

Determinants of Final-Year High School Students' Decisions in Selecting University Study Programs

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Abstract. Final-year high school students' decisions in selecting university study programs have become increasingly complex amid the rapid growth of higher education institutions and the demand for alignment with labor market requirements. Although prior studies have examined individual determinants, research integrating multiple factors into a single structural model within a specific regional context remains limited. This study analyzes the determinants of Grade XII students' study program selection decisions by examining the influence of higher education institution factors, career prospects, location, personal interest, and parental support in the Pati Residency region. A quantitative survey was conducted on 473 senior and vocational high school students, and the data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 3. The results reveal that higher education institution factors, career prospects, and parental support positively influence students' decisions, with institutional perception emerging as the most dominant determinant, whereas location and personal interest show no significant effect. These findings indicate that students' decisions are driven more by institutional and rational-economic considerations reinforced by family support than by geographical or intrinsic factors. The study extends the Theory of Planned Behavior to educational decision-making and offers strategic implications for study program development.

Keywords: Study Program Selection, Higher Education Institution, Career prospects, personal interest, parental support

1 Introduction

The decision to pursue higher education represents one of the strategic decisions made by students during the transition from secondary education to higher education. The rapid growth in the number of higher education institutions and study programs in Indonesia has expanded the range of alternatives available to prospective students [1]. This condition provides greater access to higher education opportunities on the one hand, while on the other hand it increases the complexity of the decision-making process, as students must consider various factors before determining their study program choice. Many students continue to experience uncertainty in selecting study

programs that align with their personal interests, abilities, and future career prospects [2], [3].

This phenomenon is also observed in the Pati Residency region, which demonstrates the ongoing development and dynamics of higher education. The local government of Pati Regency has addressed this phenomenon by providing academic preparation programs and guidance to support secondary school students in preparing for higher education entrance selection [4]. Regional educational demographic data further indicate that the proportion of the population completing higher education remains relatively limited compared to those completing secondary education [5]. This condition reflects a gap between the availability of higher education access and the actual level of public participation. This situation underscores the importance of empirical studies examining the factors influencing students' decisions in selecting study programs, particularly within the social and economic context of the Pati Residency region.

Theoretically, decision-making behavior can be explained through the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which states that individual decisions are influenced by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control [6]. Students' attitudes toward study program selection are formed through their evaluation of the quality of higher education institutions and their beliefs regarding graduates' career prospects [7]. Subjective norms are associated with social environmental influences, particularly parental support, whereas perceived behavioral control relates to practical factors such as the location of higher education institutions and their accessibility [8]. Therefore, the decision to select a study program can be understood as a planned behavior influenced by multiple interacting determinants.

Previous research Darajat & Sakti [9] indicates that accreditation, promotion, location, and facilities influence prospective students' decision-making. In addition, graduates' career prospects often serve as a primary consideration, as students tend to select study programs that are perceived to offer better employment opportunities [10]. Personal interest has also been shown to play a significant role in enhancing students' academic motivation and commitment [11]. On the other hand, parental support remains a strong social factor within the Indonesian cultural context, particularly in educational decision-making [12]. The location of higher education institutions, including distance and living costs, also influences students' choices, especially for those with economic constraints [13].

Although numerous studies have examined factors influencing study program selection, most have been conducted in large urban contexts or have focused on specific factors in isolation. Research that simultaneously integrates higher education institution factors, career prospects, location, personal interest, and parental support within the context of the Pati Residency region remains relatively limited. Understanding the determinants of students' decisions at the regional level is essential as a foundation for developing study program strategies that align with the needs and characteristics of prospective students.

The scientific novelty of this study lies not in the individual determinants themselves, which have indeed been widely examined, but in their simultaneous integration into a single structural model grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

and applied to an under-researched non-metropolitan regional setting. Most previous PLS-SEM studies on university selection have either tested determinants in isolation or aggregated them without an explicit behavioral framework, and most have concentrated on large urban populations. This study contributes theoretically by mapping five determinants onto the three components of the TPB, namely attitude, which is reflected in higher education institution factors and career prospects; subjective norms, which are represented by parental support; and perceived behavioral control, which is captured through location. It also contributes empirically by testing this configuration among 473 students in the Pati Residency, a region where higher education participation remains comparatively low. The resulting evidence on which behavioral antecedents dominate decision-making in a peripheral Indonesian context, together with the counter-intuitive finding regarding personal interest, distinguishes this research from prior urban-centered SEM studies.

The conceptual model was established deductively from the Theory of Planned Behavior and refined through a review of empirical determinants reported in the higher education choice literature. The five constructs were selected because each maps onto a distinct TPB antecedent and each has demonstrated relevance in the Indonesian context. Higher education institution factors and career prospects operationalize attitudinal beliefs about institutional quality and future outcomes; parental support represents the subjective-norm dimension that is especially salient in collectivist cultures; and location captures perceived behavioral control through accessibility and cost. Personal interest was retained as an intrinsic determinant that is widely emphasized in educational psychology. Several other determinants noted in the literature, such as tuition costs, scholarships, peer influence, digital marketing and social-media exposure, employability rankings, and family socioeconomic status, were deliberately excluded to preserve model parsimony and to keep the constructs aligned with the three core TPB dimensions. Several of these excluded factors are partially reflected within the retained constructs, for example cost within location and employability within career prospects, and they are acknowledged as avenues for future extension.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the determinants of final-year high school students' decisions in selecting higher education study programs. Specifically, this study examines the influence of higher education institution factors, career prospects, location, personal interest, and parental support on students' study program selection decisions. The findings of this study are expected to provide empirical contributions to the development of higher education policies that are more responsive to students' needs and labor market demands.

2 Method

This study employed a quantitative approach using an explanatory survey design. This approach was selected because the study aimed to analyze the causal relationships between independent variables and the dependent variable. The independent variables in this study included higher education institution factors, career prospects,

location, personal interest, and parental support, while the dependent variable was final-year high school students' study program selection decision.

The study population consisted of all Grade XII students from senior high schools, vocational high schools, and Islamic senior high schools in the Pati Residency region, which includes Kudus, Pati, Jepara, Rembang, and Blora Regencies. The sampling technique used purposive sampling with the criterion of Grade XII students who were in the process of planning to pursue higher education. The total number of respondents in this study was 473 students.

The Pati Residency was selected purposively because it represents a non-metropolitan, culturally homogeneous region of Central Java with comparatively low higher-education participation, offering a context that is under-represented in existing urban-centered studies. The five regencies included (Kudus, Pati, Jepara, Rembang, and Blora) provide variation in school type and academic stream while sharing broadly similar socioeconomic conditions, which strengthens internal coherence. Accordingly, the findings are intended to be analytically generalizable to comparable second-tier regions rather than statistically representative of Indonesia as a whole. Because regional characteristics, such as the local supply of institutions, prevailing labor-market structures, and cultural norms regarding family involvement, may shape the strength of the observed relationships, the results should be interpreted within this regional boundary, and cross-regional replication is recommended.

The research instrument was a structured questionnaire developed based on the indicators of each variable. Measurement was conducted using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The higher education institution variable was measured using indicators of reputation, accreditation, facilities, and lecturer quality. The career prospects variable was measured using indicators of employment opportunities, career stability, and income potential. The location variable was measured using indicators of distance, transportation accessibility, and living costs. The personal interest variable was measured using indicators of interest, aptitude compatibility, and learning comfort. Meanwhile, the parental support variable was measured using indicators of approval, guidance, and financial support. The study program selection decision variable was measured using indicators of confidence, final decision, and readiness to apply.

Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with the assistance of SmartPLS 3 software. PLS-SEM was selected because it enables the simultaneous analysis of relationships among latent variables and does not require strict assumptions of normal data distribution. In addition, this method is appropriate for predictive and exploratory research.

The analysis process was conducted in two stages, namely the evaluation of the measurement model (outer model) and the evaluation of the structural model (inner model) [14]. The outer model evaluation was performed to assess the validity and reliability of the constructs through tests of convergent validity (outer loadings and Average Variance Extracted/AVE), discriminant validity (Fornell Larcker criterion and cross loadings), as well as composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha [14].

Discriminant validity was additionally examined using the Heterotrait Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT), in line with recent recommendations for PLS-SEM. To

address the potential for common method variance arising from the self-administered, single-source, cross-sectional design, both procedural and statistical remedies were applied: item order was randomized and respondent anonymity was assured, and Harman’s single-factor test together with a full collinearity (VIF) assessment were conducted to detect common method bias.

Furthermore, the inner model evaluation was conducted to examine the relationships among variables by assessing the R-square (R^2) values, path coefficients, and statistical significance using the bootstrapping procedure by observing the t-statistic and p-value. The research hypotheses were accepted when the t-statistic value exceeded 1.96 at a significance level of 5% [14].

3 Result

3.1 Respondent Profile

The data presented in Table 1 describe the characteristics of the respondents in this study. The respondents consisted of 473 Grade XII students from senior high schools, vocational high schools, and Islamic senior high schools in the Pati Residency region. Based on gender, 254 respondents (53.7%) were female, while 219 respondents (46.3%) were male.

Based on school type, 237 respondents (50.1%) were from senior high schools, 164 respondents (34.7%) were from vocational high schools, and 72 respondents (15.2%) were from Islamic senior high schools. In terms of academic specialization, the majority of respondents were from the science stream, totaling 196 students (41.4%), followed by the social sciences stream with 166 students (35.1%), and the vocational stream with 111 students (23.5%).

Table 1. Respondent Demographics

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	219	46,3
Female	254	53,7
School Type		
Senior High School	237	50,1
Vocational High School	164	34,7
Islamic Senior High School	72	15,2
Academic Major		
Science	196	41,4
Social Sciences	166	35,1
Other Vocational Majors	111	23,5

3.2 Measurement Model

The measurement model was evaluated to assess the validity and reliability of the constructs using SmartPLS 3. The evaluation included tests of convergent validity and reliability.

Table 2. Construct Validity and Reliability

Construct	Loadings	Composite Reliability	AVE
Study Program Selection Decision		0,857	0,667
Confidence	0,775		
Decision	0,853		
Readiness to Apply	0,820		
Higher Education Institution		0,876	0,779
Institution Reputation	0,895		
Institution Accreditation	0,870		
Career Prospects		0,853	0,660
Employment Opportunities	0,773		
Clear Career Prospects	0,816		
Income Potential	0,847		
Location		0,875	0,779
Distance	0,846		
Transportation Accessibility	0,918		
Personal Interest		0,857	0,668
Interest	0,728		
Aptitude	0,878		
Learning Comfort	0,839		
Parental Support		0,880	0,710
Parental Support	0,857		
Parental Advice	0,901		
Financial Support	0,764		

Based on the measurement model evaluation results, all indicators demonstrated outer loading values above 0.70, thereby meeting the criteria for convergent validity. The Composite Reliability values for all constructs ranged from 0.853 to 0.880, indicating good internal consistency. In addition, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for each construct exceeded 0.50, suggesting that the constructs explained more than 50% of the variance in their respective indicators. Therefore, the measurement model in this study can be considered valid and reliable.

Table 3. Fornell-Larcker

	CP	DC	HEI	LC	PS	PI
CP	0,813					
DC	0,401	0,816				
HEI	0,342	0,680	0,883			
LC	0,353	0,319	0,308	0,882		
PS	0,455	0,342	0,295	0,455	0,843	
PI	0,352	0,305	0,341	0,528	0,397	0,817

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell Larcker criterion. The analysis results indicate that the square root of the AVE for each construct was greater than the correlations between constructs. This finding suggests that each latent variable demonstrates adequate discriminant validity and is able to explain the variance of its indicators more strongly than other constructs in the model. Therefore, the measurement model satisfies the discriminant validity criterion.

To provide a more rigorous assessment of discriminant validity, the Heterotrait Monotrait ratio (HTMT) was also examined, as recommended in recent PLS-SEM literature. As shown in Table 4, all HTMT values were below the conservative threshold of 0.85, confirming that the constructs are empirically distinct and that discriminant validity is firmly established.

Table 4. Discriminant validity – Heterotrait Monotrait ratio (HTMT)

	CP	DC	HEI	LC	PS	PI
CP						
DC	0.478					
HEI	0.402	0.802				
LC	0.421	0.372	0.360			
PS	0.535	0.398	0.342	0.531		
PI	0.418	0.359	0.401	0.617	0.463	

Note: DC = Study Program Selection Decision; HEI = Higher Education Institution; CP = Career Prospects; LC = Location; PS = Parental Support; PI = Personal Interest. All values < 0.85.

The potential for common method bias was subsequently evaluated because all constructs were measured through a single self-administered instrument at one point in time. Harman's single-factor test showed that the first unrotated factor accounted for 38.6% of the total variance, well below the 50% threshold, indicating that no single factor dominated the covariance among items. In addition, a full collinearity assessment based on the variance inflation factor (VIF) produced values ranging from 1.21 to 2.87, all below the 3.3 criterion. Together with the procedural remedies applied during data collection, these results suggest that common method variance is unlikely to threaten the validity of the findings.

3.3 Structural Model

After the measurement model was confirmed to be valid and reliable, the next stage involved evaluating the structural model (inner model). This evaluation aimed to assess the model's ability to explain the dependent variable and to examine the overall adequacy of the model. The structural model assessment in this study was conducted by examining the coefficient of determination (R^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), and Goodness of Fit (GoF). The R^2 value was used to measure the extent to which the independent variables explain the variance of the dependent variable, while the Q^2 value was used to evaluate the model's predictive relevance. Meanwhile, the GoF index was used to assess the overall model fit based on the combined values of AVE and R^2 .

Table 5. Goodness of Fit (GoF) Index

Construct	AVE	R2	Q2
Higher Education Institution	0,779		
Career Prospects	0,660		
Location	0,779		
Personal Interest	0,668		
Parental Support	0,710		
Decision to Choose a Study Program	0,667	0,503	0,322
Average Score	0,711		
AVE x R2		0,358	
GoF = $\sqrt{(AVE \times R2)}$		0,598	

Based on Table 5, the coefficient of determination (R^2) value for the Study Program Selection Decision variable was 0.503. This indicates that 50.3% of the variance in students' study program selection decisions can be explained by the variables of Higher Education Institution, Career Prospects, Location, Personal Interest, and Parental Support, while the remaining 49.7% is influenced by other variables outside the research model. According to the criteria proposed by Hair et al. [14], an R^2 value of 0.50 is categorized as moderate, indicating that the model has adequate explanatory power.

The Q^2 value of 0.322 indicates that the model has good predictive relevance, as the Q^2 value is greater than zero. This finding suggests that the model has sufficient capability to predict the dependent variable.

Furthermore, the Goodness of Fit (GoF) value was calculated at 0.598, which was obtained from the square root of the product of the average AVE and R^2 values. Based on the criteria proposed by Hair et al. [14], a GoF value above 0.36 is classified as high. Therefore, the structural model in this study can be considered to have excellent model fit and demonstrates a strong ability to explain the relationships among variables comprehensively.

3.4 Path Coefficients

After the structural model was confirmed to be adequate based on the R^2 , Q^2 , and Goodness of Fit values, the next stage involved hypothesis testing through path coefficient analysis. This analysis aimed to examine the direct effects of each independent variable on the dependent variable. The analysis was conducted using the bootstrapping procedure in SmartPLS 3 by evaluating the path coefficient (β), t-statistic, and p-value at a 5% significance level.

Table 6. Structural Model Path Coefficients

Hypotheses	β	T-values	P-values	Result
HEI -> DC	0,593	15,70	0,000	Accepted
CP -> DC	0,146	2,964	0,002	Accepted
Lc -> DC	0,052	1,221	0,111	Rejected
PI -> DC	-0.008	0,184	0,427	Rejected
PS -> DC	0,080	1,912	0,028	Accepted

Based on the results presented in Table 6, the Higher Education Institution (HEI) variable had a positive and significant effect on Study Program Selection Decision (DC), with a path coefficient of 0.593 and a t-value of 15.70 ($p < 0.05$). This finding indicates that perceptions of the quality and reputation of higher education institutions represent the most dominant determinant in shaping final-year high school students' decisions.

To identify which institutional attributes contributed most strongly to this dominant effect, the indicator loadings within the Higher Education Institution construct were examined and interpreted through an importance performance perspective. Institution reputation recorded the highest loading (0.895), followed by institution accreditation (0.870), indicating that perceived prestige and formal quality assurance are the most influential institutional signals in students' decisions. Combined with the construct's large total effect on the decision variable, these loadings imply that reputation and accreditation are simultaneously high in importance and high in perceived performance, whereas tangible attributes such as facilities carry comparatively less weight. Practically, this suggests that institutions seeking to attract prospective stu-

dents should prioritize building and communicating reputation and accreditation status rather than emphasizing infrastructure alone.

The Career Prospects (CP) variable also demonstrated a positive effect on study program selection decision ($\beta = 0.146$; $p < 0.05$). Although the magnitude of its effect was smaller than that of the institutional factor, career prospects remained a significant rational consideration in the decision-making process.

In contrast, the Location (LC) variable did not show a significant effect on study program selection decision ($t = 1.221$; $p > 0.05$). This finding suggests that geographical factors and accessibility were not primary determinants within the context of this study.

Similarly, the Personal Interest (PI) variable did not have a significant effect on study program selection decision ($\beta = -0.008$; $p > 0.05$). The negative coefficient further indicates that personal interest did not serve as a key determining factor within the structural model.

Meanwhile, Parental Support (PS) demonstrated a positive and significant effect on study program selection decision ($\beta = 0.080$; $p < 0.05$). This result confirms that parental support and approval continue to play an important role in reinforcing students' decision-making.

4 Discussion

The results of this study indicate that final-year high school students' study program selection decisions are significantly influenced by their perceptions of higher education institutions, career prospects, and parental support. In contrast, location and personal interest were not found to have a significant effect within the structural model. These findings suggest that educational decision-making at the senior high school level is influenced more by institutional and rational considerations than by geographical factors or intrinsic preferences alone.

First, the highly dominant influence of Higher Education Institution confirms that institutional reputation, accreditation, and academic quality are the primary determinants in shaping students' decisions. Within the framework of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), this factor represents the attitude component, in which students evaluate the benefits and credibility of institutions before making their choices. The high path coefficient indicates that students prioritize their perceptions of institutional quality over other considerations. In the context of the Pati Residency region, the reputation of higher education institutions may serve as an indicator of academic and social security for the future, thereby becoming the most decisive factor in the decision-making process. These findings are consistent with previous studies conducted by Hidayat & Yusuf [15] and Puspitasari & Patrikha [16], which reported that institutional image significantly influences students' decisions in selecting study programs.

Second, Career Prospects were also found to have a significant influence on study program selection decision. This finding indicates that students demonstrate a rational orientation toward future employment opportunities and economic stability.

These results are consistent with previous studies conducted by Basri et al. [17] and Putri & Umami [18], which emphasized the importance of employability in study program selection. From the perspective of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), career prospects strengthen behavioral beliefs related to the long-term outcomes of educational choices.

Third, Parental Support demonstrated a positive and significant influence, although its magnitude was relatively smaller compared to institutional factors and career prospects. This finding confirms that subjective norms within the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) continue to play an important role in shaping students' decisions. In collectivist cultures such as Indonesia, educational decisions are often not entirely individual but involve family considerations [19]. Moral and financial support from parents strengthens the legitimacy of students' decisions [20]. These findings are consistent with previous studies conducted by Sebayang et al. [21], Janio et al. [22], which reported that parental support has a significant influence on study program selection decisions.

In contrast, the Location variable did not demonstrate a significant effect on study program selection decision. This finding indicates that, within the context of this study, distance and accessibility were not primary considerations. It is possible that students were prepared to adapt to broader geographical locations or perceived location as a secondary factor compared to institutional reputation and career prospects. These findings are consistent with previous studies conducted by Ananda et al. [23] and Romadhon et al. [24], which reported that location does not significantly influence students' decisions in selecting study programs.

Furthermore, Personal Interest was not found to have a significant effect on study program selection decision. This finding is particularly noteworthy, as personal interest is theoretically considered a key determinant in educational choice. However, within the context of this study, the results indicate that rational and social considerations were more dominant than intrinsic factors. This suggests that final-year high school students tend to prioritize career security and social legitimacy over the exploration of personal interests when making study program selection decisions.

This unexpected result warrants a deeper theoretical and methodological interpretation. First, from a cultural standpoint, decision-making in collectivist and family oriented settings such as the Pati Residency is frequently mediated by external legitimacy, so that intrinsic interest is subordinated to institutional reputation and parental expectations rather than expressed directly; within the Theory of Planned Behavior, a strong subjective-norm and attitudinal signal can attenuate the behavioral influence of intrinsic preferences. Second, at this transitional stage many final-year students may not yet have well crystallized vocational interests, which weakens the predictive power of the construct. Third, the effect may be partly statistical: personal interest correlated moderately with location ($r = 0.528$) and parental support ($r = 0.397$), so shared variance may have been absorbed by stronger predictors, and the near-zero coefficient is consistent with suppression rather than genuine irrelevance. Finally, a measurement explanation cannot be excluded, as the three interest indicators may capture stated rather than revealed interest. These considerations suggest that personal interest may

operate indirectly, for instance through attitude formation, rather than exerting a direct effect, an interpretation that future mediation-based designs could test.

Beyond the significance of individual paths, the model explained 50.3% of the variance in study program selection decisions ($R^2 = 0.503$), a moderate value that nonetheless leaves nearly half of the variance unaccounted for. This residual variance is theoretically plausible, as educational decisions are multidimensional. Several additional determinants are likely to contribute: economic factors such as tuition costs, scholarship availability, and family socioeconomic status; social factors such as peer influence and exposure to institutional digital marketing and social media; psychological factors such as academic self-efficacy and achievement motivation; and institutional signals such as employability rankings and industry university linkages. Incorporating these variables in future models would likely raise the explained variance and provide a more complete account of the decision process, while the present moderate R^2 remains appropriate for behavioral research of this kind.

5 Conclusion

This study aimed to analyze the determinants of final-year high school students' decisions in selecting higher education study programs by examining the influence of higher education institution factors, career prospects, location, personal interest, and parental support. Based on the results of the analysis using the PLS-SEM approach, perceptions of higher education institutions were identified as the most dominant determinant in shaping students' decisions. In addition, career prospects and parental support were found to have a significant influence on study program selection decision. In contrast, location and personal interest did not demonstrate a significant effect within the research model.

These findings confirm that students' decisions in selecting study programs are influenced more by institutional and rational economic considerations than by geographical factors or intrinsic preferences alone. Perceptions of institutional reputation, accreditation, and academic quality serve as the primary basis for shaping students' confidence in their choices. Career prospects reinforce a pragmatic future-oriented perspective, while parental support functions as a form of social legitimacy in the decision-making process.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings strengthen the relevance of the Theory of Planned Behavior in the context of educational decision-making. Attitudes toward higher education institutions and career prospects, as well as subjective norms reflected through parental support, were shown to influence students' decisions. However, the non-significant effects of location and personal interest suggest that, within the context of this study, educational decision-making tends to be more rational and strategic rather than driven solely by personal preferences.

From a practical perspective, this study provides important implications for higher education institutions. Universities should prioritize strengthening institutional reputation, improving academic quality, and enhancing transparency regarding graduates' career prospects as part of their study program development strategies.

Furthermore, communication strategies that actively involve parents as key stakeholders are essential in attracting prospective students.

This study has limitations related to the geographical scope, which was confined to the Pati Residency region, as well as the number of variables examined. Future research is recommended to expand the geographical coverage and include additional variables, such as peer influence, social media exposure, and family economic conditions, in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the determinants of students' study program selection decisions.

Several further limitations should be acknowledged. The reliance on a cross-sectional, single-source, self-reported design means that, despite the procedural and statistical checks reported above, causal inferences remain tentative and residual common-method influence cannot be entirely ruled out. The purposive sampling within a single residency also limits statistical generalizability to other Indonesian regions with differing socioeconomic and institutional conditions. Future research could employ longitudinal or mixed-method designs, extend the model with the economic, social, and psychological variables noted above, and adopt importance performance map analysis to yield richer and more actionable practical implications.

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