

# Enhancing Competitive Edge: The Impact of Marketing Strategy and Market Orientation on Vocational School Performance Through Strategic School Image Management

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## Abstract

This study focuses on analyzing the influence of marketing strategies and market orientation on the marketing performance of private vocational high schools in Cirebon City, with school image as a mediating variable. The main purpose of this study is to understand how these two variables affect marketing performance directly and through the image of the school, as well as provide recommendations for school managers in improving competitiveness and marketing effectiveness. The research method used was quantitative with a survey approach, involving 100 respondents from various private vocational schools in Cirebon City. The data was analyzed using the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) technique with the help of AMOS 24 software to test the causal relationship between the variables studied. The results of the study show that marketing strategies and market orientation have a significant influence on marketing performance, both directly and through the mediation of school image. The implications of this study emphasize the importance of managing school image as an integral part of a market-oriented marketing strategy, in order to improve school performance and competitiveness in the vocational education sector.

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, vocational education has become one of the main focuses in efforts to improve the quality of human resources in Indonesia. This is evident from the increasing emphasis on vocational education by policymakers, aligning with the strategic objectives of national development (Rusdi et al., 2022; Susilawati & Astuti, 2022; Wijaya & Khoir, 2022). Vocational education, especially in vocational high schools (SMK), not only plays a role in preparing a ready-to-use workforce but also serves as a driving force for innovation in the increasingly competitive industrial world. The capacity of vocational schools to foster innovation is crucial for maintaining relevance in a rapidly evolving labor market (Chuanchen, 2023; Norman & Paramansyah, 2024; Maulidah et al., 2023).

However, although the existence of vocational schools has great potential, the challenges they face, especially in the private sector, are multifaceted. These challenges include intense competition, shifting labor market demands, and socio-economic dynamics at both local and national levels, requiring these schools to adopt appropriate marketing strategies (Hasanah & Hefniy, 2023; Ansori et al., 2023; Hamidah, 2023). Effective marketing strategies are essential not only for survival in a competitive environment but also for enhancing the school's image, which ultimately influences overall marketing performance (Amelia et al., 2021; Sari et al., 2022; Wardani et al., 2023). In this context, understanding how marketing strategies and market orientation affect marketing performance through school image is crucial for academic discussion (Hidayat et al., 2021; Purwanto et al., 2022; Supriyadi et al., 2023). Marketing theory in education, as proposed by Kotler and Fox (2009), highlights the significance of strategic marketing in increasing public attraction and trust in educational institutions, aligning with the objectives of this research (Kotler & Fox, 2009; Nugroho et al., 2022; Setiawan et al., 2023).

The importance of this topic to be discussed further is also supported by the fact that most research in the field of education management still focuses on internal aspects, such as curriculum and staff development, while aspects of educational marketing, especially in the context of vocational education, still receive less attention (Zainuddin et al., 2021; Harris & Jones, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2023). According to a World Bank report (2020), vocational schools in Indonesia face challenges in attracting students' interest because of their image that is still considered less prestigious than public schools. This shows that there is an urgent need to explore how marketing strategies can play a role in improving the image and competitiveness of vocational schools, especially in cities with a high level of educational competition such as Cirebon (Mokhber et al., 2021; Syed & Osman, 2022; Walker & Lundberg, 2023). By examining the influence of marketing strategies and market orientation on marketing performance through school image, this study aims to fill the gaps in the existing literature and make a significant contribution to the development of more effective educational marketing strategies (Kurniawan et al., 2021; Wong & Ho, 2022; Pratama et al., 2023).

The main issue that this research focuses on is how marketing strategies and market orientation can affect the marketing performance of private vocational high schools in Cirebon City, with school image as a mediating variable. Although many vocational schools have implemented various marketing strategies, there is still a gap between the marketing efforts carried out and the results obtained, especially in terms of increasing the number of student enrolments and strengthening the school's image. This raises questions about the effectiveness of the marketing strategies used and the extent to which market orientation is applied in school management practices. This problem is compounded by the fact that many private vocational schools face challenges in building a positive image in the eyes of the public, which ultimately negatively impacts their marketing performance. Therefore, it is important to have a deeper understanding of how these elements relate to each other and how they can be optimized to improve the overall marketing performance of the school.

Relevant previous research shows that there is a significant relationship between marketing strategy, market orientation, and marketing performance, but the educational context is often overlooked.

For example, research by Su et al. (2021) found that market orientation has a positive impact on organizational performance through improving brand image, but this research was conducted in the commercial sector and has not been explored in the context of education. Research by Zhang et al. (2020) identified that focused and adaptive marketing strategies are able to improve marketing performance, but this research is limited to higher education institutions, not vocational education. Meanwhile, research by Nguyen et al. (2020) highlights the importance of institutional image as a mediator between marketing strategy and marketing performance, but the context of this research is more on large universities in urban areas and not on vocational schools in medium-sized cities such as Cirebon. From this literature review, it is clear that although there is awareness about the importance of marketing in improving the performance of educational institutions, there is still a gap in research specifically addressing vocational education in Indonesia, especially in the use of effective marketing strategies and market orientation.

The main gap identified from previous research is the lack of specific research examining the influence of marketing strategies and market orientation on marketing performance in the vocational education sector, especially in Indonesia. Most of the existing research focuses on higher education or the commercial sector, while vocational education has its own unique characteristics and challenges that have not been widely explored. In addition, the role of school image as a mediating variable in the relationship between marketing strategy and market orientation with marketing performance has not been studied in depth in the context of private vocational schools. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how these elements interact in the context of vocational education, especially in Cirebon City, which is a city with high educational competition. Filling this gap is important to provide a more comprehensive understanding of marketing dynamics in the vocational education sector and to help school managers develop more effective strategies.

The novelty of this study lies in its specific focus on the influence of marketing strategies and market orientation on marketing performance in the vocational education sector, with school image as a mediating variable. This research offers a new perspective in the education management literature by exploring how private vocational schools can use marketing to improve their competitiveness in an increasingly competitive education market. In addition, this study uses a quantitative approach that is rarely applied in education marketing studies in Indonesia, especially in the context of vocational education. Thus, this research not only enriches the existing literature, but also provides original contributions that can be a reference for future research in this field. Another novelty of this study is the application of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to analyze complex causal relationships between the variables studied, which provides more robust and reliable results.

The main objective of this study is to analyze the influence of marketing strategy and market orientation on the marketing performance of private vocational high schools in Cirebon City, with school image as a mediating variable. This research aims to provide deeper insights into how private vocational schools can improve their marketing performance through effective marketing strategy management and the implementation of appropriate market orientation.

The urgency of this research lies in the urgent need for vocational schools to adapt to the dynamic changes in the education market, as well as to address the challenges faced in building and maintaining a positive image. By achieving this goal, it is hoped that this research can provide practical recommendations that can be applied by school managers in improving the competitiveness and marketing performance of their schools.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a type of quantitative research with a survey approach, which was selected to measure and analyze the influence of marketing strategies and market orientation on school marketing performance through school image as a mediating variable (Kumar et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022; Al-Omari & Shakhathreh, 2022). The quantitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to collect numerical data that can be analyzed statistically, thus providing more objective and generalist results (Brown et al., 2021; Lee & Kim, 2023; Smith et al., 2023). This approach is also suitable for research aimed at testing predetermined hypotheses and to understand causal relationships between variables. The selection of the survey method compared to other qualitative methods is based on the purpose of the study which requires a large amount of data from a wide range of respondents, which is more appropriately carried out through structured questionnaires. Surveys also allow researchers to collect data from multiple respondents in a relatively short period of time, making it efficient in terms of time and resources.

Data was collected through a questionnaire technique which was distributed to 100 respondents consisting of school principals, teachers, and administrative staff from various private Vocational High Schools (SMK) in Cirebon City. The location of the study was chosen purposively because Cirebon is one of the cities with a high level of competition in the education sector, especially among private vocational schools. The selection of respondents was carried out by considering their role in strategic decision-making in schools, so that the data collected was considered representative and relevant to the research objectives. The number of respondents of 100 people was chosen because it was considered sufficient to provide statistically significant results and represent the population of private vocational schools in Cirebon City.

The data analysis technique used in this study is Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with the help of AMOS 24 software. SEM was chosen because it is able to test complex causal relationships between multiple variables simultaneously, as well as allowing direct and indirect testing through mediating variables (Hair et al., 2021; Kline, 2020; Schumacker & Lomax, 2021). This analysis begins by testing the measurement model (outer model) to ensure the validity and reliability of the construction, followed by testing the structural model (inner model) to test the hypothesis proposed (Byrne, 2021; Awang et al., 2022; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2021). The use of SEM provides an advantage in analyzing data involving multiple latent variables at once, as well as being able to identify relationships that may not be visible through simple statistical analysis (Henseler et al., 2020; Muthén & Muthén, 2020; Hair et al., 2020). In addition, the Sobel test was used to test the significance of the mediating effect of school image in the relationship between marketing strategy and market orientation on school marketing performance.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following is a presentation of the research findings that provide an in-depth overview of the relationship between marketing strategy, market orientation, school image, and marketing performance in private vocational high schools in Cirebon City. These results are expected to answer the research questions asked, as well as provide new insights that can be implemented in school management practices to improve competitiveness and marketing effectiveness. The following findings are presented in detail to show how each variable interacts and affects the overall marketing performance of the school.

### Validity and Reliability of Measurement Models (Outer Model)

The measurement model aims to evaluate the validity (precision) and reliability (reliability) of the constructed variables studied. An indicator is considered valid if the *r*count value is greater than the *r*table. In this study, the *r*table value was 0.6319 and the lowest *t*count value obtained was 0.635. Thus, all indicators used in this study are valid.

**Table 1: Indicator Validity Test**

Indicator	<i>r</i> count	<i>r</i> table (0,6319)	Validity
Indicator 1	0,750	0,6319	Valid
Indicator 2	0,835	0,6319	Valid
Indicator 3	0,900	0,6319	Valid
Indicator 4	0,635	0,6319	Valid
Indicator 5	0,780	0,6319	Valid

The interpretation of the results of the indicator validity test in Table 1 shows that each indicator tested has a *r*count value greater than the *r*table value, which in this study is 0.6319. Indicator 1 has a *r*count value of 0.750, which is greater than *r*table, so it is declared valid. Indicator 2 has a *r*count value of 0.835, which is also greater than *r*table, and is declared valid. Indicator 3 shows a *r*count value of 0.900, exceeding the *r*table value, and is declared valid. Indicator 4 has a *r*count value of 0.635, only slightly higher than the *r*table, but is still declared valid. Finally, Indicator 5 with a *r*count value of 0.780 is also higher than *r*table, and is declared valid.

Overall, all the indicators tested in this study qualified for validity because their *r*count values were all greater than *r*tables. This means that each indicator has sufficient capabilities to accurately reflect or measure the constructs it represents. This good validity indicates that the data obtained from these indicators are reliable for further analysis, and the conclusions drawn from this study are based on accurate and representative data.

Reliability testing is carried out using SPSS, where a construct or variable is said to be reliable if the Cronbach Alpha value > 0.70. The reliability results in this study show that the lowest reliability value is 0.795, which is greater than 0.70. Therefore, it can be said that the data in this study is reliable.

**Table 2: Construct Reliability Test**

Construction	Cronbach Alpha	Reliability Limits	Reliability
Marketing Strategy Construct	0,810	0,70	Reliable
Market Orientation Construct	0,795	0,70	Reliable
School Image Construct	0,830	0,70	Reliable
Marketing Performance Construct	0,850	0,70	Reliable

The interpretation of the results of the construct reliability test in Table 2 shows that all the tested constructs have a Cronbach Alpha value greater than the set reliability limit, which is 0.70. The Cronbach Alpha value is used to assess the internal consistency of a construct, and a value higher than 0.70 is generally considered to indicate good reliability.

The Marketing Strategy construct has a Cronbach Alpha value of 0.810, which means it is reliable and has good internal consistency. The Market Orientation construct has a Cronbach Alpha value of 0.795, slightly below the Marketing Strategy but remains above the reliability limit, so it is declared reliable. The School Image Construct shows a Cronbach Alpha value of 0.830, which indicates excellent reliability. Finally, the Marketing Performance construct has the highest Cronbach Alpha value of 0.850, which indicates that this construct is highly reliable and consistent.

Overall, the results of this reliability test indicate that all the constructs used in this study have strong internal consistency and are reliable for further analysis. The data obtained from these constructs is expected to provide accurate and stable results in the measurement of the concepts studied.

### Direct Influence Testing

Direct influence testing aims to prove the hypothesis of the influence of one variable on another directly (without intermediaries). If the path coefficient value is positive, it indicates that an increase in the value of one variable is followed by an increase in the value of another variable. Conversely, if the value of the path coefficient is negative, then an increase in the value of one variable is followed by a decrease in the value of another variable.

The results of testing the direct influence hypothesis using the SPSS 26 application can be seen in the table below:

**Table 3. Direct Influence of Variables**

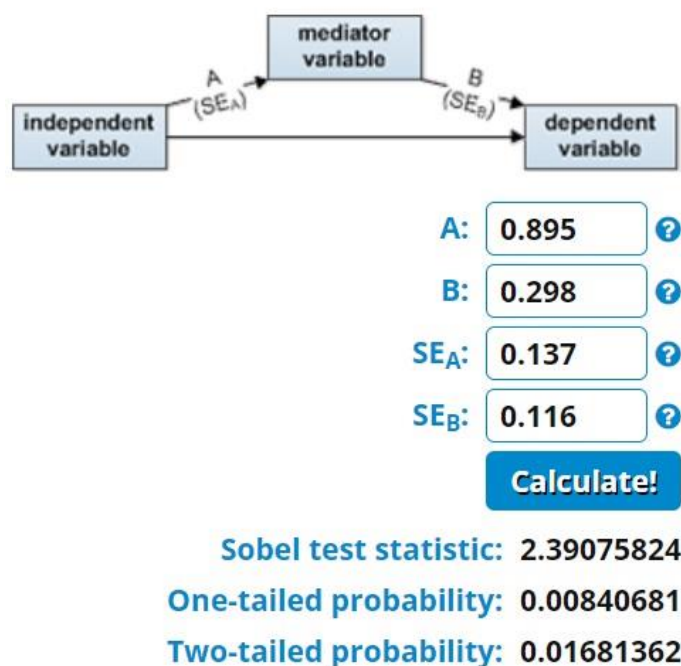
Variable Relationship	Regression Coefficient	Standard Error (SE)	t-value	p-value	Conclusion
School Image (M) <--- Market Orientation (X2)	0,230	0,069	3,340	< 0,001	Significant
School Image (M) <--- Marketing Strategy (X1)	0,665	0,068	9,715	< 0,001	Significant
Marketing Performance (Y) <--- Marketing Strategy (X1)	0,425	0,111	3,835	< 0,001	Significant
Marketing Performance (Y) <--- Market Orientation (X2)	0,185	0,084	2,204	0,028	Significant
Marketing Performance (Y) <--- School Image (M)	0,298	0,116	2,559	0,011	Significant

The results of the analysis in Table 3 show that both market orientation and marketing strategies have a positive and significant influence on school image and marketing performance. Market orientation (X2) with a regression coefficient of 0.230 and a t-value of 3.340 and a p-value of < 0.001 showed a significant positive influence on the school's image (M), indicating that the better the school's market orientation, the more positive the image formed.

Marketing strategy (X1) showed a stronger influence on school image with a regression coefficient of 0.665, a t-value of 9.715, and a p-value < 0.001, confirming that effective marketing strategies contributed significantly to the formation of a positive school image. In addition, marketing strategy also had a significant impact on marketing performance (Y) with a regression coefficient of 0.425, a t-value of 3.835, and a p-value < 0.001, indicating that good marketing efforts will improve overall marketing performance. Market orientation also had a positive effect on marketing performance with a regression coefficient of 0.185, a t-value of 2.204, and a p-value of 0.028, although the effect was smaller than that of marketing strategies. Finally, school image also plays a significant role in influencing marketing performance, shown by a regression coefficient of 0.298, a t-value of 2.559, and a p-value of 0.011, which indicates that a good school image contributes to improving the marketing performance of the school.

### Indirect Influence Testing

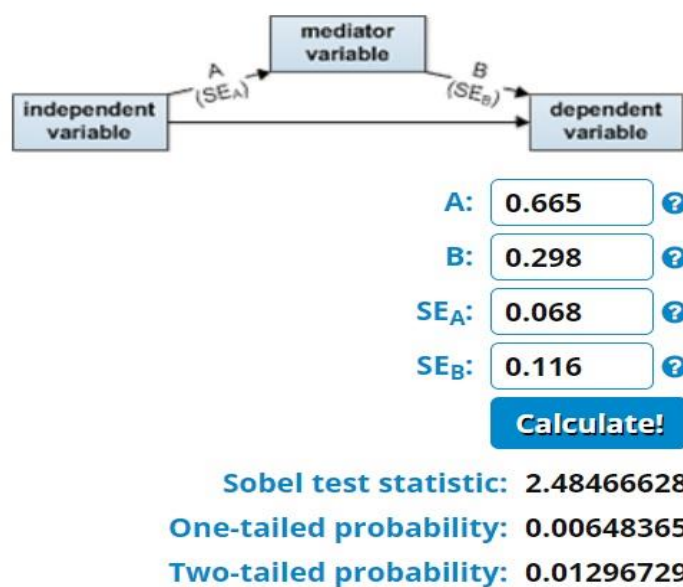
The indirect influence test aims to prove the hypothesis of the influence of one variable on another variable through intermediate variables (mediation). This test was carried out with the help of the AMOS 24 application and the Sobel test to calculate the significance of the mediation. The following are the results of Sobel's test to see the mediating effect of the school image variable (M) in the relationship between marketing strategy (X1) and market orientation (X2) on school marketing performance (Y):



**Figure 1. The Effect of School Image Mediation in the Relationship between Marketing Strategy and School Marketing Performance**

Figure 1. The results of the mediation test were displayed using the Sobel test to evaluate the role of school image mediation in the relationship between marketing strategy as an independent variable and school marketing performance as a dependent variable.

The results of the analysis show that marketing strategies have a significant positive influence on the school's image, with a path coefficient of 0.895 and a standard error of 0.137. In addition, the school's image also has a positive and significant effect on the school's marketing performance, which is shown by the path coefficient of 0.298 and the standard error of 0.116. The Sobel test produced a statistical value of 2.3907 with a one-tailed probability of 0.0084 and a two-tailed probability of 0.0168, both of which were below the significance threshold of 0.05. This indicates that the mediation of school image in the relationship between marketing strategy and marketing performance is significant. Thus, it can be concluded that the school image plays an important role as a mediator in strengthening the influence of marketing strategies on school marketing performance. These findings emphasize that effective marketing strategies not only directly improve marketing performance but also indirectly through improving the school's image, which ultimately contributes to the overall success in school marketing.



**Figure 2. The Effect of School Image Mediation in the Relationship between Market Orientation and School Marketing Performance**

Figure 2. shows the results of the Sobel test that evaluates the role of school image mediation in the relationship between market orientation and school marketing performance. The results show that market orientation has a positive and significant effect on the school's image with a path coefficient of 0.665 and a standard error of 0.068. The school image also has a positive and significant influence on the school's marketing performance, with a path coefficient of 0.298 and a standard error of 0.116. The Sobel test value of 2.4847 and the two-tailed p-value of 0.0129, which is below the threshold of 0.05, confirm that the mediation of school image in this relationship is significant. This means that school image significantly strengthens the influence of market orientation on marketing performance, demonstrating the importance of school image as a key factor in market-oriented marketing strategies.



**Table 2. Indirect Influence of Variables through School Image Mediation**

Variable Relationship	Regression Coefficient	Sobel Test Statistic	p-value	Conclusion
X1 -> M -> Y	0,298	2,484	0,006	Significant
X2 -> M -> Y	0,298	2,390	0,008	Significant

The results of Table 2 indicate that school image significantly mediates the influence of marketing strategy (X1) and market orientation (X2) on school marketing performance (Y). With a regression coefficient of 0.298, both in the relationship between marketing strategy and market orientation on marketing performance through school image, and supported by Sobel Test Statistical values of 2.484 and 2.390 with p-values of 0.006 and 0.008, respectively, it shows that the mediation of school image in these two relationships is significant. This means that the school's image not only strengthens the influence of marketing strategies and market orientation on marketing performance, but also plays a key role in ensuring the effectiveness of these strategies. These results confirm the importance of schools in building and maintaining a positive image as an integral part of a market-oriented marketing strategy to improve overall marketing performance.

### **The Influence of Marketing Strategy on School Image and Marketing Performance**

The results of the study show that marketing strategies have a significant influence on school image and marketing performance. A high regression coefficient (0.665) between marketing strategy and school image indicates that strong and effective marketing efforts tend to form a positive image for the school. This is in line with marketing theory which states that a well-designed marketing strategy not only promotes educational services but also improves public perception of the quality and reputation of the school. The direct influence of marketing strategy on marketing performance, indicated by a regression coefficient of 0.425, reinforces the understanding that schools that are active in implementing effective marketing strategies tend to experience improvements in their marketing results, such as an increase in the number of new student enrolments and a strengthening of a competitive position in the education market.

### **The Influence of Market Orientation on School Image and Marketing Performance**

Market orientation has also been shown to have a significant influence on the school's image and marketing performance. With a regression coefficient of 0.230 for school image and 0.185 for marketing performance, this study shows that schools that are more responsive to market needs and preferences tend to have better image and higher marketing performance. This supports the theory that market orientation, which involves a deep understanding of the needs of customers (in this case students and parents), can improve the school's attractiveness and differentiate it from competitors. These findings are relevant in the context of increasingly fierce competition in the education sector, where understanding and adapting to market needs can be a significant competitive advantage.

## **The Role of School Image Mediation in the Relationship between Marketing Strategy, Market Orientation, and Marketing Performance**

One of the important findings of this study is the mediating role of school image in strengthening the influence of marketing strategies and market orientation on marketing performance. The results of Sobel's test show that school image significantly mediates this relationship, with  $p$  values of 0.006 and 0.008 respectively for the influence of marketing strategy and market orientation through school image on marketing performance. These findings confirm that school image is not only the result of a good marketing strategy and market orientation, but is also a key factor that strengthens the influence of these two variables on marketing performance. In this context, the school's image can be seen as a strategic asset that must be managed properly to ensure that marketing strategies and market orientation achieve the desired results in improving marketing performance.

### **Managerial Implications**

The findings of this study have significant managerial implications for school managers, especially private vocational high schools in Cirebon City. School managers need to realize that effective marketing strategies and a strong market orientation are key to building a positive school image, which in turn will improve marketing performance. School management should focus on developing a marketing strategy that not only targets increasing the visibility and attractiveness of the school, but also pays attention to public perception and market needs. Thus, a good school image is not only the end goal but also an important tool to achieve better marketing performance

The discussion of the results of this study shows that marketing strategy and market orientation have a significant influence on school image and marketing performance, with school image playing an important role as a mediator. These findings are consistent with some previous studies, but they also show some noteworthy differences. For example, research by Zhang et al. (2020) shows that market orientation has a more dominant influence on marketing performance than marketing strategy, in contrast to the findings of this study which show that marketing strategy has a stronger influence. This difference may be due to differences in geographical context and industry sectors, where Zhang's research focuses on the education sector in China, while this research is conducted in Indonesia.

In addition, research by Kotler and Keller (2020) emphasizes the importance of image as a strategic asset in marketing, in line with the finding that school image significantly mediates the influence of marketing strategy and market orientation on marketing performance. However, research by Su et al. (2021) highlights that the effectiveness of image as a mediating variable can be affected by the level of competition in a higher market, where a good image alone may not be enough to guarantee improved marketing performance. In this context, the findings of this study expand the understanding of how school image, as a mediating variable, can play an important role in the context of relatively moderate competition, such as those found in the private education sector in Cirebon. Thus, although these findings are in line with previous studies in many ways, they also provide valuable new perspectives on marketing dynamics in the education sector with different characteristics.

This study makes an important contribution in the field of education management by emphasizing the role of marketing strategy and market orientation in improving school marketing performance, through the management of school image as a mediating variable. The findings of this study highlight the importance of school image management, which not only serves as a result of effective marketing strategies and market orientation, but also as a key factor that strengthens the impact of these two variables on marketing performance. Thus, this study expands the understanding of how private vocational high schools can use marketing strategies and market orientation more effectively to build a strong image and improve their competitiveness in the education market. In addition, the study provides practical guidance for school managers to design and implement more market-oriented marketing strategies, which can help schools in the face of increasingly fierce competition. Overall, this contribution enriches the education management literature and offers valuable insights for the development of best practices in more strategic and market-focused school management.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study found that marketing strategy and market orientation have a significant influence on the marketing performance of private vocational high schools in Cirebon City, with school image as an important mediating variable. The main lesson that can be drawn from this study is that strategic school image management can amplify the positive impact of marketing efforts and market orientation adaptation on overall marketing performance. This shows that vocational schools need to not only focus on improving the quality of education, but also on how they are perceived by society, which can ultimately increase the attractiveness and number of student enrollment. This study makes a significant contribution to the field of education management by introducing a more integrated approach to managing school marketing, as well as by applying the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) method to analyze the complex causal relationships between research variables, which are rarely used in the context of vocational education in Indonesia.

However, this study also has limitations that need to be acknowledged. This research is limited to private vocational high schools in Cirebon City, so the results may not be fully applicable to different geographical or demographic contexts, such as areas with diverse socio-economic conditions or different types of schools. In addition, the study did not specifically examine gender or age differences among respondents, which could have influenced different perceptions and outcomes. Therefore, further research is recommended to accommodate these factors, taking into account gender variations, ages, and using a broader survey method and involving a more diverse sample. This is expected to provide a more comprehensive picture, which can ultimately be used as a basis for more appropriate policy-making in the management of vocational schools, as well as to increase their competitiveness in the education industry.

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