

ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL PROMOTION AND SCHOOL IMAGE ON STUDENTS' DECISIONS TO CHOOSE A SCHOOL THROUGH INTEREST AS A MEDIATION VARIABLE AT STATE VOCATIONAL SCHOOL 2 PEMATANG SIANTAR

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Abstract

The development of information technology in the past five years has significantly impacted the way schools communicate and attract prospective students, with social media, websites, and digital platforms becoming the primary sources of information for parents and students. This study aims to analyze the influence of digital promotion and school image on school choice decisions through interest as a mediating variable at SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar. Digital promotion, which involves a series of marketing activities utilizing digital media, can build closer relationships with audiences and influence school choice decisions. School image, formed through the experiences, information, and achievements displayed, plays a significant role in shaping prospective students' perceptions of the quality of education offered. This study used 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 showed that digital promotion had a positive and significant effect on student choice decisions and interest. School image also had a positive effect on interest, although it was not significant on the decision to choose directly. Student interest proved to be a significant mediating variable between digital promotion, school image, and choice decisions. These findings provide important contributions to school communication strategies, particularly in enhancing digital promotion and strengthening the school's image to attract new prospective students.

Keywords: *digital promotion, school image, voting decisions, interest*

INTRODUCTION

Background

Advances in information technology over the past five years have transformed the way schools communicate and attract prospective students. Social media, websites, and digital platforms are now the primary sources for parents and students seeking school information. Dwivedi et al. (2021) define digital promotion as "a series of marketing activities that utilize digital media to convey values, build relationships, and influence audience behavior." This suggests that schools can no longer rely solely on physical brochures or in-person visits but must build active, creative, and interactive digital communication. On the other hand, school image plays a crucial role in shaping prospective students' perceptions and beliefs about the school's quality. Kamalia (2025) asserts that "school image is the impression formed in the minds of the public based on the school's experiences, information, achievements, and the quality of educational services provided." When a school's image is positive—for example, it is known for its high performance, competent teachers, and excellent learning facilities—prospective students are more likely to choose that school.

However, students' decisions about choosing a school are not solely determined by promotions and image, but also by their interest in the school itself. Interest serves as a psychological bridge between exposure to promotions/images and the final decision. Restarie et al. (2025) state that "interest in choosing a school is reflected in students' interest, attention, information seeking, and desire to enroll in a particular school over others." This means that digital promotions and a school's image must be able to foster emotional and cognitive appeal so that students are truly motivated to choose. Meanwhile, the decision to choose a school is the result of a student's and/or parents' thought process and evaluation in determining the appropriate educational institution. Nurohman et al. (2025) explain

ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL PROMOTION AND SCHOOL IMAGE ON STUDENTS' DECISIONS TO CHOOSE A SCHOOL THROUGH INTEREST AS A MEDIATION VARIABLE AT STATE VOCATIONAL SCHOOL 2 PEMATANG Siantar

Jerriwanto Pontus Regen Sitorus et al

that "the decision to choose a school is a decision-making process that involves recognizing needs, searching for information, evaluating alternatives, making a choice, and post-choice behavior." Thus, students' decisions do not emerge spontaneously, but are formed through a process of logical and emotional consideration. In the context of SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar, this school is in a competitive situation with various other vocational schools that are also intensively conducting digital promotions and building the school's image. However, it is not yet known for certain to what extent the school's digital promotions are able to stimulate student interest, and whether the school's image formed in the community actually influences students' decisions to choose the school. In other words, an empirical analysis is needed to determine whether student interest mediates the relationship between digital promotions and school image on the decision to choose. In the last three years, there has been a decline in the number of students enrolling at SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar, as can be seen below.

Table 1. Number of Students at State Vocational School 2 Pematang Siantar

No.	Year	Amount
1.	2023	1,700
2.	2024	1,610
3.	2025	1,493

Source: State Vocational School 2 Pematang Siantar, 2025

Table 1 above shows a decline in the number of student enrollments over the past three years, raising concerns that this will recur in the following year. Based on this description, this study was conducted to analyze the influence of digital promotion and school image on students' school selection decisions through interest as a mediating variable at SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar. The results of this study are expected to serve as a basis for decision-making regarding school communication strategies, particularly in optimizing digital promotion and strengthening school image during the new student admissions process (PPDB).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Decision to Choose a School

a) Understanding Choosing a School

The decision to choose a school is the result of a student's/parent's evaluation 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, seeking information, evaluating alternatives, making a decision to choose, and post-choice behavior."

b) Factors Influencing the Decision to Choose a School

Factors that influence students in choosing Vocational High Schools (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)

Internal factors originate from within the student and relate to psychological aspects and personal characteristics. These factors reflect how students understand their needs, potential, and future goals. One of the most influential internal factors is interest and talent. Students tend to choose schools that align with their interests and abilities to optimize and enhance the learning process.

2) External Factors (Environment)

External factors originate from a student's environment and directly or indirectly influence the decision to choose a school. Parents and family play a significant role in this process, particularly in providing guidance, advice, and considerations regarding their child's future. Parents' expectations for their child's career and success often form the basis for school choice.

3) Social and Economic Factors

Social and economic factors relate to the social conditions of the family and the environment in which the student lives. A family's socioeconomic status influences parents' ability to finance education, including school fees, learning supplies, and transportation. Economic circumstances are often a primary limitation or consideration in determining realistic and affordable school choices.

In general, students' decisions in choosing a vocational school are the result of the interaction of personal factors (interests, talents, career perceptions) and environmental factors (family, friends, school image, and economics).

ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL PROMOTION AND SCHOOL IMAGE ON STUDENTS' DECISIONS TO CHOOSE A SCHOOL THROUGH INTEREST AS A MEDIATION VARIABLE AT STATE VOCATIONAL SCHOOL 2 PEMATANG Siantar

Jerriwanto Pontus Regen Sitorus **et al**

Schools that are able to build a positive brand, provide facilities relevant to industry needs, and strengthen community ties will be more attractive to prospective students.

c) School Selection Decision Indicators

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

- 1) Recognition of Needs
Parents/students realize the need to choose a school that suits their child's educational needs, character, and future.
- 2) Information Search
Parents/students look for information about schools through the internet, brochures, social media, friends, alumni, or direct visits.
- 3) Alternative Evaluation
Parents/students compare several schools based on factors such as teacher quality, facilities, fees, achievements, distance, and school image.
- 4) Election Decision
The stage of determining the school choice that is considered most suitable and making the final decision to enroll.
- 5) Post-Election Behavior
Satisfaction or dissatisfaction after students enter the school, including whether parents would recommend the school to others.

Interest in Choosing a School

a) Understanding Interest

Interest is a psychological drive that influences a person's tendency to choose. Restarie et al. (2025) stated that "interest in choosing a school is reflected in students' interest, attention, information seeking, and desire to enroll in a particular school over another." The higher the interest, the greater the chance of a student making the decision to enroll.

b) Interest Indicator

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

- 1) Interest
The level of student/parent liking and interest in a particular school because of the values, programs, or characteristics it offers.
- 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 activities.
- 3) The Desire to Choose
The tendency to prioritize this school over alternatives indicates a clear preference.
- 4) Information Search
Students/parents' efforts to dig deeper into the school through the internet, alumni, friends, or visiting in person.
- 5) Decision to Register
Real action in the form of a willingness to register, fill out a new student admission form, or take the school's selection test.

School Image

a) Understanding School Image

School image is formed from public perception of the school's quality. Kamalia (2025) states that "school image is the impression formed in the public mind based on the school's experiences, information, achievements, and the quality of educational services provided." A positive school image will increase trust and appeal to the school.

Budiyatmo & Iriani (2022) also emphasized that school image is "the public's impressions, beliefs, and assessments of a school, formed through direct interactions and information circulating in the social environment." This suggests that image is a psychological process based on real-life experiences and reputation.

b) School Image Indicators

School Image Indicators according to Kamalia (2025):

- 1) Quality of Educational Services
Community views on the quality of the learning process, discipline, student development, and academic climate in schools.
- 2) School Reputation and Achievements
Public impression of academic/non-academic achievements, accreditation, and recognition from external parties.
- 3) Facilities and Infrastructure (Facilities)
Community assessment of the completeness, comfort, safety, and cleanliness of learning facilities, classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and the school environment.
- 4) Behavior and Competence of Teachers and Education Personnel
The school's image is formed from the friendliness, professionalism, teaching ability, and ethics of teachers and staff in providing services.
- 5) Public Relations and Communication
The impression that arises from the way the school builds communication with parents, alumni, and the community (for example through social media, public activities, and openness of information).

Digital Promotion

a) Understanding Digital Promotion

The development of information technology has transformed 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 serves not only to disseminate information but also to build closeness and engagement with prospective students and parents.

Another opinion was expressed by Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick (2022) who explained that digital promotion is "a marketer's effort to achieve marketing goals through the application of digital technology and media on online communication channels such as websites, email, social media platforms, and search engines." In the school context, digital promotion is an important tool in conveying excellence, flagship programs, and graduate competency profiles.

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 people's interest in choosing a school.

b) Digital Promotion Indicators

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

- 1) Entertainment
Promotional content should be fun, engaging, creative, and provide a positive experience so that the audience feels comfortable interacting.
- 2) Interaction
Digital promotions should provide space for two-way communication, such as comments, messages, live chat, polls, and discussions.
- 3) Trendiness (Current/Active in presenting the latest information)
Content must be up-to-date, follow trends, and be quick to convey the latest information about products or services.
- 4) Customization (Adjustment/Suitability to customer needs)
Promotions are personalized, tailored to the interests, preferences, and characteristics of consumer segmentation.
- 5) Word of Mouth (User to user talk / Reviews and Recommendations)
Digital promotions encourage the spread of recommendations, reviews, testimonials, or sharing from one consumer to another.

B. Conceptual Framework

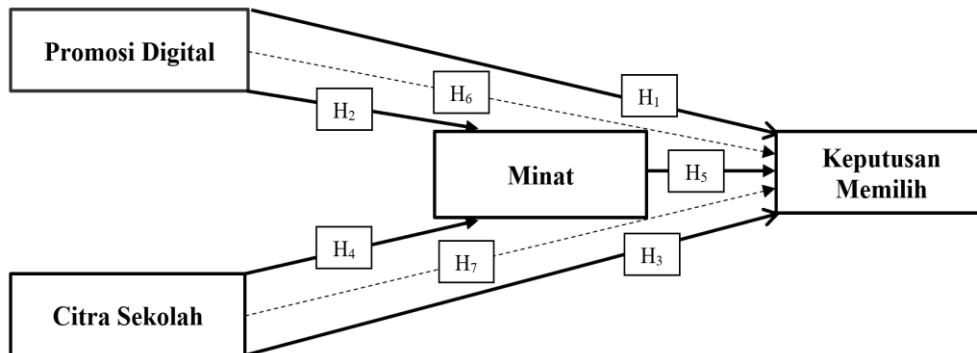


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Research Hypothesis

H1 : Digital promotion has a positive and significant influence on the decision to choose SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar .

H2 : Digital promotion has a positive and significant impact on interest in SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar .

H3 : School image has a positive and significant influence on the decision to choose SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar .

H4 : School image has a positive and significant influence on interest in State Vocational School 2 Pematang Siantar .

H5 : Interest has a positive and significant influence on the decision to choose SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar .

H6 : Digital promotion has a positive and significant influence on the decision to choose through interest in State Vocational School 2 Pematang Siantar .

H7 : School image has a positive and significant influence on the decision to choose through interest in State Vocational School 2 Pematang Siantar .

RESEARCH METHODS

Types 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 the philosophy of positivism, used to research a specific population or sample. Sampling techniques are generally random, data collection uses research instruments, and data analysis is quantitative/statistical in nature with the aim of testing predetermined hypotheses. This type of quantitative research was conducted to create a study that aims to adjust a research and to analyze 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 Research Time

The research location was SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar, located on Jalan Asahan/Sannawaluh, Pematangsiantar. The research period was three months, from October to December 2025.

Population and Sample

According to Arikunto (2022), a population is all elements or elements that share the same characteristics and become the object of research. In the context of research, a population refers to the group to be studied and examined, which can be individuals, objects, or events that meet 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 people. The sampling used in this study was 10% of the population, resulting in a sample of 150 students. The sample was taken from class X, which is a new student class.

Research Data Sources

The data sources used in this study are primary data .

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Outer Model Analysis

Outer Model Analysis using the *PLS Algorithm* , produces:

Validity Test

Table 1. Outer Loadings Values

	Digital Promotion	Interest	School Image	Student Decision
X1.1	0.800			
X1.2	0.764			
X1.3	0.813			
X1.4	0.792			
X1.5	0.786			
X2.1			0.832	
X2.2			0.822	
X2.3			0.801	
X2.4			0.784	
X2.5			0.641	
Y.1				0.625
Y.2				0.778
Y.3				0.625
Y.4				0.825
Y.5				0.717
Z.1		0.843		
Z.2		0.769		
Z.3		0.825		
Z.4		0.857		
Z.5		0.772		

Source: Smart PLS Output, 2025

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

ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL PROMOTION AND SCHOOL IMAGE ON STUDENTS' DECISIONS TO CHOOSE A SCHOOL THROUGH INTEREST AS A MEDIATION VARIABLE AT STATE VOCATIONAL SCHOOL 2 PEMATANG Siantar

Jerriwanto Pontus Regen Sitorus et al

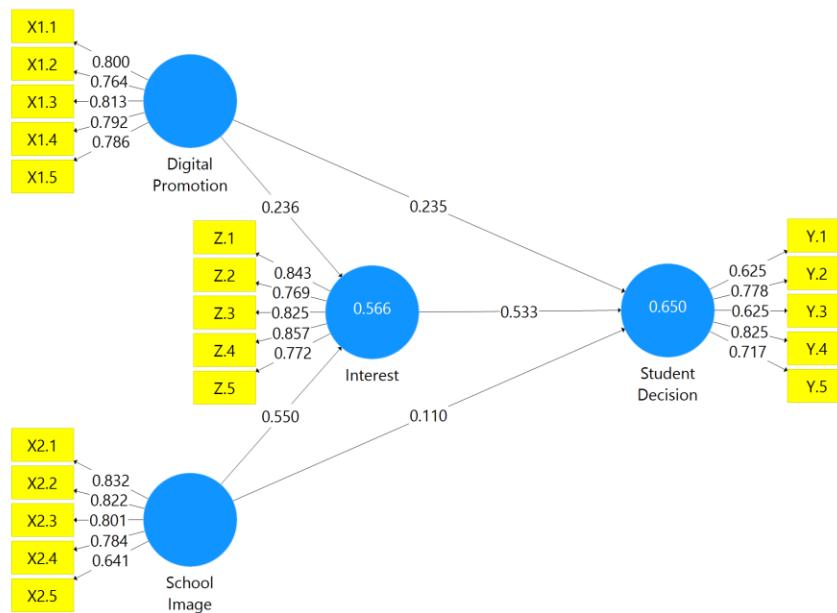


Figure 1. Outer Loading

In this study there is an equation and the equation consists of two substructures for substructure 1:

$$Z = \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + e_1$$

$$Z = 0.236X_1 + 0.550Z + e_1$$

For substructure 2:

$$Y = \beta_2 X_1 + \beta_3 X_2 + \beta_4 Z + e_2$$

$$Y = 0.235 X_1 + 0.110X_2 + 0.533Z + e_2$$

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
School Image	0.835	0.844	0.885	0.607
Student Decision	0.765	0.790	0.840	0.516

Source: Smart PLS Output, 2025

Table 2 above shows 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 can be relied upon to measure their respective constructs. Therefore, the research instrument is deemed reliable and suitable for use in testing the structural model.

Coefficient of Determination (R²)

Evaluating a model with PLS begins by examining the R-square for each dependent latent variable. The table below shows the results of R-square estimation using SmartPLS.

Table 3. R Square Results

	R Square	R Square Adjusted
Interest	0.566	0.562
Student Decision	0.650	0.645

Source: Smart PLS, 2025

In table 3 there is an R square value for both dependent variables for the interest variable there is an R square value of 0.566 meaning the influence of digital promotion and school image is 56.6% the rest is on other variables outside

ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL PROMOTION AND SCHOOL IMAGE ON STUDENTS' DECISIONS TO CHOOSE A SCHOOL THROUGH INTEREST AS A MEDIATION VARIABLE AT STATE VOCATIONAL SCHOOL 2 PEMATANG Siantar

Jerriwanto Pontus Regen Sitorus **et al**

the model. The R square value of the decision to choose is 0.650 meaning digital promotion, school image and interest are 65% the rest is on other variables outside the model.

Structural Model Testing (Inner Model)

Hypothesis Testing

Direct Influence Between Variables

The direct influence between variables can be seen in the *path coefficients*. The data processing results show the direct influence values, which can be seen in the following table.

Table 4. *Path Coefficients* (Direct Effect)

	Original Sample	T Statistics	P Values	Conclusion
Digital Promotion -> Student Decision	0.235	3,382	0.001	Accepted
Digital Promotion -> Interest	0.236	3,035	0.003	Accepted
School Image -> Student Decision	0.110	1,400	0.162	Rejected
School Image -> Interest	0.550	7,269	0,000	Accepted
Interest -> Student Decision	0.533	7,477	0,000	Accepted

Source: Smart PLS Output, 2025

In the results of Table 4, there are direct influence values as follows:

1. Digital promotion has a positive and significant influence on voting decisions with a t-statistic value of 3.382. above 1.96 and a significance of 0.001 below 0.05 means that digital promotion has a real effect on students' voting decisions because the significance value is below 0.05. The results of this study are in line with the results of previous studies, namely that marketing promotions have a positive and significant effect on the purchasing decision of Kanki shoes on Shopee in Gen-Z 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 3.035 above 1.96 and a significance value of 0.003 below 0.05. This means that digital promotion has a significant effect on interest, as the significance value is below 0.05. This finding aligns with previous research, indicating that marketing promotion has a positive and significant effect on increasing interest (Fiona et al., 2022).
3. School image has a positive but insignificant effect on the decision to choose a school with a t-statistic value of 1.400 below 1.96 and a significance of 0.162 above 0.05, meaning that school image has no real effect because the significance value is above 0.05. The results of this study are not in line with previous studies, namely that brand image has a positive and significant effect on the decision to choose a school to purchase MS Glow products (Harahap & Harianto, 2023; Rahmadani, 2024; Sonia & Siregar, 2025).
4. School image has a positive and significant effect on interest, with a t-statistic value of 7.269 above 1.96 and a significance value of 0.000 below 0.05. This means that school image has no significant effect because the significance value is above 0.05. The results of this study are in line with previous research, which found that brand image has a positive and significant effect on interest (Zulfikar, 2022).
5. Interest has a positive and significant effect on the decision to choose a school with a t-statistic value of 7.477 above 1.96 and a significance value 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 research, namely that interest has a positive and significant effect on purchasing decisions (Paramita et al., 2022; Fitri, 2022) .

Indirect Influence Between Variables

The indirect influence between variables can be seen in the *specific indirect effects values*. The data processing results show the indirect effect values, which can be seen in Table 5 below.

ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL PROMOTION AND SCHOOL IMAGE ON STUDENTS' DECISIONS TO CHOOSE A SCHOOL THROUGH INTEREST AS A MEDIATION VARIABLE AT STATE VOCATIONAL SCHOOL 2 PEMATANG Siantar

Jerriwanto Pontus Regen Sitorus **et al**

Table 5. *Specific Indirect Effects*

	Original Sample	T Statistics	P Values	Conclusion
Digital Promotion -> Interest -> Student Decision	0.126	2,795	0.005	Accepted
School Image -> Interest -> Student Decision	0.294	5,268	0,000	Accepted

Source: Smart PLS, 2025

In table 5 there is an indirect influence between variables, namely:

1. Digital promotion has a positive and significant influence on the decision to choose through interest with a t-statistic value of 2.795. above 1.96 and a significance value of 0.005 below 0.05 means that interest plays a role as a mediating variable between digital promotion and the decision to choose.
2. School image has a positive and significant influence on the decision to choose through interest with a t-statistic value of 5.268. above 1.96 and a significance value of 0.000 below 0.05 means that interest plays a role as a mediating variable between school image and the decision to choose.

CONCLUSION

1. Digital promotion has a positive and significant influence on the decision to choose SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar.
2. Digital promotion has a positive and significant impact on interest in SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar.
3. School image has a positive but not significant influence on the decision to choose SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar.
4. School image has a positive and significant influence on interest in SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar.
5. Interest has a positive and significant influence on the decision to choose SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar.
6. Digital promotion has a positive and significant influence on the decision to choose through interest in State Vocational School 2 Pematang Siantar.
7. School image has a positive and significant influence on the decision to choose through interest in State Vocational School 2 Pematang Siantar.

SUGGESTION

1. For the decision variable to choose a school with the lowest value statement, namely " I compare SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar with other schools before choosing." So the suggestion that can be given is to increase cooperation with the business and industrial world (DUDI) to provide more internship opportunities and industry-based training, so that students can have skills relevant to the needs of the job market and increase the competitiveness of the school.
2. The lowest score for interest was "I pay attention to information about SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar when I see school promotions." Therefore, the suggestion is to highlight the excellence of the school's expertise programs through digital platforms such as social media, websites, and promotional videos. Showcasing success stories of alumni who have succeeded in the workforce or continued on to higher education can attract the attention of prospective students and parents, as well as demonstrate the quality of the education offered .
3. The image of the school with the lowest score statement "SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar is known as a high-achieving school. Suggestions can be given to utilize this reputation to strengthen the school's brand. This can be done by highlighting achievements that have been achieved in various fields (academic, vocational, sports, arts) through social media, websites, and publications. In addition, holding activities that involve the community and industry, such as competitions or seminars, can increase visibility and expand cooperation networks, as well as strengthen the school's positive image.
4. The digital promotion with the lowest score statement was "The school's social media provides a space for interaction between prospective students and the school." Suggestions include maximizing these platforms by holding regular Q&A sessions or webinars. This can provide prospective students with the opportunity to learn more about the excellent programs, facilities, and opportunities available at SMK Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar. Furthermore, featuring testimonials from alumni and accomplished students can also increase credibility and attract prospective students.

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