

The Role of Instagram in Parents' School Selection Decision-Making Process

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 2026-09-02 Accepted: 2026-09-09 Published: 2026-09-21	This study examines the role of Instagram in parents' school selection decision-making process. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the research was conducted in Cakung District, East Jakarta, and involved five mothers of prospective students who had accessed school-related information on Instagram. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed with NVivo 15 to support case classification, coding, thematic development, and visualization. The findings show that Instagram serves as an initial gateway to information, increasing school awareness and familiarity through repeated exposure. Parents then use visual content to assess school activities, facilities, learning environments, religious education, and student experiences. Trust develops gradually through consistent posting, perceived transparency, and responsiveness, but parents do not rely on Instagram alone. They verify information through comments, other parents, family discussions, alternative sources, and direct observation. The decision-making process, therefore, follows a digital-to-interpersonal pathway comprising information seeking, visual assessment, trust formation, verification, school comparison, family deliberation, and decision confirmation. Instagram supports, rather than independently determines, the final school choice Keywords: Instagram, Parent decision-making, School choice, Social media

INTRODUCTION

School selection is an important educational decision with long-term consequences for children's academic development, social experiences, and character formation. For parents, choosing a school is rarely a straightforward matter. The decision commonly involves identifying available alternatives, gathering information, comparing school characteristics, considering children's individual needs, discussing options within the family, and assessing the perceived fit between a school and parental expectations. Research on school choice shows that the notion of the "right school" is not determined solely by objective indicators such as academic performance. Parents also construct perceptions of school fit through family values, social experiences, available information, and beliefs about the educational environment they consider appropriate for their children (Kafka, 2022). School choice is further shaped by socioeconomic conditions, children's characteristics, and family resources that influence parents' ability to access and evaluate different educational alternatives (Lei & Yu, 2025).

Information, therefore, plays a central role in the school selection process because parents cannot

realistically evaluate every school through direct observation. Families typically construct a limited set of viable options before making a final choice. This choice set is formed through several mechanisms, including geographical proximity, publicly available information, and interactions with other families (Canals et al., 2023). School preferences may subsequently evolve through social processes in which parents exchange information, experiences, and judgments within their networks. Previous studies have demonstrated that social networks and family social capital can influence educational aspirations and choices, although access to such informational resources is unevenly distributed across social groups (Lenkewitz & Wittek, 2022). Parental networks may also reflect socioeconomic differences, which means that educational information circulates through social relationships that vary considerably in their resources and influence.

The digitalization of communication has expanded this information environment (Apriyanti & Sidharta, 2025). Parents are increasingly able to access school-related information without relying exclusively on brochures, open houses, institutional visits, or personal recommendations. A systematic review of parental social media use indicates that social media has become an important environment for searching, evaluating, and exchanging information relevant to parenting and family decision-making (Mertens et al., 2024). Parents are attracted to social media because information can be accessed quickly, is available continuously, and is often accompanied by experiences and opinions shared by other users (Frey et al., 2022). Evidence from other areas of parental decision-making also suggests that parents use social media both before and after consulting formal sources, including to compare perspectives and verify information they have previously received (Frey et al., 2023). These patterns indicate that contemporary parents increasingly operate within hybrid information environments in which institutional, interpersonal, and digital sources interact.

This development is particularly relevant to educational institutions because schools and universities increasingly use social media as part of their strategic communication. A systematic review of social media in higher education marketing identifies digital platforms as important channels for student engagement, institutional branding, enrollment decision-making, relationship management, and strategic communication (Pawar, 2024). Among these platforms, Instagram offers distinctive communicative affordances it combining photographs, videos, captions, stories, reels, comments, and direct interaction within a highly visual environment. Evidence from Indonesian educational institutions shows that Facebook and Instagram are used to communicate institutional programs, processes, personnel, promotional activities, and physical evidence to prospective audiences (Juhaidi, 2024).

Instagram's visual orientation is especially relevant when parents attempt to imagine an educational experience they have not yet encountered directly. Photographs and videos of student activities, classroom environments, facilities, religious programs, achievements, teacher–student interactions, and everyday school life can provide parents with symbolic representations of institutional identity and educational culture. Studies of social media communication in educational institutions suggest that platform-specific communication matters because user engagement is influenced by the characteristics of both content and platform design (Sörensen et al., 2026). Social media engagement through interaction, information sharing, information monitoring, and exposure to institutional content can contribute to relationship quality and institutional image (Song et al., 2023). The emotional and narrative qualities of social media messages may also generate different forms of audience engagement with educational institutions (Soares et al., 2022).

Yet the role of Instagram in educational decision-making should not be reduced to a simple relationship between promotional exposure and final choice. Instagram enables prospective users to engage with institutional communication through repeated exposure, visual observation, content exploration, and interactive responses. Studies of educational social media marketing indicate that interaction, trendiness, entertainment, advertising, and personalization may shape engagement and enrollment intention (Juhaidi et al., 2024). Social media and content strategies can also strengthen institutional brand equity and attractiveness, thereby influencing how prospective users evaluate educational institutions (Nofrizal et al., 2024). At the same time, audiences may assign greater credibility to authentic narratives, testimonials, interactive communication, and informal information than to purely promotional institutional messages (Prabawangi et al., 2026). These findings suggest that the communicative influence of Instagram operates

through interpretation and evaluation rather than through exposure alone.

School choice nevertheless remains a social and contextual process. Parents may obtain information online, but they interpret it through the needs of their children, family expectations, other parents' experiences, cultural values, financial considerations, and perceptions of the school environment. Research on middle-class parents in India shows that school preferences emerge from the interplay among family expectations, shared values, and informal social networks (Ullah et al., 2025). Other studies demonstrate that parental expectations, economic capacity, social capital, and cultural context can lead families to make different school choices even when they face relatively similar educational alternatives (Mahapatra, 2025). Parents may also consult official school websites, external information sources, personal networks, and digital platforms to verify or challenge information provided by educational institutions (Villavicencio et al., 2025).

Educational decision-making can therefore be understood as an iterative information journey rather than a single moment of choice. Individuals move between multiple touchpoints, gather information from digital media, communicate with others, compare alternatives, and revise their preferences when new information becomes available (Poole et al., 2023). Institutional reputation and perceived educational quality also remain important factors in school and university selection, suggesting that digital communication gains value when it provides evidence that prospective users consider meaningful and credible (Juhaidi, 2024). From this perspective, visibility on Instagram alone does not fully explain how digital information evolves into interest, trust, comparison, family discussion, verification, and, eventually, school selection.

A clear research gap emerges from this literature. Much of the recent scholarship on social media and educational choice has concentrated on higher education, prospective students, institutional branding, social media engagement, and enrollment intention. Considerably less attention has been given to how parents interpret and use Instagram when selecting schools for their children. The school-choice literature has established the significance of information, social networks, social capital, and perceived school fit, whereas research on social media has emphasized digital engagement and institutional communication. The intersection between these two bodies of scholarship, particularly the process through which parents move from Instagram-based information to interpersonal deliberation and final school choice, remains underexplored. This gap is especially important because parents may simultaneously act as information seekers, evaluators, family communicators, and decision-makers.

Accordingly, this study, "The Role of Instagram in Parents' School Selection Decision-Making Process," aims to explore how parents use and interpret school-related information obtained through Instagram when selecting a school for their children. More specifically, the study seeks to identify the role of Instagram across several stages of parental decision-making, including information seeking, perception and trust formation, comparison of school alternatives, information verification, family deliberation, and final school selection.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Parental School Choice as a Contextual Decision-Making Process

Parental school choice is increasingly understood as a contextual and socially embedded decision rather than a simple calculation of school quality. Parents must interpret incomplete information, reconcile competing priorities, and make choices within structural constraints that shape which options appear realistic and desirable. Research with Black middle-class families in the United States, for example, shows that parents combine intensive information gathering with reliance on trusted social ties when navigating uncertainty and institutional mistrust (Lareau et al., 2021). A more recent interdisciplinary model similarly argues that school choice emerges from the interaction of information, preferences, constraints, and social, economic, and cultural capital rather than from individual preference alone (Bartoli et al., 2026). Social stratification remains relevant because access to resource-rich parental networks can influence the educational pathways families consider and ultimately select. In Islamic educational settings, parental choice may additionally incorporate religious legitimacy, academic aspirations, and culturally embedded forms of trust, demonstrating that school selection is also a value-laden communication process (Amiruddin et al., 2026).

Instagram as an Information and Visual Communication Environment

Within this decision environment, Instagram can be conceptualized as an information space in which users encounter, search for, evaluate, and revisit content. Research on Instagram information behaviour shows that platform use may be purposive, such as actively searching for specific information, or non-purposive, when users encounter information incidentally while browsing; credibility assessment and fact-checking become particularly important when information is perceived as consequential (Marcella-Hood & Marcella, 2023). Information acceptance on Instagram is influenced by characteristics such as accuracy, relevance, conciseness, usefulness, and source trustworthiness, indicating that repeated exposure does not automatically lead to information adoption (Lee et al., 2021).

Research on Instagram user-generated content further demonstrates that social presence, trustworthiness, enjoyment, and perceived ease of use can shape attitudes and planning intentions, suggesting that visual platforms can influence pre-decision evaluation processes (Zhou & Xue, 2022). Visual symbols can also intensify engagement, emotional resonance, perceived trust, and diffusion, making imagery a substantive component of digital meaning-making rather than merely decorative content (Gurung et al., 2025). More broadly, social media images increasingly serve as meaningful communicative objects, representing experiences, identities, environments, and narratives that may not be captured through text alone (Chen et al., 2023).

Institutional Social Media Communication and Educational Choice

For educational institutions, this means that social media presence involves more than maintaining digital visibility. Institutional communication requires selecting appropriate platforms, maintaining consistent activity, and using content formats that align with audience expectations and communication objectives (Capriotti et al., 2024). A review of social media marketing for student recruitment shows that digital communication contributes to institutional branding, information provision, relationship formation, and recruitment, and that its effects depend on how prospective audiences process institutional content (Cingillioglu et al., 2024). Empirical evidence from international students further indicates that the quality of social media can mediate how prospective students interpret program quality, price, location, and promotional communication when evaluating educational destinations (Al-Dmour et al., 2024). The decision pathway may therefore develop hierarchically, as social media use generates attention and interest that are subsequently evaluated through perceived usefulness and credibility before stronger choice-related desire emerges (Pawar & Islam, 2025).

Trust, Verification, and Parental Digital Decision-Making

The importance of credibility becomes even clearer when the literature is extended to parental digital decision-making. Qualitative research on parents' online information practices shows that parents combine search engines, social media, professional sources, and personal judgement when assessing the credibility of information about their children (Altawil et al., 2023). Parents do not necessarily place equal trust in all digital sources; official and professional sources may retain greater credibility even when social media is frequently used for supplementary information (Campbell et al., 2023). Evidence also shows that parental decisions are influenced by multiple information sources, including professionals, family, friends, and social media, particularly when uncertainty and perceived risk are high (Smith et al., 2022). Netnographic research further demonstrates that online communities may simultaneously provide information and expose parents to strongly contested narratives, making verification central to responsible decision-making (Smith et al., 2024).

Parents also use social media to obtain information, update family members, seek peer experiences, and support decisions despite uncertainty about the reliability of information (Franklin et al., 2022). Digital platforms additionally provide parents with informational and social support that may be unavailable through conventional channels, although access, privacy, and the quality of advice remain important concerns (Gruebner et al., 2022). Parents' preferences for credible, legitimate, concise, and visually accessible content suggest that the perceived quality of digital communication can determine whether social media

serves as a useful decision-support resource (Patel et al., 2024). Taken together, these studies suggest that Instagram should be examined as one component of a broader parental communication ecology rather than as an isolated promotional channel.

In the context of school selection, its role can be organized into interconnected processes: initial and repeated exposure, digital information-seeking, visual assessment of school life, credibility evaluation, verification through alternative sources, comparison between schools, and interpersonal deliberation within the family. Instagram may therefore help parents construct an initial understanding of a school, while the meaning and persuasive force of that information remain contingent on trust, perceived school-child fit, social networks, family considerations, and subsequent verification. This process-oriented perspective provides the conceptual basis for examining how Instagram participates in, rather than independently determines, parents' school selection decision-making process.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to examine the role of Instagram in parents' school selection decision-making process. This design was considered appropriate because the study sought to obtain a direct and contextually grounded account of how parents encountered, interpreted, evaluated, and used school-related information on Instagram before deciding whether a school was suitable for their children. Qualitative description enables researchers to remain close to participants' accounts while still identifying meaningful patterns across experiences, making it suitable for studies that aim to explain a process without imposing excessive theoretical abstraction (Hall & Liebenberg, 2024). The study was conducted in Cakung District, East Jakarta, Indonesia, where parents increasingly encounter educational information through digital platforms alongside interpersonal sources. The unit of analysis was parents who were directly involved in selecting a school for their children. Five parents of prospective students participated as informants. To maintain confidentiality in the presentation of findings, participants were identified as Informant A, B, C, D, and E.

Participants and Data Collection

The participants were selected because they had direct experience in searching for and evaluating school information during the school-selection process. The study focused specifically on parents who had encountered or accessed information about the school on Instagram and were involved in determining their children's educational choice. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This format allowed the researcher to maintain a consistent focus on the research objective while giving participants sufficient space to describe their individual experiences. The interview questions explored how parents first became aware of the school, the types of Instagram content they considered important, how they assessed the credibility and usefulness of school information, whether they compared information across schools, how they discussed school alternatives with family members, and how Instagram contributed to their final decision. The interviews were subsequently transcribed into textual data. The transcripts were reviewed to ensure that participants' statements were represented consistently before being imported into the qualitative data-management software.

Data Management and Analysis Using NVivo 15

Qualitative data were managed and analyzed using NVivo version 15. NVivo was used as an organizational and analytical support tool rather than as an automated substitute for researcher interpretation. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis enables researchers to systematically organize transcripts, conduct coding, retrieve coded segments, compare cases, develop categories, visualize relationships, and maintain a transparent analytical trail (Allsop et al., 2022). The analysis was conducted in several stages. First, all interview transcripts were imported into NVivo 15 and organized by individual informant. Each participant was created as a case, and case classifications were used to record relevant participant attributes, including parental role, occupation, residence, school considered, and social media platform used.

Second, the transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve data familiarization. Relevant meaning units were then coded into initial nodes. Coding focused on statements related to Instagram exposure, information seeking, visual assessment, perceived credibility, school comparison, information verification, family discussion, trust formation, and final school choice. Third, related codes were reviewed and grouped into broader categories. Through comparison across the five cases, the analysis identified recurring patterns in how parents used Instagram during different stages of decision-making. NVivo queries and visual tools, including word frequency analysis, word clouds, node visualization, case classification, and matrix coding, were used to assist pattern identification and cross-case comparison.

Fourth, the categories were refined into higher-order themes representing the communicative process of parental school selection. The emerging analytical structure included digital information seeking, visual information assessment, information verification, school comparison, family deliberation, and decision confirmation. These themes were continuously checked against the original interview excerpts to ensure that interpretation remained grounded in participants' accounts. Analytical credibility was strengthened through repeated transcript readings, cross-informant comparisons, consistency checks between codes and original quotations, and documentation of coding decisions in NVivo. Cross-case examination was also used to identify both recurring patterns and variations among participants. Rather than treating frequency as evidence of importance by itself, the interpretation considered the meaning, context, and relevance of each coded statement to the research question.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Context and Participant Case Classification

The study examined how parents of prospective students used Instagram while considering MI PKP Jakarta Islamic School as a possible school for their children. The research site was located in Cakung District, East Jakarta. The interview material situates the school within the broader PKP Jakarta Islamic School educational complex, an institution that combines general education with an Islamic educational identity and presents itself through programs, facilities, learning activities, religious activities, and student development. Within this context, the analysis focused on the parents' information practices rather than on an institutional evaluation of the school itself.

NVivo 15 case classification was used to organize the five interview participants as individual cases. The cases were relatively homogeneous in demographic terms: all five participants were women, mothers, housewives, and residents of Cakung, East Jakarta. All had considered MI PKP Jakarta Islamic School and had encountered information about the school on Instagram. This homogeneity is analytically useful because it reduces demographic variation and allows closer comparison of how parents with similar social roles use the same digital platform differently across the decision-making process. At the same time, it limits claims about how gender, occupation, socioeconomic position, or residential differences might shape school-choice communication beyond this participant group.

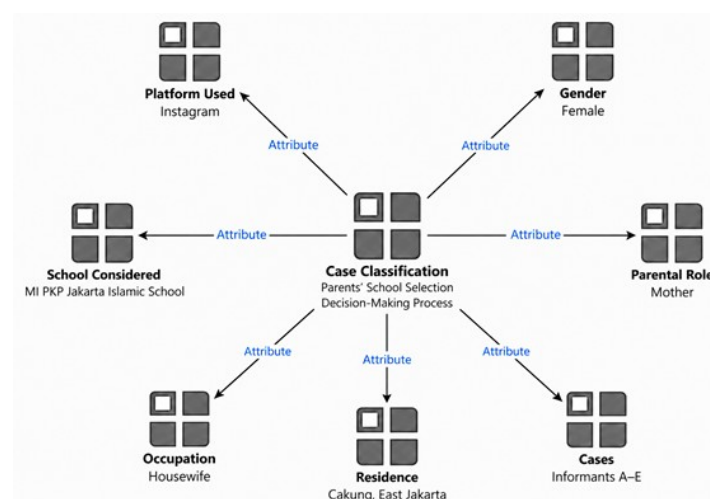


Figure 1. NVivo case classification of parent informants and shared participant attributes.

Figure 1 presents the NVivo case-classification structure. Rather than serving as a thematic finding, the visualization establishes the study's analytical architecture: five parent cases were classified based on shared attributes, and their interview accounts were then compared across nodes and themes. This case-based organization supported cross-case interpretation of information seeking, visual assessment, trust formation, verification, comparison, family deliberation, and confirmation of the final decision.

Word-Frequency Pattern and the Semantic Emphasis of the Interviews

The NVivo word-cloud visualization provides an initial descriptive view of the vocabulary that repeatedly structured the participants' accounts. The most visually prominent terms include "school," "Instagram," "information," "parents," "children," and "choice." Other salient terms include "decision," "activities," "family," "compare," "trust," "needs," "environment," "learning," "program," "facilities," "options," "comments," "social media," "communication," and "experience." These terms correspond closely to the substantive logic of the interviews: parents were not discussing Instagram as entertainment or as a stand-alone advertising channel, but as an information environment embedded in the practical work of choosing a school for their children.



Figure 2. NVivo word cloud showing dominant terms in the parent interview dataset.

The prominence of "school," "information," and "Instagram" indicates that the platform was primarily narrated as a means of knowing the school. Meanwhile, the presence of "activities," "environment," "learning," "facilities," and "religious education" reflects the evaluative content that parents sought when imagining the child's possible experience at school. Terms such as "trust," "reliable," "comments," "comparison," "options," and "decision" point to a second layer of meaning: parents did not simply consume school content; they assessed, compared, questioned, and verified it. Finally, "family," "husband," "discussion," "needs," and "children" show that digital information was subsequently transferred into interpersonal and family-level deliberation.

The word cloud should not be treated as evidence of thematic importance solely on the basis of frequency. Frequency does not automatically indicate analytical significance in qualitative research. In this study, visualization served as a supporting descriptive tool, while thematic interpretation remained grounded in the contextual meaning of interview excerpts and cross-case coding. The convergence between the word-frequency pattern and the coded interview themes nevertheless strengthens the interpretation that Instagram operated as a communication resource within a multi-stage school-selection process.

Cross-Case Thematic Structure

The coding process produced seven interrelated themes. These themes represent a process rather than isolated categories. Parents commonly progressed from initial exposure to Instagram to active information-seeking, visual assessment, trust formation, verification, comparison, family deliberation, and confirmation of the final decision. The sequence was not strictly linear in every case; participants often returned to

previous stages when new information or alternative schools appeared. Table 1 summarizes the themes, empirical indicators, and cases in which each theme was clearly expressed.

Table 1. Cross-case thematic structure derived from NVivo coding and interview interpretation

Theme	Key empirical indicators	Cases	Interpretive meaning
Instagram as an initial information gateway	Repeated exposure, account visits, opening older posts, and initial curiosity	A, B, C, E	Instagram creates awareness and moves a school into the parents' consideration set.
Visual assessment of school experience	Student activities, teachers, facilities, learning, religious activities, and school atmosphere	A–E	Visual content helps parents imagine the child's possible everyday experience.
Familiarity and trust formation	Consistent posting, repeated exposure, responsiveness, perceived activity, and planning	A, B, C, E	Trust develops gradually through consistency and perceived transparency, rather than through a single post.
Information verification	Reading comments, asking others, checking alternative sources, and direct observation	A–E	Parents treat Instagram as provisional information that requires confirmation.
Comparison and filtering of alternatives	Comparing programs, facilities, environment, religion, fit, and other schools	A–E	Instagram reduces search costs and supports the construction of a manageable choice set.
Family deliberation	Sharing posts, discussing with husband/family, seeking opinions	A–E	Digital information becomes interpersonal communication and a shared family resource.
Decision confirmation	Child needs, family expectations, external information, confidence, final choice	A–E	Final selection emerges from convergence among digital, interpersonal, and contextual evidence.

Instagram as an Initial Information Gateway

The first theme concerns Instagram's role in bringing a school into parents' field of attention. Several participants did not begin with a fixed preference for MI PKP Jakarta Islamic School. Their engagement developed after repeatedly encountering school-related content while already engaged in the broader task of searching for a school. Instagram, therefore, served as a point of entry into the decision-making process: it increased recognition, sparked curiosity, and encouraged parents to move from passive exposure to active investigation.

"It started from Instagram. I was beginning to look for a school for my child. I did not have a specific school in mind yet. I saw information about PKP Jakarta Islamic School several times, and because it appeared repeatedly, I began to pay more attention. Then I opened the school's Instagram account, looked at older posts, and saw the activities carried out by the children." (Informant A)

Informant A's account shows a shift from incidental exposure to purposive information seeking. The repeated appearance of school content created a memory trace and motivated further searching. Informant E described a similar mechanism, emphasizing that repeated exposure made the PKP name easier to remember and generated curiosity. This distinction is important because it suggests that Instagram's influence begins before a parent consciously evaluates a school. Exposure expands awareness, but the decision-making relevance of that exposure depends on whether it prompts deeper information behavior.

"At first, I often saw the promotion on Instagram. Because it appeared several times, the name PKP became easy for me to remember. If we only see information once, we may forget it quickly, but if we repeatedly see school activities, over time, we become curious." (Informant E)

This pattern is consistent with information-behavior research showing that Instagram accommodates both non-purposive encounters and purposive search behavior, with users frequently moving between passive exposure and active checking when information becomes personally relevant (Marcella-Hood &

Marcella, 2023). In the present study, the platform's role was therefore not simply promotional. It was a mechanism through which an initially unknown or weakly known school entered the parents' consideration set. The finding also refines conventional interpretations of social media marketing: the important outcome of exposure was not an immediate enrollment decision but the activation of a more extensive decision-making process.

Visual Assessment and the Construction of an Imagined School Experience

The second theme is the use of visual content to construct an imagined experience of the school. All five participants referred to school activities or other visible features when explaining what they looked for on Instagram. Parents wanted to see what the children did, what the teachers were like, what facilities were available, how religious values were reflected in everyday activities, and what the school environment looked like. These visual cues helped convert an abstract institutional claim into something parents felt they could inspect and interpret.

"What helped me most was that the information was visual. As a parent, I want to imagine what kind of environment my child will be in. On Instagram, I can see the school atmosphere, student activities, teachers, facilities, religious activities, and learning activities." (Informant A)

The quotation indicates that parents were not merely searching for formal facts. They were attempting to imagine the child's future presence within the school. Visual information allowed parents to infer atmosphere, routines, values, and the relationship between academic and religious education. Informant C similarly focused on whether religious education was visible in daily activity rather than merely stated in the school's name. She also examined student interaction, teachers, facilities, and the broader educational atmosphere.

"I mainly look for an overview of children's activities and the school environment. I want to know whether religious education can actually be seen in everyday activities, not merely in the name of an Islamic school. I also pay attention to learning activities, children's interactions, teachers, facilities, and how the school presents its educational atmosphere." (Informant C)

This visual-assessment process can be interpreted as a form of mediated pre-experience. Parents cannot observe every school continuously, but Instagram gives them recurring visual access to selected fragments of school life. Such fragments become symbolic evidence through which parents form preliminary judgments about school quality and fit. Research on Instagram has shown that visual and symbolic communication can strengthen engagement, emotional resonance, and perceived trust when audiences interpret images as meaningful indicators of an underlying reality (Gurung et al., 2025). In school choice, however, the visual advantage also creates a credibility problem because parents understand that institutions curate what they display. The same feature that makes Instagram useful, therefore, produces a need for verification.

Familiarity, Consistency, and the Gradual Formation of Trust

Trust emerged as a gradual outcome rather than an immediate response to a persuasive message. Participants repeatedly emphasized consistency. A single promotional post was insufficient; parents looked for a pattern of activity across time. Frequent and varied posts signaled that the school was active, that programs were not isolated events, and that the institution was willing to make school life visible. Trust was therefore associated with continuity, perceived transparency, and the accumulation of evidence.

"If there were only one or two promotional posts, I might not trust them yet. But when I saw the information repeatedly, I felt I had more material to assess the school. Instagram did not only make me know the school's name; it gradually built my confidence." (Informant A)

Informant B added another dimension: responsiveness. She read other users' comments and observed how the school responded to questions. The significance of comments was not that they provided definitive evidence, but that they offered a visible test of institutional openness. A responsive account was interpreted as a sign that the school was willing to communicate with parents rather than only broadcast promotional messages.

"I also read the comments. Sometimes other parents ask the same questions that I want to ask. I also see how the school responds. For me, that kind of communication is important because it shows whether the school is open in providing information." (Informant B)

The findings suggest that digital trust in this context is relational and cumulative. It is produced through repeated exposure, coherent visual evidence, continuity of posting, and visible responsiveness. This is consistent with research showing that perceived credibility and trust are central to how users adopt information on Instagram, especially when the information has practical consequences (Lee et al., 2021; Marcella-Hood & Marcella, 2023). For parents, trust was not equivalent to believing everything shown online; instead, it represented sufficient confidence to continue considering the school and invest more effort in checking it.

Verification and the Management of Digital Uncertainty

A central finding is that parents maintained interpretive distance from institutional social media content. They were aware that Instagram is a curated medium and that schools have an incentive to present themselves positively. As a result, Instagram information was treated as provisional rather than final. Parents used the platform to generate questions, identify issues requiring clarification, and determine what should be checked through other sources.

"Instagram is certainly a school medium for showing good things. I understand that. So I do not think everything displayed should be trusted 100% immediately. I use Instagram information as a basis for asking questions and checking further." (Informant C)

This statement demonstrates a form of practical digital literacy. Informant C recognized the representational logic of institutional social media and responded by cross-checking. Informant E likewise stated that viewing Instagram content alone was insufficient because school selection is a decision that affects several years of a child's life. She sought information from other people, considered the experiences of parents who knew the school, and believed that direct observation should be used when possible.

"Instagram is good for getting initial information, but we still have to make sure. A school is a decision for several years. I still seek information from others and pay attention to the experiences of parents who know the school. If there is an opportunity, the school's actual condition also needs to be known directly." (Informant E)

Verification reduced the risk of aesthetic presentation being mistaken for educational quality. It also prevented digital communication from becoming the sole basis of choice. Studies of parental digital information practices in other high-stakes domains similarly show that parents combine online information with professional, interpersonal, or authoritative sources and may actively evaluate credibility when consequences for children are significant (Altawil et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2024). The present findings extend this logic to school selection: the relevant communicative competence is not merely the ability to access information but to compare, question, and contextualize it.

Instagram as a Tool for Comparing and Filtering School Alternatives

Instagram also reduced the practical cost of comparing schools. Parents did not need to visit every institution before forming a preliminary shortlist. They could examine programs, facilities, learning environments, religious education, and activities across several school accounts and decide which alternatives deserved further investigation. Informant C explicitly described Instagram as a way to filter options, while Informant D emphasized its usefulness for comparing one school with another.

"I use Instagram as one way to filter the choices. There are many schools in East Jakarta, so it would be difficult to visit them all individually. Through Instagram, I can first see which ones are approximately suitable for the needs of the family and the child." (Informant C)

"Instagram eventually helped me make something like an assessment list in my head: which schools were attractive, which ones needed more questions, and which ones could be removed from the options. So, for

me, Instagram is not merely a platform for promotion. It becomes a tool for comparing alternatives." (Informant D)

These accounts reveal an important cognitive function of social media in school choice: reducing a large and uncertain market to a manageable set of alternatives. Parents used Instagram to create preliminary rankings and exclusion criteria before undertaking more resource-intensive actions such as direct visits or deeper interpersonal inquiry. The process resembles contextual school-choice models in which families navigate limited time, incomplete information, preferences, and social resources, rather than making choices under perfect knowledge (Lareau et al., 2021; Bartoli et al., 2026). Instagram, therefore, acts as an informational infrastructure that makes comparison easier, but it does not remove the social and contextual nature of the final choice.

Family Deliberation: From Digital Information to Interpersonal Communication

One of the strongest findings is the movement of information from the digital platform into family conversation. Instagram use was often initiated by the mother individually, but the decision was not presented as an individual act. Participants shared posts, discussed observations, sought their husbands' opinions, and incorporated family expectations into the final evaluation. This shows that Instagram's influence is mediated by interpersonal communication rather than ending at the screen.

"Instagram is not only used by me alone. The information from Instagram becomes material for discussion in the family. I show my husband a school activity and ask, 'What do you think if our child goes to school here?' From there, a discussion begins." (Informant D)

Informant E similarly described herself as the family member who often first discovered the information because she used Instagram more frequently, but she rejected the idea that the decision was hers alone.

"I may be the first person to find the information because I use Instagram more often, but the school decision is still discussed together." (Informant E)

The analytical significance of this theme lies in the way school-related social media content becomes a shared communicative object. A post can be saved, shown to a spouse, discussed, questioned, and reinterpreted within the family. The platform thus links digital communication and interpersonal deliberation. This finding goes beyond models that treat social media exposure as a direct predictor of choice. Parents' decisions are socially embedded, and family discussion can strengthen, modify, or reject impressions initially formed online. This aligns with school-choice research emphasizing that parents rely on trusted relationships and social networks when navigating uncertainty (Lareau et al., 2021).

Decision Confirmation: Instagram as an Enabling Rather Than Determining Influence

Across all five cases, participants rejected the idea that a single Instagram post, or Instagram alone, determined their final school choice. The platform was influential, but its impact was strongest in the early and middle stages: creating awareness, providing information, establishing familiarity, supporting comparison, and building preliminary confidence. The final decision required convergence of digital impressions and external evidence, including children's needs, family expectations, location, school environment, others' experiences, and direct knowledge of the school.

"The process is not seeing one post and then registering immediately. I see it as a gradual process: first knowing, then becoming interested, searching for more information, trusting, comparing, and then making a decision." (Informant B)

Informant D similarly explained that a visually attractive social media presence could not substitute for confirmation from other sources. Informant C emphasized that the final decision emerged only when Instagram information was consistent with the child's needs and reinforced by other sources. These accounts position Instagram as an enabling communication environment rather than an autonomous causal force.

"The final decision still has to be confirmed through other information. I do not want to choose a school solely because its social media presence looks good. Social media makes me interested and helps me compare, while the final decision appears after considering the child's needs, the family, the school's condition, and information obtained outside Instagram." (Informant D)

The distinction between influence and determination is central to the study's contribution. Instagram reduces uncertainty and makes information accessible, but parents remain active interpreters. They compare evidence, question institutional self-presentation, and subject digital impressions to family and contextual criteria. Studies of educational social media similarly indicate that digital content can attract attention and facilitate evaluation, while credibility and perceived usefulness become critical before desire or intention to enroll develops (Pawar & Islam, 2025). The qualitative evidence here adds process detail by showing how these evaluations unfold within parental practice.

Integrative Discussion: A Digital-to-Interpersonal School-Choice Pathway

Taken together, the findings support a processual interpretation of Instagram's role in parental school selection. The process begins with repeated or incidental exposure, which increases familiarity and can place a school into the parent's awareness set. Once interest is activated, the parent shifts toward purposive information seeking by opening the school account, reviewing older posts, examining photos and videos, and observing comments. Visual content provides an imagined representation of school life, while posting consistency and responsiveness contribute to initial trust. Trust does not close the decision process. Instead, it creates sufficient confidence for deeper evaluation. Parents compare the school with alternatives, test the consistency of Instagram claims, seek information from other parents or relatives, and consider direct observation. The resulting information is then brought into family deliberation, where digital content becomes material for discussion with a spouse or other family members. The final choice is reached when information from Instagram converges with external sources and criteria such as children's needs, religious and educational values, location, environment, facilities, and family expectations.

This sequence can be expressed as a digital-to-interpersonal decision pathway: repeated exposure → active information seeking → visual assessment → familiarity and initial trust → verification → comparison and filtering → family deliberation → decision confirmation. The arrows in this pathway should not be interpreted as irreversible. Parents may return to earlier stages after encountering another school, seeing a new post, receiving a recommendation, or identifying a discrepancy that requires additional checking. The process is therefore iterative and recursive. Conceptually, the findings contribute to communication research by positioning Instagram within a communication ecology rather than as a stand-alone persuasive channel. Its role is distributed across several communicative functions: visibility, information provision, symbolic representation, interaction, memory reinforcement, comparison, and conversational triggering. The final decision is reached through the interaction between platform-based and interpersonal communication. This interpretation helps bridge social media research, which often focuses on engagement or enrollment intention, with school choice research, which emphasizes information constraints, social networks, family preferences, and contextual fit.

Table 2. Digital-to-interpersonal pathway of parents' school selection decision-making.

Stage	Primary communication mode	Parent activity	Decision function
1. Exposure	Platform-based	Sees repeated school content	Awareness and familiarity
2. Information seeking	Platform-based	Opens account and older posts	Expands knowledge
3. Visual assessment	Platform-based	Examines activities, facilities, and environment	Imagines school experience
4. Trust formation	Platform-based/interactive	Assesses consistency and responsiveness	Creates preliminary confidence
5. Verification	Cross-channel	Checks comments, people, other sources, and visits	Tests credibility
6. Comparison	Cross-platform/cognitive	Compares alternative schools	Filters the choice set
7. Family deliberation	Interpersonal	Shares content and discusses with spouse/family	Negotiates family preference

8. Decision confirmation	Integrated	Matches all evidence with child/family needs	Final school selection
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CONCLUSION

School selection decision-making process. For the five parents interviewed in Cakung, East Jakarta, Instagram first served as an information gateway, making MI PKP Jakarta Islamic School visible and memorable. Repeated exposure encouraged parents to move from incidental awareness to active information seeking. They subsequently used the platform to examine school activities, teachers, facilities, learning, religious practices, and the school environment, allowing them to form an initial picture of what their child's educational experience might be like. The decision process did not end with visual exposure. Parents evaluated the consistency of posts, observed how the school responded to questions, read comments, and gradually developed trust. Importantly, trust was provisional. Participants recognized that a school's Instagram account is a curated representation and therefore verified information with other parents, family members, alternative sources, comparisons with other schools, and, when possible, direct observation. Instagram consequently reduced uncertainty and search costs, but did not eliminate the need for verification.

The findings further demonstrate that digital information has become a form of interpersonal communication. Mothers frequently acted as the first family member to encounter school information on Instagram, but they shared content and discussed alternatives with their husbands or other family members. The final school choice emerged from integrating Instagram-based impressions with children's needs, family expectations, religious and educational values, location, environment, and external information. The study, therefore, identifies a digital-to-interpersonal pathway in which Instagram supports awareness, information seeking, visual assessment, trust formation, verification, comparison, family deliberation, and decision confirmation. The central contribution of the study lies in shifting attention from whether social media influences school choice to how that influence is produced in practice. Instagram does not operate as a single persuasive stimulus. Its role is distributed across a sequence of communicative activities performed by parents. This perspective provides a more nuanced explanation of parental school choice and highlights parents' active agency as information seekers, evaluators, verifiers, family communicators, and decision-makers.

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