



The Power of Word-of-Mouth: Understanding the Dynamics of Organic Marketing in Faith-Based Educational Institutions

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Abstract:

This study analyzes how word-of-mouth (WOM) is used as an organic marketing strategy in faith-based educational institutions, especially its influence on the perception and decisions of prospective students. The research was conducted by quantitative surveys, collecting data from active students, alumni, and parents through structured questionnaires and supporting documents from institutions. The results show that the positive experiences of students, the credibility of mentors and teachers, and recommendations from senior students and alumni greatly influence the decision of prospective students. Data analysis showed positive experiences contributed the most, followed by the credibility of sources and peer recommendations. This confirms that direct interaction is more influential than formal promotion. Digital media is only an additional channel of information, while interpersonal interaction remains a major factor in the effectiveness of WOM. This study concludes that WOM in faith-based educational institutions runs through social interaction and trusted personal networks, thus becoming an effective and efficient marketing strategy. The implication of this research is that institutional managers can improve their reputation and attract prospective students by creating positive experiences, strengthening the role of mentors and seniors, and documenting original testimonials to optimize organic marketing strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Religious-based educational institutions have characteristics that distinguish them from general or commercial education (Robledo et al., 2022). One of its main characteristics is word of mouth (WOM), which is the dissemination of information through recommendations from trusted people (Berger, 2025). This is important because prospective students and parents usually trust the experiences shared by the surrounding community rather than formal promotions. In Islamic boarding schools, WOM can influence the decisions of prospective

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students and shape the institution's reputation naturally (Edi Irawan, 2023). Therefore, understanding these dynamics is essential for developing a faith-based education marketing strategy (Ishii & Kikumori, 2022).

The main problem faced is the lack of empirical understanding of how much WOM influences the perception and decisions of prospective students in Islamic boarding schools (Oc et al., 2023). Most previous research has been conducted in secular educational settings or commercial institutions, so faith-based educational contexts that emphasize religious and community values are still rarely analyzed quantitatively (Roy et al., 2025). This raises questions about the relationship between the quality of social interaction, the perception of trust in the sender of information, and the decision of prospective students in choosing educational institutions (Mukti & Isa, 2024).

Several studies have shown that the credibility of information sources, the quality of interpersonal relationships, and emotional involvement greatly affect the effectiveness of WOM (Khofsah, 2025; Rahman, 2025; Shoha, 2025). In the field of education, individual testimonials and real experiences can shape the reputation of the institution and encourage prospective participants to join (Baharun & Jannah, 2025; Edi Irawan, 2023). However, most of these studies took samples from public schools or secular universities, so the results do not necessarily apply to Islamic boarding schools that have different social structures and religious values (Baharun et al., 2024).

This knowledge gap shows the need for research that examines the influence of WOM quantitatively in faith-based educational institutions, especially Islamic boarding schools that combine religious education and entrepreneurship (Firmansyah et al., 2025). Previous studies have rarely quantitatively measured the relationship between the dissemination of information, community perception, and its impact on the decision of prospective students (Rofik et al., 2025). This quantitative understanding is important so that cottage managers can obtain empirical evidence to formulate effective communication strategies (Rozi et al., 2021).

The researcher chose the Nuris 2 Entrepreneur Student Islamic Boarding School in Jember, East Java, as the research site because it has a unique character in combining religious education and entrepreneurship. This pesantren also has a community that is active in exchanging information (Munif et al., 2021). This condition allows researchers to quantitatively measure the influence of WOM on the perception and decisions of prospective students using valid and standard surveys or data collection instruments.

Based on this background, this study aims to measure the influence of word of mouth as an organic marketing strategy in religion-based educational institutions.

This research focuses on the relationship between social interaction, the perception of trust in the sender of information, and the influence of WOM on the decision of prospective students at the Nuris 2 Entrepreneurial Student Islamic Boarding School. The results of the research are expected to make an empirical contribution to the marketing strategy of religion-based education and enrich the academic literature in this field.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a quantitative approach with a survey design to measure the influence of word-of-mouth (WOM) on the perception and decision of prospective students at the Nuris 2 Entrepreneur Student Islamic Boarding School, Jember, East Java. The survey was chosen because it can collect data from many respondents systematically and provides a basis for numerical analysis of the relationships between variables. This research focuses on the influence of interpersonal experiences, recommendations from alumni and senior students, and the credibility of information sources on the decision of prospective students in choosing Islamic boarding schools.

The research population includes all prospective students, active students, alumni, and parents who have experience or information about the spread of WOM in Islamic boarding schools. This population was chosen so that the results of the research could represent the perception and influence of WOM in the entire Islamic boarding school community. The research sample was taken from groups that already had experience or information about social interactions and cottage activities that affected the perception of prospective students, in accordance with inclusion criteria.

This study uses purposive sampling techniques to determine the sample. Respondents were selected because they actively interacted in the social network of the lodge or had direct experience with the dissemination of information through WOM. In this way, the data collected remains relevant to the purpose of the research, which is to measure the influence of WOM on the perception and decision of prospective students. The sample size was taken proportionally from each population category so that the variety of experiences and social interactions in the Islamic boarding school community could be represented.

The main data collection was carried out with a structured questionnaire using a Likert scale to measure variables related to WOM, such as the credibility of information sources, positive experiences, alumni or senior recommendations, and perceptions of prospective students. In addition, the lodge's internal documents such as activity records, alumni reports, and official publications are used as supporting data to strengthen the validity of the instruments. This questionnaire facilitates the systematic processing of numerical data and aids in quantitative analysis.

Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics describe the characteristics of respondents and the distribution of questionnaire answers. Inferential analysis was carried out by multiple linear regression to test the influence of independent variables, namely the credibility of sources, experiences, and recommendations, on dependent variables, namely the decisions of prospective students. The validity and reliability test of the instrument is carried out to ensure that the data obtained is accurate, consistent, and worthy of analysis.

This approach provides an empirical understanding of the influence of WOM as an organic marketing strategy in faith-based educational institutions. The results of the quantitative analysis will show how much influence each factor has, so that these findings can be the basis for practical recommendations for Islamic boarding school managers in developing more effective and evidence-based communication strategies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study found that word-of-mouth (WOM) is the main factor that shapes the perception and decision of prospective students at the Entrepreneur Nuris 2 Student Islamic Boarding School Table 1. The results of the questionnaire showed that the positive experiences of students received the highest average scores, followed by the credibility of information sources and recommendations from alumni or senior students. These findings show that real experiences shared directly have a great influence on the decision of prospective students.

Tabel 1. Survey Results Word-of-Mouth

Factor	Average Score	Influence (%)
Source Credibility	4.3	35
Positive Experience	4.5	40
Alumni/Senior Recommendations	4.1	25



Figure 1. Documentation of Religious Activities in the Musholla

The results of observation and documentation of activities in the cottage Figure 1 show that routine interaction strengthens the spread of WOM. Activities such as mentoring, casual discussions, and exhibitions of entrepreneurial products are important moments for students to share their experiences and recommend the cottage to prospective students. In addition, internal documents and alumni reports show patterns that are in line with the survey results, namely recommendations from community members who are believed to greatly influence the perception of prospective students.

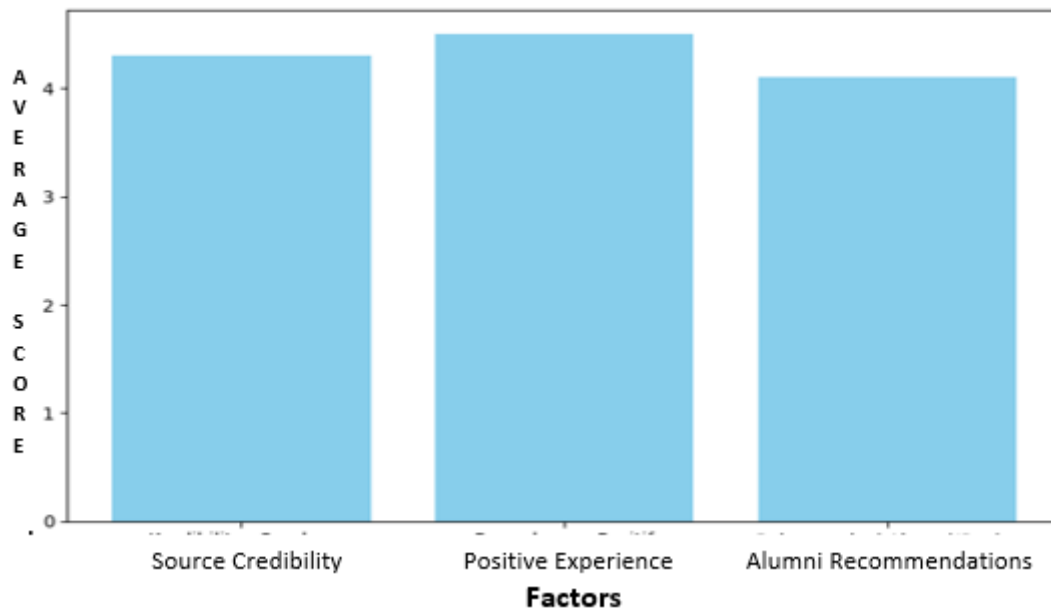


Figure 2. Average word-of-mouth influence factor score

Quantitative analysis showed an average score of 4.3 for the source credibility factor, 4.5 positive experience, and 4.1 for alumni or senior recommendations on a five-point Likert scale Figure 2. These results show that the direct experience of students has more influence on the decision of prospective students than oral recommendations from alumni, although the two are still complementary to each other.

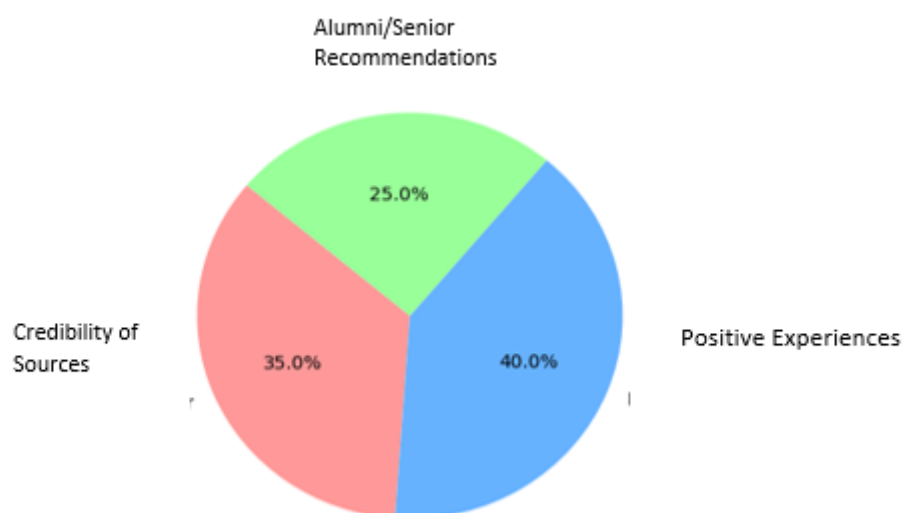


Figure 3. The proportion of the influence of word-of-mouth factors on the decision of prospective students

The proportion of the influence of each factor on the decision of prospective students was also analyzed using a pie chart Figure 3. Positive experiences account for 40%, source credibility 35%, and alumni or senior recommendations 25%. These results show that WOM has several layers, where real experience and social interaction in the cottage community are the most important factors in

shaping the perception of prospective students.

In addition to the main factors, surveys and documentation show that digital media serves as a complement to information. Prospective students usually check information from social media or the boarding school website by comparing it to experiences shared by senior students or mentors. These findings underscore the importance of combining formal and informal communication in WOM strategies, although direct interaction between individuals is still the most effective way to disseminate information.

Overall, this study provides a real picture of how the WOM mechanism runs in Islamic boarding schools. The quantitative findings are in line with qualitative data from observations and documents, which show that students' positive experiences, mentor credibility, and senior recommendations are the three main factors in organic marketing strategies. This information can be the basis for cottage managers to maximize community interaction as an effective way to disseminate information.

The results of the study show that the credibility of information sources has a great influence on the decision of prospective students in choosing religious education institutions. The survey shows that testimonials from trusted seniors or mentors are the main way of disseminating information through WOM and shaping the views of prospective students about Islamic boarding schools. These findings are in line with the literature that states that WOM not only functions as a promotional tool, but also builds trust and credibility among consumers (Agus R et al., 2024), (Mundiri et al., 2022). Information conveyed through direct interaction is more reliable than formal institutional communication (Sugiono & Hasan, 2022). In education, the credibility of information sources is an important mediator that strengthens the relationship between real experience and the decision of prospective students (Wahid, 2024).

Social interaction in the cottage community is an important factor in the effective spread of WOM (Ni'am et al., 2025). Students who are active in activities such as mentoring, group discussions, and entrepreneurship exhibitions are more likely to become WOM agents because they have relevant experience and are able to share information persuasively with their friends (Sudiantini et al., 2023). Research on WOM students in higher education shows that academic experience and quality of service are the main factors that make a person speak positively about their institution, so that the institution's reputation increases among peers (Mudarris, 2024). The community's activeness in sharing daily experiences creates a natural flow of information and has a great impact on recommending institutions to prospective students, something that has never been empirically researched before in pesantrens (Anggi Maharani Nasution et al., 2023).

Quantitative results showing that positive experiences are a major factor in WOM are also supported by the educational marketing literature. This literature emphasizes that the subjective experience of the user is crucial in shaping informal recommendations (Wardilla et al., 2025). These studies found that the perception of value from a particular experience becomes a link between students' satisfaction and their desire to recommend the institution to others (Asih, 2025). These findings are relevant to Islamic boarding schools that not only offer academic experience, but also community and entrepreneurial life (Widodo, 2025). Thus, the experience of students becomes a social capital that is easily

disseminated through WOM.

Other research in the field of educational WOM shows that WOM is often more effective than traditional marketing strategies because it comes from real, unpaid or formally designed experiences (Purwitasari, 2024). This is why survey respondents in pesantren are more likely to respond positively to information from senior or alumni recommendations compared to digital promotional materials or institutional leaflets (Sugiono & Hasan, 2022). The credibility and authenticity that exist in WOM make it very important in educational decision-making, especially in faith-based communities that strongly uphold the values of trust and social solidarity (Rachman et al., 2025).

Quantitative data analysis showed that recommendations from alumni and senior students remained the main factor, although the effect was slightly lower than that of direct experience. These findings highlight the importance of social networks and peer support in decision-making. Empirical research on the effect of WOM on educational decisions has also found that informal communication between students or alumni can influence prospective students, as they are perceived to have direct experience with the institution (Krisnadi, 2025). In the context of pesantren, intergenerational social relations help strengthen informal information transfer and increase the likelihood of prospective students receiving positive recommendations.

In addition, the combination of direct and digital interaction enriches the dynamics of WOM in Islamic boarding schools (Islam, 2025). Although digital media is not the main source of information for respondents, they still use it to verify and complement recommendations from social interactions. The digital marketing literature also shows that e-WOM on online platforms can complement and strengthen traditional interpersonal communication, so that information dissemination becomes more efficient and messages can reach a wider audience (Rachman et al., 2025). This finding is important for Islamic boarding schools that use digital media to support WOM, while still prioritizing interpersonal relationships as the main source of information (Islam, 2025).

This research shows that the quality of educational services and the reputation of institutions play an indirect role in supporting WOM. Respondents felt that their experience was helped by good service and a positive reputation, making the recommendations given stronger and easier to accept. Quantitative studies in primary schools also found that parental trust in institutions mediated the effectiveness of WOM in increasing enrollment (Parapat et al., 2025). It confirms that the quality of service and the reputation of the institution are important factors that support WOM. Although the social structure in pesantren is different from public schools, the quality of service remains the main factor in strengthening WOM (Islam, 2025).

Conceptually, these findings confirm that WOM in a faith-based education environment is not only about sharing information, but also the result of students' experiences, perceptions of credibility, and the social structure of the community. The results of this study are in line with the literature that states that WOM is a cheap but very influential marketing strategy because it creates authentic communication and is trusted by the audience (Purwitasari, 2024). This means that pesantren managers can create strategies based on experience and interpersonal credibility to strengthen WOM as an effective way of organic marketing.

CONCLUSION

This study found that word-of-mouth (WOM) is the main way that shapes the perception and decision of prospective students at the Nuris 2 Entrepreneur Student Islamic Boarding School. Quantitative results and document analysis show that the positive experiences of students, the credibility of mentors and teachers, and recommendations from alumni or senior students greatly influence the decision of prospective students. WOM has proven to be more effective than formal promotions because it is based on real experience and direct interaction trusted by the Islamic boarding school community. These findings confirm that organic marketing strategies in faith-based educational institutions rely heavily on the quality of community experiences and social beliefs. Therefore, managers can take advantage of daily interactions and cottage activities to strengthen the dissemination of positive information.

The study also shows that combining direct interaction with digital media support can make WOM more effective without compromising the character of the community. The authors suggest that the management of the cottage continue to support activities that create a positive experience for students, strengthen the role of mentors and seniors as sources of information, and document authentic testimonials to support organic marketing strategies. For further research, it is recommended to research the effectiveness of WOM in other Islamic boarding schools or explore the role of digital technology in expanding communication, so that the understanding of experience-based communication strategies in religious education institutions becomes more complete and easy to apply.

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