

Word of Mouth Advocacy in Maintaining Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Educational Market Presence

Muhammad Kholilurrohman^{1✉}, Muhammad Thoiful Abrar², Moh Rofik³, Abdul Aziz Alwahedi⁴, Maulidatul Adzimah⁵, Abu Hasan Agus R⁶

Universitas Nurul Jadid, Indonesia

Abstract:

The sustainability of Islamic elementary education increasingly depends on institutions' ability to maintain public trust and competitiveness amid changing parental preferences. This study aims to examine how word-of-mouth advocacy contributes to maintaining Madrasah Ibtidaiyah's presence in the educational market. A qualitative case study, supported by grounded theory procedures, was employed, involving 18 informants, including a principal, teachers, educational staff, parents, alumni, and community leaders. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and document analysis, and analyzed using data condensation, reduction, display, and verification techniques. The findings reveal that advocacy behavior emerged through three interconnected dimensions: trust-based relationships that encourage voluntary recommendations, informal communication that expands institutional visibility, and shared values that reinforce educational sustainability. The study proposes a community-driven advocacy model that conceptualizes word-of-mouth advocacy as an ethically motivated and socially embedded process within Islamic educational settings. These findings suggest that madrasah managers should strengthen stakeholder engagement, trust building, and value-oriented programs to sustain institutional competitiveness.

✉Corresponding Author: lilurdretzone22@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

The sustainability of educational institutions has become an increasingly important issue in contemporary society because schools are required not only to provide quality learning services but also to maintain public trust amid intense competition. Educational institutions operate within a social environment in which parents act as consumers, evaluating educational benefits, ethical values, and long-term outcomes before making enrollment decisions (Cortini et al., 2021; Casa et al.,



2021; Ishmuradova et al., 2020). In Muslim communities, madrasahs are expected to preserve Islamic values while simultaneously demonstrating organizational competitiveness and accountability. Previous observations indicate that recommendations from relatives, neighbors, and community leaders significantly influence educational preferences. Therefore, understanding the mechanisms that strengthen community advocacy for Islamic elementary schools is essential for supporting educational sustainability and social welfare from an Islamic economic perspective (Lau et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2022).

Madrasah Ibtidaiyah institutions currently face considerable challenges in maintaining their presence in the educational market because demographic changes, digital dissemination of information, and the expansion of private educational providers have altered parental decision-making patterns. Many parents increasingly rely on informal communication channels, social media discussions, and testimonials from trusted individuals before selecting schools for their children (Carnemolla et al., 2021; Uttamchandani, 2021). In several regions, Madrasah Ibtidaiyah enrollment rates fluctuate despite continuous improvements in facilities and academic programs. This phenomenon suggests that institutional quality alone may not guarantee market sustainability when positive advocacy from stakeholders remains limited (Goldman et al., 2020; Hawley et al., 2022). Consequently, ineffective communication among alums, parents, and local communities may weaken madrasahs' ability to retain their competitive position in the educational marketplace.

Several scholars have discussed word-of-mouth and consumer advocacy within service organizations. Tehc (2022), Chang et al. (2021), and Zeqiri et al. (2023) argue that positive word of mouth stems from customer satisfaction and significantly contributes to an organization's competitiveness. Fakfare (2021) and Odekerken et al. (2022) emphasize that customer advocacy strengthens loyalty and encourages repeat behavior. Pecorari et al. (2021) demonstrate that interpersonal recommendations substantially affect consumer choices in experience-based services. Meanwhile, Hussain et al. (2021), Putri et al. (2024), Astatke et al. (2025) explain that emotional attachment and perceived value influence consumers' willingness to recommend services to others. Nevertheless, previous studies predominantly examine commercial sectors, higher education institutions, and conventional schools. Limited attention has been devoted to Islamic elementary education, particularly concerning the integration of advocacy behavior within the framework of Islamic economics and ethical consumption, thereby creating an important research gap.

This study offers a state-of-the-art perspective by positioning word-of-mouth advocacy as an intangible social asset that helps sustain Madrasah Ibtidaiyah's educational market presence. Unlike previous studies that emphasize promotional strategies or institutional branding, this research interprets advocacy behavior through the lens of behavioral economics and Islamic ethical principles, in which trust, honesty, social responsibility, and communal benefit are fundamental considerations in decision-making (Del et al., 2020; Sholeha et al., 2022). The study aligns with the scope of Islamic Finance and Economic Insights, as educational selection can be understood as a form of consumer behavior shaped by religious values and ethical preferences.

Examining advocacy mechanisms in Islamic elementary education is therefore important to support inclusive, sustainable, and value-based educational services.

Based on the aforementioned discussion, the central research problem concerns how word-of-mouth advocacy helps maintain Madrasah Ibtidaiyah's presence in the educational market amid changing parental preferences and increasing competition among educational providers. Specifically, the study seeks to investigate the forms of advocacy developed by parents, alums, teachers, and surrounding communities, as well as the factors that encourage individuals to disseminate positive information about madrasah services voluntarily. Furthermore, the research aims to determine whether advocacy behavior serves merely as a communication tool or evolves into a strategic mechanism that strengthens institutional resilience, preserves public trust, and supports long-term enrollment sustainability within Islamic educational environments.

This study argues that word-of-mouth advocacy is a strategic resource that can preserve Madrasah Ibtidaiyah's educational market presence, as advocacy behavior is embedded in social relationships characterized by trust, moral commitment, and collective responsibility. The preliminary assumption is that stakeholders who perceive educational services as beneficial, ethically managed, and consistent with Islamic teachings are more likely to become voluntary advocates. The originality of this research lies in conceptualizing advocacy as a manifestation of Islamic consumer behavior rather than solely a marketing outcome. Consequently, the findings are expected to enrich the literature on behavioral economics within Islamic contexts and provide practical insights for policymakers and madrasah administrators seeking sustainable institutional development.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design supported by grounded theory procedures (Kekeya, 2023). A qualitative case study was selected because the research seeks to obtain an in-depth understanding of how word-of-mouth advocacy is formed, disseminated, and sustained within a Madrasah Ibtidaiyah context. The case study design enables researchers to investigate advocacy practices as a contextual phenomenon embedded in social interactions among educational stakeholders. Meanwhile, grounded theory procedures were utilized to facilitate the emergence of conceptual categories and develop a practical model of word-of-mouth advocacy based on empirical findings rather than predetermined assumptions. This design is considered appropriate for exploring advocacy behavior as a form of Islamic consumer behavior and community trust that contributes to maintaining the educational market presence of Madrasah Ibtidaiyah.

The research was conducted at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Nurul Mun'im, Nurul Jadid Islamic Boarding School, Paiton, Probolinggo, East Java, Indonesia. The institution was purposively selected because it represents a pesantren-based elementary school characterized by intensive interactions among parents, teachers, students, alums, and surrounding communities, creating a conducive environment for the development of advocacy behavior. The informants consisted of 18 participants selected through purposive sampling, including one madrasah principal, four teachers, two educational

staff members, six parents of students, three alums, and two community leaders. These participants were considered capable of providing rich information about their experiences, perceptions, and motivations regarding their recommendations of the madrasah to others.

Data were collected from March to May 2026 through semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide that focused on experiences recommending the madrasah, perceived educational benefits, trust formation, and communication patterns among stakeholders. Observations were undertaken during school activities, meetings with parents, and community events to identify naturally occurring advocacy practices. Documentary sources included institutional profiles, annual reports, promotional materials, social media content, and enrollment records. The use of multiple data sources enabled a comprehensive understanding of the advocacy phenomenon and minimized dependence on a single source of information (Cole, 2024; Fadli, 2021).

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data condensation, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification (Soesana et al., 2023). Data condensation involved selecting, simplifying, and coding interview transcripts, field notes, and documentary evidence according to emerging themes. Subsequently, data reduction was conducted by categorizing similar information into broader concepts: advocacy actors, communication channels, trust mechanisms, and institutional sustainability. The organized data were then presented in narrative descriptions and thematic matrices to facilitate interpretation. Finally, conclusions were continuously verified throughout the research process to ensure consistency between empirical evidence and conceptual findings.

The trustworthiness of the data was ensured through several validation techniques. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from parents, teachers, alums, community leaders, and institutional documents. Method triangulation involved cross-checking findings derived from interviews, observations, and documentary analysis. Member checking was carried out by returning summarized interview results to selected participants for confirmation and clarification. In addition, an audit trail documenting data collection procedures, coding decisions, and analytical processes was maintained to enhance transparency and dependability. These strategies were employed to strengthen the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the research findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The findings reveal that maintaining Madrasah Ibtidaiyah's educational market presence is closely associated with the formation of trust, informal communication practices, and the internalization of shared values among stakeholders. These interconnected dimensions demonstrate that advocacy behavior extends beyond conventional promotional activities and evolves into a socially embedded mechanism that strengthens institutional visibility, stakeholder engagement, and long-term educational sustainability.

Trust-Based Relationships Generate Advocacy Behavior

Trust-based relationships generate advocacy behavior, which is the process through which parents, alumni, teachers, and community members voluntarily recommend Madrasah Ibtidaiyah to others because they perceive the institution as trustworthy, beneficial, and aligned with their educational and religious expectations. In the field, trust was reflected in participants' confidence in the quality of learning, teachers' commitment, the religious atmosphere, and the consistency between institutional values and educational practices. This trust encouraged stakeholders to become advocates who actively shared positive experiences with relatives, neighbors, and other prospective parents, without formal instruction from the institution.

Several parents emphasized that their willingness to recommend the madrasah emerged from positive educational experiences and confidence in the institution's values. One parent stated, "I initially enrolled my child because of recommendations from relatives, but after seeing the teachers' dedication and my child's development, I confidently recommend this madrasah to other parents." Another parent explained, "The Islamic environment is not only taught in class but also practiced daily, which makes me trust the school and share my experiences with others." These statements indicate that advocacy behavior was rooted in personal satisfaction and trust developed through direct interaction with educational services.

Alums and community leaders expressed similar views. An alumnus remarked, "I often encourage relatives to choose this madrasah because it contributed significantly to my academic and religious development." A community leader stated, "Many residents trust information about the madrasah because positive stories consistently come from parents and former students." The researcher interprets these findings as evidence that advocacy behavior is not generated by promotional campaigns alone but emerges organically from accumulated trust and positive educational experiences. Stakeholders who perceive meaningful benefits become informal ambassadors who continuously strengthen the institution's reputation within the community.

Field observations further supported these findings. During parent meetings, religious gatherings, and student activities, researchers observed frequent interactions in which participants shared positive experiences regarding the madrasah. Discussions commonly focused on student achievements, teacher commitment, character development, and religious learning outcomes. These observations indicate that trust was repeatedly reinforced through everyday social interactions. In other words, advocacy behavior was not merely expressed through formal recommendations but was embedded within routine communication among stakeholders. The findings demonstrate that trust serves as a social mechanism that encourages individuals to disseminate positive information about the institution voluntarily.

The overall pattern suggests that advocacy behavior emerged through a sequential process, beginning with positive educational experiences, followed by trust formation, stakeholder satisfaction, and, eventually, voluntary recommendations. Trust was consistently identified as the central factor connecting individual experiences with advocacy actions. Participants who perceived educational quality, religious consistency, and institutional integrity were more likely to engage in recommendation behavior. As

trust accumulated among various stakeholder groups, advocacy expanded beyond individual relationships and became a collective social practice. Consequently, trust-based relationships played a significant role in strengthening the madrasah’s visibility, credibility, and educational market presence within the surrounding community.

Informal Communication Expands Madrasah Reach

Informal communication expands madrasah reach by disseminating information about the madrasah through spontaneous, non-institutional interactions among parents, community members, alums, and other stakeholders. Unlike formal promotional activities, informal communication occurs naturally in everyday social settings, including conversations during student pick-up times, religious gatherings, community meetings, and social interactions within the pesantren environment. Operationally, this sub-theme was identified through direct observations of communication activities that contributed to increasing public awareness and interest toward the madrasah.

Table 1. Observation of Informal Communication Expands Madrasah Reach

Observation Findings	Indicator
Parents exchanged information about students' achievements during school dismissal.	Information sharing among parents
Community members discussed the madrasah during local religious gatherings.	Public discussion of institutional reputation
Alums introduced the madrasah to relatives and neighbors during social interactions.	Informal educational recommendation
Parents shared positive educational experiences in community meetings.	Experience-based advocacy
Discussions regarding new student admissions frequently emerged in neighborhood forums.	Expansion of institutional awareness
Madrasah activities were repeatedly mentioned in everyday community conversations.	Sustained communication visibility

The observed data indicate that informal communication functioned as a continuous channel through which information about the madrasah circulated within the community. Researchers found that discussions about educational quality, student development, religious programs, and institutional achievements emerged naturally, without direct intervention by the school. Restating the findings, the spread of information relied heavily on interpersonal interactions rather than structured promotional campaigns. These observations demonstrate that community members actively shared positive experiences with others. As a result, information regarding the madrasah reached broader audiences through trusted social networks, increasing awareness and strengthening institutional visibility within the local educational environment.

A consistent pattern emerged across all observation settings. Information was most effectively transmitted through existing social relationships characterized by familiarity and frequent interaction. Parents, alums, and community members became central actors in extending the reach of institutional information. The observed communication process was repetitive, socially embedded, and largely self-sustaining. Rather than relying on formal advertising, the madrasah benefited from

communication flows that naturally occurred within daily community life. This pattern suggests that informal communication served as an important mechanism for expanding the institution's reach and maintaining its presence in a competitive educational landscape.

Shared Values Maintain Educational Sustainability

Shared values sustain educational sustainability, defined as the collective acceptance and practice of common religious, educational, and social values among stakeholders, thereby contributing to the madrasah's long-term continuity. In the field, these values were reflected through commitments to Islamic character education, community participation, mutual support, religious activities, and institutional loyalty. The sustainability of the madrasah was not solely dependent on educational services. Still, it was also supported by a shared belief that the institution plays an important role in preserving Islamic values and community development.

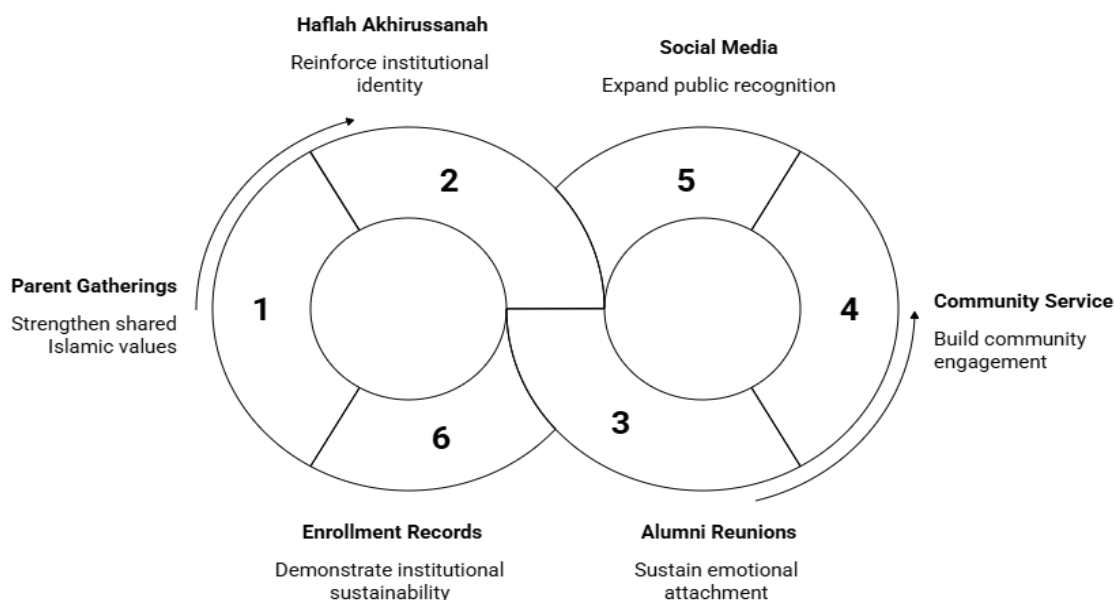


Figure 1. Institutional Growth Cycle

Observational findings revealed strong stakeholder participation in activities that reflected shared institutional values. Parents consistently attended religious programs organized by the madrasah, alums remained involved in educational and social events, and community members actively supported institutional activities. Researchers observed that these interactions were not merely ceremonial but reflected a collective commitment to preserving the madrasah's educational mission. Such participation demonstrated that institutional sustainability was reinforced through continuous value-sharing practices among various stakeholder groups.

Restating the findings, the sustainability of the madrasah was closely linked to the existence of common values that connected parents, students, teachers, alumni, and community members. These values created a sense of collective ownership toward the institution and encouraged continued participation in educational activities. The researcher interprets this condition as evidence that sustainability extends beyond

organizational management and is strengthened through social and religious commitments shared by stakeholders. Consequently, educational continuity was supported by both institutional efforts and community-based reinforcement of values.

The overall pattern indicates that educational sustainability emerged from the interplay among shared beliefs, stakeholder participation, and institutional loyalty. Activities that promote Islamic values consistently create opportunities for social engagement and strengthen stakeholders' attachment to the madrasah. As participation increased, commitment to supporting the institution also became stronger. The recurring presence of value-oriented activities across contexts suggests that shared values served as a social foundation, maintaining institutional legitimacy, strengthening community support, and ensuring the madrasah's long-term sustainability in the educational marketplace.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that trust is a fundamental driver of advocacy behavior among parents, alums, teachers, and community members. Participants voluntarily recommended the madrasah because they perceived educational services as reliable, beneficial, and consistent with Islamic values. This finding supports previous studies emphasizing that trust and satisfaction encourage individuals to become advocates who willingly share positive experiences with others (Budiyanti et al., 2020; Ginting et al., 2023). Similar arguments have been proposed by Kotler and Keller, who explain that customer satisfaction contributes to positive word-of-mouth behavior, and by Zeithaml et al., who suggest that advocacy is strongly influenced by perceived service quality and value congruence. However, unlike studies focusing on commercial services, this research reveals that advocacy within Madrasah Ibtidaiyah is influenced not only by service performance but also by religious commitment and shared educational aspirations. Theoretically, these findings extend the discussion of consumer behavior by demonstrating that trust within Islamic educational settings possesses both functional and spiritual dimensions (Chang et al., 2021; Khoo, 2022; Pozharliev et al., 2021). In practice, madrasah administrators should prioritize maintaining educational integrity, teacher professionalism, and religious consistency to preserve stakeholder confidence and encourage voluntary advocacy.

Another important finding concerns the role of informal communication in expanding the madrasah's reach within the surrounding community. Information regarding educational quality, religious programs, and student achievements circulated through conversations among parents, interactions with alums, religious gatherings, and neighborhood forums (Camilleri, 2022; Maulana et al., 2025). These results are consistent with Hennig-Thurau et al., who argue that interpersonal communication significantly influences decision-making processes in experience-based services. Likewise, Sweeney et al. explain that recommendation behavior becomes more effective when information is delivered through trusted social relationships. Nevertheless, the present study differs from previous research in that informal communication functions as a self-sustaining mechanism that continuously disseminates information without institutional intervention (Aprilia et al., 2021; Hung et

al., 2024; Sun et al., 2023). Theoretically, this finding reinforces the importance of social capital in shaping educational consumer behavior. From a practical perspective, madrasah leaders may facilitate stakeholder interactions through parent forums, alum associations, and community-based activities to strengthen communication networks that naturally support institutional promotion.

The study also indicates that shared values play a substantial role in maintaining educational sustainability. Stakeholder participation in religious programs, alum gatherings, social activities, and community engagement reflects collective commitments toward preserving the madrasah's mission (Cheung et al., 2021; Lina et al., 2023; Nasir et al., 2021). These findings correspond with previous discussions regarding value-based loyalty, suggesting that individuals tend to maintain long-term relationships with institutions whose values align with their personal beliefs. However, this study demonstrates that shared values function not only as determinants of loyalty but also as social resources that sustain institutional legitimacy and community participation. In theoretical terms, the findings contribute to behavioral economics in Islamic contexts by showing that ethical considerations and communal responsibilities shape educational choices and continued support (Etilé, 2022; Huang et al., 2021). In practice, educational managers should design programs that continuously reinforce shared values and encourage active stakeholder involvement to ensure institutional resilience.

The three findings collectively reveal a sequential process in which positive educational experiences generate trust, trust stimulates advocacy behavior, advocacy expands through informal communication, and repeated interactions strengthen shared values that support educational sustainability. This pattern differs from conventional marketing models that predominantly rely on planned promotional strategies and institutional branding. Instead, the present study highlights a community-driven advocacy model in which stakeholders actively contribute to institutional development. Such a mechanism confirms that educational sustainability can emerge from social relationships characterized by reciprocity, mutual trust, and collective responsibility. Consequently, advocacy behavior should be understood not merely as a communication outcome but as an intangible social asset that enhances the competitiveness and continuity of Islamic educational institutions.

Overall, this research contributes to the growing literature on behavioral economics, educational marketing, and Islamic value-based management by proposing an integrative perspective linking trust-based relationships, informal communication, and shared values within Madrasah Ibtidaiyah. Previous studies have generally examined these variables independently, whereas this research demonstrates their interdependence in maintaining educational market presence. The originality of this study lies in conceptualizing word-of-mouth advocacy as a socially embedded and ethically motivated process influenced by religious beliefs and collective commitments. These findings have practical implications for policymakers and educational practitioners seeking sustainable strategies to strengthen the position of Islamic elementary schools in increasingly competitive educational environments.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that word-of-mouth advocacy functions as a strategic social asset in maintaining the educational market presence of Madrasah Ibtidaiyah. The most significant finding is that positive educational experiences foster trust among stakeholders, which in turn encourages voluntary advocacy, expands institutional visibility through informal communication, and strengthens shared values that sustain educational continuity. The study highlights that advocacy behavior in Islamic elementary education is shaped not only by satisfaction with educational services but also by religious commitment, collective responsibility, and social attachment. Academically, this research contributes to the literature on behavioral economics and Islamic educational management by proposing an integrative model linking trust, communication, and value internalization. Nevertheless, this study is limited to a single pesantren-based madrasah and a qualitative approach. Future studies may involve multiple institutions, employ mixed methods, and examine the influence of digital advocacy platforms on educational sustainability.

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