

## Enhancing Public Trust in Islamic Boarding Schools through Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM): A Symbolic Interactionism Analysis

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### ABSTRACT:

*This study explores the impact of Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM) on public trust in Islamic boarding schools, using Nurul Jadid Islamic Boarding School as a case study. Applying symbolic interactionism, the research aims to understand how E-WOM shapes public perceptions in this educational context. A qualitative approach employing naturalistic phenomenology and descriptive analysis involving observations, interviews, and documentation was used. The findings indicate that E-WOM, utilized since 2018 at Nurul Jadid, has significantly enhanced the school's public image and trust, notably increasing student enrollment and international attention. Key strategies include effective digital content creation and audience engagement. However, the study's focus on a single institution suggests the need for broader research to generalize these findings. Implications for educational administrators and policymakers include strategic insights for digital communication and public engagement. This research contributes to the academic discourse in communication and educational studies, offering a novel application of symbolic interactionism in digital communication. Future research should examine E-WOM's long-term effects on institutional reputation and explore its application in diverse educational settings.*

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**ABSTRAK**

*Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi dampak Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM) terhadap kepercayaan masyarakat terhadap pesantren, dengan menggunakan studi kasus Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid. Dengan menerapkan interaksionisme simbolik, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami bagaimana E-WOM membentuk persepsi masyarakat dalam konteks pendidikan ini. Pendekatan yang digunakan adalah pendekatan kualitatif yang menggunakan fenomenologi naturalistik dan analisis deskriptif yang melibatkan observasi, wawancara, dan dokumentasi. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa E-WOM, yang digunakan sejak tahun 2018 di Nurul Jadid, telah meningkatkan citra dan kepercayaan publik sekolah secara signifikan, terutama meningkatkan penerimaan siswa dan perhatian internasional. Strategi utama mencakup pembuatan konten digital yang efektif dan keterlibatan audiens. Namun, fokus penelitian ini pada satu institusi menunjukkan perlunya penelitian yang lebih luas untuk menggeneralisasi temuan-temuan ini. Implikasinya bagi administrator pendidikan dan pembuat kebijakan mencakup wawasan strategis untuk komunikasi digital dan keterlibatan publik. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada wacana akademik dalam studi komunikasi dan pendidikan, menawarkan penerapan baru interaksionisme simbolik dalam komunikasi digital. Penelitian di masa depan harus mengkaji dampak jangka panjang E-WOM terhadap reputasi institusi dan mengeksplorasi penerapannya dalam lingkungan pendidikan yang beragam.*

**Kata kunci:** *Desa Pintar, Manajemen Pendidikan, Pengembangan Kolaboratif*

**INTRODUCTION**

Public trust is the initial foundation that must be laid because the success or failure of an organization depends on public responses and comments (Rifaed et al., 2023). Community appraisal is the main target for determining the fate of an organization that will have consequences (Aminatun, 2021). As for feedback from public trust, it will have a sustainable impact on the organization's reputation (Rahmadika et al., 2022). So, it is necessary to build a good attitude of cooperation and tolerance accompanied by a mature plan implemented in a programmed, systematic, and sustainable manner in all strata of society to increase trust in the organization (Elyus, 2021). Meanwhile, public opinion is the main thing needed because it is a reference for development and competition between organizations to determine the level of desire of the audience (Yudi Prayoga, 2022). A good bond between the organization and its vision should be established because the public's trust will trigger the desire to participate enthusiastically and actively in the educational institution (Reola, 2020). So, it is



necessary to cultivate a good relationship to create a favorable opinion and raise public trust.

At this time, it is recorded that 4.66 billion people use the internet and 4.20 billion others are involved in social media, so it is undeniable to make E-WOM a communication platform because it has excellent power and opportunities to intervene to generate public encouragement and interest (Zaib Amir, 2023). Bringing claim to the public through E-WOM is a top priority that must be done because it becomes a consideration and determines the audience's decision to use or trust these educational institutions (Rastini, 2022). Educational institutions are starting to improve and compete with other organizations by using E-WOM to propagate their institutions so that positive influence arises (Ferdianto et al., 2023). Educational institutions must position themselves in the middle of the audience by understanding social conditions and introducing themselves by utilizing E-WOM, which can be accessed instantly and practically so that it will result in public trust (Tuyu et al., 2022). However, several considerations are still the cause of public concern about E-WOM due to the risk that reality does not match what it should be, so reputation in educational institutions also plays an important role (Ruhamak & Rahmadi, 2022). It is necessary to convey accurate information without exaggerating so that the audience's expectations are based on the existing reality.

Research on E-WOM has been widely researched. The quality of information that is shared in full through 46% of E-WOM can be used as a reference and influence the public so that it has an impact on increasing public trust (Andrew & Erdiansyah, 2021). E-WOM encourages its audience to share experiences and comments so that public perception will impact the ups and downs of quality, so E-WOM is involved in improving brand image (Dewi & Sukaatmadja, 2022). It also believes that audience experience and comments through E-WOM and an appropriate and accurate strategy will impact educational institutions, leading to decisions and public trust because trust is a necessity that educational institutions must continuously foster (Wulandari, Jeni, 2020).

Research on E-WOM (Electronic Word of Mouth) has rapidly evolved, especially in the context of customer satisfaction and its influence on e-commerce. Analyzing customer satisfaction on historical sites through E-WOM

has proven effective in revealing their satisfaction levels, showing that E-WOM influences public perception and provides valuable insights into customer satisfaction (Nilashi et al., 2022). In a different context, it was found that online satisfaction, E-WOM, and online trust significantly influence customer loyalty in B2C e-commerce in Jordan, affirming that customer satisfaction and trust built through E-WOM are crucial to maintaining customer loyalty (Al-Adwan et al., 2020).

In the context of social media, E-WOM plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions and decisions. The effectiveness of E-WOM, as seen in the use of Twitter, is still influenced by geographic distance, offering new insights into how information spreads across different geographic scopes (Todri et al., 2022). There has also been a positive relationship between elements of E-WOM and its acceptance and dissemination, with gender acting as a mediator and moderator, highlighting the importance of understanding gender dynamics in the context of E-WOM (Mansour & Farmanesh, 2020). In the educational context, parasocial interaction significantly impacts prospective students' intentions to enroll in universities and share information through E-WOM, indicating that E-WOM directly impacts educational decisions (Hidayanto et al., 2020). This reinforces the view of the importance of E-WOM in building trust in educational institutions.

It can be understood that E-WOM has many significant impacts and influences in increasing public trust. It also explained that the power of E-WOM can increase interest, image, and public confidence in making decisions. This is contained in previous research where most researchers focused only on the influence of E-WOM to increase public trust. However, there needs to be more discussed the impact of E-WOM combined with an education-oriented communication context to increase public confidence from the perspective of symbolic interactionism.

Despite the extensive research on the role of Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM) in shaping public trust, there remains a significant gap in understanding its specific impact within the context of educational institutions, particularly Islamic boarding schools. Previous studies have primarily focused on E-WOM in commercial sectors or general organizational settings, often overlooking educational environments' unique dynamics and cultural nuances. Moreover, there needs to be more exploration into how symbolic interactionism,



a theory emphasizing the creation of meaning through social interactions, plays a role in interpreting E-WOM in these educational settings. This gap highlights the need for a nuanced investigation that considers the specificities of educational institutions and the symbolic meanings that stakeholders attach to their communications, particularly in the digital realm where E-WOM predominantly occurs.

This study aims to delve into the impact of E-WOM on public trust in Islamic boarding schools, applying the lens of symbolic interactionism to uncover deeper insights. By focusing on this educational context, the research seeks to understand how digital communications via E-WOM contribute to forming public trust and the symbolic meanings ascribed to these interactions by various stakeholders. The potential contribution of this study lies in its ability to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms through which E-WOM influences public perceptions in a specific educational setting. Additionally, it aims to enrich the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism by applying it in a novel context. The findings are expected to offer valuable insights for educational administrators and policymakers in Islamic boarding schools, enabling them to strategize more effectively in their communication and engagement efforts with the public. Furthermore, this research could serve as a foundation for future studies exploring the intersection of digital communication, public trust, and education, thereby contributing to the broader academic discourse in communication and educational studies.

## **METHODS**

This study used a qualitative approach with a naturalistic phenomenology type and descriptive analysis, which refers to observations, interviews, and documentation conducted at the Nurul Jadid Islamic Boarding School, Paiton, Probolinggo Indonesia. Researchers want to explore and examine the phenomenon of the impact of E-WOM to see the increase in public trust that occurs in the field through symbolic interactionist perceptions, in which case E-WOM is used as a means to increase public confidence at the Nurul Jadid Islamic Boarding School, Paiton Probolinggo Indonesia. This research was carried out in June–July 2023, where the data was obtained and produced from interviews, observation, and documentation to obtain accurate and accountable

data. There were several informants in this study, namely the head of Public Relations, the multimedia section, administrators of the Islamic Boarding School, alums in 2018, and guardians of students, to get an overview according to the type of research that will be discussed, namely the impact of E-WOM on increasing public trust from the perspective of symbolic interactionism.

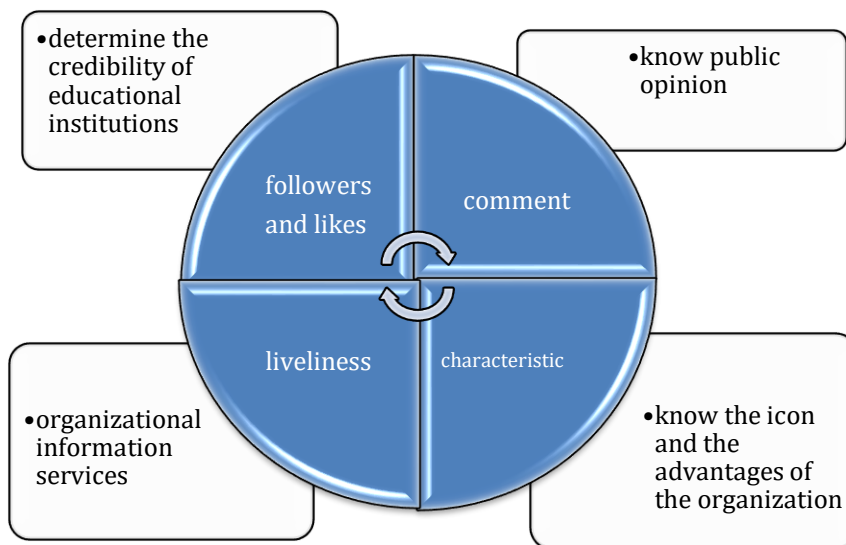
Data analysis was carried out through the collection of primary data related to the impact of E-WOM on increasing public trust from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, namely through descriptive analysis. Then, the researcher carried out data reduction, namely selecting data that had been collected related to themes and topics of discussion, presenting results, exploring, and providing arguments to simplify so that data would be obtained, which was arranged systematically according to the needs and focus of research related to the impact of E-WOM on increasing public trust from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, which then ends with concluding so that the data is structured and easily presented by researchers as findings.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **FINDINGS**

The Nurul Jadid Islamic Boarding School has effectively utilized Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM) since 2018 to bolster public trust. This digital strategy enables rapid information dissemination, significantly influencing the institution's reputation. It fulfills a crucial demand in enhancing the public image, confidence, and audience loyalty, with service being a key element. Digital media offers a platform for diverse uses, including political and business activities. According to Sania, an administrator, digital media dramatically aids information dissemination. Mujiburrohman, the head of Public Relations, credits E-WOM and various digital platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube for the yearly increase in student enrollment, even attracting international attention. A Multimedia team member emphasized the importance of content quality, style, language, and image in eliciting emotional responses, underscoring the need for effective communication in digital media.





**Figure 1. Things affecting the public interest**

There are several things that trigger public interest through digital media. In contrast, the four items in Figure 1 this is a picture that is seen by the public to find out about the progress and reputation of the organization, so if the above components are well created in an organization, then public trust will be made appropriately. So, the results of the study show that the impact of E-WOM in increasing public trust at the Nurul Jadid Islamic Boarding School from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, Paiton, and Probolinggo is as follows:

### **Planning for raising Public Trust**

The failure of an educational institution depends on the plans made. Suppose a vision and mission require planning to overcome existing obstacles effectively. In that case, Planning is a step that every educational institution should undertake since it defines the organization's direction to conform to the goals and objectives agreed upon. Then, as the chief of the Humas Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid relates, if there is a desire to create a significant change, it must be parallel with the mature plan as a guideline to move so that it is directed. Then, at the Nurul Jadid pesantren, the festival's head affirmed the necessity of having a plan, strategy, program, and a vision for future missions to be implemented. As for the project in the Residence Nurul Jadid, there are three stages to the whole desire and the program planned, namely: first, Planning or the Master Programme of Residence, which is significant planning carried out

by the Residential Residence Nurul Jadid for the next 20 years by setting goals by setting a program of work, and then, of course, organizing, taking into account the efficiency and effectiveness of each work program. This is mid-level planning that lasts for five years, which is the presentation of a more detailed planning, and then after that, it is to make a step into the planning or program. The third is the annual planning that Nurul Jadid must carry out, which is more detestable and specific than the five-year plan, which contains daily, weekly, and monthly targets implemented continuously. So, everything you do daily must align with the agreed-upon schedule.

As for the planning stages in the Nurul Jadid Hostel, which are planned, systematic, structured, and sustainable, the head of the Public Relation Unit (PRU) is consulted with the top Secretariat Branch and Chief of the Hostel for approval and signature. As far as the next step is concerned, PRU's side is running strategic planning with its members to realize the wishes, whether it is widespread dissemination of information, marketing, public image, public relations, or more public trust.

### **Market Analysis for Increasing Public Trust**

Educational institutions today must stay abreast of public needs and opinions to strategize and adjust their targets effectively, significantly impacting their success and general satisfaction. Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM) in analyzing public behavior is an innovative marketing approach for educational institutions, as highlighted by the multimedia section of pondok pesantren. This approach is essential for understanding general needs, ensuring community acceptance, and sparking interest. Nurul Jadid's Chief Humas advocates for innovation and adaptation in educational institutions while preserving traditional values, using E-WOM as a bridge between the public and institutions like pondok pesantren Nurul Jadid.

According to Latifah, the chief guardian, public confidence in an organization is now evident through social media metrics like followers, likes, comments, and video engagement. This public trust is influenced by an institution's unique identity and reputation. Mujiburrohman notes that Nurul Jadid actively engages with its audience, sharing unique content like motivational videos and stories, distinguishing itself from other institutions and thus attracting more followers and effectively disseminating information. This modern approach to education, understanding the evolving customs and needs



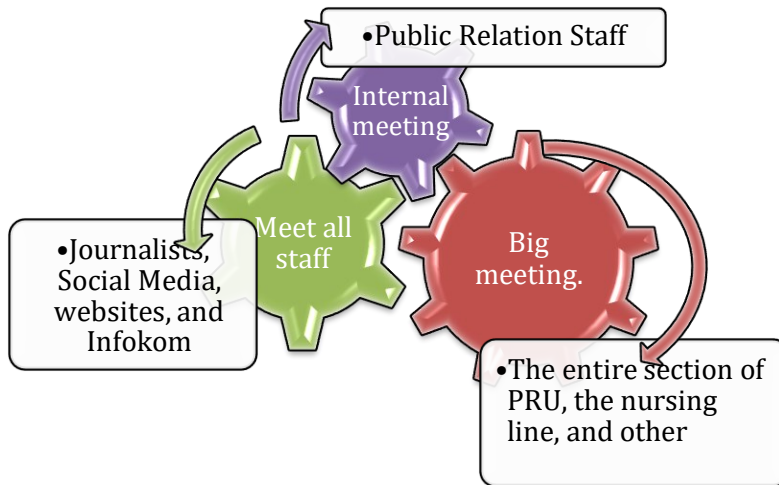


of the public, is crucial for educational institutions to remain relevant and impactful in today's dynamic environment.

### **Evaluation as a basis for accommodating criticism and recommendations to suit the wishes of the Public**

Information management of educational institutions should be carried out by professional practitioners who are already skilled in their field because the opinions and reviews submitted to the public will potentially affect the public's perception of the quality of such institutions based on objective assessment. This is the function of quality control in controlling and informing public relations so that it is more responsive and dynamic in the development of humans so as not to generate negative comments submitted by the public because, given the reputation of the educational institutions, it is in the hands of the human practitioners themselves in managing public opinion.

Evaluation is essential in an organization because it is possible to know the level of obstacles to achievement and the degree of credibility of a program. Evaluation is also a means to know the audience's response. As for the Evaluation conducted by Nurul Jadid, Paiton, and Probolinggo, which was presented by the head of the PRU Nurul Jadid, there were three times a month evaluation meetings, at the first meeting that was conducted internally and the second meeting, the meeting of the entire section of the structural staff of PRU in the journalist's area that includes the social media section, the website, infokom, protocoler and so on where each other discussed the realization of the program and the objectives of achievement during the month, the obstacles and complaints experienced by each of the divisions were also submitted so that they found a clear point and a solution to the matters faced. The third evaluation meeting, a significant meeting that is usually held on weekends, is a meeting of the entire structural section of PRU with the senior chief of the Resident Houses and nurses at the Residence, Nurul Jadid, to discuss the public submission of the criticisms and suggestions submitted for the progress of the resident houses so that a jointly agreed agreement will be established on the follow-up to the complaints and advice presented to the public.



**Figure 2. Summary Evaluation Stage**

This is in line with the judge's statement that by accommodating the aspirations of the public, a harmonious relationship will be created because the public feels compelled to contribute to the improvement of the educational institution. However, an external party should evaluate because it will allow more criticism and advice that builds for the progress of the said training house. Then, the public's comments, input, criticism, and advice must be accommodated and used as a benchmark for quality improvement and service for further improvement of the institution because the external judgment is more objective and naturalistic than the internal provider is in the incentive of education. Nurul Jadid, the manager of the training house, argued that conducting evaluations regularly has an impact on the further progress of the organization because it shows how much progress and obstacles occur in the field.

Whatever image is built by the public with criticism and advice, the idea of the educational institution can be well awakened. PRU Nurul Jadid said that there were criticisms and suggestions as a bridge to public statements with the reception house as a means of refinement, and from that, the reception house Nurul Jadid Rutin read every information delivered in the form of comments or through private chat provided to the public either from Instagram, Tik Tok, Youtube, and so on. Even for the people who need the information, PRU, who serves on social media, should be responsive, fast, active, and responsive in

communication with the audience. As for all these things to be fulfilled well as a form of service because the negative comments submitted by the public will affect the reputation of the educational institution itself because, with E-WOM, the public is free to think and assume, if the image in a wrong instance of the thing will affect other things such as the decrease in the number of centers enrolled each year, the matter has to be quickly reduced.

## DISCUSSION

This study explores the impact of Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM) on public trust in Islamic boarding schools, focusing on Nurul Jadid Islamic Boarding School. The application of symbolic interactionism in this research provides unique insights into how digital communications via E-WOM contribute to the formation of public trust. This approach is essential as it helps unravel the symbolic meanings associated with these interactions by various stakeholders, an area relatively unexplored in existing literature (Carter & Montes Alvarado, 2019). The research findings reveal that since 2018, Nurul Jadid Islamic Boarding School has successfully used E-WOM to enhance public trust. This digital strategy has been instrumental in rapidly disseminating information and significantly influencing the institution's reputation. Notably, it has proven effective in improving the school's image, trust, and audience loyalty, focusing on service quality as a critical element (Gumilang, 2019; Susanti & Wulandari, 2021).

This study's outcomes align with and extend previous research on E-WOM and public trust in educational contexts. Previous studies have established the importance of E-WOM in shaping public perception and belief (Aminatun, 2021; Rifaid et al., 2023). However, this research provides a more comprehensive understanding by integrating symbolic interactionism, offering more profound insights into how stakeholders perceive and interpret digital communications in a boarding school context. This integration sets a new direction in understanding the dynamics of public trust in educational institutions (Sapitri, 2022).

The effectiveness of E-WOM in enhancing public trust at Nurul Jadid can be attributed to its capability to facilitate rapid and broad information dissemination. As emphasized by the school's Multimedia team, the strategic use of digital media plays a critical role in eliciting emotional responses through

content quality, style, language, and imagery. This approach is particularly significant in symbolic interactionism, as it underscores the importance of how messages are constructed and interpreted by the audience (Nursakti, 2023; Turmidzi, 2022).

The study also highlights the need for careful planning in educational institutions, as reflected in Nurul Jadid's thorough approach to strategy and program implementation. The institution's success in building public trust through E-WOM also exemplifies the importance of understanding and meeting general needs and opinions, as supported by educational marketing theories (Padmawati, 2020; Syahdiany & Trinanda, 2019). Furthermore, the research identifies that responsive information management and evaluation are crucial to maintaining and enhancing public trust. Regular assessments and the acceptance of general feedback demonstrate Nurul Jadid Islamic Boarding School's commitment to continuous adaptation and improvement, directly impacting public perception and the institution's reputation (Fahrul, 2021; Patras et al., 2019).

The implications of this research are manifold. Firstly, it underscores the significance of E-WOM as a powerful tool for Islamic boarding schools to enhance public trust and reputation. These findings are crucial for educational administrators and policymakers, offering them strategic insights for effectively leveraging digital platforms for communication and public engagement. Additionally, this study contributes to the broader academic discourse in communication and educational studies by providing a novel application of symbolic interactionism in digital communication. It also sets the stage for future research exploring the intersection of digital communication, public trust, and education, thereby enriching theoretical and practical understanding of these dynamics (Flanagin, 2020).

## CONCLUSION

This study explored the impact of the Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM) on public trust in Islamic boarding schools, mainly through symbolic interactionism at the Nurul Jadid Islamic Boarding School. Key findings revealed the effectiveness of E-WOM in enhancing the public image and trust, emphasizing the importance of strategic planning, market analysis, and



responsiveness to general feedback. These results underscore E-WOM's pivotal role in educational settings, contributing novel insights into the intersection of digital communication, public trust, and education. However, the study's scope, focused on a single institution, suggests a need for further research across diverse educational contexts to understand E-WOM's broader implications and potential challenges fully. Future research should, therefore, investigate E-WOM's long-term effects on institutional reputation stakeholder relationships and explore the theoretical application of symbolic interactionism in varying cultural and educational environments.

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