

RESEARCH

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Enhancing Public Trust Through E-WOM In Islamic Boarding Schools: a Cyber Public Relations Perspective

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the role of Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM) in enhancing public trust in Islamic boarding schools from the perspective of Cyber Public Relations (CPR) at Darussalam Islamic Boarding School Banyuwangi. This research employed a qualitative approach using a case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation involving pesantren administrators, students, alumni, and members of the community. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis and validated through data triangulation. The findings reveal that public trust is strengthened through integrated digital communication strategies, including the optimization of websites and social media, dissemination of value-based educational content, and interactive communication characterized by responsiveness and transparency. Educational content such as religious advice, santri memorization activities, and Shahih Bukhari study sessions contributed to strengthening the pesantren's reputation and encouraging positive E-WOM. This study implies that Cyber Public Relations serves as an effective strategy for maintaining institutional reputation and strengthening public trust in the digital era.

Keywords: Public Trust, E-WOM, Cyber Public Relations.

Introduction

Enhancing public trust in Islamic boarding schools through Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) has become an increasingly relevant issue in the contemporary digital era (Roy et al., 2025; Wanigapura et al., 2025). As traditional Islamic educational institutions, pesantren play a significant role in shaping the character, morality, and Islamic knowledge of younger generations. Nevertheless, in order to maintain their relevance and public legitimacy amid rapid social and technological transformations, pesantren are required to adopt more adaptive communication strategies. One of the most effective approaches is the utilization of e-WOM as a strategic instrument for strengthening institutional image and public trust (Angelina & Widaningsih, 2025; Dandis et al., 2026). Through e-WOM, positive information and experiences related to pesantren can be disseminated extensively via digital platforms such as social media, online forums, and review websites. Previous studies have demonstrated that e-WOM exerts a substantial influence on public decision-making in selecting educational

institutions. Positive testimonials from alumni and parents shared across digital platforms can significantly enhance the credibility and reputation of Islamic boarding schools. Therefore, integrating e-WOM into the Cyber Public Relations (CPR) strategy of pesantren constitutes a strategic effort to reinforce public trust, sustain institutional relevance, and attract the interest of both younger generations and parents (Atnan & Hidayat, 2026; Mulyani, 2025). Foundational e-WOM studies also emphasize that online consumer-generated evaluations influence credibility, perceived usefulness, and behavioral intentions (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Ismagilova et al., 2017).

Numerous studies have emphasized that public trust serves as a fundamental basis for establishing positive relationships between organizations or brands and society (Huang & Ki, 2023; Rindova and Petkova 2023; Cheng, et al., 2024)). In addition, public trust toward an institution or brand plays a pivotal role in shaping long-term relationships among organizations, consumers, stakeholders, and the broader community. The availability of accurate, relevant, and easily accessible information contributes significantly to reducing uncertainty and strengthening institutional trustworthiness (Azzahra et al., 2025; Lamsal et al., 2025). In this regard, effective communication practices become essential in constructing sustainable organizational legitimacy within increasingly competitive and digitally connected environments. In public relations and digital interaction contexts, trust is commonly understood as a multidimensional relationship outcome involving credibility, commitment, competence, and confidence in institutional behavior (Mayer et al., 1995; Hon & Grunig, 1999; McKnight et al., 2002).

Furthermore, e-WOM frequently provides valuable feedback for institutions regarding the quality of their products or services (Suradji & Faridi, 2025; Arifianto et al., 2025). Information distributed through e-WOM can spread rapidly across various digital platforms, including social media, online discussion forums, and review websites. Consequently, messages or reviews posted by a single individual may reach thousands of audiences within a relatively short period. Consumer reviews may also serve as a source of inspiration for service innovation and institutional improvement based on the needs and preferences expressed by users. Moreover, e-WOM significantly influences collective decision-making processes involving particular groups or communities (Ologunbe & Taiwo, 2025; Roy et al., 2025). Discussions and recommendations shared within online communities and social media groups are capable of shaping perceptions and behaviors among interconnected audiences. The persuasiveness of e-WOM is also shaped by information quality, review helpfulness, source credibility, and information adoption processes in digital environments (Filiari, 2015; Erkan & Evans, 2016).

The rapid development of digital technology has transformed patterns of public communication in obtaining and disseminating information regarding educational institutions, including Islamic boarding schools. Consequently, public trust is no longer constructed solely through traditional reputation, but also through interactions and perceptions evolving within digital spaces. Within this context, Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) has become an essential element in shaping public perceptions through reviews, testimonials, and experiences shared by alumni, students, parents, and the broader community across social media and other digital platforms. The increasingly rapid and transparent flow of information requires pesantren to develop more adaptive communication strategies through the Cyber Public Relations (CPR) approach in order to maintain institutional image, strengthen relationships with society, and continuously foster public trust. Therefore, examining the enhancement of public trust through

e-WOM from the perspective of Cyber Public Relations is essential for understanding how pesantren utilize digital spaces as communication channels while remaining aligned with Islamic educational values and traditional institutional identities. This transformation is consistent with social media scholarship, which highlights that Web 2.0 platforms shift audiences from passive receivers into active producers, distributors, and evaluators of institutional messages (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Berthon et al., 2012).

The novelty of this study lies in its attempt to provide a comprehensive understanding of Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) practices in strengthening public trust through the perspective of Cyber Public Relations (CPR) within the context of Islamic boarding schools. This study does not merely conceptualize e-WOM as a medium for disseminating digital information, but also as a communication process embedded with religious values, social intimacy, and the representation of Islamic educational identity within cyberspace. Furthermore, this research offers a new perspective on how pesantren develop humanistic digital communication through the experiences, testimonials, and interactions of stakeholders across digital media platforms. Such practices contribute to establishing closer relationships between institutions and society without diminishing the traditional characteristics and Islamic values that distinguish pesantren from other educational institutions. Accordingly, this study aims to comprehensively analyze how public trust is enhanced through Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) at Darussalam Islamic Boarding School Banyuwangi.

Method

This study adopted a qualitative approach employing a case study design to explore in depth how Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) contributes to enhancing public trust in Darussalam Islamic Boarding School Banyuwangi, particularly from the perspective of Cyber Public Relations (CPR) (Huzali et al., 2025; Setiawan & Ekaningsih, 2025). The selection of this pesantren as the research site was based on its significant role within the local community and the broader Islamic educational environment in the region. In addition to functioning as a center for Islamic education, the pesantren possesses substantial potential as an institution that actively manages its reputation and public interactions through digital platforms. Accessibility to the research setting and institutional support from the pesantren were essential in ensuring the effectiveness of the data collection process and in facilitating a comprehensive understanding of how digital communication strategies shape public perceptions toward the institution. The case study design was considered appropriate because it enables an in-depth investigation of contemporary communication practices within their real-life institutional context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018).

Data collection techniques employed in this study included in-depth interviews and participant observation (Chand, 2025; Khan et al., 2025; Lamsal et al., 2025). The in-depth interviews were conducted with various stakeholders, including pesantren administrators, students, alumni, and members of the surrounding community. This approach enabled the researcher to obtain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives regarding the implementation of e-WOM and its influence on their perceptions of the pesantren. Meanwhile, participant observation provided an opportunity to directly examine interactions between the pesantren and the community within digital contexts, particularly through social media platforms and the official website of the pesantren. Through this process, the researcher was able to capture communication patterns, public engagement, and the

dynamics of digital interactions that contributed to the construction of institutional trust (Ologunbe & Taiwo, 2025; Setiawan et al., 2025).

The collected data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, in which qualitative data were systematically examined to identify major themes related to Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) and Cyber Public Relations practices within the pesantren environment (Tam et al., 2025; Pandey & Dash, 2026). The application of this analytical technique was intended to reveal how digital communication strategies implemented by the pesantren influenced public perceptions and trust toward the institution. To ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the findings, data triangulation was employed by comparing information obtained from multiple sources and methods. In addition, objectivity checks were conducted to minimize potential bias and ensure accurate interpretation of the research findings. Therefore, this study is expected to provide valuable insights into how Islamic boarding schools can strategically utilize Cyber Public Relations to strengthen relationships with society and enhance public trust through digital communication practices (Azhari et al., 2025). The thematic analysis procedure was strengthened by following the logic of identifying, reviewing, naming, and interpreting recurring patterns of meaning across qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results and Discussion

Enhancing public trust in Islamic boarding schools through Electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM) from the perspective of Cyber Public Relations (CPR) requires well-structured and strategic communication management. Several essential strategies include active online reputation management through monitoring and responding to interactions across social media platforms and institutional websites. In addition, strengthening institutional credibility through the dissemination of high-quality content related to educational activities, religious programs, and the social contributions of pesantren is equally important. Engaging alumni, parents, and local communities in online discussions may further reinforce institutional relationships while simultaneously increasing the visibility of the pesantren within digital spaces. Collaboration with local influencers and maintaining transparent communication regarding institutional policies and programs also constitute effective approaches for developing and sustaining public trust. Through such strategic efforts, pesantren can optimize the utilization of e-WOM in strengthening their positive public image in the digital sphere. In this regard, digital public relations requires dialogic, strategic, and relationship-oriented communication that enables institutions to build mutual understanding and long-term relationships with their publics (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Grunig, 2009; Taylor & Kent, 2014).

Building a Strong Reputation in Islamic Boarding Schools

Establishing a strong reputation constitutes a crucial aspect for every Islamic boarding school. A positive reputation not only shapes public perceptions toward the institution but also plays a significant role in attracting prospective students, obtaining financial and social support, and maintaining competitive advantages among Islamic educational institutions. Within the context of contemporary education, reputation has become a strategic asset that determines the level of public trust toward the quality of education, mentoring systems, and Islamic values promoted by pesantren. Therefore, reputation building cannot be achieved instantaneously; rather, it requires planned, consistent, and sustainable communication strategies.

In the rapidly evolving digital era, the reputation development of Islamic educational institutions has increasingly been influenced by the utilization of digital media and online

communication. Cyber Public Relations (CPR) emerges as a strategic approach that enables pesantren to establish a positive institutional image through various digital platforms, including websites, social media, and online forums. Through CPR, pesantren are able to disseminate information transparently, establish communication with society, and expand their influence within digital public spaces. Informative, inspirational, and easily accessible content significantly contributes to strengthening public trust toward the institution. Furthermore, CPR facilitates two-way interactions with the public through responsive communication, public opinion management, and the reinforcement of relationships with stakeholders such as alumni, parents, local communities, media, and institutional partners. Effective implementation of CPR generates long-term impacts, including increased student enrollment, stronger public support, enhanced institutional image, and the reinforcement of the pesantren's role in disseminating Islamic values within modern society. Interactive online communication and relationship cultivation through social media are essential because publics tend to evaluate institutions not only from formal information but also from responsiveness, openness, and conversational voice (Kelleher, 2009; Men & Tsai, 2012).



Figure 1. Building a Strong Reputation in Islamic Boarding School

This perspective is consistent with the illustration presented in Figure 1. Building a Strong Reputation in Islamic Boarding School, which demonstrates that developing the reputation of Islamic educational institutions requires integrated strategies encompassing various aspects of communication and social relationships. The figure illustrates that institutional reputation is constructed through website development and high-quality content as forms of informational transparency, management of online reviews to maintain public perception, utilization of social media to enhance audience engagement, and the establishment of relationships with influencers and media to strengthen institutional credibility. Thus, the reputation of pesantren is formed through a combination of effective digital communication, harmonious social relationships, and consistency in conveying institutional values and identity to the public.

These conditions are also reflected in the efforts undertaken by Darussalam Islamic Boarding School Banyuwangi in strengthening its institutional reputation. The pesantren perceives reputation as a fundamental pillar for achieving its educational objectives and institutional development. A positive reputation is believed to attract prospective students, enhance public trust, and strengthen relationships with parents, alumni, and local communities. Consequently, the institution strives to establish a positive image through effective communication management, the utilization of digital media, and transparent dissemination of information to the public.

These findings are reinforced by interviews conducted with several informants directly involved in communication management and institutional image development, including the Media Administrator (AM), the Head of the Pesantren (KP), and the Documentation and Publication Division (DP). The interview findings reveal that reputation building is systematically conducted through the optimization of digital media, strengthening relationships with society, and creating positive experiences for students and alumni. As stated by the informants:

“Our website is designed to be informative and user friendly, and we provide comprehensive information about the pesantren, including the curriculum, flagship programs, alumni profiles, and admission information.” (AM)

“We focus on transparency in communication with the public, active management of social media through informative and inspirational content, and strengthening relationships with alumni and local communities.” (KP)

“Positive reviews and testimonials from alumni, parents, and the community are highly influential. We strive to provide satisfying experiences for every student so that they can contribute to building our positive institutional image.” (DP)

Based on these interview findings, it can be understood that Darussalam Islamic Boarding School Banyuwangi implements a reputation-building strategy aligned with the principles of Cyber Public Relations. The statement from the Media Administrator indicates that the institutional website functions not merely as an information platform but also as a medium of transparency in communicating the pesantren's identity, educational programs, and institutional quality to the public. Such informational transparency serves as a critical factor in strengthening public trust toward Islamic educational institutions.

Furthermore, the explanation provided by the Head of the Pesantren demonstrates that social media is actively utilized as a communication tool and as a means of strengthening relationships with society. Informative and inspirational content functions not only to disseminate information but also to establish emotional closeness between the pesantren and its audiences. This strategy illustrates that social media plays a substantial role in shaping positive public perceptions while simultaneously expanding the institution's communication reach.

On the other hand, the statement from the Documentation and Publication Division emphasizes that positive student experiences constitute a central element in reinforcing institutional reputation. Testimonials from alumni, parents, and the community represent forms of electronic word-of-mouth capable of naturally constructing a positive institutional image within public digital spaces. These positive reviews indicate that the reputation of pesantren is not solely developed through digital promotion but also through the quality of experiences and services directly perceived by stakeholders.

Therefore, the findings of this study demonstrate that reputation building at Darussalam Islamic Boarding School Banyuwangi is conducted through integrated digital communication strategies, informational transparency, strengthening stakeholder relationships, and creating positive experiences for students and society. These efforts indicate that the reputation of Islamic educational institutions is established through consistent and sustainable processes, enabling pesantren to strengthen public trust while maintaining institutional existence and competitive advantages amid the increasingly dynamic development of the educational landscape.

Educational Content (Value-Based Content)

From the perspective of Cyber Public Relations, strengthening public trust through electronic word of mouth (E-WOM) in Islamic boarding schools can be achieved through the strategy of disseminating educational content (value-based content). Islamic boarding schools possess unique advantages in the form of Islamic values and religious knowledge that can be developed into beneficial digital da’wah content for the wider community. Such content may include short videos on Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook featuring ustadz or pesantren caregivers providing brief tips on Islamic manners, daily prayers, Islamic motivation, or simple explanations about everyday life from an Islamic perspective, as well as the daily activities of the students at Darussalam Islamic Boarding School Blokagung Banyuwangi. In addition to videos, pesantren can also utilize digital posters containing Islamic quotes, worship reminders, and moral messages that are regularly published through social media platforms.

Consistency in updating educational and inspirational content will help build the image of the pesantren as an institution that not only focuses on internal education but also actively contributes benefits to the wider community through digital media. This strategy indirectly encourages the formation of positive E-WOM because the public will perceive that if the free content shared by the pesantren already provides meaningful benefits and educational value, then the quality of education offered within the institution must be even better and more trustworthy. Therefore, value-based content functions not only as a medium of da’wah but also as an important instrument in strengthening the reputation and public trust toward Islamic educational institutions.



Figure 2. Advice from the Caregiver Transparent



Figure 3. Students Memorization Activity



Figure 4. Shahih Bukhori Studi Session

The three figures demonstrate the implementation of a value-based content strategy from the perspective of Cyber Public Relations in building public trust through electronic word of mouth (E-WOM) at Darussalam Blokagung Islamic Boarding School. The first image shows a da’wah poster uploaded through the pesantren’s Instagram account, containing advice from one of the caregivers about the importance of maintaining sunnah practices. The message is delivered in simple and easily understandable language, allowing it to provide religious education while also reflecting the depth of the spiritual values taught within the pesantren. This type of content helps build the image of the pesantren as an institution that actively disseminates Islamic knowledge and religious guidance to the wider community through digital media.

Meanwhile, the second image depicts students participating in a lalaran activity by

memorizing the 1002 verses of Alfiyah Ibnu Malik, illustrating the strong academic culture and well-preserved scholarly traditions of the pesantren. Through this content, the public can recognize that the pesantren not only focuses on formal education but also remains committed to preserving the tradition of classical Islamic learning and strengthening the intellectual competencies of its students.

Furthermore, the third image portrays one of the caregivers conducting a religious study session with the students during the month of Ramadan using Shahih Bukhari as the primary reference book. This content reflects the close relationship between the caregivers and the students while also portraying the strong religious atmosphere within the pesantren environment. Overall, these three forms of content represent educational, inspirational, and authentic digital communication that contributes to strengthening the pesantren's reputation, increasing audience engagement, and encouraging the development of positive E-WOM within society.

Fast and Transparent Responses (Interactive Communication)

From the perspective of Cyber Public Relations, strengthening public trust through electronic word of mouth (E-WOM) in Islamic boarding schools is not only achieved through the dissemination of educational content, but also through interactive, responsive, and transparent communication. Public trust will grow when the pesantren does not merely deliver one-way information, but also demonstrates its ability to listen, respond, and actively interact with the community. In practice, comment sections and direct messages (DMs) on social media platforms become important communication channels between the pesantren, prospective students' parents, alumni, and the wider public. Quick, friendly, and informative responses to questions regarding educational programs, tuition fees, facilities, and pesantren activities create the impression of professionalism and openness. Such communicative attitudes indirectly shape positive public perceptions that the pesantren provides good services and is genuinely committed to building relationships with the community. Responsive clarification is particularly important because unmanaged digital conversations can create reputation risks, while timely crisis communication helps institutions reduce uncertainty, prevent misinformation, and protect reputational assets (Coombs, 2007; Aula, 2010).

In addition, interactive communication also serves as an important strategy in addressing issues or negative information that may potentially damage the institution's reputation. In the context of Cyber Public Relations, pesantren institutions cannot remain passive or disappear when negative news emerges on social media. Instead, the pesantren needs to provide clarification quickly, honestly, and transparently through its official website and social media accounts so that accurate information can be received by the public. Transparency in providing explanations helps break the chain of negative rumors and reduces the spread of misinformation. Therefore, responsive and open two-way communication functions not only as a medium for information services, but also as an important instrument for maintaining institutional reputation, strengthening emotional relationships with the community, and increasing positive E-WOM toward Islamic educational institutions.

Table 1. Interactive Communication

| Forms of Interactive Communication | Cyber PR Implementation in Pesantren | Impact on Public Trust and E-WOM |
|---|---|--|
| Comment and DM responses | Responding quickly and politely to questions from prospective students' parents | Enhances the impression of professionalism and quality service |
| Clarification of negative issues | Providing factual explanations through official websites and social media | Reduces the spread of rumors and protects the institution's |

| | | |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| Social media interaction | Responding to public suggestions, criticism, and feedback | reputation Builds emotional relationships and closeness with the public |
| Regular information updates | Providing periodic updates about pesantren activities | Encourages transparency and strengthens public trust |

The table above shows that interactive communication in Cyber Public Relations plays an important role in building public trust within Islamic boarding schools. Quick and transparent responses to questions and issues circulating on social media create the image of an institution that is open, professional, and attentive to the needs of the community. Furthermore, the active involvement of the pesantren in interacting with its audience can strengthen emotional relationships with the public, thereby encouraging recommendations, testimonials, and the digital dissemination of positive experiences through E-WOM.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that strengthening public trust in Islamic boarding schools through electronic word-of-mouth (E-WOM) from the perspective of Cyber Public Relations (CPR) requires strategic and integrated digital communication management. Darussalam Islamic Boarding School Banyuwangi has implemented various Cyber PR strategies through the optimization of websites, social media platforms, and transparent communication to build and maintain its institutional reputation. These efforts demonstrate that the reputation of pesantren is not formed instantly, but rather through consistent communication, active public engagement, and the dissemination of accurate and informative content that reflects the institution’s educational values and identity.

Furthermore, the dissemination of value-based content has become an important strategy in strengthening public trust and encouraging positive E-WOM. Educational and inspirational content, such as religious advice from caregivers, santri memorization activities, and Shahih Bukhari study sessions, reflects the strong spiritual, academic, and moral culture of the pesantren. Through such authentic digital content, the public can recognize that the pesantren not only focuses on formal education but also actively contributes to spreading Islamic values and religious knowledge through digital media. As a result, these communication practices help strengthen the positive image of the pesantren while increasing audience engagement and institutional credibility within society.

In addition, interactive communication through fast, responsive, and transparent interactions on social media plays a significant role in maintaining public trust. Quick responses to comments, direct messages, public feedback, and issue clarification create the impression of an open, professional, and community-oriented institution. Transparent communication also helps reduce misinformation and strengthens emotional relationships between the pesantren and the public. Therefore, the integration of digital reputation management, value-based content dissemination, and interactive communication serves as an effective Cyber Public Relations strategy for strengthening public trust and sustaining positive E-WOM toward Islamic boarding schools in the digital era.

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