interest in SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar.
- H3: Interest has a positive and significant effect on decision-making at SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar.
- H4: Digital promotion has a positive and significant effect on the decision to choose through interest in SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar.

Research Methodology Type of Research

The type of research used by the researcher is quantitative research. According to Sugiyono (2022), quantitative research can be defined as a method based on positivism philosophy, used to study a specific population or sample, with sampling techniques generally conducted randomly, data collection using research instruments, and quantitative/statistical data analysis with the aim of testing predetermined hypotheses. This type of quantitative research was conducted to create a study aimed at adjusting a study and analyzing digital promotion and school image on students' decisions to choose a school through interest as a mediating variable at SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar.

Research Location and Time

The research location was at SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar, located at Jalan Asahan / Sangnawaluh Pematangsiantar. The research was conducted over a period of 3 months, from October to December 2025.

Population and Sample

According to Arikunto (2022), the population is all elements that have the same characteristics and are the object of research. In the context of research, the population refers to the group to be studied and researched, which can be individuals, objects, or events that have certain criteria. All elements in this population are expected to provide information relevant to the research objectives. In this study, the number of students at SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar was 1,500. The sample used in this study was 10% of the population, so the sample taken consisted of 150 students.

Research Data Sources

The data source used in this study is primary data.

Results Outer Model Analysis

Outer Model Analysis using the PLS Algorithm produced the following results: **Validity Test**

Table 1. Outer Loadings Values

	Digital Promotion	Interest	Student Decision
X1.1	0.800		
X1.2	0.764		
X1.3	0.813		
X1.4	0.792		
	Digital Promotion	Interest	Student Decision
X1.5	0.786		
Y.1			0.624
Y.2			0.779
Y.3			0.626
Y.4			0.825
Y.5			0.716
Z.1		0.843	
Z.2		0.769	
Z.3		0.827	
Z.4		0.856	
Z.5		0.770	

Source: Smart PLS Output, 2025

Based on the values in Table 1 above, which show the results of outer model testing through loading factor/outer loadings values, all indicators in each variable have a loading value ≥ 0.60 . This indicates that each indicator is measured validly and strongly. Therefore, it can be concluded that all items in the questionnaire have met the validity criteria, as shown in the following figure.

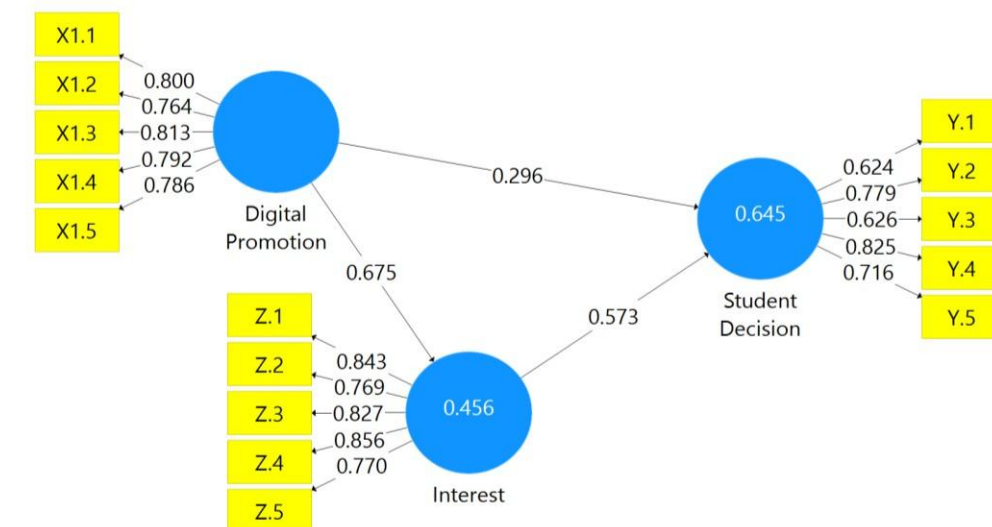


Figure 2. Outer Loading

Reliability Test

Table 2. Construct Reliability and Validity Test

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Digital Promotion	0.851	0.852	0.893	0.626
Interest	0.872	0.874	0.907	0.662
Student Decision	0.765	0.790	0.841	0.516

Source: Smart PLS Output, 2025

From Table 2 above, the reliability test results show that the Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values for all constructs are above 0.70. This indicates that all indicators have high internal consistency and are reliable in measuring their respective constructs. Thus, the research instrument is declared reliable and suitable for use in structural model testing.

Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

In assessing the model with PLS, we begin by looking at the R-square for each dependent latent variable. The table below shows the Rsquare estimation results using SmartPLS.

Table 3. R Square Results

	R Square	Adjusted R-Square
Interest	0.456	0.454
Student Decision	0.645	0.643

Source: Smart PLS, 2025

Table 3 shows the R square values for both dependent variables. For the interest variable, the R-squared value is 0.456, meaning that digital promotion has an influence of 45.6%, with the remainder attributable to other variables outside the model. The R-squared value for the decision to choose is 0.645, meaning that digital promotion and interest have an influence of 64.5%, with the remainder attributable to other variables outside the model.

Structural Model Testing (Inner Model) Hypothesis Testing Direct Influence Between Variables

The direct effect between variables can be seen in the path coefficients. The data analysis results show the direct effect values in the following table.

Table 4. Path Coefficients (Direct Effects)

	Original Sample	T Statistics	P Values	Conclusion
Digital Promotion -> Student Decision	0.296	4.754	0.000	Accepted
Digital Promotion -> Interest	0.675	14,574	0.00	Accepted

Interest -> Student Decision	0.573	9,320	0.00	Accepted
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Source: Smart PLS Output, 2025

The results in Table 4 show the following direct effect values:

1. Digital promotion has a positive and significant effect on purchasing decisions with a tstatistic value of 4.754 above 1.96 and a significance of 0.000 below 0.05, meaning that digital promotion has a real effect on students' purchasing decisions because the significance value is below 0.05 . The results of this study are in line with previous studies, namely that marketing promotion has a positive and significant effect on the decision to purchase Kanky shoes on Shopee among Gen-Z in Garut (Diana et al., 2025; Karo & Siregar, 2025).
2. Digital promotion has a positive and significant effect on interest with a t-statistic value of 14.574 above 1.96 and a significance of 0.000 below 0.05, meaning that digital promotion has a real effect on interest because the significance value is below 0.05. The results of this study are in line with previous research findings, namely that marketing promotion has a positive and significant effect on increasing interest (Fiona et al., 2022).
3. Interest has a positive and significant effect on the decision to choose a school with a tstatistic value of 9.320 above 1.96 and a significance of 0.000 below 0.05, meaning that interest has a real effect because the significance value is below 0.05. The results of this study are in line with previous studies, namely that interest has a positive and significant effect on purchasing decisions (Paramita et al., 2022; Fitri, 2022).

Indirect Influence Between Variables

The indirect effect between variables can be seen in the specific indirect effects values. The data analysis results show the indirect effect values in Table 5 below.

Table 5. Specific Indirect Effects (Indirect Influence)

	Original Sample	T Statistics	P Values	Conclusion
Digital Promotion -> Interest -> Student Decision	0.387	7.855	0.000	Accepted

Source: Smart PLS, 2025

Table 5 shows the indirect effect between variables, namely: digital promotion has a positive and significant effect on the decision to choose through interest with a t-statistic value of 7.855 above 1.96 and a significance value of 0.005 below 0.05, meaning that interest acts as a mediating variable between digital promotion and the decision to choose.

Conclusion

1. Digital promotion has a positive and significant effect on purchasing decisions at SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar.
2. Digital promotion has a positive and significant effect on interest at SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar.
3. Interest has a positive and significant effect on voting decisions at SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar.
4. Digital promotion has a positive and significant effect on the decision to choose through interest at SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar.

Recommendations

1. For the variable of school selection with the lowest score, namely "I compared SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar with other schools before choosing," the recommendation is to increase cooperation with the business and industry world (DUDI) to provide more internship and industry-based training opportunities so that students can acquire skills relevant to the needs of the job market and increase the school's competitiveness.
2. Interest with the lowest statement score is "I pay attention to information about SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar when I see school promotions." Therefore, the suggestion is to highlight the advantages of the school's expertise programs through digital platforms such as social media, websites, and promotional videos. Showcasing the success stories of alumni who have succeeded in the workforce or continued to higher education can attract the attention of prospective students and parents and prove the quality of education offered.
3. Digital promotion with the lowest value statement: "School social media provides a space for interaction between prospective students and the school." One suggestion is to maximize the platform by holding regular Q&A sessions or webinars. This can give prospective students the opportunity to learn more about the school's flagship programs, facilities, and opportunities at SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar. In addition, displaying testimonials from alumni and students who have achieved success can also increase credibility and attract the interest of prospective students.

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