



Building Competitive Advantage through Integrated Word-of-Mouth Strategy in Educational Institutions

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Abstract : This study investigates how an integrated word-of-mouth (WOM) strategy contributes to strengthening the competitiveness of An-Nadwa Integrated Elementary School in an increasingly competitive educational market. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis involving school leaders, teachers, parents, and other key stakeholders. The data were analyzed using an interactive analysis model comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, with triangulation employed to enhance trustworthiness. The findings reveal that the school's WOM strategy operates through three interconnected stages: attracting community attention, fostering interest through positive educational experiences and institutional reputation, and strengthening the desire to enroll by reinforcing trust and perceived educational quality. The study further demonstrates that the effectiveness of WOM extends beyond interpersonal communication by integrating institutional values, service quality, stakeholder engagement, and community participation into a coherent marketing strategy. These findings contribute to the literature on educational marketing by illustrating how an integrated WOM strategy can generate sustainable competitive advantage for educational institutions. Practically, the study provides strategic insights for school leaders seeking to strengthen institutional branding and increase community engagement in highly competitive educational environments.

Keywords : Word-of-Mouth Marketing; Competitive Advantage; School Branding.

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INTRODUCTION

The increasing intensity of competition across industrial and business sectors, accompanied by rapid technological advancement and changing consumer preferences, has compelled organizations to adopt customer-oriented strategies to maintain their competitiveness (Pereira, Gusti, Giantari, & Sukaatmadja, 2016). This phenomenon is equally relevant to educational institutions, where schools increasingly operate in competitive environments that require not only academic excellence but also effective institutional management and marketing. As educational service providers, schools are expected to continuously improve customer satisfaction to strengthen their reputation and sustain their competitiveness (Caner & Servet, 2020). In the educational context, parents act as the primary consumers who determine school selection for their children. Consequently, customer satisfaction reflects the quality of educational services provided (McGregor, 2018) and directly influences institutional sustainability and enrollment performance (Machali, 2015).

Customer perceptions and experiences have become increasingly important in shaping the public image of educational institutions. Positive experiences shared by parents and students significantly influence institutional reputation and public trust (Wijaya, 2019). Conversely, the inability of educational institutions to establish customer trust poses a substantial challenge to their long-term sustainability. Schools that fail to satisfy students and parents are less likely to survive in an increasingly competitive educational market (Jabbar, Hashmi, & Ashraf, 2019). To overcome this challenge, many schools rely on various promotional strategies, including tuition discounts, scholarships, free uniforms, and complimentary educational materials to attract prospective students. Although such initiatives may temporarily increase enrollment, they often require considerable financial resources and may not guarantee sustainable competitive advantages. Therefore, educational institutions require more effective and efficient marketing strategies that emphasize customer trust, institutional reputation, and long-term relationships rather than financial incentives alone (Margareta, Magister, Ismanto, & Sulasmono, 2018).

Among various marketing approaches, word-of-mouth (WOM) communication has attracted increasing attention because of its ability to influence consumer decisions through trusted interpersonal interactions. Unlike conventional advertising, WOM is perceived as more credible because information is voluntarily communicated by customers based on their personal experiences (Herold, Tarkiainen, & Sundqvist, 2016). Satisfied customers consequently become informal ambassadors who promote organizational quality through their social networks. In addition, WOM has frequently been associated with viral marketing because it enables marketing messages to spread rapidly through interpersonal communication channels rather than formal promotional activities (Hasan & Setiyaningtiyas, 2015).

From the perspective of marketing communication, WOM represents a persuasive communication process through which organizations indirectly influence consumer attitudes and behaviors. Marketing communication itself refers to organizational efforts to communicate information through various channels to create changes in consumer knowledge, attitudes, and behavioral intentions (Shirkhodaie & Rastgoo-Deylami, 2016; Trust, 2018). Consequently,

effective marketing communication should not rely solely on paid promotional media but also incorporate interpersonal communication capable of building trust and credibility. In this regard, WOM serves as one of the most influential marketing communication strategies for strengthening organizational competitiveness and achieving institutional objectives (Ariwibowo, 2019).

The importance of WOM is particularly evident in educational institutions where school selection is strongly influenced by parents' perceptions, recommendations, and previous educational experiences. SD Terpadu An-Nadwa Besuki, the setting of this study, annually allocates resources to conventional promotional media such as brochures, banners, and institutional websites to attract prospective students. However, despite continuous promotional efforts and financial investment, these formal marketing activities have not consistently generated the expected level of community interest and student enrollment.

Preliminary observations conducted at SD Terpadu An-Nadwa Besuki indicate that parents generally place greater trust in information obtained through interpersonal relationships than in formal promotional materials. Decisions to enroll children are predominantly influenced by recommendations from relatives, neighbors, friends, and parents whose children have previously studied at the school. Positive educational experiences shared by alumni families and existing parents appear to generate stronger trust than brochures, banners, or social media campaigns. These findings suggest that interpersonal communication constitutes a more influential determinant of school selection than conventional advertising, highlighting the strategic importance of WOM in educational marketing.

WOM functions through the active participation of satisfied customers who voluntarily communicate their experiences to potential consumers. Such communication enables existing customers to become credible communicators capable of influencing prospective customers through personal testimonies and recommendations (Kursan Milakovic, Anić, & Mihić, 2020). Within educational institutions, this process involves parents, alumni, teachers, and surrounding communities who collectively disseminate positive information regarding educational quality, learning experiences, institutional values, and student achievements. Consequently, WOM should not merely be understood as spontaneous interpersonal communication but as an integrated marketing strategy that strengthens institutional reputation and public trust.

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated the effectiveness of WOM across various contexts. Joesyiana (2018) reported that WOM positively influences consumers' purchasing decisions through online media, while Maghfiroh (2019) found that WOM significantly improves consumer satisfaction. Similarly, Le, Robinson, and Double (2020) identified parents as the most influential source of WOM information affecting students' educational decisions. Other studies have shown that institutional image and educational satisfaction significantly influence students' WOM behavior, thereby contributing to educational marketing effectiveness. These findings collectively indicate that WOM plays an important role in shaping consumer behavior and organizational reputation.

Likewise, previous studies concerning educational marketing strategies have emphasized the importance of strategic promotion in improving institutional performance. Turmudzi (2017) argued that effective educational marketing strategies generate positive institutional outcomes, whereas Ariwibowo (2019) emphasized that marketing strategy has become indispensable not only in business organizations but also in educational institutions. Furthermore, Labasa (2018) explained that educational marketing adopts marketing principles not to commercialize education but to improve educational quality and institutional services. Collectively, these studies confirm that strategic marketing contributes significantly to institutional competitiveness.

Despite the growing body of literature on WOM and educational marketing, previous studies have primarily examined WOM as an independent communication variable affecting purchasing decisions, customer satisfaction, or student behavior. Comparatively limited attention has been devoted to understanding how WOM is strategically integrated into the institutional marketing system of primary educational institutions, particularly Islamic elementary schools operating in competitive educational environments. Furthermore, existing studies tend to emphasize the outcomes of WOM while providing limited explanation regarding the mechanisms through which parents, alumni, educational quality, institutional values, and community trust interact to generate sustainable institutional competitiveness. This gap indicates the need for a more comprehensive understanding of WOM as an integrated educational marketing strategy rather than merely a communication tool.

Accordingly, this study investigates how SD Terpadu An-Nadwa Besuki integrates WOM into its educational marketing practices to enhance public interest and strengthen institutional competitiveness. Unlike previous studies that primarily examine the direct effects of WOM, this research explores the strategic process through which interpersonal communication is developed, maintained, and institutionalized through stakeholder engagement and educational service quality. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically to the educational marketing literature by extending the understanding of integrated WOM strategies in educational institutions and, practically, by providing evidence-based recommendations for school leaders seeking sustainable and cost-effective marketing strategies in increasingly competitive educational environments.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences and meanings underlying the implementation of word-of-mouth (WOM) as an educational marketing strategy at An-Nadwa Integrated Elementary School, Besuki, East Java, Indonesia. A phenomenological approach was selected because the study sought to understand how school stakeholders perceive, experience, and construct WOM practices in promoting the institution and attracting prospective students. Rather than measuring the effectiveness of marketing quantitatively, this approach enabled an in-depth exploration of the social interactions, values, and experiences that shape parents' decisions to enroll their children in the school.

The research was conducted at An-Nadwa Integrated Elementary School, a private educational institution that has consistently relied on interpersonal communication alongside conventional promotional activities to increase student enrollment. The study focused on understanding the experiences and perspectives of individuals directly involved in the implementation and dissemination of WOM, including school leaders, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders who actively participated in promoting the institution within the local community.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted to obtain participants' experiences and perceptions regarding the implementation of WOM as an institutional marketing strategy. Participant observation enabled the researcher to understand interactions among school stakeholders and community members during educational promotion activities, while institutional documents were examined to support and verify the findings obtained from interviews and observations.

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. These analytical processes were conducted iteratively throughout the research to allow emerging findings to continuously inform subsequent data collection and interpretation. Data reduction involved selecting, organizing, and categorizing information relevant to the research objectives. The organized data were then systematically displayed to facilitate pattern identification and thematic interpretation before conclusions were drawn and continuously verified against the collected evidence.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement in the research setting, triangulation of data sources and data collection techniques, and continuous comparison of information obtained from different participants. In addition, peer debriefing was conducted to minimize researcher bias and enhance the consistency of data interpretation. These procedures strengthened the credibility and dependability of the findings and ensured that the interpretations accurately represented participants' lived experiences regarding the implementation of WOM as an integrated educational marketing strategy.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

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1. Word of Mouth as a Marketing Strategy in Education

An-Nadwa Integrated Elementary School is one of the formal educational institutions under the auspices of the pesantren which has unique characteristics. This uniqueness can be seen from the management system which has more value compared to management in other public educational institutions, such as techniques to attract public sympathy that do not only use "pure management", but are combined with spiritual values,

such as prayer, istighasah. , khotmil qur'an, and so on, which aims to attract public sympathy for the continuity of education in Islamic boarding schools and strengthen the sense of belonging to the existence of Islamic boarding schools as educational institutions with Islamic characteristics.

The various achievements and achievements of the institution have given the institution a positive image in society. Public trust is slowly starting to build, which will have implications for community loyalty, where people place their hopes on the two educational institutions to educate and nurture their children according to expectations. This is the strength of the two institutions in fostering and establishing harmonious relationships with the community and alumni. Good relations with the community and alumni have made the institution increasingly known by the public, which has implications for increasing support for education and learning activities in the institution.

From the strengths of these institutions, it turns out that these institutions have considerable opportunities to collaborate with the community in marketing their educational institutions through communication that is built intensively, namely word of mouth communication. Through this communication it turned out to be quite effective in increasing public trust, public loyalty, and increasing resources, both in quantity and quality.

The way word of mouth works is used as an institutional marketing strategy to increase public interest in An-Nadwa Integrated Elementary School through; Attention, namely making the public aware of the processes and innovations that exist in the institution; Interest, namely raising public interest; The desire to choose an institution; Action, namely community action that makes the chosen institution the main choice.

2. Attention

The concern referred to here is how institutions try to develop strategies so that the public is aware of the programs, innovations, services, and quality of institutions through various means as branding, such as brochures, pamphlets, advertisements, videos, websites, social media and so on. This stage is the initial stage where the community begins to realize and understand the programs offered by the two educational institutions so that they can attract the attention of the community.

Through the introduction and understanding of programs and innovations, institutions realize that the role of alumni and the community is very large in providing systematic and massive information to introduce and build the image of the institution. With this distribution, and supported by the social position played by alumni in several regions, it has become an icon and brand for the institution, indirectly An-Nadwa Integrated Elementary School has become an educational institution that has succeeded in fostering and developing the potential of its students.

In addition, the success of alumni who have occupied positions in the two institutions also serves as personal branding that can improve the image of these institutions. Various successes displayed through personal branding have indirectly become a hot topic of conversation in society, this has also triggered word of mouth communication among the public which can boost the image of the institution.

Things that trigger word of mouth communication to become more widespread are; the position of the two institutions under the auspices of the pesantren, where culturally the community has a very strong emotional connection, both religiously and culturally, is influenced by their very charismatic leadership. Based on Rosi (2023) as an educational staff at the An-Nadwa Besuki Integrated Elementary School, he stated that "there are people occupying certain positions, which are a symbol or image of the institution, that they have succeeded in educating their students. They are a very effective agency broadcaster, and they are free." Nadya(2023) as the head of An-Nadwa Integrated Elementary School said that "every school must also have a track record of its alumni, where have the alumni gone? are in college, even in their community, both in scientific, religious, and organizational aspects.

To foster intensive communication with alumni, a Community association was formed as a medium of communication between institutions and graduates. In addition, a special group was also formed to communicate with the community to convey various kinds of information to alumni and the public about various matters. Through this, the community can convey institutional information to the wider community through word of mouth communication. Through various media used to communicate with the community, it is hoped that it can build public attention to the existence of these institutions. When you get attention, word of mouth will work effectively and beat other media. Moreover, the input characteristics of the students are very heterogeneous, some are from the lower economic class to the upper economic class, where the communication strategy must be right on target.

3. Interest

At this stage, the community has responded, started to be interested, and learned about the superior programs and services offered by the institution. In this case the community will seek more in-depth information, asking people who are considered to know about the information they need regarding An-Nadwa Integrated Elementary School.

The institution can inspire people's feelings and hopes for various superior innovations that are developed. An-Nadwa Integrated Elementary School in this case has advantages and institutional characteristics, namely excelling in formal lessons, religious studies, tahfidz Qur'an, and many good achievements on a local scale. Innovation and creation, which are the hallmarks and characteristics of the institution, have made the institution able to win the competition with other educational institutions in its vicinity, as evidenced by the increasing number of students entering the institution each year. This shows that public trust in the two educational institutions has started to build properly.

To attract public interest in the institution, the institution always informs its students about outstanding achievements through various media, both print and electronic. Even so, the institution realizes that this is not effective enough in informing the institution's achievements, so a word of mouth strategy is needed to convey this information massively to all levels of society, both the lower, middle and upper levels of society, namely through alumni, student guardians and sympathizers.

Through massive and systematic word of mouth information carried out by parents and sympathizers, it can generate public interest in An-Nadwa Integrated Elementary School. As stated by Aisha (2023) who said that "I sent my child to An-Nadwa Integrated Elementary School because I heard information from friends and input from several parents". Likewise with ABD Hasin (2023) who says that "the activities that are often carried out by students of the An-Nadwa Integrated Elementary School in several regions provide a lot of information related to institutional development, both programs, innovations, and student achievements". The existence of interest from the community, indicates that various information is conveyed by the institution through various channels, and strengthened by word of mouth, indicating that the public has begun to have an interest in the two institutions, both from the information conveyed, superior and proven innovations. product.

4. Desire

The response shown by the community, where they began to have a desire to use and take advantage of the services provided by An-Nadwa Integrated Elementary School. This is because the two educational institutions are able to convince the public about various innovations, creations, services, and quality displayed through various information, either directly or indirectly.

Institutions always update student achievements through community groups and other information media. Likewise with innovation, creation, and the quality of institutions that continue to be presented in accordance with existing facts. Some of the information submitted by the institution was then accessed by students and sympathizers, then passed on by word of mouth to other people, so that there was a desire from the community to include their children in the institution.

This information is conveyed to the student's guardian, so that the student's guardian conveys it to the community. Where they explain the advantages of the institution and the greatness of their output. At this stage, the student guardian as an institution tries to provide an in-depth explanation of the advantages of the institution to the community. This action is done to form a will among the people. Because with more and more information being discussed by the parents of students, the community will be more interested, which leads to the desire to choose An-Nadwa Integrated Elementary School.

Syaifuddin (2023) as the student's guardian said that his interest in the An-Nadwa Integrated Elementary School was due to the success of his siblings' children who had made brilliant achievements in the CCQ Tahfidz Qur'an competition. Arifin's interest was also justified by Salim (2023) stating that "indeed our students often excel at CCQ Tahfidz. This had a tremendous impact on the formation of the image of the madrasa, because many parents were interested in this. Many parents send their children to this institution with the hope that their children will be able to have competence in the fields of balanced religious and formal knowledge.

This statement was justified by Munir (2020) who said that "the success and success of institutions in producing outstanding students, even graduates who are widely accepted at excellent schools provide a positive image for the institution. Through this success, we

gain the trust of the community, so that every year the number of our students continues to increase.”

Departing from the statement of the informant, it can be understood that the image of the institution that is built is not dominant by word of mouth, but is assisted by other information media, such as electronic media and social media. Through online media intermediaries, the information is then followed up by the institutional community, alumni, and sympathizers through word of mouth so as to foster the public's desire to involve their children in these two institutions. What drives the community to this stage is that the two institutions can convince the public that this institution can best fulfill their needs and can provide added value.

The findings demonstrate that Word-of-Mouth (WOM) functions not merely as an informal communication channel but as an integrated marketing strategy capable of enhancing the competitiveness of educational institutions. Unlike conventional promotional media that rely on one-way communication, WOM operates through interpersonal interactions that are perceived as more trustworthy because they are based on authentic experiences shared by parents, alumni, and community members. This finding supports Herold et al. (2016), who argue that WOM is one of the most persuasive communication channels because consumers place greater trust in recommendations from individuals with direct experience than in organizational advertising. Similarly, Srivastava and Sharma (2017) explain that WOM transforms satisfied customers into institutional advocates whose recommendations significantly influence prospective consumers' decision-making processes.

The implementation of WOM at An-Nadwa Integrated Elementary School follows a sequential process consistent with the AIDA (Attention–Interest–Desire–Action) communication model. Although the school employs conventional promotional media such as brochures, banners, websites, and social media, these media primarily function as instruments for creating initial awareness. The effectiveness of these promotional activities is substantially strengthened when institutional information is disseminated through parents, alumni, and community networks. This finding indicates that promotional media and interpersonal communication should not be viewed as competing approaches but rather as complementary components within an integrated educational marketing strategy. The importance of integrating formal promotion with interpersonal communication has also been highlighted in recent educational marketing studies, which emphasize that digital branding becomes substantially more effective when reinforced by WOM communication rooted in stakeholder trust.

The attention stage demonstrates that institutional reputation constitutes the primary trigger of WOM communication. Public attention is generated not only through institutional promotion but also through the achievements of students and alumni, the credibility of school leadership, and the religious identity associated with the pesantren. These findings indicate that institutional reputation represents a valuable intangible asset capable of stimulating

continuous interpersonal communication within the community. Consequently, branding in educational institutions extends beyond visual identity or promotional campaigns to encompass educational quality and institutional credibility, which are continuously communicated by satisfied stakeholders. This finding corroborates Wijaya (2019), who argues that consumer perceptions significantly shape institutional image, and Ariwibowo (2019), who emphasizes that marketing communication should establish trust rather than merely disseminate promotional information.

The interest stage reveals that prospective parents actively seek additional information after becoming aware of the institution. Rather than relying exclusively on promotional materials, they consult relatives, alumni, and parents of current students to verify the credibility of institutional information. This behavior demonstrates that school selection is a socially embedded decision-making process in which interpersonal trust outweighs promotional persuasion. The findings support Le, Robinson, and Double (2020), who found that parents represent the most influential source of educational information during school selection. Similarly, Joesyiana (2018) and Maghfiroh (2019) concluded that WOM significantly influences consumer decisions because recommendations originating from trusted individuals are perceived as more reliable than commercial messages.

The findings further indicate that desire emerges when interpersonal communication is supported by tangible institutional performance. Student achievements, Qur'an memorization programs, academic excellence, and alumni success collectively reinforce the credibility of the information circulated within the community. Therefore, prospective parents develop confidence not because of persuasive promotional messages alone but because positive institutional experiences are consistently validated through trusted social networks. This result confirms the argument of Jabbar et al. (2019) that customer satisfaction and trust constitute fundamental determinants of institutional sustainability. Likewise, McGregor (2018) argues that service quality directly influences stakeholder satisfaction, while Machali (2015) emphasizes that institutional sustainability depends upon maintaining public trust through consistently high-quality educational services.

A significant contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that WOM at An-Nadwa Integrated Elementary School operates as an Integrated Word-of-Mouth Strategy rather than as isolated interpersonal communication. The findings reveal that institutional competitiveness is achieved through the interaction of several strategic elements, including educational quality, institutional reputation, stakeholder engagement, alumni achievements, religious values, and digital communication. These elements collectively reinforce one another to create sustainable public trust. Such findings extend previous studies that primarily conceptualized WOM as an independent determinant of purchasing decisions or customer satisfaction. Instead, this study proposes that WOM functions as a strategic institutional capability integrating formal marketing communication with community-based advocacy to enhance educational competitiveness. This integrated perspective is consistent with recent educational marketing literature emphasizing the synergy between digital branding and WOM in strengthening institutional competitiveness.

Another noteworthy finding concerns the role of the pesantren environment in strengthening WOM communication. Unlike commercial organizations, An-Nadwa Integrated Elementary School benefits from strong religious and socio-cultural relationships within the surrounding community. These relationships create a high level of institutional legitimacy, enabling educational information to spread more rapidly and be accepted more readily by prospective parents. Consequently, the effectiveness of WOM is influenced not only by communication quality but also by shared cultural values, institutional identity, and community trust. This finding suggests that the success of educational marketing strategies depends upon organizational context and social capital rather than promotional intensity alone.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the educational marketing literature by extending the conceptualization of WOM from a communication technique to an integrated strategic framework that combines institutional branding, educational quality, stakeholder participation, and community trust. Practically, the findings suggest that school leaders should prioritize improving educational quality, strengthening relationships with parents and alumni, and maintaining institutional credibility rather than relying predominantly on expensive promotional campaigns. Satisfied parents and successful alumni should be regarded as strategic partners capable of sustaining institutional competitiveness through credible interpersonal communication. Consequently, an integrated WOM strategy represents a sustainable, cost-effective, and trust-based marketing model for educational institutions operating in increasingly competitive educational environments.

The findings of this study have broader implications beyond the context of An-Nadwa Integrated Elementary School. Globally, educational institutions are operating in increasingly competitive environments driven by demographic changes, school-choice policies, digital transformation, and growing parental expectations regarding educational quality. Consequently, schools are no longer competing solely through academic performance but also through their ability to establish institutional reputation, stakeholder trust, and sustainable community engagement. Recent evidence suggests that schools facing greater competitive pressure tend to adopt more sophisticated marketing strategies, although such strategies do not always translate into meaningful educational improvement (Greaves, Wilson, & Nairn, 2023).

The present study extends this perspective by demonstrating that sustainable competitiveness cannot be achieved merely through promotional activities. Instead, the effectiveness of educational marketing depends on the integration of institutional quality, stakeholder participation, community trust, and interpersonal communication. Unlike marketing approaches that emphasize advertising intensity or branding alone, the findings indicate that trust-based educational marketing generates stronger and more sustainable public engagement because parents perceive recommendations from trusted individuals as more credible than institutional promotional messages. This finding reinforces previous studies showing that educational marketing should prioritize relationship building rather than transactional promotion (Labasa, 2018; Ariwibowo, 2019).

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature by introducing the concept of an Integrated Word-of-Mouth Strategy. Previous studies have generally examined Word-of-Mouth (WOM) as an independent communication variable affecting purchasing decisions, customer satisfaction, or school selection (Joesyiana, 2018; Maghfiroh, 2019; Le, Robinson, & Double, 2020). However, the present findings indicate that WOM in educational institutions is better understood as a multidimensional strategic capability. The effectiveness of WOM emerges from the interaction among institutional reputation, educational quality, alumni achievements, parental satisfaction, stakeholder engagement, digital communication, and socio-religious legitimacy. Accordingly, WOM should be conceptualized not merely as interpersonal communication but as an institutional ecosystem capable of generating sustainable competitive advantage.

Another important theoretical implication concerns the integration of the AIDA communication model with educational marketing. The findings demonstrate that the sequential process of Attention–Interest–Desire–Action does not operate independently but is continuously reinforced through stakeholder interactions. Formal promotional media create initial awareness, whereas interpersonal communication validates institutional claims and transforms awareness into trust, intention, and ultimately enrollment decisions. This integrated process expands the traditional AIDA model by incorporating community trust as a central mechanism that links institutional communication with parental decision-making.

From a global perspective, the proposed Integrated WOM Strategy is particularly relevant for educational institutions in developing countries, where financial resources for large-scale promotional campaigns are often limited. Rather than depending on costly advertising, schools can strengthen their competitiveness by investing in educational quality, stakeholder satisfaction, alumni engagement, and institutional credibility. Such a strategy enables schools to achieve sustainable enrollment growth while simultaneously improving educational services, thereby creating long-term institutional resilience.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the global discourse on educational sustainability by supporting the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: Quality Education. High-quality education is not solely determined by curriculum and learning outcomes but also by public confidence in educational institutions. Strengthening community trust through integrated stakeholder engagement encourages greater parental participation, enhances institutional accountability, and improves equitable access to quality education. Consequently, the Integrated WOM Strategy represents not only a marketing approach but also a governance mechanism that promotes stronger partnerships among schools, families, alumni, and local communities in support of sustainable educational development.

The findings suggest several practical implications for educational leaders. *First*, school administrators should recognize parents, alumni, teachers, and local communities as strategic partners rather than passive beneficiaries of educational services. Institutional investment should therefore prioritize educational quality, stakeholder satisfaction, and alumni engagement, as these factors generate authentic recommendations that are more influential than conventional promotional campaigns. *Second*, educational institutions should integrate

digital communication with interpersonal communication instead of relying exclusively on social media or printed advertisements. Digital platforms may increase institutional visibility, whereas WOM enhances message credibility through trusted social relationships. The combination of both approaches creates a more comprehensive and sustainable educational marketing strategy. Thus, the findings have policy implications for educational authorities. Government agencies and educational organizations should encourage schools to strengthen stakeholder engagement, institutional transparency, and community participation as integral components of school quality assurance. Policies that promote collaboration among schools, parents, alumni, and local communities are likely to produce more sustainable educational outcomes than policies focusing exclusively on promotional activities or enrollment targets. Therefore, strengthening social capital and institutional trust should become an essential element of educational governance in increasingly competitive educational systems.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Word-of-Mouth (WOM) functions as an integrated educational marketing strategy that strengthens institutional competitiveness by developing public attention, interest, desire, and enrollment decisions through trusted interpersonal communication. The findings demonstrate that the effectiveness of WOM extends beyond informal recommendations, emerging instead from the integration of institutional reputation, educational quality, stakeholder engagement, alumni achievements, religious values, and community trust. Collectively, these interconnected elements create an Integrated Word-of-Mouth Strategy that enhances institutional credibility and encourages sustainable public participation in educational decision-making. Unlike conventional promotional approaches that primarily rely on brochures, banners, websites, or social media, the findings reveal that parents place greater confidence in authentic experiences and recommendations shared by alumni, current parents, teachers, and community members. Consequently, educational institutions seeking long-term competitiveness should prioritize strengthening educational quality, stakeholder satisfaction, and institutional trust rather than depending solely on promotional campaigns. These findings reinforce the view that trust-based communication constitutes a more sustainable and cost-effective marketing strategy for educational institutions operating in increasingly competitive environments.

This study contributes to the educational marketing literature by extending the conceptualization of Word-of-Mouth from a communication tool to an integrated institutional strategy that combines formal marketing communication with stakeholder advocacy and community engagement. The proposed Integrated Word-of-Mouth Strategy also enriches the application of the Attention–Interest–Desire–Action (AIDA) model by demonstrating that each stage of parental decision-making is reinforced through interpersonal trust and positive educational experiences rather than promotional communication alone. The findings also have broader implications for educational systems worldwide. As educational institutions

increasingly compete for student enrollment amid demographic change, digital transformation, and rising parental expectations, trust-based marketing strategies become increasingly important. The Integrated Word-of-Mouth Strategy proposed in this study offers an alternative model for schools, particularly in developing countries, where financial resources for large-scale promotional campaigns are limited. By emphasizing community trust and stakeholder collaboration, this strategy supports the development of more sustainable educational institutions and contributes to the realization of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4): Quality Education, particularly through strengthening partnerships between schools, families, alumni, and local communities.

This study is subject to several limitations. *First*, the research was conducted in a single Islamic elementary school operating within the socio-cultural context of a pesantren, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other educational settings. *Second*, the qualitative phenomenological approach emphasizes participants' lived experiences rather than measuring causal relationships among variables. Future research is therefore encouraged to examine the proposed Integrated Word-of-Mouth Strategy in diverse educational contexts, including public schools, higher education institutions, and international educational organizations. Comparative and mixed-method studies are also recommended to validate the conceptual model developed in this research and to investigate the interaction between Word-of-Mouth, digital marketing, institutional branding, and stakeholder engagement in enhancing educational competitiveness.

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