

Decoding Spiritual Word-of-Mouth in Education Marketing: A Qualitative Case Study of Trust Formation in Islamic Boarding School Selection in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT. This study identifies a research gap in the consumer behavior literature regarding how spiritual dimensions function to mitigate perceived risk in the decision-making process of selecting Islamic boarding schools, despite the well-established dominance of rational-based models in educational choice. Employing a qualitative case study approach, this research investigates the phenomenon through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The findings reveal that parental decision-making is not purely transactional, but rather shaped by a socio-spiritual trust ecosystem that integrates the charismatic authority of the *Kiai* with religious word-of-mouth communication. Within this ecosystem, institutional legitimacy is reinforced through culturally embedded practices such as the Haul ritual, a form of collective meaning-making and narrative reinforcement; *Sowan*, a relational trust-building mechanism; and alumni networks, which function as continuous channels of information diffusion within community-based communication structures. Theoretically, this study contributes to the service marketing and consumer behavior literature by extending the concept of trust formation by introducing spiritually mediated loyalty into educational decision-making contexts, thereby broadening the explanatory capacity of existing rational-choice frameworks. On a broader level, the study contributes to global discourse on community-based education marketing in developing and collectivist societies. In practice, the findings suggest that Islamic boarding school management should strengthen institutional trust by reinforcing leadership credibility, spiritual authenticity, and community-based relational networks, rather than relying primarily on physical infrastructure.

Keywords: *Charismatic Leadership; Educational Consumer Behavior; Islamic Boarding School; School Choice; Word of Mouth.*

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INTRODUCTION

Word-of-mouth (WOM) has long been recognized as one of the most influential mechanisms shaping consumer decision-making in high-involvement service contexts (Gu et al., 2012; Herold et al., 2016; 2017). Existing studies consistently demonstrate that recommendations from trusted individuals exert a stronger influence on service selection than formal promotional activities because they reduce uncertainty and perceived risk (Mohammed, 2024). Nevertheless, the dominant WOM

literature remains largely grounded in economic-rational perspectives, emphasizing the exchange of information regarding service quality, performance, and customer satisfaction (Rasheed & Rashid, 2024; Marcos & Coelho, 2022). Such perspectives offer limited explanations of decision-making processes in contexts where trust is constructed through shared values, moral legitimacy, and spiritual beliefs rather than purely functional evaluations.

These limitations become particularly evident in nonprofit and faith-based organizations, where consumer choices are often influenced by value congruence, moral credibility, and collective identity (Koehrsen & Burchardt, 2024). Previous research suggests that trust in religious institutions often extends beyond assessments of service quality to encompass perceptions of ethical leadership, spiritual authority, and communal belonging (Krishna et al., 2025; Alsaeed et al., 2023; Baharun & Hasanah, 2023). Consequently, conventional service marketing frameworks may not fully capture how trust is established and maintained within religious educational settings.

The persistence and growth of faith-based educational institutions despite increasing competition in the educational market further challenge conventional assumptions in consumer behavior research. In many contexts, these institutions continue to attract and retain students without extensive reliance on commercial advertising, suggesting the presence of alternative trust-generating mechanisms embedded within religious communities (Fayed, 2026). Such mechanisms may involve charismatic leadership, shared spiritual values, and dense social networks that collectively shape educational preferences and institutional loyalty.

Within Indonesia, Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) provide a particularly relevant context for examining these dynamics. As long-standing indigenous educational institutions, *pesantren* function not only as centers of learning but also as social and spiritual institutions deeply embedded within local communities (Pakpahan et al., 2025; Malik, 2024; Suryati et al., 2026). Among them, *Pesantren Darussalam Blokagung* in East Java represents an important case due to its sustained reputation, extensive alumni network, and continued ability to attract students across generations. These characteristics make it an appropriate setting for investigating how trust and influence are formed in educational decision-making processes.

Recent scholarship has highlighted the importance of both social capital and spiritual capital in generating trust within religious communities. Studies emphasizing social capital argue that social cohesion, family networks, and alumni relationships strongly influence educational choices (Abbas et al., 2024; Alemayehu et al., 2023). In contrast, research on spiritual capital highlights the role of religious authority, moral legitimacy, and perceptions of sacred leadership in shaping trust and commitment (Yasin et al., 2023; Fazilat et al., 2022). Although these streams of research have contributed significantly to understanding trust formation, limited attention has been devoted to examining how charismatic religious authority interacts with community-based communication networks to influence educational decision-making.

Furthermore, existing studies on *pesantren* have predominantly focused on pedagogical, sociological, cultural, and political dimensions (Ningsih et al., 2026; Faizin, 2024). Compared with other studies, fewer have explored *pesantren* from a marketing management and consumer behavior perspective. At the same time, educational marketing research has largely concentrated on public and private schools that compete through institutional accreditation, academic performance, and physical facilities (Zebua & Us, 2025; Kerssens et al., 2024; Coutet, 2022). As a result, the mechanisms through which charismatic religious leadership contributes to institutional trust and influences parental educational choices remain insufficiently understood.

Addressing this gap, the present study investigates how the charismatic authority of the *Kiai* and religious WOM networks jointly shape parents' decisions to enroll their children in *Pesantren Darussalam Blokagung*. Particular attention is given to the role of community-based communication channels, alumni networks, and religious activities in facilitating trust formation and institutional reputation. By examining the interaction between spiritual authority and WOM processes, this study

seeks to extend existing consumer behavior and educational marketing literature beyond conventional rational-choice explanations.

The study contributes to theory by proposing a trust-formation framework that incorporates charismatic authority as an important source of credibility in faith-based educational services. It also contributes to educational marketing scholarship by demonstrating how religious institutions mobilize social and spiritual resources to sustain institutional attractiveness in competitive educational environments. In practice, the findings offer insights for managers of value-based educational institutions seeking to strengthen stakeholder trust through authentic community engagement, leadership credibility, and alumni participation. In doing so, this research advances understanding of educational decision-making in collectivist and religiously embedded contexts where communal trust and spiritual legitimacy play central roles.

METHOD

Research Design

This research uses a qualitative approach with an explanatory single-case study design. The underlying paradigm is social constructivism, which aims to explore how parents construct the meaning of "belief" in their decision to enroll their children in an Islamic boarding school. The choice of this single-case study design is based on revelatory case logic, in which the Darussalam Blokagung Islamic Boarding School has unique characteristics as an institution that has experienced massive student growth despite minimal conventional promotion. The main focus of the research is to uncover previously hidden internal mechanisms (black boxes) in the religious-based consumer decision-making process.

Locus

The research location is the Darussalam Islamic Boarding School in Blokagung, Banyuwangi, Indonesia. Case selection was based on extreme-case criteria: this Islamic boarding school has a highly militant alumni network, and the charismatic influence of its caretakers transcends geographical boundaries. The justification is that the religious WOM phenomenon in this location is very prominent and institutionalized through annual rituals, thus providing rich data to address theoretical anomalies in service marketing. Field access was obtained through official permission from the central board of the Islamic boarding school, with the researcher acting as a passive participant observer to maintain objectivity.

Participants

Participant information was collected through purposive sampling, with strict inclusion criteria. Participants included 15 people: 8 new student guardians (selected within the last year), 4 core administrators (with an understanding of communication strategies), and 3 senior alumni figures (network coordinators). Recruitment was conducted through the secretariat database, with potential informants contacted by telephone before face-to-face meetings. A data saturation strategy was applied, in which sampling was stopped when the 13th to 15th informants no longer provided new information on the motives and communication patterns used in decision-making.

Table 1: Participants

<i>Code</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Amount</i>	<i>Inclusion Criteria</i>	<i>Data Shape</i>
NSG-01 to NSG-08	New Student Guardian	8	Decided to choose a boarding school within the last < 1 year	Personal motivation, information search process, influence of Kiai figures, and experience of exposure to WOM.
CM-01 to CM-04	Core Management	4	Have authority in management and understand the institution's communication strategy.	Haul narrative management strategy, guest reception mechanism (Sowan), and social media management.

SAF-01 to SAF-03	Senior Alumni Figures	3	Alumni network coordinator with a service period > 10 years.	Alumni solidarity mechanisms, information dissemination patterns in chat groups, and the role of alumni as lead generators.
Total		15	Data Saturation Strategy	Interview Transcripts, Observation Notes, and Communication Documents.

Source: Data Collection, 2026

Procedure

Data collection procedures were conducted through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation over six months. Interviews lasted 60–90 minutes per session, were conducted offline at the Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) or the informant's residence, were recorded digitally, and transcribed verbatim. Participant observation focused on interactions during the "Sowan" ritual and activities in communal WhatsApp groups to observe real-time information dissemination patterns. Documentation included registration archives, internal magazines, and Islamic boarding school social media content to verify the brand storytelling narratives conveyed by the informants.

Data Analysis

Data analysis operationalized Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's interactive model through four systematic stages using NVivo 12 software. First, data condensation involved initial coding (open coding) of interview transcripts. Second, axial coding was applied to connect categories such as "Kiai Authority" and "Alumni Loyalty." Third, thematic coding was used to develop a major theme on "Spiritual Belief Ecosystem." Fourth, conclusions were drawn by comparing patterns across informants to ensure that the resulting themes reflected the participants' psychological realities.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure trustworthiness, this study applied the Lincoln and Guba criteria. Credibility was achieved through source triangulation (comparing data from guardians and administrators) and member checking (returning draft findings to informants for confirmation). Transferability was achieved by providing a thick description of the Islamic boarding school's cultural context, enabling the study's results to be applied in similar settings. Dependability and confirmability were achieved through an audit trail that documented all research logs and field notes, allowing external auditors to review the findings and ensure they were derived solely from the data and not from researcher bias.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed, with informed consent obtained from all participants before data collection. Participants were provided with an explanation of the research objectives, the right to withdraw at any time, and guaranteed confidentiality through the use of anonymity (initials). The researchers also committed to maintaining the sensitivity of religious values at the research site, ensuring that data collection procedures did not disrupt the rhythm of worship and educational activities. All recorded data was stored in an encrypted folder accessible only to the research team to prevent misuse of information.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Leveraging Hauls and Grand Events as Brand Storytelling

Based on research findings, Haul and Grand Events have proven to be highly effective Brand Storytelling tools because they build a strong, authentic brand narrative through emotional bonds and deep spiritual values within the community. This phenomenon allows Islamic boarding schools to integrate directly with cultural heritage, history, and respected figures (such as ulama or founding figures), thereby increasing credibility and audience loyalty by transforming the brand experience

into participation in a meaningful and sacred tradition, far beyond conventional promotions. Regarding this, as explained by Core Management 01 below.

Islamic boarding schools can gain significant emotional leverage through Haul, which is not just a gathering, but a collective spiritual bond. Islamic boarding schools build their stories on a foundation of history and figures trusted by millions. The stories formed there are not just heard; they are experienced together. This is sustainable storytelling with high authority. (CM-01)

The statement emphasized that Haul is a powerful brand storytelling mechanism for Islamic boarding schools, far exceeding the function of ordinary religious events. Islamic boarding schools can achieve "very high emotional leverage" because Haul creates a collective emotional bond among millions of participants. This means that the narrative or story of the Islamic boarding school is built on a foundation of history and trusted figures (ulama/founders), providing high authority and instant credibility. Most importantly, this storytelling is sustainable because the stories conveyed are not merely passively absorbed but "experienced together" by the congregation, transforming spiritual experiences into long-term loyalty and community advocacy for the values and heritage of the Islamic boarding school.

To analyze in depth how the charismatic authority of the *Kiai* is strengthened and transformed into community loyalty that impacts religious Word-of-Mouth (WoM), this study identifies Haul (the commemoration of the death of a central figure of the *pesantren*) as the most significant cultural-religious mechanism. Haul functions beyond just a religious ritual; it is also a Brand Storytelling strategy that leverages the congregation's collective emotional power. The visual model below outlines the transformative stages of Haul, from an ordinary event to a strong foundation that builds long-term loyalty in the *pesantren* community.

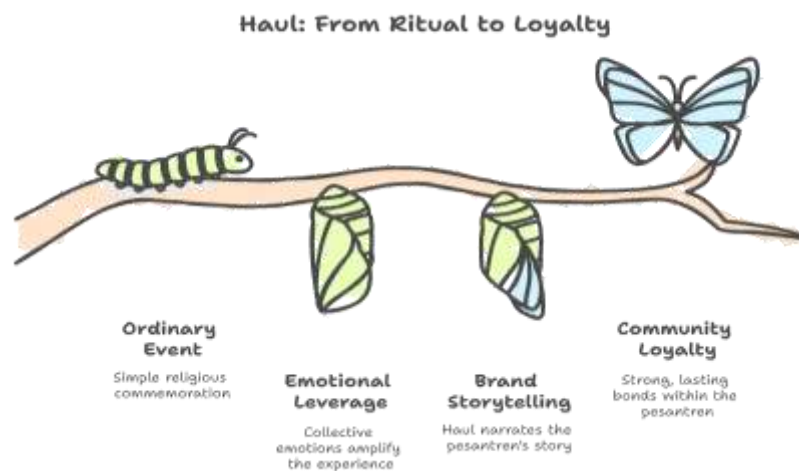


Figure 1. Haul: Building Community Loyalty

The image presents a visual model illustrating the evolutionary process, using the metaphor of the butterfly life cycle—from caterpillar to adult—to chart the transformation of a mundane religious event into long-term community loyalty. The Haul begins as a Religious Event (the caterpillar), then transitions into the critical phase of Emotional Bonding (the first pupa) that creates a collective inner bond. The process continues with the strengthening of the Historical Authority of the commemorated figure (second pupa), which triggers Shared Experience and collective storytelling (butterflies emerging from the cocoon), until finally reaching the peak stage of Community Loyalty (adult butterflies) which is marked by long-term advocacy of the values of the Islamic boarding school; overall, this model shows how the Haul ritual functions as a strong and effective Brand Storytelling with emotional leverage that can bind and maintain Islamic boarding school stakeholders.

Mechanism of Visiting and Silaturahmi as Relationship Maintenance

Based on research findings, the *Sowan* and *Silaturahmi* mechanisms are essential and effective cultural and spiritual practices for long-term Relationship Maintenance, particularly within the ecosystem of Islamic boarding schools or religious communities. These two practices function as authentic, periodic communication rhythms that consistently strengthen emotional and social bonds between individuals, as well as between community members and authority figures (such as kyais or teachers). Through respectful face-to-face meetings (*sowan*) and efforts to maintain connections (*silaturahmi*), these practices ensure that relationships not only endure but are continuously nurtured, renewed, and sustain trust and loyalty over time. This is emphasized by Core Management 02 below.

"A visit is a ritual of cultivating loyalty and recharging values. Digital communication only conveys information, but a visit creates a physical presence and transfers energy. This is an irreplaceable form of high-context communication. It acknowledges the autonomy (leadership of the Kyai) and strengthens the commitment to ta'dzim (respect) of the students". (CM-02)

This statement was confirmed by Senior Alumni Figure 01 below:

"Silaturahmi is like oiling a machine. Social relationships, especially those of a patron-client nature, such as those in Islamic boarding schools, will wear out if not maintained. By visiting, we send a message that this relationship is important, that we remember. It is not just about sharing news, but about an emotional investment that ensures that when major problems arise, the channels of communication and trust are firmly established".(SAF-01)

In essence, the *Sowan* and *Silaturahmi* mechanism is a very effective long-term relationship maintenance strategy in a socio-cultural context, where this practice functions as a periodic communication rhythm that is emotionally invested. *Sowan*, as a respectful face-to-face interaction, and *Silaturahmi*, as an effort to maintain connection, ensure that relationships do not become cold or transactional. Both practices consistently renew trust and loyalty (maintenance) by sending a powerful non-verbal message: that the relationship is valued and remembered, thus maintaining the integrity (cohesion) of a social network or community over time.

Public Relations Through Community Service for Santri Students

Based on research findings, the Santri Community Service program has proven to be a highly effective and authentic Public Relations (PR) instrument for Islamic boarding schools. This program allows Islamic boarding schools to interact directly with the community, not through promotional claims, but through concrete actions and solution-oriented contributions (educational, social, and religious). By positioning students as agents of change and goodness, Islamic boarding schools have succeeded in building a positive image and strong credibility in the public's eyes, while simultaneously fostering a sense of ownership and community support for the educational institution, which is the core of successful, sustainable public relations. This presentation is as explained by New Student Guardian 01 below.

"Community engagement by students is the most authentic form of public relations, something we call 'PR by Doing.' Unlike press conferences, which focus on telling, community service is about showing. The public does not just hear the pesantren's claims; they experience the benefits of the students' presence firsthand. This automatically builds a positive image and builds trust".(NSG-01)

So, student involvement in community service activities is the most effective and authentic Public Relations (PR) strategy for Islamic boarding schools. This approach is called "PR by Doing" because it focuses on concrete actions (showing) rather than mere verbal statements (telling). Its main advantage is that the community can directly experience the benefits of students' presence, thereby fostering a positive image and high trust in the Islamic boarding school. Thus, this activity serves as a bridge, shifting public perception from mere claims to real, positive experiences.

Besides the charismatic authority of the *Kiai* and the central role of alumni, another key element in the Islamic boarding school's religious Word-of-Mouth (WoM) ecosystem is the direct

manifestation of the quality of education and the social contributions of students to the wider community, identified as the Student Community Service (PR by Doing) mechanism. This mechanism serves a dual function: as an authentic public relations (PR) channel and as tangible evidence of the Islamic boarding school's educational output to prospective student guardians in other regions. The following figure shows one concrete activity from the implementation of this strategy.



Figure 2. Blokagung Students' Social Service

The image documents the "ISHDAR Social Service in Lamongan" activity carried out by the Ashuhan Darussalam Santri Association (ISHDAR) Blokagung on September 13-22, 2024, which is a concrete manifestation of the cultural-religious communication mechanism of the Santri Community Service (PR by Doing). This activity functions as a public relations strategy based on performance and real charity, where the santri (as brand ambassadors of the Islamic boarding school) actively interact with the local community and educational institutions (TPQ, MI, MTs), and collaborate with local NU community elements (IPNU, PPNNU, Pemuda Ansor, Ranting NU). Through direct services such as leading tahlilan, yasinan, lectures, and Ha'id training, as well as caring for the dead, this Islamic Boarding School effectively instills a positive image. It strengthens the bonds of trust (WoM Religious) in the region, proving its commitment as an institution that is socially and religiously beneficial.

Alumni Solidarity as the Strongest WOM Network

Based on research findings, Alumni Solidarity is a major asset for an institution because it functions as the Most Powerful Word-of-Mouth (WOM) Network. This network is effective because it is based on emotional bonds (loyalty) and deep, shared experiences within the institution, making every recommendation (regarding the quality of education, the credibility of figures, or programs) highly authentic and trustworthy to potential audiences and other stakeholders. Thus, alumni not only act as credible spokespersons but also as brand ambassadors (brand advocates) who organically and widely spread positive information about their institution without incurring conventional promotional costs. This explanation is in accordance with the statement of Senior Alumni Figure 02, below.

"Alumni's primary contribution is acting as gatekeepers and first-tier influencers. In many regions, prospective parents consult their closest alumni first, rather than the admissions committee. These alumni offer personal, highly persuasive endorsements. They are the highest-quality lead generators for institutions".

In essence, alumni solidarity is a crucial word-of-mouth (WOM) force in institutions' recruitment and marketing processes. Alumni act as "gatekeepers and first-tier influencers," meaning they are the leading filters and influencers at the local community level. By providing personal and persuasive endorsements, alumni effectively transform an institution's brand story

into a highly trusted recommendation. Therefore, they are the “highest quality lead generators” because leads (potential students) who enter through the alumni route already have a very high level of trust and initial interest.

Table 2. The Role of Alumni Solidarity as a Religious Word-of-Mouth (WoM) Force

Alumni Role	Function Description	Marketing Impact
Gatekeepers and First-Tier Influencers	Act as a leading information filter and influencer at the local/grassroots community level.	Control the initial narrative and ensure that prospective students have a focused understanding.
Personal and Persuasive Endorser	Providing recommendations (endorsements) based on personal experience, so that they are very personal and convincing.	Transforming an institution's brand story into a highly trusted recommendation.
Highest Quality Lead Generator	Produce prospective students (leads) who already have a high level of initial trust and interest in the institution.	Reduce acquisition costs and increase conversion rates for new student admissions.
Crucial Power in Recruitment	Dominate effective and trusted referral channels.	Be the backbone in the process of recruiting new students on an ongoing basis.
Gatekeepers and First-Tier Influencers	Act as a leading information filter and influencer at the local/grassroots community level.	Control the initial narrative and ensure that prospective students have a focused understanding.

Source: Data Collection, 2026

The table confirms that Alumni Solidarity serves as a central element in the Islamic boarding school's religious Word-of-Mouth (WoM) communication strategy, going beyond the role of a traditional endorser. Alumni play a dual role as "Gatekeepers and First-Level Influencers," filtering information and exerting a leading influence in the local community. By providing personal endorsements grounded in credible experience, they effectively transform the Islamic boarding school's narrative into highly persuasive recommendations. The most significant marketing impact is the alumni's ability to act as "Highest-Quality Lead Generators," with their referrals yielding prospective students who already have a very high level of initial trust and interest, making the alumni route a crucial, efficient, and effective recruitment channel.

Utilizing Communal Chat Groups as a Fast WOM Channel

The use of communal chat groups (such as WhatsApp or Telegram) is a highly efficient and modern mechanism for functioning as a rapid word-of-mouth (WOM) channel. These chat groups facilitate the instant, horizontal, and trusted dissemination of information within a homogeneous, emotionally connected community (e.g., alumni or a congregation). The high-trust environment established among members ensures that the information, recommendations, or testimonials shared are highly persuasive and can trigger actions or decisions in a very short time, far exceeding the speed and reach of traditional promotional media. This is as reported by New Student Guardian 02.

“The key is value-added content, not hard selling. Tell stories about students' successes, invite them to socialize, or share information about upcoming Hauls. Chat groups should be viewed as networking tools, not marketing channels. Let group members voluntarily spread positive messages outside the group”.(NSG-02)

This statement emphasizes that the use of Communal Chat Groups as an effective and authentic Word-of-Mouth (WOM) channel must adhere to the principles of added value and network maintenance. This strategy emphasizes the importance of presenting rich content (storytelling about successes or invitations to socialize) rather than hard selling, because the chat group is seen as a space to maintain and strengthen community ties. WOM success is quickly achieved when the Islamic boarding school does not force the spread, but rather allows group members to voluntarily and organically spread positive messages outward, leveraging the existing level of trust to ensure the message's validity and reach.

In today's digital era, the Darussalam Blokagung Islamic Boarding School not only relies on face-to-face communication but also strategically leverages fast, reliable digital channels. A crucial mechanism that serves as a fast Word-of-Mouth (WoM) channel is the Communal Chat Group, including WhatsApp, which is filled with alumni, student guardians, and sympathizers. This chat group transforms traditional WoM into instant digital dissemination. The model below illustrates how the Darussalam Islamic Boarding School utilizes this channel, from content input to output in the form of messages with high reach and validity, by building on existing trust as the main foundation.



Figure 3. Building Effective WOM

The funnel image suggests that the Communal Chat Group in the Islamic boarding school ecosystem functions as an effective, fast-paced Word of Mouth (WoM) channel, built on Existing Trust among community members (student guardians and alumni). The process begins with the input of Rich Content (information, preaching, activities) that provides Added Value to members, driving the Network Maintenance phase through constant interaction. This added value and maintenance then triggers the Organic Spread of the Islamic boarding school's positive messages, which ultimately results in high Message Reach and Validity. Overall, this model demonstrates that the success of digital WoM in Islamic boarding schools depends not only on technology but also on the use of chat platforms as a network maintenance mechanism that transforms social trust into rapid information dissemination.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the parental decision-making process at the Darussalam Blokagung Islamic Boarding School is not a stand-alone atomistic act, but rather a manifestation of the Spiritual Trust Ecosystem. This phenomenon indicates that a pragmatic cost-benefit analysis does not drive school choice, but rather a search for spiritual legitimacy (Decety et al., 2025; Mölk, 2024). The researcher interprets that for parents, choosing an Islamic boarding school is an attempt to transfer the risk of their child's future to a figure perceived as possessing divine authority. This shifts the conventional Service Marketing paradigm from performance-based trust to blessing-based trust.

The integration of the Haul ritual as an Emotional Brand Storytelling strategy provides a new dimension to narrative marketing theory. While storytelling is used globally to build a unique brand identity (Kim et al., 2025; Mills & John, 2025; Hong et al., 2022), in Islamic boarding schools, the Haul serves as a time machine that connects consumers to the sacredness of the past and visions of the future. Comparison with global theory shows that the Haul performs a function similar to heritage branding in legendary European companies, but with an added eschatological element. This concept implies that a sacred historical narrative can eliminate the need for modern physical facility promotion.

The mechanism of visiting and *silaturahmi*, in theory, constitutes a form of theocentric relationship maintenance. In relationship marketing literature, loyalty is typically maintained through material incentives or easy access to services (Hussain et al., 2025; Chatzi et al., 2024). However, in the research location, the "access" referred to is spiritual accessibility to the *Kiai*. The researcher argues that visiting and *silaturahmi* serve as a powerful "loyalty anchor"; a brief meeting between parents and *Kiai* can mitigate the cognitive dissonance that may arise from the modest facilities of the Islamic boarding school. This demonstrates that in the market for faith-based education, intimacy with leaders is more valuable than administrative efficiency.

Furthermore, student community service (PR by Doing) redefines the concept of Public Relations (PR). Conventionally, PR is understood as verbal communication aimed at building an image (Alshammari & Alshammari, 2025; Chitac et al., 2024). However, this finding suggests that the image of Islamic boarding schools is built through "products that speak." When students demonstrate superior moral behavior in the public sphere, it becomes a tangible cue that validates the institution's quality. This aligns with the Service Quality (SERVQUAL) theory, where the Assurance dimension is no longer provided through formal accreditation, but rather through testimonials of students' real-life behavior.

Alumni solidarity emerged as a massive organic word-of-mouth engine. Unlike brand advocates for commercial products, whose incentives may drive (Müller et al., 2025; Bubphapant & Brandão, 2025; Bilro & Loureiro, 2023), Islamic boarding school alumni act out of a sense of spiritual debt. Researchers observe a conversion of social capital into spiritual capital here; spreading the goodness of the Islamic boarding school is seen as part of a lifetime of devotion. Conceptually, this is an extension of customer advocacy into spiritual advocacy, in which promoting the school becomes part of the alumni's religious identity.

Digitization through communal chat groups demonstrates how Digital Amplification works within traditional social structures (Ringel & Ribak, 2024; Poddar, 2024; Fahmi & Arifianto, 2022). Although the platform used is modern technology like WhatsApp, the communication flow still follows a paternalistic pattern. Information from Islamic boarding schools is not consumed as ordinary news, but rather as "*dawub*" (commands) that must be obeyed. This concept implies that technology does not always bring secularization or the democratization of information; in the context of Islamic boarding schools, it can actually strengthen centralization of authority and extend the *Kiai*'s influence beyond traditional geographic boundaries.

This study makes a theoretical contribution by offering a Charismatic-Communal Decision-Making Model. This model corrects the Theory of Planned Behavior, which focuses too much on individual intentions (Shekhar et al., 2026; Hagger et al., 2022). Our findings suggest that in collectivist-religious societies, decisions are made through a "Spiritual Consensus" mediated by charismatic figures. This contribution is globally significant for marketing scholars, as it shows that in many parts of the world (especially emerging markets), individual agency often yields to perceived higher communal and spiritual authority.

Another contribution lies in the formulation of the Theocentric Loyalty variable. This variable explains why consumers remain loyal despite declining physical service quality. This loyalty is rooted in the belief that worldly dissatisfaction is part of a spiritual test, not a reason to switch to another service provider. This concept challenges conventional Customer Satisfaction theory, which states that dissatisfaction automatically triggers brand switching. (Huang et al., 2025 ; Ibrahim Awwad et al., 2025) In Islamic boarding schools, satisfaction is defined transcendently, not simply functional satisfaction with the service received.

Practically, this research implies that the marketing strategies of religious educational institutions should not be trapped in the commodification of facilities. The practical implication is that Islamic boarding school managers should prioritize image management and strengthening social networks. Rather than spending large budgets on visual advertising, Islamic boarding schools

would be more effective if they invested in activities that regularly bring together alumni and guardians (such as *Haul* and *Sowan*). This creates a sustainable, organic marketing cycle and has much higher credibility than one-way advertising messages.

To conclude, this study confirms that marketing in traditional Islamic educational institutions is the most extreme form of Value-Based Marketing. By integrating charismatic authority, ritual storytelling, and digital technology, Islamic boarding schools have successfully created an ecosystem independent of secular market logic. The global significance of these findings is a reminder to management theory that the variables of "faith" and "charisma" are not residual but core, capable of redefining the entire process of consumer behavior in modern societies that maintain their religious identity.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that parental decision-making in selecting Islamic boarding schools reflects a distinct trust formation mechanism that extends beyond conventional secular consumer behavior models, where trust is not primarily constructed through tangible indicators such as academic performance or physical facilities, but rather through an integrated socio-spiritual system shaped by perceived institutional credibility, communal validation, and the charismatic authority of religious leaders. In this context, religious practices such as *Haul* and *Sowan*, along with ongoing interactions among schools, students, and parents, serve as symbolic and relational communication channels that reinforce institutional legitimacy and long-term commitment. Theoretically, this study extends consumer behavior and educational marketing literature by demonstrating that rational-choice based frameworks such as the Theory of Planned Behavior are insufficient to explain decision-making in collectivist and faith-based contexts fully, and by introducing the concept of spiritually mediated loyalty, where loyalty formation is shaped not only by functional satisfaction but also by moral trust, perceived spiritual value, and collective belief systems embedded within the community. However, the study is limited by its single-case qualitative design, which restricts broader generalization, and by its focus on parents without fully incorporating students' perspectives in an increasingly digitalized decision-making environment. Future research is recommended to conduct comparative studies across different types of *pesantren* leadership models as well as large-scale quantitative studies to test the relationships between charismatic authority, religious word-of-mouth, trust formation, and behavioral intention. Practically, the findings suggest that faith-based educational institutions should strengthen institutional trust not only through functional quality but also through authentic value-based engagement, leadership credibility, and the reinforcement of alumni and community networks as core elements of sustainable institutional attractiveness.

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