

The ACDAL Framework for Parents' Customer Journey in School Choice through Social Media Content

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ABSTRACT: The growing role of digital platforms in educational marketing has transformed how parents engage with schools before making enrollment decisions. Previous studies have examined social media as a tool for branding and communication, yet few have explored its function as structured touchpoints within the customer journey of parents. This study introduces the ACDAL framework (Awareness, Consideration, Decision, Action, and Loyalty) to map parental engagement across different stages of school choice. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected from seven parents and documentation of Facebook and Instagram content published by a private junior high school in Tasikmalaya, Indonesia. Data were analyzed through content analysis to identify patterns of interaction between parents and school-generated content. The findings suggest that awareness is primarily stimulated by academic achievements and visually appealing content; consideration emerges through testimonials and program highlights; decision-making is influenced by responsive communication and transparent information; action is reflected in online and offline enrollment; and loyalty is strengthened by continuous publication of student activities and achievements. These results indicate that social media content functions as critical digital touchpoints along the parental customer journey. The study contributes to the literature by extending the customer journey model to educational settings using ACDAL and offers practical insights for schools seeking to design effective social media strategies to attract and retain parental trust.

Keywords: ACDAL Framework, Customer Journey, Parental Engagement, School Choice, Social Media Content.



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INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of digital platforms has reshaped how organizations, including schools, plan and implement marketing strategies. Parents no longer rely only on physical visits or word-of-mouth when choosing schools for their children. They actively seek information through websites, online reviews, and especially social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp community

groups that enable direct communication between schools and parents. In Indonesia, this trend is supported by data from the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APPII, 2022), showing that 89 percent of internet users access social media every day. This high level of connectivity creates a new landscape for school marketing, where institutions must develop digital content that not only attracts attention but also guides parents through stages of awareness, comparison, and decision-making similar to consumer behavior in other service industries (Kotler & Keller, 2016; Tuten & Solomon, 2021).

Schools, especially private institutions, operate in a competitive environment where enrollment depends on effective communication of value propositions. Unlike public schools where students are often assigned based on catchment areas, private schools must persuade parents to choose them over alternatives. In such contexts, social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram have become central to school branding efforts. These platforms allow schools to showcase achievements, highlight extracurricular activities, and communicate their educational philosophy in real time (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Parents, in turn, use this content as part of their evaluation of a school's credibility, quality, and suitability for their children's needs.

Research in educational marketing has long highlighted the importance of parental involvement in school choice. Parents are the main decision-makers and are influenced by many factors such as academic performance, school reputation, facilities, safety, and alignment of values (Bosetti, 2004; Wei et al., 2022). In today's context, these factors are mediated through digital touchpoints that shape awareness, consideration, decision, action, and loyalty. This connection reflects the transition of marketing principles from the commercial sector to education, where schools must build relationships of trust and belonging rather than focus only on promotion. The present study places parental engagement with school social media content at the center of understanding the modern educational customer journey.

Prior studies have examined social media in education from several perspectives. Some focused on how digital platforms enhance institutional branding and visibility (Constantinides & Stagno, 2011; Pinteă & Băcilă, 2020). Others highlighted the role of online reviews and digital reputation in shaping parental trust (Lim & Richardson, 2020). More recently, studies have emphasized how interactivity in social media content fosters engagement and influences perceptions of authenticity (Voorveld et al., 2018).

While these contributions are valuable, much of the existing literature has treated social media as a promotional tool rather than as a structured set of touchpoints guiding parents through a decision-making process. The majority of educational marketing research emphasizes brand awareness and communication outcomes, leaving a gap in understanding how parental engagement unfolds systematically across multiple stages. Moreover, the application of customer journey mapping (CJM) in education remains limited, with most CJM studies situated in consumer goods and services (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

The absence of a stage-based framework in analyzing parental engagement with school social media is a notable gap. Existing models, such as pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages, oversimplify the nuanced journey of parents when selecting schools. Parents move through stages that are more elaborate, involving not only initial awareness but also comparison, reassurance,

enrollment action, and post-enrollment loyalty. Few studies have mapped this progression in the educational sector, especially in developing country contexts like Indonesia where parental expectations and digital behavior patterns may differ from Western settings.

To address this gap, the present study applies the ACDAL framework, Awareness, Consideration, Decision, Action, and Loyalty, as a novel lens for examining parental engagement with school social media content. Unlike generic consumer journey models, ACDAL provides a granular understanding of how parents interact with digital content at each stage. By adopting this framework, the study contributes both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it extends customer journey literature into the domain of educational marketing. Practically, it provides schools with actionable insights into designing stage-appropriate social media strategies to attract, convert, and retain parents.

This detailed stage-based perspective is particularly important in educational settings, where parental decision-making involves not only rational evaluation but also emotional and value-based considerations. A granular analysis allows researchers to capture subtle behavioral dynamics, such as shifts in trust, confidence, and alignment between school values and family expectations. These nuanced insights help schools design more empathetic and context-sensitive communication strategies that address parents' evolving concerns throughout the journey of choosing and committing to a school.

Models such as AIDA (Lewis, 1898), its extension AIDAL, Kotler's buyer decision process, and the Customer Journey Map (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) have long guided studies of consumer behavior. However, these frameworks remain too general to capture the complex and rational decision-making of parents in school choice. This study therefore advances the discussion by proposing the ACDAL Framework (Awareness, Consideration, Decision, Action, Loyalty) as an adapted and contextually relevant model.

The objectives of this study are threefold:

1. To analyze how parents engage with school social media content across the ACDAL stages.
2. To identify what types of content are most effective in stimulating awareness, consideration, decision, action, and loyalty.
3. To provide recommendations for educational institutions on optimizing social media strategies for enrollment and long-term parental engagement.

To establish the novelty of this study, it is important to compare the traditional Customer Journey Map (CJM) with the ACDAL framework. The traditional model, often applied in consumer goods and retail contexts, simplifies the journey into three stages: pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase. However, parental school choice in the education service sector requires a more nuanced framework. The ACDAL model, comprising awareness, consideration, decision, action, and loyalty, captures the complexity of parental engagement more effectively. Table 1 presents a comparison between these two frameworks.

Table 1. Comparison of Traditional CJM and ACDAL Framework

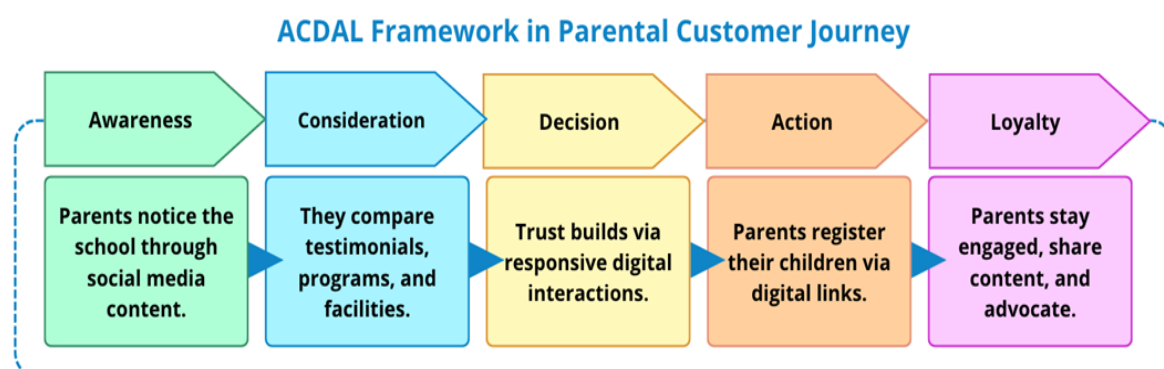
Traditional CJM	ACDAL Framework
Pre-Purchase: Customers become aware of a product or service through advertising, recommendations, or visibility in the marketplace.	Awareness: Parents notice the school through social media content, particularly achievement posts and event highlights.
Purchase: Customers make a buying decision and complete the transaction.	Consideration: Parents compare schools by evaluating testimonials, facilities, and program information shared on social media.
Post-Purchase: Customers evaluate satisfaction and may become repeat buyers or advocates.	Decision: Parents build trust through responsive digital interactions and finalize their choice. Action: Parents register their children through seamless digital links. Loyalty: Parents remain engaged, share content, and become advocates of the school.

Source: Adapted from Lemon & Verhoef (2016) for CJM; developed by the authors (2025) for ACDAL.

As shown in Table 1, the ACDAL framework extends the traditional CJM by offering a more granular and context-sensitive approach. While the conventional model condenses behavior into three phases, ACDAL divides the journey into five interrelated stages, emphasizing the importance of both interactivity and advocacy. This distinction highlights the contribution of this study: positioning parental school choice within the broader domain of service marketing while accounting for the unique dynamics of digital engagement in education.

To illustrate the conceptual framework of this study, the ACDAL model is presented as a sequential journey consisting of five stages: Awareness, Consideration, Decision, Action, and Loyalty. This framework reflects how parents, as customers in the education service market, interact with digital touchpoints provided by schools through social media content. The visualization below clarifies the progression of parental engagement along the customer journey.

Figure 1. ACDAL Framework in Parental Customer Journey



Source: Developed by the authors (2025).

As shown in Figure 1, the customer journey is conceptualized as a linear progression from initial exposure to sustained advocacy. Awareness arises when parents encounter content highlighting

school achievements or events. Consideration follows as they evaluate testimonials and program details. Decision emerges through responsive communication and interactive exchanges. Action is realized through seamless digital registration pathways. Finally, loyalty is sustained by continuous parental engagement with student-related content, leading to advocacy. This visualization emphasizes the structured role of social media content as strategic touchpoints throughout the parental customer journey.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how parents engage with school-generated social media content throughout the customer journey. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it allows an in-depth understanding of meanings, experiences, and processes rather than numerical measurement (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study design provided contextual insights into a single school's social media strategy and parental engagement within a specific cultural and geographic setting.

Population and Informants

The population of this study consisted of parents whose children were enrolled in a private junior high school in Tasikmalaya, West Java, Indonesia. Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on specific criteria, including active engagement with the school's Facebook or Instagram content. Seven parents participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews, representing varied occupational and educational backgrounds as well as different levels of familiarity with digital platforms. This diversity enabled the identification of multiple patterns of parental engagement. The number of participants was determined according to the principle of data saturation in qualitative research. Saturation was reached after the seventh interview, when no new themes or categories emerged from the data, ensuring the depth, richness, and consistency required for an exploratory study.

To ensure credibility and diversity of perspectives, the study involved seven parent informants selected through purposive sampling. These parents were chosen because they actively engaged with the school's social media content and had direct experience in making school-choice decisions. The profiles reflect variation in gender, age, occupation, and level of digital engagement. Table 2 summarizes the characteristics of the informants.

Table 2. Informants' Profile Summary

Informant	Gender	Age Range	Occupation	Digital Engagement Level
P1	Female	30–35	Teacher	High (daily social media use, frequent sharing of posts)
P2	Male	40–45	Entrepreneur	Medium (active commenting, occasional sharing)
P3	Female	35–40	Civil Servant	High (regularly interacts with posts, follows stories)
P4	Male	38–42	Private Employee	Medium (uses social media for information, saves posts)
P5	Female	33–37	Homemaker	Low (observes content, rarely interacts)
P6	Male	42–47	Religious Leader	Medium (engages with religious and event posts)
P7	Female	30–34	Health Worker	High (frequently engages with stories and reels)

Source: In-depth interviews with parents (2025).

As summarized in Table 2, the informants represented diverse backgrounds, ensuring a range of insights into parental engagement. Most informants were in their 30s and 40s, reflecting the age group typically responsible for school decisions. Occupations varied from educators and professionals to homemakers, indicating different perspectives on education and marketing communication. Levels of digital engagement also differed: some parents actively shared and interacted with posts, while others primarily consumed content passively. This diversity enriched the data, allowing triangulation between high-frequency digital users and more reserved participants, thus strengthening the validity of findings.

Research Location

The study was conducted at SMP QSBS Al-Kautsar 561, a private Islamic junior high school in Tasikmalaya. The school is recognized for its achievements in academic competitions and has an active presence on social media. The choice of this site reflects both the school's reliance on digital marketing strategies for student recruitment and its relevance as a case for examining parental engagement in a digital era.

Instruments and Tools

Data were collected through two main instruments. First, a semi-structured interview guide was developed to capture parents' experiences and perceptions of school social media content. The guide included questions about how parents first discovered the school online, what content attracted their attention, and how such content influenced their decisions. Second, documentation of Facebook and Instagram posts from the school was gathered, focusing on a six-month period

surrounding the enrollment season. These posts were saved, categorized, and analyzed as digital artifacts reflecting the school's content strategy.

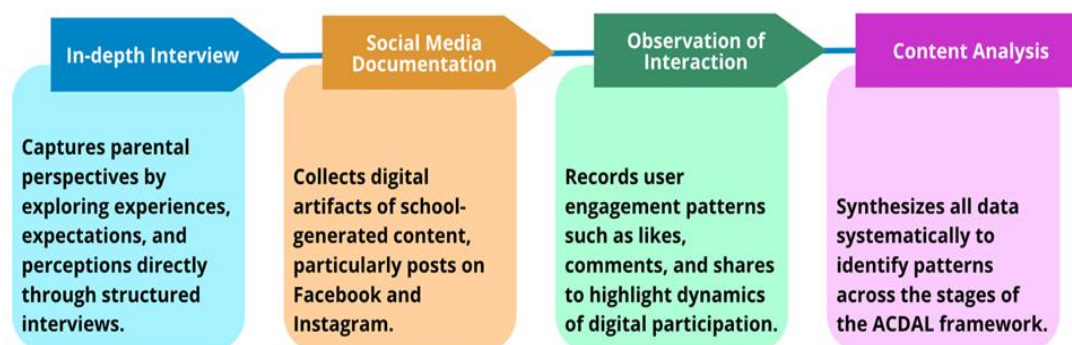
Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was carried out in three steps.

1. In-depth interviews: Conducted face-to-face or via online platforms such as video conference or call, each interview lasted 30–45 minutes. All interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.
2. Documentation: A total of 120 social media posts (Facebook and Instagram combined) were collected and archived, covering promotional campaigns, event highlights, student achievements, and parental testimonials.
3. Observation: Informal observation was conducted on how parents interacted with the posts, including likes, comments, and shares, providing additional context to the interview data.

The data collection process in this study followed a structured flow to ensure rigor and credibility. Interviews provided personal insights from parents, documentation offered digital artifacts of school content, and observation captured interaction patterns. These data sources were then integrated through content analysis. The visualization below presents the sequential flow of the research process.

Figure 2. Research Flow of Data Collection



Source: Developed by the authors (2025).

The Figure 2 illustrates the sequential stages of the study, starting from data collection to analysis and interpretation. The process began with semi-structured interviews with seven parents, followed by documentation review of Facebook and Instagram content published by the school, and direct digital observation to validate engagement patterns. These three stages were then integrated through qualitative content analysis using NVivo 15 to generate thematic categories and construct the ACDAL-based parental engagement model.

Data Analysis

The study applied content analysis to both interview transcripts and social media posts. Following (Krippendorff, 2018), the analysis involved coding textual and visual data, categorizing them into themes, and mapping the findings onto the five stages of the ACDAL framework (Awareness, Consideration, Decision, Action, Loyalty). This approach enabled systematic identification of patterns across multiple data sources. Triangulation of data was conducted by comparing interview insights with documentation and observation results, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings (Flick, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to standard ethical practices in qualitative research. Participants were provided with informed consent forms explaining the study's objectives, procedures, and confidentiality measures. Pseudonyms were used in the reporting of findings to protect participant identities. All digital data were stored securely and used only for academic purposes. Participation was voluntary, and parents could withdraw at any time without consequences.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are presented according to the ACDAL framework, which illustrates the progression of parents' engagement with school social media content from initial awareness to long-term loyalty. Data triangulated from interviews and documentation of social media posts reveal that each stage is characterized by specific types of content and forms of interaction.

Awareness

Awareness was primarily generated through visually appealing content showcasing student achievements, extracurricular activities, and participation in competitions. Parents frequently reported that their first exposure to the school occurred through Facebook posts shared by friends or community groups. One mother noted:

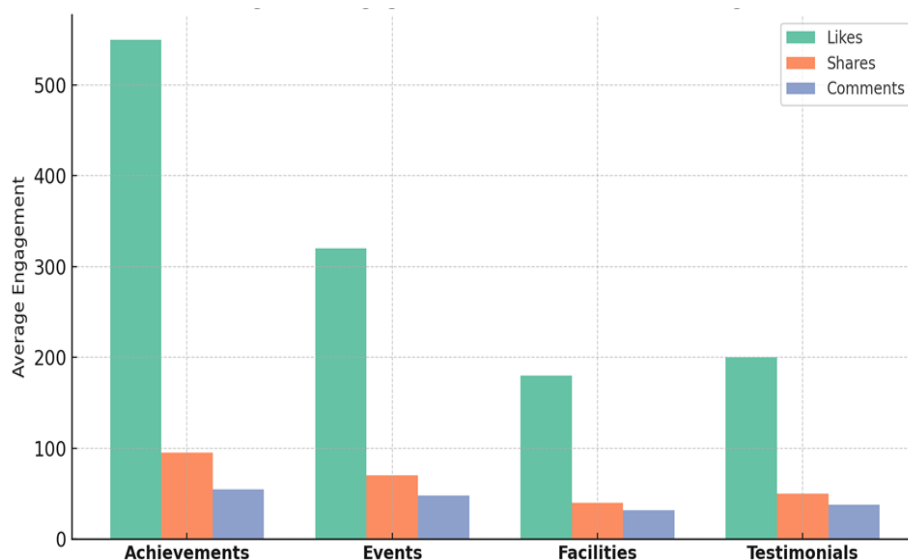
"I first noticed the school because someone shared a post about a student winning a provincial science competition. It caught my attention because it showed real achievement, not just promotion."

On Instagram, photos and short reels highlighting school events, such as flag ceremonies or religious activities, attracted likes and shares beyond the immediate parent community. These posts functioned as digital visibility mechanisms, signaling the school's active presence and credibility.

The netnographic observation revealed that not all content types generated the same level of engagement during the awareness stage. Posts emphasizing student achievements and large-scale events consistently outperformed other categories, both in terms of visibility and interaction. In contrast, facilities-related content and testimonials, while informative, attracted significantly lower

responses. To illustrate these differences, Figure 3 presents the average number of likes, shares, and comments across four main content categories documented on Facebook and Instagram.

Figure 3. Engagement Levels in Awareness Stage



Source: Netnographic observation of Facebook and Instagram posts, SMP QSBS Al-Kautsar 561 (2023–2025), processed by the authors

As shown in Figure 3, achievement-oriented posts recorded the highest engagement, with an average of 550 likes, 95 shares, and 55 comments per post. Event-related content followed closely, reaching 320 likes, 70 shares, and 48 comments on average. In contrast, posts on school facilities and testimonials remained below 200 likes and generated fewer comments and shares. These findings highlight that awareness is most effectively built through authentic signals of excellence, such as competition results and public events, that resonate with both parents and the wider community. By comparison, informational content such as facilities or testimonials appears to play a secondary role, contributing more to later stages of the journey rather than initial awareness.

Consideration

At the consideration stage, parents compared the school with other alternatives by engaging more deeply with its content. Posts featuring detailed information about programs, facilities, and student life were particularly influential. Testimonial videos from alumni or parents played a significant role in reassuring prospective families.

One father explained:

“When I was considering schools, I checked not only the facilities but also how parents spoke about their experiences. Seeing other parents happy with the school made me more confident.”

Facebook posts with detailed captions describing curriculum features or extracurricular opportunities encouraged parents to ask questions in the comments. Instagram carousel posts, which allowed multiple images in a single post, were appreciated for providing richer context.

At the consideration stage, parents engaged more deeply with social media content, using it to evaluate and compare schools. Netnographic observation revealed that certain content types—particularly testimonials, facilities showcases, and program information—stimulated higher

interaction through comments, questions, and saved posts. Interviews confirmed that these content categories played a significant role in shaping parental evaluation and trust. Table 3 summarizes the content types, patterns of engagement, and representative interview quotes.

Table 3. Consideration Stage Content and Parental Engagement

Content Category	Engagement (Netnography)	Pattern	Representative Interview Insight
Testimonials (parents/alumni)	Frequently saved; questions in comments; shared within parent groups		"When I saw how other parents spoke about their experiences, it gave me confidence." (Father, 42)
Facilities Showcase (classrooms, labs, dorms)	Likes and saves; moderate comments asking about capacity and fees		"I looked at the facilities photos and thought they matched my expectations for quality." (Mother, 37)
Program Information (curriculum, extracurriculars)	Comments with clarifying questions; DMs to admin; occasional shares		"The carousel about curriculum helped me understand the program better than just a brochure." (Mother, 35)

Source: Netnographic observation of Facebook and Instagram, combined with interview data (2025).

As shown in Table 3, testimonials emerged as the most influential content in terms of credibility, often prompting parents to save posts for future reference or share them with peers. Facilities showcases provided reassurance of physical quality, although interactions were generally limited to clarifying questions. Program information posts, particularly when presented in carousel format, proved effective in conveying detailed insights, leading to follow-up inquiries via direct messages. These findings highlight that during the consideration stage, content functions primarily as a decision-support mechanism, reducing uncertainty and enabling parents to evaluate alternatives more confidently.

Decision

The decision stage was strongly shaped by interactive communication. Parents emphasized the importance of responsive replies from administrators managing social media accounts. Quick and polite responses to direct messages (DMs) or comment inquiries created trust and reduced uncertainty regarding fees, admission requirements, and schedules.

A mother recounted:

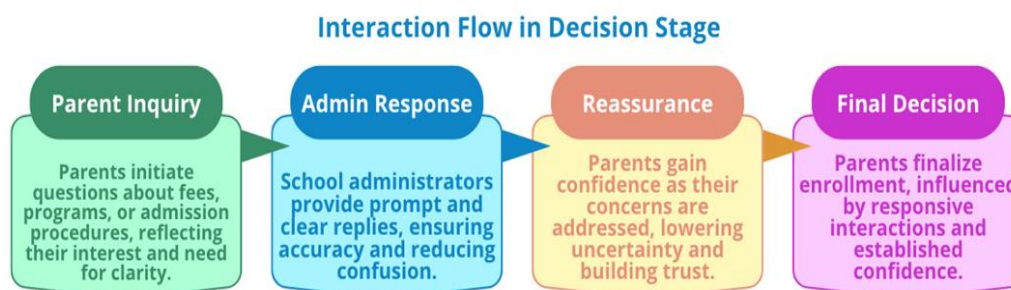
"I messaged the school on Instagram to ask about tuition fees. They replied quickly with detailed information, and that gave me the confidence to register my child."

Social media content at this stage often included infographics on admission procedures or posts announcing open house events. Such content acted as calls-to-action, bridging consideration and decision-making.

The decision stage was heavily influenced by interactivity between parents and school representatives on social media. Parents emphasized that the speed and clarity of responses directly

shaped their confidence in enrolling their children. Figure 4 illustrates the interaction flow from initial inquiries to final decisions.

Figure 4. Interaction Flow in Decision Stage



Source: Netnographic observation and interview data, processed by the authors (2025).

As shown in Figure 4, parents often began with inquiries about fees, programs, or admission procedures. When administrators responded quickly and clearly, reassurance was established, reducing uncertainty. This reassurance subsequently led parents to finalize their decision to enroll. The visualization highlights that responsiveness in digital interactions functions as a critical trust-building mechanism, bridging consideration and action within the ACDAL framework.

Action

Action was reflected in parents proceeding with enrollment, both online and offline. Posts that included links to registration forms or contact numbers were critical in facilitating this step. Parents highlighted that clear instructions in Instagram stories or pinned Facebook posts reduced barriers to taking action.

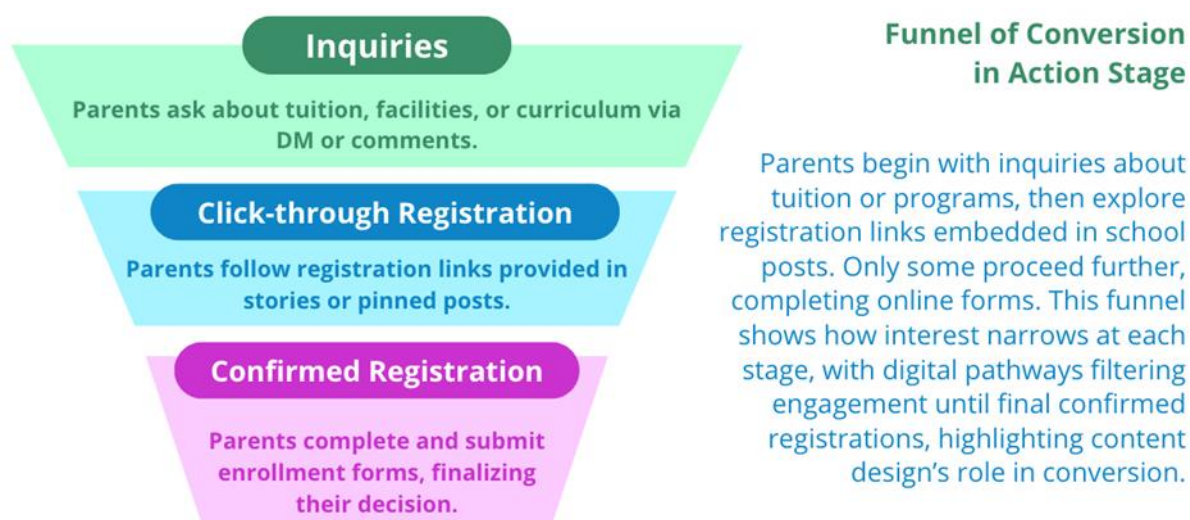
One informant described:

“The Instagram story had a swipe-up link to the registration form. It was very easy. I filled it out and then got contacted by the staff for the next steps.”

This indicates that action-oriented content must not only provide information but also create a seamless path toward enrollment.

The action stage represents a gradual progression rather than a single event. Parents described their experiences beginning with inquiries, followed by exploring registration links, and finally completing the enrollment forms. This process is visualized as a funnel of conversion, shown below.

Figure 5. Funnel of Conversion in Action Stage



Source: Interviews with parents and netnographic observation, processed by the authors (2025).

Figure 5 illustrates that not every inquiry leads to registration. Parents first raised questions through direct messages or comments, particularly about tuition and admission requirements. Some of them followed the digital registration links embedded in social media posts and stories, which they found convenient and accessible. Only a portion of these parents proceeded to finalize their decision by completing the registration forms. The funnel highlights how digital pathways support action but also filter parental engagement, with content design playing a critical role in facilitating each stage.

Loyalty

Loyalty emerged after enrollment, when parents continued to engage with school content as a way of affirming their decision and sharing pride. Posts featuring their children in activities, competitions, or classroom moments reinforced their commitment to the school. Many parents reported sharing such posts on their personal accounts, thereby acting as informal brand ambassadors.

One father stated:

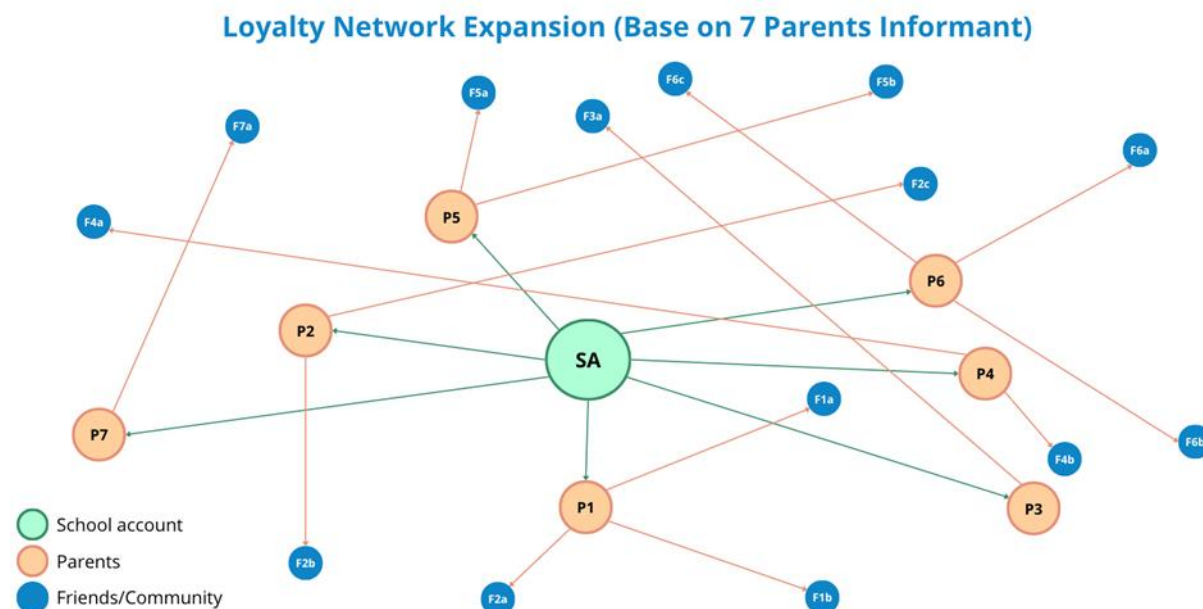
"When I saw my child's photo on the school's Facebook page, I proudly shared it on my timeline. Friends commented and asked about the school, and I told them it's a great place."

Content that emphasized community values, religious activities, and ongoing achievements strengthened loyalty and advocacy. This indicates that loyalty is not merely passive satisfaction but active participation in amplifying the school's reputation.

The loyalty stage was strongly reflected in how parents acted as informal promoters of the school. Interviews revealed that seven parent informants frequently shared school posts, while

netnographic observation confirmed that these reposts expanded the school's visibility into broader networks. The following figure illustrates how loyalty translates into network expansion.

Figure 6. Loyalty Network Expansion



Source: Interviews with parents and netnographic observation of Facebook and Instagram, processed by the authors (2025).

As shown in Figure 6, the school account serves as the origin of content, which is then shared by seven parent informants. Each parent extended the content to their personal networks, represented here as friends or community members. Parents expressed pride in reposting school content, often highlighting their children's achievements. Observational data confirmed that these shares multiplied the school's digital presence, reaching audiences far beyond direct followers. This expansion demonstrates that parental loyalty evolves into advocacy, positioning parents not only as consumers but also as active co-creators of the school's brand reputation.

Integrated Findings

To summarize, social media content shaped parental engagement across all five ACDAL stages. Each stage was associated with distinct content types and engagement patterns, supported by both netnographic observations and interview data.

Table 4. Summary of ACDAL Findings from Interviews and Netnography

ACDAL Stage	Dominant Content Type (FB & IG)	Engagement Pattern (Netnography)	Representative Interview Insight
Awareness	Achievements, event highlights, reels	High likes and shares; discovery via reposts	<i>"I first noticed the school when a competition post was shared in my group."</i> (Mother, 38)
Consideration	Testimonials, facilities, curriculum info	Comments with questions; frequent saves	<i>"Seeing testimonials from other parents helped me compare with other schools."</i> (Father, 42)
Decision	Admission infographics, open house posts	Direct messages; quick admin responses	<i>"When they replied fast to my tuition question, I felt assured to proceed."</i> (Mother, 35)
Action	Registration links, pinned posts, stories	Click-throughs; follow-up confirmation comments	<i>"I used the story link to register, very convenient."</i> (Mother, 33)
Loyalty	Student activities, religious/community events	Parents repost and tag friends; advocacy behaviors	<i>"I proudly shared my child's photo, and many friends asked about the school."</i> (Father, 40)

Source: Authors' synthesis of interview and netnographic data (2025).

Triangulation of Data

The integration of interviews, social media documentation, and observation demonstrates the robustness of findings. Each source confirmed and enriched the others: interviews explained motivations, documentation revealed strategic content types, and observation showed actual engagement behaviors.

The results confirm that parental engagement in school selection follows a structured journey that can be mapped using the ACDAL framework. Social media content functions as distinct touchpoints at each stage, shaping awareness, deepening consideration, enabling decision, facilitating action, and sustaining loyalty.

Collectively, the five stages of the ACDAL framework illustrate a continuous and evolving journey of parental engagement rather than isolated phases. Awareness emerges from exposure to consistent and credible digital content, which gradually transforms into consideration as parents start comparing school values, achievements, and programs. Decision-making unfolds through interactive communication and transparent responses that build confidence in the school's credibility. The action stage marks the conversion of interest into enrollment, while loyalty reflects sustained satisfaction and advocacy through ongoing social media interactions. Viewing these stages as interconnected moments within a single journey provides a deeper understanding of how digital content cultivates trust and long-term commitment between parents and schools.

The results of this study provide important insights into how digital marketing strategies function within the education sector, conceptualized as a service industry. By employing the ACDAL framework (Awareness, Consideration, Decision, Action, Loyalty), parental engagement with school social media content can be understood not merely as "educational involvement" but as a

structured customer journey analogous to those observed in broader service marketing contexts. This discussion interprets the findings in light of contemporary marketing literature, highlighting the novelty of the approach, drawing comparisons with existing studies, and outlining both theoretical and practical implications.

Awareness: Visibility and Brand Signals in Service Marketing

Parental attention is first drawn through consistent exposure to visually appealing and informative posts. At the awareness stage, parents were first introduced to the school brand through high-visibility content such as posts on student achievements and event highlights. Netnographic data confirmed that these posts had the highest rates of likes, shares, and reach beyond the immediate follower base. Interviews reinforced this, with parents often stating that their initial recognition of the school came from posts shared in community networks.

This finding parallels research in marketing that underscores awareness as the first step in the customer journey (Kotler & Keller, 2016). In service marketing, brand signals such as testimonials, awards, or community involvement function as critical touchpoints for initiating consumer recognition (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The evidence here suggests that in the education sector, achievements and public events serve as equivalent brand signals, positioning the school as a credible service provider.

Comparisons with earlier studies further support this interpretation. Voorveld et al. (2018) emphasized that visual and authentic content attracts initial engagement, while Bosetti (2004) highlighted the continuing importance of traditional word-of-mouth in school choice. The current study demonstrates that these two processes now converge in the digital sphere: community recommendations manifest as digital shares and reposts, thereby amplifying awareness far beyond local boundaries.

Consideration: Content Marketing as Decision-Support

As awareness develops into curiosity, parents begin comparing programs, achievements, and school values. The consideration stage demonstrated the centrality of informative content in helping customers (parents) compare alternatives. Posts that provided detailed information about facilities, curriculum, and extracurricular programs were most influential. Testimonial content from other parents or alumni reinforced perceptions of credibility, consistent with the logic of social proof (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Netnographic analysis showed frequent questions in comments, while interviews revealed that parents valued peer experiences in shaping their evaluations.

In marketing theory, this aligns with the concept of content marketing as a decision-support mechanism. Constantinides and Stagno (2011) argued that social media enhances consideration by providing a platform for transparency and authenticity, while e-WOM builds trust. However, Pinteá and Băcilă (2020) caution that overly curated testimonial content risks being dismissed as inauthentic. The present study confirms this concern indirectly: while testimonials were effective,

their influence was strongest when they appeared authentic and specific rather than generic or overly promotional.

Thus, the consideration stage illustrates the critical role of designing content strategies that balance institutional messaging with authentic narratives. This reflects a general principle in digital service marketing: decision-support content must be both informative and trustworthy.

Decision: Interactivity and Trust-Building

The decision process unfolds when communication becomes two-way, reducing uncertainty and confirming trust. The decision stage findings point to the decisive role of responsiveness in building consumer trust. Parents highlighted that quick, detailed, and polite replies to direct messages or comments shaped their confidence to enroll. From a marketing perspective, responsiveness functions as digital customer service, a frontline extension of the brand that can make or break conversion (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

This aligns with Lim and Richardson (2020), who found that rapid responses to online inquiries significantly increase digital trust. It also reflects broader literature on customer experience, which emphasizes the importance of interactivity for trust formation (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). However, critics argue that in high-involvement decisions such as education, trust ultimately depends on offline verification (Herzberg et al., 2020). The present findings suggest a hybrid model: online responsiveness initiates trust, while offline visits confirm it.

This highlights a key theoretical insight: digital service interactions cannot entirely replace physical encounters but function as critical precursors that set the tone for subsequent offline engagement.

Action: Seamless Pathways and Digital Conversion

Once confidence is established, parents proceed to concrete actions such as registration and inquiries. The action stage is characterized by conversion: parents moving from interest to enrollment. Findings indicate that posts with clear calls-to-action (CTAs), such as pinned posts with registration forms or Instagram stories with swipe-up links, were most effective in facilitating this transition. Parents repeatedly described the process as “easy” and “convenient,” confirming that frictionless digital pathways drive action.

This result resonates with Tuten and Solomon's (2021) assertion that clear CTAs significantly improve conversion rates. In service marketing more broadly, ease of transition from consideration to action is a core determinant of customer acquisition. The netnographic data in this study supported this, showing higher engagement and click-through rates on posts with explicit CTAs compared to generic content.

Nevertheless, parallels with Wei et al. (2022) remind us that in the education sector, action often includes offline confirmation steps. This suggests that digital pathways in service industries with high-involvement products (like education or healthcare) are most effective when integrated with offline touchpoints, reinforcing the notion of hybrid customer journeys.

Loyalty: Advocacy and Co-Creation of Brand Value

Sustained engagement emerges as parents continue sharing, commenting, and promoting the school's content. Loyalty emerged not simply as continued satisfaction but as advocacy. Parents actively shared posts featuring their children, tagged friends, and expressed pride. This behavior transforms them from passive consumers into active co-creators of brand value (Gensler et al., 2013). The study confirmed that parental loyalty in digital spaces extended the school's reach beyond its official audience, effectively multiplying brand visibility through user-generated advocacy.

This finding connects with Keller, (2013) framework on brand equity, which emphasizes loyalty and advocacy as the pinnacle of customer relationships. Similarly, Park et al., (2006) suggest that attachment drives consumer behaviors that go beyond purchase to include promotion. Yet Nierenberg et al., (2017) caution that digital loyalty may be fragile if the underlying service quality falters. This study's interviews confirmed that advocacy is contingent on continuous performance: parents expressed loyalty online, but tied it to ongoing achievements and the school's value delivery.

Therefore, in service marketing terms, loyalty in the education industry involves sustaining both digital engagement and core service quality, ensuring alignment between image and reality.

Evolution of Customer Journey Models: From AIDA to ACDAL

The historical development of customer journey theories began with AIDA (Lewis, 1898), which described the psychological sequence of attention, interest, desire, and action. This model was later extended into AIDAL by adding loyalty as a post-purchase phase, highlighting retention. Kotler and Keller (2016) expanded the perspective further through the buyer decision process, outlining five stages: problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior. While this framework offered a more systematic view than AIDA/AIDAL, it remained primarily focused on consumer goods.

Lemon and Verhoef (2016) reframed the discussion by introducing the Customer Journey Map (CJM), which condensed consumer behavior into three stages: pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase. This model, while useful for retail and service industries, often oversimplified high-involvement contexts such as education. To address this gap, the present study introduces ACDAL (Awareness, Consideration, Decision, Action, Loyalty) as a contextual adaptation. By distinguishing consideration and decision as separate stages, ACDAL integrates the psychological depth of AIDAL, the rational structure of Kotler's buyer decision process, and the service orientation of CJM, providing a more granular and contextually relevant framework for analyzing parental school choice.

ACDAL as an Extension of Customer Journey

The integration of interview data, social media documentation, and observation highlights how the ACDAL framework enriches the conceptualization of the customer journey in service marketing. Traditional three-stage models (pre-purchase, purchase, post-purchase) oversimplify complex decisions in high-involvement services. ACDAL provides a more granular structure, capturing the sequential influence of digital touchpoints.

To position the findings within existing literature, the study compared its results with previous research on customer journey, digital marketing, and parental engagement. The comparison reveals points of alignment as well as divergence, highlighting the novelty of applying the ACDAL framework to the education service sector. Table 5 summarizes the supporting and contradicting evidence from earlier studies alongside the findings of this research.

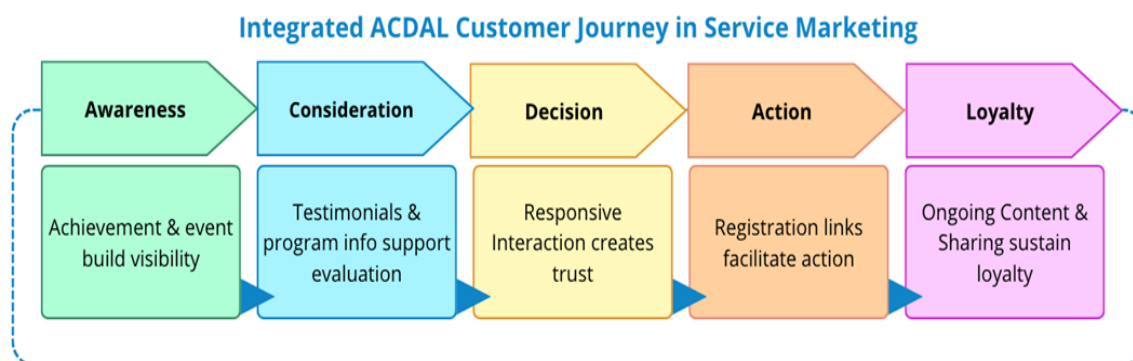
Table 5. Comparison of Findings with Previous Studies (Pro vs Contra)

ACDAL Stage	Supporting Literature (Pro)	Contradicting Literature (Contra)	Alignment with Findings
Awareness	Kotler & Keller (2016); Voorveld et al. (2018) – visual content enhances brand recognition	Bosetti (2004) – word-of-mouth offline is dominant	Awareness is now driven by digital achievements/events, amplified through online sharing
Consideration	Dwivedi et al. (2021); Constantinides & Stagno (2011) – e-WOM builds trust	Pintea & Băcilă (2020) – testimonials may be perceived as biased	Authentic testimonials and facilities information supported parental comparison and evaluation
Decision	Lemon & Verhoef (2016); Lim & Richardson (2020) – interactivity builds trust	Herzberg et al. (2020) – trust primarily offline	Responsiveness in digital interaction played a decisive role, often preceding offline confirmation
Action	Tuten & Solomon (2021) – CTAs drive conversion	Wei et al. (2022) – offline steps still critical	Digital CTAs initiated action, but parents often validated decisions offline
Loyalty	Gensler et al. (2013); Keller (2013) – advocacy extends brand value	Nierenberg et al. (2017) – digital loyalty may be fragile	Parents acted as advocates by sharing posts, sustaining loyalty through digital and community ties

Source: Authors' synthesis based on literature review and study findings (2025).

The novelty of this study lies in applying ACDAL to the education sector as a service marketing case. While CJM literature has focused on retail and consumer goods (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), this study demonstrates that parental school choice follows a similarly structured but more elaborate pathway. By integrating netnographic analysis with parental interviews, it extends customer journey scholarship into a new domain, offering a framework applicable to other service industries.

Figure 7. Integrated ACDAL Customer Journey in Service Marketing

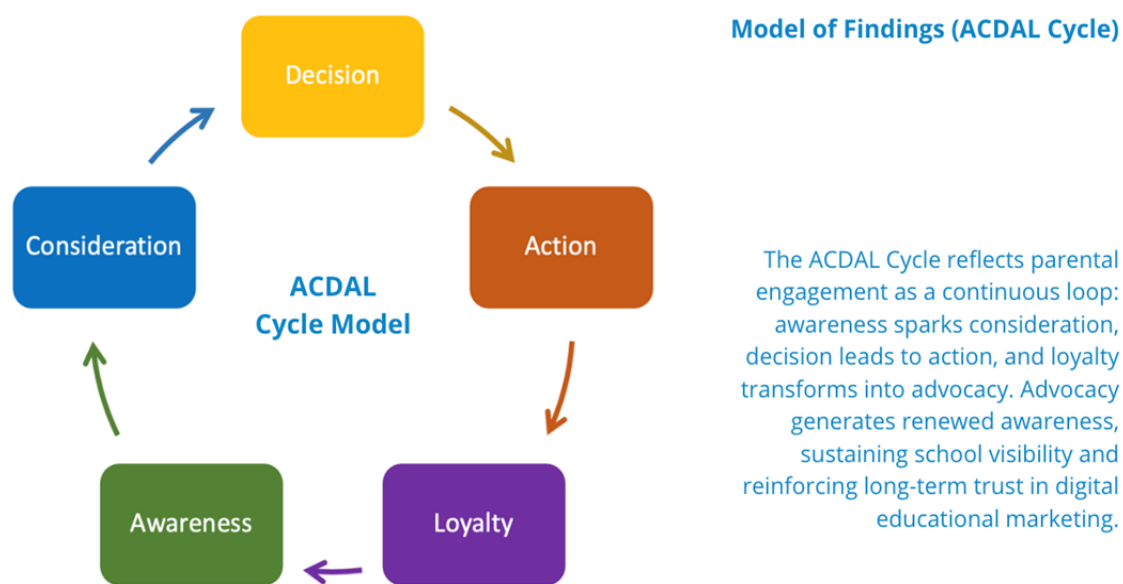


Source: Developed by the authors (2025).

While Figure 7 highlights the linear pathway of parental engagement, it is important to note that the process does not end with loyalty. Instead, loyalty feeds back into awareness, creating a continuous cycle of engagement. To capture this dynamic, the following figure visualizes the ACDAL journey as a cyclical model, demonstrating how parental advocacy generates new awareness and sustains the school's digital marketing ecosystem.

To conclude the study, the following figure summarizes the findings by visualizing parental engagement as a continuous cycle. This cyclical model highlights that parental involvement does not end with enrollment but evolves into loyalty and advocacy, feeding back into new awareness for the school.

Figure 8. Summary Model of Findings (ACDAL Cycle)



Source: Developed by the authors (2025).

As shown in Figure 8, parental engagement in digital contexts is best conceptualized as cyclical. Each stage builds upon the previous one, and loyalty transforms into advocacy that reinitiates

awareness in extended networks. This cyclical understanding provides a comprehensive summary of the study's contributions and serves as a conceptual bridge to the concluding section.

Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, the study contributes to three areas:

1. It extends the scope of customer journey research into the education sector, treated as a competitive service industry.
2. It validates ACDAL as a more nuanced framework than traditional CJM, offering greater explanatory power for high-involvement decisions.
3. It underscores the role of digital touchpoints (particularly content strategies and responsiveness) as core mechanisms of trust, engagement, and loyalty.

These contributions highlight that service marketing is increasingly inseparable from digital strategy, with customer journeys mediated by online content and interactions.

Practical Implications

From a managerial perspective, the study offers concrete insights for service providers in education and beyond.

1. Content Strategy: Differentiate content by ACDAL stage. Use achievement-oriented content for awareness, testimonials for consideration, detailed Q&A for decision, CTAs for action, and student-focused updates for loyalty.
2. Responsiveness: Treat social media replies as digital customer service. Allocate trained staff to ensure timely, authentic responses.
3. Hybrid Journeys: Integrate digital and offline touchpoints. While digital pathways drive engagement and conversion, offline reassurance consolidates trust.
4. Loyalty Programs: Encourage parents (customers) to act as brand advocates by sharing experiences and creating user-generated content.

These strategies align with broader service marketing principles, positioning schools as active competitors in the digital service marketplace.

Limitations

While offering valuable insights, this study has limitations. First, its single-case design in Tasikmalaya restricts generalizability. Second, data were drawn only from Facebook and Instagram, excluding platforms like TikTok or YouTube. Third, the qualitative sample of seven parents limits the breadth of perspectives. These limitations suggest caution in extrapolating findings universally.

Future Research

Future studies could adopt mixed methods to measure the relative influence of ACDAL stages quantitatively. Comparative research across multiple schools or regions could test contextual differences. Expanding to other platforms would provide a fuller understanding of digital strategies in education marketing. Finally, longitudinal designs could trace loyalty trajectories over time, examining how online engagement translates into sustained advocacy.

This study makes two main contributions. From a theoretical perspective, it extends the customer journey framework into the field of educational marketing by explaining how parental engagement follows a structured process of awareness, consideration, decision, action, and loyalty. The ACDAL model introduced in this study provides a new analytical lens for understanding how digital content shapes parents' decision-making behaviors in a culturally specific educational context. From a practical perspective, the study offers a framework for schools to design content and communication strategies that correspond to each stage of parental engagement. Applying this approach helps schools build trust, improve enrollment communication, and sustain long-term relationships with parents.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how parents engage with school-generated social media content in the process of school selection, using the ACDAL framework: Awareness, Consideration, Decision, Action, and Loyalty. The integration of interview data, social media documentation, and observation through netnographic analysis demonstrated that parental engagement is not random but follows a structured customer journey similar to consumer behavior in other sectors.

The findings revealed that awareness is triggered by authentic and visually appealing posts, particularly those showcasing achievements and events. Consideration deepens through testimonials, program details, and facilities showcases, which provide parents with decision-support information. Decision-making is strongly influenced by responsive communication via direct messages and comments, highlighting the centrality of interactivity in building trust. Action is facilitated by seamless digital pathways such as registration links and pinned posts, while loyalty is sustained by continuous engagement with posts featuring student activities and achievements, leading parents to act as informal advocates for the school.

Theoretically, this study contributes to extending the customer journey literature into the education sector. By employing the ACDAL framework, it demonstrates that parental involvement in school selection is best understood through a stage-based model that captures nuanced interactions across digital touchpoints. It shows that customer journey mapping is not limited to commercial contexts but can be effectively applied to educational marketing, thereby bridging gaps in both marketing and education literature.

Practically, the findings provide schools with clear guidance on designing social media strategies that align with each ACDAL stage. To attract attention, schools should prioritize authentic

achievement-oriented content. To strengthen consideration, they should highlight testimonials and facilities in transparent ways. To drive decisions, schools must institutionalize rapid and authentic responses to parental inquiries. For action, clear calls-to-action and seamless digital registration pathways are essential. Finally, to sustain loyalty, schools should continuously publish content that engages parents emotionally and reaffirms their trust in the school. These strategies not only support student recruitment but also foster long-term parental advocacy.

Despite its contributions, the study has limitations. It is based on a single case study in Tasikmalaya and limited to Facebook and Instagram platforms. The findings therefore may not be generalizable to other contexts or platforms such as TikTok and YouTube, which are increasingly popular among parents. Additionally, the informants of seven parents, while sufficient for qualitative insights, cannot represent the full diversity of parental experiences.

Future research should expand the scope by conducting comparative studies across multiple schools and platforms, employing quantitative surveys to measure the relative strength of each ACDAL stage, and adopting longitudinal designs to track parental engagement over time. Such approaches would enrich the theoretical robustness of the ACDAL framework in educational contexts and offer more generalizable insights for practice.

In conclusion, this study underscores the growing importance of social media as strategic touchpoints in parental school selection. By systematically mapping parental engagement through ACDAL, it demonstrates that digital platforms are not merely promotional channels but essential components of the customer journey. Schools that strategically design and manage their social media content stand to gain not only in attracting new students but also in building lasting loyalty and advocacy among parents.

Overall, this study highlights the novelty of the ACDAL framework as a contextual innovation that extends the customer journey model beyond commercial settings into the educational domain. It offers an integrated perspective that connects digital engagement, parental trust, and decision-making across sequential touchpoints. Theoretically, it bridges gaps between service marketing and education research by providing a model that captures both cognitive and emotional dynamics of parental involvement. Practically, it equips schools and policymakers with a structured approach to design content and communication strategies that foster awareness, strengthen trust, and sustain advocacy. The ACDAL framework therefore serves not only as an analytical model but also as a strategic guide for educational institutions operating in competitive and digitally mediated environments.

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