INJECT (Interdisciplinary Journal of Communication)
p-ISSN: 2548-5857; e-ISSN: 2548-7124
Vol. 11. No. 2 Dec 2026: p. 2129-2152
DOI: https://doi.org/10.18326/inject.v11i2.7038

# Analyzing Multi-Actor Communication Pathways In Higher Education Choice Among Islamic Senior High School Students In Malang, Indonesia

**Ahmad Nabil Ali***
Program Studi lmu Komunikasi,Universitas Brawijaya, 65145, Malang, Indonesia
nabilali02@student.ub.ac.id

**Maulina Pia Wulandari**
Program Studi lmu Komunikasi,Universitas Brawijaya, 65145, Malang, Indonesia
m.wulandari@ub.ac.id

**Bambang Dwi Prasetyo**
Program Studi lmu Komunikasi,Universitas Brawijaya, 65145, Malang, Indonesia
bambgprast@ub.ac.id

## Abstract

Higher education choice is not merely an individual decision based on academic interest or institutional promotion, but a socially negotiated process involving parents, school counselors, and peers as important reference groups. However, existing studies on university choice often emphasize individual rational choice and marketing persuasion, while paying limited attention to how reference groups shape legitimacy and final decision-making. This study examines how Islamic senior high school students in Malang City communicate and negotiate with their key reference groups during the higher education selection process. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through focus group discussions with 10 final-year students, complemented by semi-structured interviews involving 2 guidance and counseling teachers from two Islamic senior high schools with contrasting institutional and socioeconomic backgrounds, and 1 external tutoring teacher to enrich the data. The data were analyzed thematically with the assistance of NVivo. The findings produce the Multi-Actor Iterative Communication (MAIC) Model of University Choice, reframing recruitment not as a linear marketing funnel, but as a circular, recursive communication system.

The model concludes that prospective students' choices only solidify into enrollment when marketing stimuli successfully align personal aspirations with parental validation, data-driven school guidance, performance analytics from external tutors, and horizontal peer exploration. Ultimately, this study provides higher education marketers with a novel marketing framework to strategically navigate a distributed network of community gatekeepers rather than targeting isolated consumers.

***Keywords**: Communication Pathways, University Choice, Reference Groups, Islamic Senior High School, Marketing Communication*

## 1. Introduction

The massification of higher education and the rapid growth of universities have intensified competition for student enrolments. Recorded in 2024, there were 2.840 higher education institutions under the Indonesian Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Technology, and 1001 institutions operating under the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2026a, 2026b). Needs to be noted that this figure excludes foreign higher education institutions that actively target Indonesian applicants. The problem is the distribution of higher education applicants; a high concentration is often found in well-established and prestigious institutions. In contrast, developing higher education institutions requires more strategic approaches to attract prospective students to apply and enroll in their programs. This phenomenon encourages higher education institutions to refine their marketing and recruitment strategies (Masduki et al., 2023; Satyanegara & Widikusyanto, 2018; Salazar et al., 2021).

Conventional promotional approaches employed by higher education institutions, such as educational exhibitions and school visits, have traditionally succeeded in increasing brand awareness, ensuring that prospective students become familiar with the institution's name and offerings (Bohara et al., 2022; Sari & Wijaya, 2019). In practice, events and promotions may bring the university onto the radar of students, but the eventual decision is often co-constructed within reference groups, where family members, peers, and other significant actors discuss, evaluate, and collectively legitimize particular options as realistic, appropriate, or desirable (Swart & Schutte, 2024). These trends reveal the inadequacy of purely individualistic and persuasion-based models and underscore the need to understand university choice as a socially embedded, relational process, especially in collectivist and religious contexts where social influence and reference groups are salient (Swart & Schutte, 2024; Masduki

et al., 2023; Satyanegara & Widikusyanto, 2018). In collectivist, religious, and community-oriented contexts, decisions are negotiated within dense networks of obligations, honor, and loyalty rather than made by isolated individuals (Qazi et al., 2026; Campos & Kim, 2017; Akkuş et al., 2017).

The previous studies have examined university choice, particularly in relation to reference group exposure effects on student enrollment behavior and the utilization of integrated marketing communications in higher education (Harwani et al., 2018). They have heavily focused on identifying the descriptive actors of influence and the determining factors driving enrollment (Johnston, 2010; Satyanegara & Widikusyanto, 2018). However, there has been limited attention to examining how higher education choices are communicatively negotiated through the integration of multi-actor pathways, especially in the Indonesian context, where decisions are socio-culturally and religiously embedded. This research gap becomes particularly salient when situated in the Indonesian educational landscape, where exposure to parental expectations, teacher advice, and peer group networks is still highly regarded.

Reference groups defined by people, such as family, peers, and other people who are used as a reference in forming responses, behaviors, and the decision-making process (Hyman, 1960). The influence of these groups is not only normative but also informational. Students trust their reference groups as sources of correct and personally relevant social reality (Spears, 2021). At the same time, research emphasizes that legitimacy is inherently relational: there is an object being evaluated (e.g., a college choice), an evaluating audience (family/counselor, teacher/peers), and a relationship between them, bound together by shared expectations, approval, and adherence to group norms (Schoon, 2022). When students perceive authorities or reference group members as competent and relationally close, they develop a sense of voluntary obligation to follow their advice and decisions (Tyler, 1997). Accordingly, in the context of this study, the influence of family, peers, and school actors on higher education choices can be understood as a process in which they simultaneously function as reference groups. They shape students' higher education choices by acting as sources of information, advice, and encouragement (Satyanegara & Widikusyanto, 2018; Swart & Schutte, 2024; Winata & Keni, 2023).

In Indonesia, alongside general senior high schools (SMA), there exist *Madrasah Aliyah* (MA), or Islamic senior high schools. Islamic senior high schools represent a distinctive educational, social, and moral value within Indonesian society, as spaces for intensive religious formation and social identity development (Thoyib et al., 2024; Muslim et al., 2024; Musaddad, 2023). These institutions combine religious, moral, and social education,

producing graduates whose worldviews, aspirations, and life choices are shaped by religious authority, communal norms, and collective obligations, rather than merely individual preferences (Thoyib et al., 2024; Musaddad, 2023; Apriyanto & Hidayati, 2022).

This study selects Malang City as the research site, justified by its dense educational ecosystem and a deeply collectivist socio-cultural context that aligns with the study's focus. Demographically, Malang hosts over 59,000 secondary students across 138 high schools (Kemendikdasmen, 2025a, 2025b). On the supply side, the presence of more than 60 higher education institutions inherently creates an intensely competitive marketplace, compelling universities to actively execute aggressive marketing communication strategies to attract applicants. Crucially, this competitive environment operates within a society known for its strong collectivist values (Ariani, 2019). Within this sociological backdrop, significant life choices are rarely made individually; instead, they are negotiated through continuous interaction with reference groups, such as family, peers, and school counselors.

Building on these insights, this study aims to examine how Islamic high school students in Malang City communicate and negotiate with their reference groups in deciding university choice. This study also aims to develop a model that serves as a strategic framework for higher education marketers to design more targeted and effective recruitment approaches. Crucially, the model moves beyond merely identifying who influences the student; it explicitly uncovers what specific topics are negotiated and how the iterative higher education selection process is structurally communicated within collectivist and religious environments.

## 2. Method

The study adopts a qualitative design within a constructivist paradigm (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), viewing university choice as socially constructed through interaction. An interpretive approach is used to capture how students and school actors make sense of reference group influence and relational legitimacy in context. To systematically guide the execution of this research, a structured procedural trajectory was developed, as visualized in the research flowchart. The research began with the identification of research problems and literature gaps regarding the relational dynamics of university choice, followed by the formulation of a qualitative comparative research design. Data collection was then executed, subsequently transcribed, organized, and iteratively analyzed using thematic analysis with NVivo software to construct the emergent processual model and map its strategic communication implications.

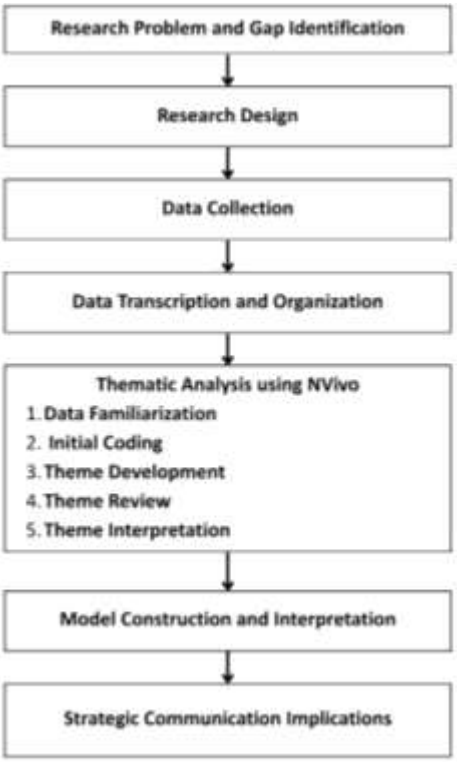


**Figure 1** Research Flowchart

This research purposefully selected two Islamic senior high schools with contrasting institutional and socioeconomic profiles in Malang City to explore how reference group dynamics and legitimacy processes vary across distinct environmental structures. School A represents a top-performing, elite institution catering predominantly to middle-to-upper socioeconomic students, while School B reflects a lower-performing, faith-based boarding institution (*pesantren*) serving students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Comparing these contrasting sites allows for a rigorous examination of how social class, institutional opportunity structures, and cultural norms form perception and options (Callender & Dougherty, 2018; Liu, 2019).

Purposive sampling was utilized to select participants who could provide rich, contextual narratives regarding the phenomenon. The primary inclusion criteria for students were: 1) final-year status, 2) active or recent engagement in university choice, and 3) represent diversity in gender, academic performance, and socioeconomic strata in line with qualitative work on social and family effects in education choices. To operationalize the multi-actor iterative framework, the data collection

instruments were: Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were deployed for the students to capture the interactive, horizontal peer-student-parents dynamics and collective meanings, complemented with semi-structured in-depth interviews, which were conducted with 2 school counselors and one guidance tutor who actively assist students in their further study selection process to capture the institutional vertical guidance perspective.

The final sample size consisted of 10 students, 2 school counselors, equally distributed across both sites, and one guidance tutor from a tutoring institution that helps many high school students in Malang City to direct their university choices. Given the study's interpretive commitments, this sample size was strictly justified by the principle of qualitative data saturation, rather than statistical generalizability. Furthermore, the purpose of this study is not to generalize to all regional locations, but to develop an explanation of how communication processes operate when choosing higher education. Restricting the sample to 13 multi-actor participants across two sites ensured that the researchers could generate a highly focused, micro-level comparative cross-case analysis without diluting the analytical depth of the qualitative data.

To protect participant vulnerability and maintain absolute confidentiality, a strict data anonymization protocol was enforced; all institutional identifiers and personal names were stripped from the datasets and replaced with alphanumeric pseudonyms across all transcripts and reports.

**Table 1.** Informants Profile

| Code | Profile and Selection Rationale |
|---|---|
| **SA-1** | Female; School A (Language stream); Middle-to-upper socioeconomic background. Highly active in information searching; already established clear target choices. Selected to illuminate the strategic alignment stage. |
| **SA-2** | Male; School A (Language stream); Middle-to-upper socioeconomic background. Proactive orientation; possesses clear programmatic goals while maintaining tactical flexibility. Selected to represent high student initiatives. |
| **SA-3** | Female; School A (Language stream); Middle-to-upper socioeconomic background. Long-term planner with early university exposure. Selected to capture strategic alignment between student aspirations and parental targets. |
| **SA-4** | Female; School A (Language stream); Middle-to-upper socioeconomic background. Independent researcher; displays self-driven analysis tailored to maternal professional |

| Code | Profile and Selection Rationale |
|---|---|
| | background. Selected to map solo information-seeking behavior. |
| **SA-5** | Female; School A (Language stream); Middle-to-upper socioeconomic background. Negative case profile; subject to absolute parental veto regarding major gender compatibility and career prospects. Selected to examine domestic negotiation deadlocks. |
| **SB-1** | Male; School B (Social Studies stream); Lower-to-middle socioeconomic boarding background. Circular researcher; heavily dependent on horizontal peer discussion and weekend family communication. Selected to map resource-constrained loops. |
| **SB-2** | Male; School B (Social Studies stream); Lower-to-middle socioeconomic boarding background. Negative case profile; actively resisted parent-driven tracking (STAN) to pursue performing arts via external validation. Selected to analyze student defiance. |
| **SB-3** | Male; School B (Social Studies stream); Lower-to-middle socioeconomic boarding background. Negative case profile; initial higher education rejection resolved through horizontal mediation of extended family (older brother). Selected to map alternative deadlock resolutions. |
| **SB-4** | Male; School B (Social Studies stream); Lower-to-middle socioeconomic boarding background. Peer-dependent explorer driven by vertical role models and shared horizontal values of collective self-development. Selected to represent group reliance. |
| **SB-5** | Male; School B (Social Studies stream); Middle-to-upper socioeconomic boarding background. Inherited competence profile; choice framed by paternal language instructions and reliance on local family networks. Selected to capture familial tracking. |
| **CA** | Female, School A Counselor. Key vertical guide: manages high-volume proactive student consultation queues after school hours. Selected to provide an institutional perspective on high-initiative settings. |
| **CB** | Male; School B Counselor. Key vertical mediator; manages institutional interest-aptitude mapping and passive students. Selected to provide an institutional perspective on boarding school settings. |

| Code | Profile and Selection Rationale |
|---|---|
| **T** | Female; External Key Informant. Manager of Research & Development and Student Tutor at one of the tutoring institutions. Actively designs metric-driven student tracking and executes parent-student alignment. Selected to provide data-driven external legitimacy. |

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. Thematic analysis was chosen because it provides a systematic yet flexible approach for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning across qualitative data, allowing us to capture both explicit and latent content relevant to the research objectives (Lochmiller, 2021). The analysis followed an iterative process of familiarization with the data, coding, generating and reviewing themes, and refining thematic definitions. NVivo was used to manage and organize the data, facilitate consistent coding, and support the retrieval and comparison of codes and themes across participants, thereby enhancing the transparency, traceability, and rigor of the analytic process.

## 3. Results

This section presents the findings in the form of qualitative themes derived from the analytical processing of multi-actor focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. To ensure structural clarity and maintain a distinct separation between raw data patterns and higher-level conceptualizations, this section focuses entirely on mapping empirical realities and explicit conversational contexts. The comprehensive theoretical implications and macro-level connections to existing literature are systematically developed within the subsequent Discussion section. All dialogue excerpts presented have been translated into English, and alphanumeric pseudonyms are consistently used to protect the participants' confidentiality.

The data demonstrate that the university choice process among Islamic senior high school students in Malang City does not operate as isolated categories and a linear sequence. Instead, the analytical framework identifies four primaries, shifting axes of communication that constitute the Multi-Actor Iterative Communication (MAIC) model: the Student-Parent-Counselor Chain, Student-Counselor Consultations, Student-Peer Loops, and Student-Tutor Consultations. These communicative pathways do not operate as isolated categories. They are deeply intertwined, looping networks where data-driven inputs from external tutors or school counselors are continuously brought back to be

negotiated within the domestic family circle and horizontally validated during informal peer interactions.

**Table 2.** Thematic Analysis Summary

| Theme (Emergent Model Axis) | Definition in This Study | Evidence Pattern & Source Data | Interactional Meaning | Decision Alignment Outcome |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Student-Parent-Counselor Chain** | Vertical negotiation and mediation process between students and parents, facilitated by counselors, to resolve any conflicting preferences. | • Observed in 100% of family deadlocks. • Highlighted in School A & B counseling records. | Balancing personal aspirations with socio-economic and religious boundaries | Securing absolute parental approval (*ridlo*) as a moral-financial requirement. |
| **Student-Counselor Consultations** | Formal, data-driven vertical communication focused on matching academic metrics with institutional admission filters. | • Highly visible in School A's proactive counseling queues after school hours. • Verbatim: Counselor A, Counselor B, School A student listings | Injecting objective, quantitative reality into subjective/emotional family expectations. | Reduction of institutional choice anxiety and stabilization of strategy. |
| **Student-Peer Loops** | Horizontal, informal communication networks among | • Predominant in School B's boarding | Informal testing of alternatives and psychological risk-sharing | Normalization of academic ambitions and |

| Theme (Emergent Model Axis) | Definition in This Study | Evidence Pattern & Source Data | Interactional Meaning | Decision Alignment Outcome |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | classmates are used to process ambiguity and share unvetted data. | house daily interactions and collective research circles. • Highlighted in School A & B. | before entering formal gates. | horizontal validation of choices. |
| **Student-Tutor Consultations** | External, data-driven diagnostic communication providing private metric estimates to reinforce students' bargaining positions. | • Reported heavily by students utilizing external prep-course services and specialized tracking systems. • Verbatim: T | Arming the student with private, independent data trajectories for family presentation. | Push students' self-efficacy and strategic leverage during domestic negotiations. |

Table 2 serves as an analytical map for this empirical section, outlining each communicative axis, its definition within the scope of this study, the observed field patterns, and the direct decision alignment outcomes. The subsequent subsections provide localized descriptive evidence, detailed participant accounts, and the vital negative cases where structural deadlocks and communication barriers alter the institutional choice trajectory.

### 3.1. Family as Primary Legitimacy Authority

Across both participating schools, parents do not merely function as an external variable or a causal source of advice. For many, they operate as the absolute gatekeepers of relational and structural legitimacy. Students

consistently described the need to ask permission first and framed university choice as incomplete until parents granted explicit approval (locally and spiritually conceptualized as *ridlo*). This domestic framework demonstrates that in a collectivist setting, the choice of a university is treated as a collective family investment rather than an individualistic decision driven solely by promotional media. As a result, initial student preferences are dramatically vulnerable to restructuring, or even total cancellation, once exposed to the vertical authority of the family network.

However, the operational mechanics of this parental authority are not uniform. They are sharply formatted by the socioeconomic capital and educational literacy available within the household. In School A, where families occupy middle-to-upper socioeconomic strata, parental intervention manifests through highly deliberate career tracking and risk aversion. Parents in this elite environment utilize their own professional literacy to examine the utility of the student's choices. When a severe mismatch occurs between a student's personal passion and parental pragmatic expectations, the family exercises an intervention. This dynamic is seen in the negative case of Student SA-5. Her independent aspiration for Psychology at Universitas Brawijaya was completely overridden by her mother, an established high school teacher, who redirected her to Islamic Education (PAI) at UIN Malang based on gender compatibility and market demand stability. SA-5's compliance highlights that parental intervention in upper-middle-class families is often voluntarily internalized by students, as the parents' professional status serves as a legitimate source of rationality. Parents are often perceived as having greater experience and understanding of their children's potential.

The operational mechanics of familial legitimacy in School B are heavily bound by financial constraints and geographical constraints, and are reluctant to adapt to new environments. The empirical data show that most students in this boarding institution actively limit their university options to institutions within Malang City, such as Universitas Negeri Malang (UM) or Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN). This geographical preference is driven by a shared strategy to minimize living costs, as remaining in the pondok pesantren or staying with local relatives eliminates the heavy financial burden of renting a room or moving to an unfamiliar city. Even when a student attempts to look outside this geographic boundary, severe hesitations emerge; for instance, Student SB-2, who evaluated joining one of the institutions in Yogyakarta, expressed constant anxiety regarding transport logistics, accommodation costs, and long-distance travel boundaries. Furthermore, the vertical interaction with parents often functions as a push toward higher education rather than a

barrier. This is evident in the experience of Student SB-3, who initially planned to bypass university completely to enter a vocational railway academy in Madiun. His parents directly rejected this out-of-town vocational route and instead instructed him to pursue an information technology degree within the safer, localized academic landscape of Malang. Consequently, family dynamics in this lower-middle boarding profile operate through a collective resource-saving framework, where parental authority actively redirects student ambitions away from high-risk external migration and guides them toward stable, affordable public institutions within their immediate reach.

However, when family financial capital is explicitly guaranteed, the interactional pattern shifts from a restrictive gatekeeping dynamic to immediate financial validation. In these scenarios, the relational anxiety regarding tuition costs is neutralized early on, allowing the student more flexibility to choose between competing state institutions. This smooth validation loop is clear in the case of Student SB-1, who initially feared that the high cost of a prestigious state university (UM) would burden his family, only to receive a direct counter-assurance from his mother

### 3.2. School Counselor (BK) as Mediators and Strategic Guides

The formal counseling pathway within the school system operates under a distinct bureaucratic imperative that prioritizes strategic student distribution and institutional risk aversion. Guidance counselors\ occupy a vertical role where success is calculated based on broad graduation rates and the avoidance of admission failures across the student body. School counselors position themselves as neutral, data-driven intermediaries who match a student's personal ambitions against empirical academic records and institutional admission filters. Managing high-volume student queues constrains the counselor's capacity to deliver highly individualized strategies. Consequently, their communicative interventions act as a stabilizer, using interest-aptitude mapping and historical school grade analytics to inject realistic parameters into subjective family expectations.

The operational mechanics of this institutional pathway reveal a sharp contrast in intensity and sophistication across the two socio-educational environments. In School A, regular counseling sessions, career seminars, and highly targeted open campus house visits to top-tier universities like UI and ITB are formally integrated into the academic calendar. Counselor CA uses advanced grade trajectory data from the first four semesters to set concrete score targets for the fifth semester, helping students narrow options and prepare metric-driven arguments for their parents. Conversely, within the resource-constrained environment of School B, structured programs are more sporadic and compressed into a dedicated two-hour

weekly curriculum schedule under the kesiswaan naungan. Counseling is often delivered in groups, and conversations frequently start at a more basic level, such as clarifying whether higher education is financially feasible and introducing state Islamic university paths (SPAN-PTKIN or UMPTKIN) to students who face strict digital isolation within the boarding pesantren setting.

Despite these environmental differences, counselors in both schools serve as vital structural arbitrators when student preferences and parental expectations collide. When domestic standstills occur, counselors utilize their professional authority to step in and mediate the divergence. Counselor CA illustrates this by implementing a compromise framework that splits the university application choices by example, assigning the parents' preference to the first slot and the student's desire to the second slot, while leveraging local religious values regarding ridlo to soften the family's rigid stance. Similarly, Counselor CB frequently manages situations where parents are passive, but the student is highly ambitious, or scenarios where parents demand a specific major, like accounting, while the student lacks the basic capabilities. By utilizing mandated Ministry-provided interest-aptitude tests printed directly onto report cards, counselors communicate objective risk profiles to parents. This intervention effectively reassures families about systemic risks, protects the student's academic capabilities, and ensures that the final choice remains relationally secure and realistic.

### 3.3. Peers as Social Validation, Informal Exploration, and Information Sharing

The horizontal communication network among classmates operates as a specialized sub-system, functioning entirely through informal exploration and information sharing. High school students use these lateral interactions to process initial interest sets independently, evaluating options away from the immediate pressure of vertical family authorities. This specific layer of communication consists of fluid, recurring exchanges where unvetted data, social media links, and campus rumors are constantly evaluated. Through this collaborative network, applicants find a space to share various academic scenarios before entering formal institutional gates.

Empirically, this informal pathway is driven by the strategic sharing of videos, links, and other information, which alters how students perceive university competitiveness. Students actively circulate informal career exploration narratives during school breaks, dormitory gatherings, and digital messaging threads. In School B, this behavior serves as an essential channel to expand options, especially because the boarding pesantren context limits individual digital search capabilities. Through this peer-

driven infrastructure, students encounter institutional brands and scholarship pathways that were not previously on their family radar. This collaborative sharing normalizes higher education ambitions, particularly among lower-middle-class students who initially lacked family precedents for university enrollment.

### 3.4. Tutor as Data-Driven Layer and Strategic Leverage

The communication pathway established within specialized tutoring environments introduces a highly technical, data-driven layer to the university selection ecosystem. While formal school counseling focuses on broad risk aversion, the tutoring center operates as a performance-focused accelerator designed to push a student's competitive boundaries. This external communication channel is built upon intense one-on-one interactions where objective metrics dictate strategy. Through continuous assessment tracking, tutoring institutions create a specialized informational space where students can evaluate their national competitiveness using empirical data.

The operational mechanics of this data-driven layer depend on tutoring teachers offering precise probability estimates to the students. By using localized ranking web systems and historical score criteria from top-tier national institutions, tutors calculate exact admission chances based on daily quiz results and mock exam performances. This statistical feedback shifts the student's perspective from emotional guesswork to concrete probability mapping. Prospective applicants receive clear visibility into where their scores stand nationally, allowing them to evaluate the feasibility of high-demand programs like medicine or engineering before initiating formal application steps.

Building upon these probability metrics, tutoring teachers offer strategic suggestions to optimize the student's institutional choices. When a student's metrics fall short for a primary target, such as a specific prestigious medical faculty, tutors utilize their statistical database to identify identical programs with safer competitive thresholds. This strategic alignment process involves mapping alternative choices that match the student’s academic profile while preserving their initial professional ambitions. The tutor's advice serves as a tactical guide, ensuring that programmatic goals are maintained through calculated positioning rather than a downward revision of aspirations.

The final interactional phase occurs when the student internalizes these professional suggestions and uses them to argue with parents. Armed with objective probability estimates and independent metric validation, the student gains significant communicative leverage within the domestic circle. During intense family discussions, this internalized data functions

as a powerful tool to manage parental hesitation, counter geographical or financial anxieties, and challenge institutional limits suggested by schools. The tutoring pathway transforms a student's personal wish into a well-defended, data-backed strategic position capable of securing the parental endorsement necessary to authorize the final choice.

### 3.5. Iterative Decision-Making Process

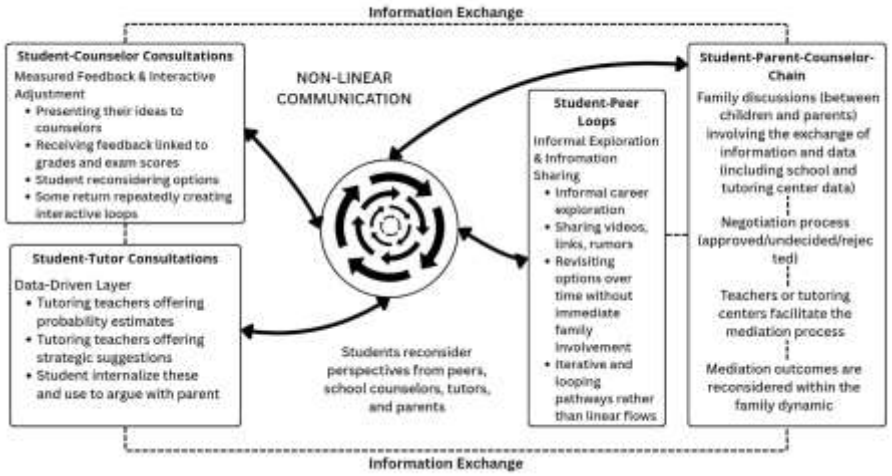


**Figure 2** Multi-Actor Iterative Communication (MAIC) Model of University Choice

The data depict university choice as an iterative and looping process, not a linear sequence. As visualized in Figure 2, this study named this model the multi-actor iterative communication (MAIC) model of university choice. Student decision-making does not progress smoothly from information search to final selection, but constantly revolves around a central axis where students continuously reconsider perspectives derived from peers, school counselors, tutors, and parents.

Even though this does not make it purely random, findings confirm that initial aspirations often emerged from peer talk, followed by tentative exploration via school programs such as alumni visits, educational expos, etc., and online searches. Students then brought emerging preferences to counselor teachers for evaluation of fit and feasibility. The data collected by the school, such as subject interests and grade point averages, and face-to-face discussions, were considered by the counselor. Then, they go to their parents for discussion and approval. Parental responses, ranging from enthusiasm to hesitation or rejection, sent students back into further information search, renewed counseling, or alternative proposals. Several

students described multiple cycles of revising major choices after mock exam results, updated financial assessments, or new input from trusted reference groups. This aligns with models of cyclical decision-making in higher education, where students continuously search for information and respond to feedback from multiple stakeholders before ultimately making a choice.

## 4. Discussion

The findings conceptualize university choice as a circular communication system in which the prospective student stands at the center of an interactive field, continuously addressed, evaluated, and repositioned by multiple actors. Influence moves in loops rather than along a descending funnel. Parents occupy a structurally distinctive position as final arbiters of moral and financial legitimacy, whose *role* is both an affective blessing and a procedural gatekeeping act that can close off or reopen options even after the student has articulated clear preferences, strengthening findings that parents are powerful co-consumers with veto power over university enrollment decisions (Eldegwy et al., 2024).

School counselors operate as bureaucratic intermediaries who translate institutional thresholds, program structures, and exam requirements into standardized guidance for students. The counselors align individual aspirations with the constraints of centralized or competitive admissions systems described in prior work on matching mechanisms and centralized choice (Hakimov & Kübler, 2021; Poole et al., 2023). Tutoring centers layer this guidance with probability calculations based on mock examinations, historical minimum grade, and performance analytics that stretch or contract students' perceived frontier of feasible higher education institutions, making the boundary between possible and impossible targets.

Surrounding these formal actors, peers share links, videos, university rankings, and rumors about passing scores, campus life, or graduate outcomes. These activities create a dense and accessible flow of informal conversations among students that can collectively reduce risk and help students be realistic in their decision-making, consistent with network evidence that self-selected peers strongly influence academic pathways and major choices (Rubineau et al., 2024).

What emerges from this configuration is a non-linear, iterative process in which each actor's judgment is simultaneously input and outcome. Institutional marketing programs, such as open houses, school visits, and alumni talks, do not stand at the top of a decision-making funnel but enter a shared information pool that is continuously revised by these actors in conversation. This aligns with interactive decision-making models that

describe cycles of information gathering, word-of-mouth (WOM) exchanges, and feedback among decision-making units, where applicants and their entourages repeatedly draw from and contribute to a common pool of digital and interpersonal information (McNicholas & Marcella, 2024).

In MAIC, each round of discussion with parents, counselors, tutors, or peers can destabilize seemingly settled positions, initiating new searches or recalibrating aspirations in light of updated exam scores, financial estimates, or revised perceptions of institutional fit. This resonates with research on iterative decision cycles and non-linear educational trajectories, which documents students backtracking, revising, and looping through stages as their circumstances and understandings evolve over time (Puente et al., 2025; Rubineau et al., 2024). Within MAIC, decision moments are less discrete points and more temporary stabilizations of a complex communicative field that only solidifies into enrollment once parental ridlo aligns with the student's aspirations and the feasibility assessments produced by counselors, tutors, and peers.

Furthermore, placed against the backdrop of stakeholder theories and integrated marketing communication (IMC) in higher education, the MAIC model reinforces and sharpens a shift that is already visible in current research. Relationship marketing and stakeholder engagement frameworks stress that higher education institutions must manage relationships with multiple constituencies, such as students, parents, schools, and tutoring institutions, through coherent, multi-channel communication to sustain reputation and enrollment (Harwani et al., 2018). MAIC moves this agenda from a managerial abstraction to a concrete communicative topology: it identifies who speaks to whom, in what order, and with what types of information, thereby exposing the pathways through which institutional cues are amplified, reframed, or muted. In quantitative models, reference groups, IMC exposure, or stakeholder engagement typically appear as latent constructs with direct or mediated paths to enrollment intention, as in studies where reference groups and IMC affect intentions through attitudes and subjective norms or mediate the effects of educational services on choice decisions (Harwani et al., 2018; Khairani & Soviyanti, 2022). MAIC treats these variables as actors whose influence is enacted through specific, observable communicative episodes, thus providing an analytical bridge between macro-level path models and micro-level interaction.

### 4.1 Practical Implications

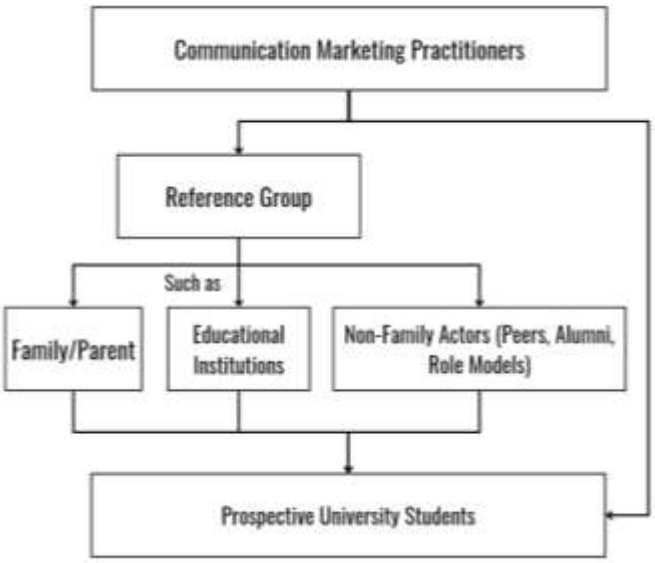


**Figure 3.** Strategic Recommendation Framework

Translating this relational system into strategic guidance implies that universities engaged in competitive recruitment can no longer rely on student-centric, transactional communication. Evidence from IMC research in higher education indicates that effective practice already hinges on digital channels, high school teacher networks, and coherent organizational messaging, and that coordinated, multi-channel communication strengthens trust and recruitment prospects. MAIC clarifies why such integration matters: messages must be designed to feed multiple rounds of informal and formal discussion among families, counselors, tutors, and peer networks. Practitioners need to anticipate that a single household or school may revisit institutional information across several months, in response to evolving performance data and changing family calculations. Materials that simply attract attention in a one-off encounter are insufficient if they do not also equip actors who will subsequently defend, interrogate, or contest the student's preference.

From a tactical perspective, this means designing a communications architecture that operates simultaneously on three interrelated fronts. First, marketing stimuli should be intentionally targeted at families, with content that explicitly addresses financial clarity, long-term job prospects, neighborhood safety, and the influence of neighborhoods on moral and religious values that empirical work identifies as central to parental evaluations and their willingness to recommend a university to their

children (McNicholas & Marcella, 2022; Eldegwy et al., 2022). Parent-focused briefings, tailored brochures, and accessible parent-institution discussion events can stabilize household discussions that might otherwise send students back into cycles of uncertainty.

Second, universities should systematically equip formal educational channels, such as counselors, school leaders, and teachers, with structural data and interpretive tools that align institutional narratives with the interests of the school, such as university rankings, graduate quality, admission pathways, and various enrollment-related information. Research on touch points and widening-participation students highlights the centrality of college tutors and school-based intermediaries in guiding information search and evaluation, suggesting that strengthening these nodes can significantly enhance recruitment outcomes (Poole et al., 2023).

Third, and closely connected to the MAIC emphasis on peer communication, institutions need to work with non-family networks as distributed amplifiers of credible narratives. Peers shape aspirations through everyday interactions, and digital environments magnify these effects, as students rely heavily on websites, social media, rankings, and online reviews when forming choice sets and assessing feasibility (McNicholas & Marcella, 2022). Strategic mobilization of alumni as storytellers in school events, peer-targeted digital campaigns that foreground authentic student voices, and responsive online channels that can absorb and clarify rumors are all consistent with MAIC's premise that legitimacy is co-constructed through repeated interpersonal exchanges. When communications are designed to move coherently across families, schools, tutoring ecosystems, and peer networks, the system begins to generate a form of distributed endorsement in which the student's eventual decision is consistently validated at each loop of the process. In such a configuration, enrollment is secured less by a single persuasive message and more by a sustained communicative infrastructure that supports alignment among actors who, in everyday life, already share responsibility for the student's future.

## 5. Conclusion

This study fulfills its primary objective to explicitly uncover how university choice is structurally communicated, negotiated, and legitimized within dense collectivist and religious environments. By examining the communicative pathways of Islamic senior high school students, this research answers its core question by demonstrating that higher education selection is a non-linear, recursive system. University choice is a socially embedded process that achieves stability only when

institutional data metrics are harmonized across multiple vertical and horizontal reference axes.

The primary theoretical novelty of this study lies in the conceptual formulation of the *Multi-Actor Iterative Communication (MAIC) Model* and its integration of the indigenous concept of *ridlo* (parental approval). Within this framework, *ridlo* is theorized not merely as an emotional blessing or a simple cultural variable, but as a formal mechanism of relational legitimacy and a strict procedural gatekeeping act. Social norms, religious values, and even financial dependence make parental approval a crucial factor in university choice decisions. Practically, this relational legitimacy perspective demands that higher education marketing practitioners abandon transactional, student-centric advertising. Instead, they must deploy a multi-layered stakeholder engagement strategy that systematically arms parents, school counselors, external tutors, and alumni networks with targeted communication assets designed to feed multiple iterative decision loops.

Nevertheless, this study is constrained by its small qualitative sample from a specific environment, which naturally limits the generalizability of the findings. However, this limitation opens future scholarly inquiry. Future research should employ rigorous mixed-method designs to quantitatively test and refine the proposed MAIC model through large-scale surveys across more diverse educational landscapes. Furthermore, comparative studies between collectivist, faith-based institutions and secular, individualist contexts would heavily enrich the literature by clarifying how cultural norms and religious authority format the relative weight of different reference groups in higher education choices.

## References

Akkuş, B., Postmes, T., & Stroebe, K. (2017). Community collectivism: A social dynamic approach to conceptualizing culture. *PLoS One*, *12*(9), e0185725.

Apriyanto, N., & Hidayati, D. (2022). Student integrative Islamic boarding school education management model. *International Journal of Educational Management and Innovation*, *3*(2), 210–224.

Ariani, M. (2019). Kearifan Lokal Malangan dalam Kumpulan Cerpen Aloer-Aloer Merah Karya Ardi Wina Saputra. *Journal Satwika*.

Badan Pusat Statistik. (2026a). *Jumlah Perguruan Tinggi, Dosen, dan Mahasiswa (Negeri dan Swasta) di Bawah Kementerian Agama Menurut*

*Provinsi, 2025—Tabel Statistik*. https://www.bps.go.id/id/statistics-table/3/ZG5GNFRUZHdiRWN3YlRGSGF6QXdaVXRPTVZSQlFUMDkjMw==/jumlah-perguruan-tinggi--tenaga-pendidik--dan-mahasiswa--negeri-dan-swasta--di-bawah-kementerian-agama-menurut-provinsi--2023.html?year=2025

Badan Pusat Statistik. (2026b). *Jumlah Perguruan Tinggi, Dosen, dan Mahasiswa (Negeri dan Swasta) di Bawah Kementerian Pendidikan Tinggi, Sains, dan Teknologi Menurut (wilayah), 2025—Tabel Statistik*. https://www.bps.go.id/id/statistics-table/3/Y21kVGRHNXZVME13S3pCRlIyMHJRbnB1WkVZemR6MDkjMw==/jumlah-perguruan-tinggi-sup-1--sup---dosen--dan-mahasiswa-negeri-dan-swasta--di-bawah-kementerian-riset--teknologi-dan-pendidikan-tinggi-kementerian-pendidikan-dan-kebudayaan-menurut-provinsi--2023.html?year=2025

Bohara, S., Suri, P., & Panwar, D. (2022). Impact of brand awareness on enrollment decision process moderated by students' gender for HEI. *Journal of Content, Community and Communication*, *15*(8), 227–241.

Callender, C., & Dougherty, K. J. (2018). Student choice in higher education—Reducing or reproducing social inequalities? *Social Sciences*, *7*(10), 189.

Campos, B., & Kim, H. S. (2017). Incorporating the cultural diversity of family and close relationships into the study of health. *American Psychologist*, *72*(6), 543.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage Publications.

Eldegwy, A., Elsharnouby, T. H., & Kortam, W. (2024). Like father, like son: The role of similar-education parents in their children's university choice. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, *34*(2), 458–477. https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2021.2018087

Hakimov, R., & Kübler, D. (2021). Experiments on centralized school choice and college admissions: A survey. *Experimental Economics*, *24*(2), 434–488.

Harwani, Y., Suharjo, B., Nurmalina, R., & Suprayitno, G. (2018). Minat pemilihan perguruan tinggi dan peran kelompok referensi serta komunikasi pemasaran terintegrasi. *MIX: Jurnal Ilmiah Manajemen*, *8*(2), 186–207.

Hyman, H. H. (1960). Reflections on reference groups. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *24*(3), 383–396.

Johnston, T. C. (2010). Who and what influences the choice of university? Student and university perceptions. *American Journal of Business Education*, *3*(10), 15–24.

Kemendikdasmen. (2025a). *Data Pendidikan Kemendikdasmen*. https://referensi.data.kemendikdasmen.go.id/pendidikan/dikmen/056100/2/jf/all/all

Kemendikdasmen. (2025b). *Residu Data Induk Pendidikan*. https://referensi.data.kemendikdasmen.go.id/residu/pesertadidik/wilayah/056100/2?jenjang=Dikmen

Khairani, Z., & Soviyanti, E. (2022). Peran periklanan media cetak, digital marketing, dan kelompok referensi terhadap keputusan mahasiswa memilih perguruan tinggi. *Jurnal Ilmiah Ekonomi dan Bisnis*, *19*(2), 211–217.

Liu, Y. (2019). Choices, risks and rational conformity: Extending Boudon's positional theory to understand higher education choices in contemporary China. *Higher Education*, *77*(3), 525–540. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-018-0285-7

Lochmiller, C. (2021). Conducting Thematic Analysis with Qualitative Data. *The Qualitative Report*. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2021.5008

Masduki, Prihatini, E., & Abdullah, D. (2023). Analisis Faktor-Faktor Yang Mempengaruhi Keputusan Kuliah Di Perguruan Tinggi Swasta. *Entrepreneur: Jurnal Bisnis Manajemen dan Kewirausahaan*, *4*(1), 205–219.

McNicholas, C., & Marcella, R. (2024). An interactive decision-making model of international postgraduate student course choice. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, *34*(2), 802–827. https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2022.2076276

Musaddad, A. (2023). Transformation of Islamic boarding schools as Islamic education institutions in Indonesia. *Journal of Islamic Education Research*, *4*(1), 73–82.

Muslim, A., Arroisi, J., Jan, J. M., & Ramazani, R. (2024). Indonesian *pesantren* -affiliated higher education: Universal Islamic values to develop locally engaged but globally oriented multilingual

graduates. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, *29*(1), 138–157. https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2023.2285633

Poole, R., Thompson, D., & Galloway, D. (2023). Decisions, decisions, decisions: An exploration of factors affecting the decision-making of 'Uni Connect' students, when choosing higher education study. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, *36*(1), 127–148. https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2023.2275752

Puente, M., Ríos Arroyo, D., & Romero, M. (2025). "I Kind of Backtracked a Little": The Nonlinear College Choice Pathways of Rural Latinx Students. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, *25*(1), 33–53. https://doi.org/10.1177/15381927251351340

Qazi, S., Ahmad, A., Shah, S. I., Khan, A. U., Amjad, M. U., Jehan, A. M., Ahmad, D., Saman, G., Rahman, J., & Atif, E. (2026). Family collective agency in career decision-making among medical and dental students: A qualitative intersectional study in Peshawar, Pakistan. *Frontiers in Medicine*, *13*, 1755128.

Rubineau, B., Noh, S., Neblo, M. A., & Lazer, D. M. (2024). Pathways of peer influence on major choice. *Social Forces*, *102*(3), 1089–1110.

Salazar, K. G., Jaquette, O., & Han, C. (2021). Coming Soon to a Neighborhood Near You? Off-Campus Recruiting by Public Research Universities. *American Educational Research Journal*, *58*(6), 1270–1314. https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312211001810

Sari, E. A., & Wijaya, L. S. (2019). Strategi Promosi Melalui Direct Marketing Untuk Meningkatkan Jumlah Mahasiswa Baru. *Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi*, *17*(1), 16–27.

Satyanegara, D., & Widikusyanto, M. J. (2018). Role of reference group in winning the Banten higher education service market. *IJBE (Integrated Journal of Business and Economics)*, *2*(2), 201–219.

Schoon, E. W. (2022). Operationalizing Legitimacy. *American Sociological Review*, *87*(3), 478–503. https://doi.org/10.1177/00031224221081379

Spears, R. (2021). Social influence and group identity. *Annual review of psychology*, *72*(2021), 367–390.

Swart, E., & Schutte, F. (2024). Reference groups as an external influence in choosing a private higher education institution. *International*

*Journal of Educational Management and Development Studies*, *5*(1), 54–73.

Thoyib, M. E., Degaf, A., Fatah, A. A., & Huda, M. (2024). Religious tolerance among Indonesian Islamic university students: The pesantren connection. *Journal of Al-Tamaddun*, *19*(2), 239–250.

Tyler, T. R. (1997). The Psychology of Legitimacy: A Relational Perspective on Voluntary Deference to Authorities. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *1*(4), 323–345. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0104_4

Winata, A. P., & Keni, K. (2023). Faktor-faktor yang memengaruhi keputusan pemilihan universitas di Jakarta. *Jurnal Manajemen Bisnis dan Kewirausahaan*, *7*(4), 793–802.