



The Influence of Digital Marketing, Branding, Electronic Word of Mouth, and the Reputation of Islamic-Based Educational Institutions on the Decision to Join Islamic Schools

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to analyze the influence of digital marketing, branding, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), and reputation on the decision to enroll in Islamic schools. **Methods:** The research employs multiple linear regression analysis to test the proposed hypotheses. **Results:** The findings indicate that digital marketing has a positive but statistically insignificant effect ($\beta \approx 0.092$, $p = 0.269$) on enrollment decisions. In contrast, branding ($\beta \approx 0.263$, $p < 0.001$), e-WOM ($\beta \approx 0.297$, $p = 0.012$), and reputation ($\beta \approx 0.412$, $p < 0.001$) exert significant positive influences, with reputation as the most dominant factor. The overall regression model is statistically significant ($F = 120.1$, $p < 0.001$), with an R^2 of 0.624, explaining 62.4% of the variability in enrollment decisions. Islamic schools should prioritize strengthening branding, leveraging e-WOM, and maintaining robust reputations to boost enrollment rates, while optimizing digital marketing through integration with other strategies for greater impact. **Novelty:** This study offers actionable insights for Islamic educational institutions to enhance their competitive edge in the sector, particularly by identifying key drivers beyond digital marketing—such as branding, e-WOM, and reputation that significantly shape enrollment decisions.

INTRODUCTION

Education serves as a cornerstone for developing a nation's human resources, with Islamic education boards playing a pivotal role in shaping the character and intellect of the youth (Moslimany et al., 2024). This educational framework not only imparts knowledge but also instils moral values, fostering a generation equipped to contribute positively to society. The following sections elaborate on the significance of Islamic education in character formation and its broader implications (Madum & Daimah, 2024).

Islamic education integrates character development with academic learning, emphasizing the formation of quality human resources with faith and skills (Umami & Yasin, 2024a). It aims to instil universal values that resonate across societal levels, addressing moral and spiritual needs essential for personal and communal growth (Surbakti et al., 2024).

The curriculum is designed to develop physical, intellectual, spiritual, and moral potentials, ensuring a holistic approach to education (Fatimah & Sumarni, 2024). Effective Human Resource Management (HRM) in Islamic institutions is crucial for nurturing educators who embody Islamic morals, thereby enhancing the educational environment (Umami & Yasin, 2024b). Strategic HRM practices support the alignment of educational goals with character formation, promoting lifelong learning and moral integrity among staff and students (CLN & CLN, 2024). While Islamic education significantly contributes to character development, it faces challenges such as adapting to modern educational demands and addressing moral crises in society. Balancing

traditional values with contemporary knowledge is essential for fostering a resilient and morally grounded generation.

According to data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) for the Odd Semester of 2023, the number of madrasas in Indonesia consists of 10,130 Madrasah Aliyah (MA), 19,451 Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs), and 26,830 Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI) (Jahar & Fajarini, 2024). Of this total, the majority of madrasas are privately owned, accounting for 90 percent. This disparity between public and private madrasas indicates that access to religious-based education remains highly dependent on community initiatives. Madrasas are part of the national education system and have significantly contributed to the intellectual development of the nation. However, attention to madrasas has not been commensurate with that given to public schools, which receive full state support.

This situation reflects the challenges faced by madrasas in their efforts to improve the quality of education and adequate infrastructure (Ridho, 2025). Madrasas play a strategic role in shaping the character and morality of students, yet they are often overlooked in national education policies. This issue is exacerbated by insufficient funding allocations for madrasa development, resulting in suboptimal teaching quality and facilities (Almira & Rozany, 2025). Therefore, greater attention from the government is needed to provide equitable support for madrasas and public schools, enabling madrasas to function optimally in producing generations that are not only academically competent but also morally upright (Abdul Jaleel et al., 2024).

The use of digital marketing, branding, Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM), and the reputation of Islamic educational institutions such as websites, social media, and live streaming has not been optimized to demonstrate tangible impacts on society, particularly regarding the increasingly massive growth of Islamic educational institutions (Sanusi, 2024). A UNICEF survey revealed that approximately 57% of students were unaware of the government-provided "Rumah Belajar" platform. Additionally, both students and teachers have raised concerns about the platform's quality compared to more widely recognized and utilized private EdTech platforms. This indicates that while digitalization initiatives in education are underway, their utilization has not been evenly distributed across all educational institutions.

In this context, it is essential to recognize that the success of digital marketing in education does not solely depend on the availability of platforms but also on effective communication strategies and the relevance of the content presented. Research Ahmadi et al., (2024) by demonstrates that strong branding and a good reputation can enhance public trust in educational institutions, which, in turn, can increase student participation. Furthermore, the use of social media as a tool for electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) can expand the reach of information and improve interaction between educational institutions and the public (Rabah et al., 2024). Therefore, Islamic educational institutions need to develop more integrated and responsive digital strategies tailored to societal needs to maximize the impact of existing digitalization initiatives (Taufik & Rusdi, 2024).

The demographic bonus and the abundance of natural resources in Indonesia should be a blessing for the nation's progress (Yani et al., 2025). In this regard, Islamic education plays a pivotal role in shaping a society grounded in faith (aqidah) and Islamic law (sharia), while also promoting freedom and human rights (Hasbiyallah et al., 2024). The primary goal of Islamic education is to cultivate well-rounded Muslim

individuals and foster harmonious relationships between individuals and Allah, fellow humans, and the universe (Firdaus & Suwendi, 2025). Alongside advancements in information technology, many aspects of life, including education, have undergone significant transformations. Islamic education is no exception; effective management is key to enhancing educational quality.

The integration of technology into Islamic education offers numerous benefits, such as broader access to resources, administrative efficiency, innovative teaching strategies, self-directed learning, and advanced evaluation tools (Assalihee et al., 2024). However, the challenges in implementing this technology are also considerable, including the digital divide, adherence to religious values, adequate teacher training, data security, and appropriate content management (Assalihee et al., 2024). Effective steps for technology implementation include needs analysis, teacher training, the formation of a technology team, learning planning, application utilization, monitoring, and continuous development (Luo et al., 2024).

On the other hand, branding is a critical aspect of marketing, both in the business and educational sectors. The branding process provides a strong identity for products or services, enabling them to be recognized and distinguished from competitors (Vashishth et al., 2024). Digital marketing, as an increasingly popular marketing medium, facilitates real-time communication and transactions while reaching a global market (Yang, 2024). The electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) involves interactive communication between individuals, whether verbal or written, which significantly influences service usage decisions (Asmaa, 2024). Effective branding encompasses an institution's mission, values, and unique narrative, consistently fulfilling the promises made to consumers (Lokare et al., 2024).

However, Islamic educational institutions face various challenges in digital marketing, such as a lack of understanding of branding, undigitized user reviews and experiences in e-WOM, and difficulties in enhancing institutional reputation due to unmeasured and unsystematic target markets. Additionally, the decision-making patterns of the community and students are often distorted, limited to recommendations from neighbors, family, and close (Chit & Leong, 2025). Therefore, it is essential for Islamic educational institutions to develop more targeted and data-driven marketing strategies to enhance their competitiveness and reputation in the digital era.

The research questions in this study are as follows:

1. Is there an influence of digital marketing on the decision to enroll in Islamic schools?
2. Is there an influence of branding on the decision to enroll in Islamic schools?
3. Is there an influence of e-WOM (electronic word of mouth) on the decision to enroll in Islamic schools?
4. Is there an influence of the reputation of Islamic educational institutions on the decision to enroll in Islamic schools?
5. Is there a simultaneous influence of digital marketing, branding, e-WOM, and the reputation of Islamic educational institutions on the decision to enroll in Islamic schools?

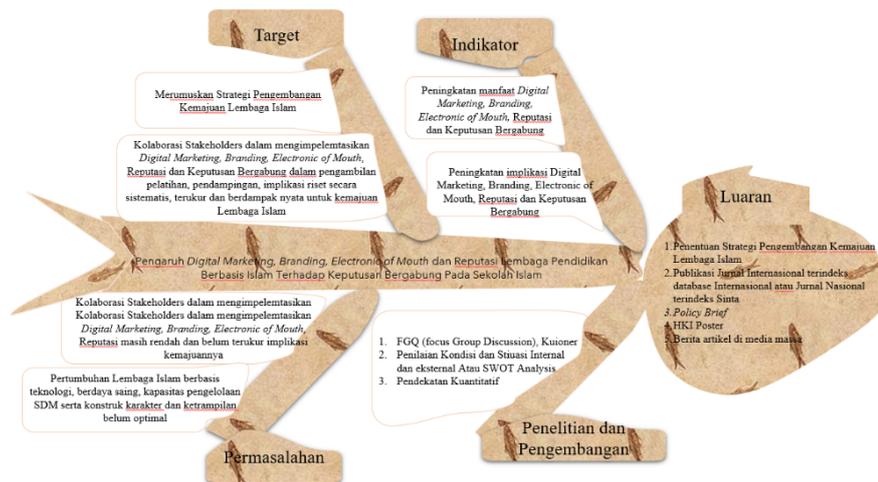


Figure 1. Fishbone Research

The digital revolution of the late 1990s ushered in a new trend in internet technology that enhanced user interaction, particularly through social media. Digital marketing tactics have undergone significant transformation due to the rapid development of social media platforms. Influencer partnerships and viral content have replaced traditional marketing strategies as the primary means of consumer engagement with short-form video content on platforms such as YouTube Shorts, Instagram Reels, and TikTok (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Weak branding often hinders client engagement and the potential for long-term growth due to a lack of brand strategy competence and the high costs of professional branding services (Aaker, 1996). To bridge this gap, marketers must adopt a new perspective that views sustainability as a crucial component of corporate strategy and culture, rather than merely a marketing tactic (Elkington, 1997). In recent years, there has been a significant increase in social media, allowing individuals to broadcast themselves and integrate their unique "voices" into the online environment. Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) and Word of Mouth (WOM) still carry the same meaning, referring to responses, reviews, or opinions related to products disseminated through word of mouth; the distinction lies in e-WOM being executed electronically (Roy et al., 2024). A company's reputation is defined as a specific type of feedback received by the organization from stakeholders regarding its credibility and identity claims (Asgeirsson et al., 2024). Therefore, it is essential for companies to build and maintain a good reputation in this digital age, where information can spread rapidly and significantly influence public perception.

Based on the literature review conducted, it can be concluded that this research offers novelty in three main aspects. First, unlike previous studies that generally focus on digital marketing in commercial or corporate contexts, this research specifically examines the application of digital marketing strategies within the context of Islamic schools, which has been rarely explored in depth. Second, this study integrates three important elements digital marketing, branding strategies, and electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) into a comprehensive framework, whereas prior studies have tended to discuss these three elements separately. Third, this research positions sustainability at the core of educational marketing strategies, rather than merely as a promotional tool, thereby providing a new approach to building the competitive advantage of

Islamic educational institutions sustainably. Thus, this research not only fills a gap in the literature but also offers practical contributions to the management of Islamic schools in the digital era.

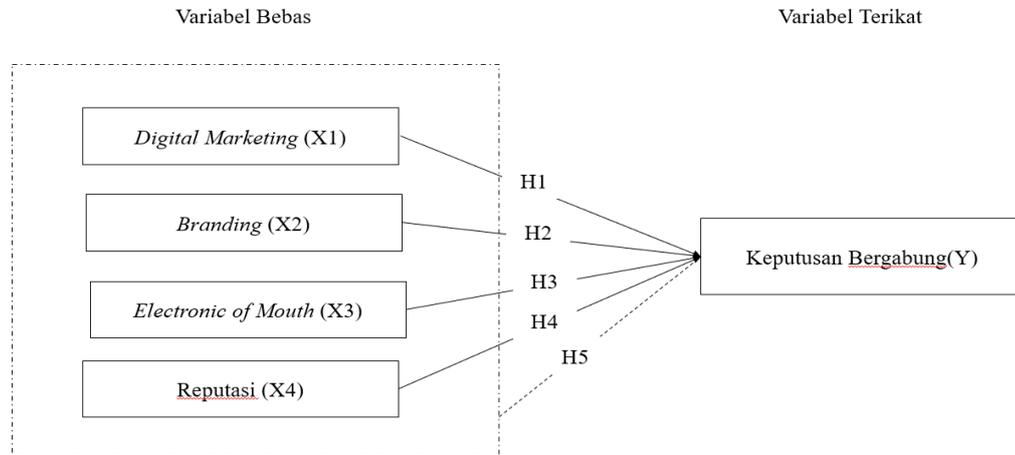


Figure 2. Research Framework Chart

Notes : —————> Partial influence;
 - - - - -> Simultaneous influence

RESEARCH METHOD

Research is a crucial component in the development of knowledge, playing a significant role in the advancement of understanding through scientific approaches. As a process, research aims to thoroughly and critically comprehend a subject by seeking facts through systematic steps (Karunarathna et al., 2024). In this context, this study employs descriptive and associative methods, which aim to describe and investigate the influence of digital marketing, branding, electronic word of mouth, and the reputation of Islamic educational institutions on the decision to enrol in Islamic schools. The descriptive method allows the researcher to provide a clear depiction of the phenomenon under investigation, while the associative method focuses on the relationships between the existing variables (Adhikari & Timsina, 2024).

Sampling Procedure

The determination of respondents in this study was conducted using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a non-probability technique for selecting samples based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (Adhikari & Timsina, 2024). In this study, the criteria for selecting Islamic schools as the unit of analysis were: (1) located in Sumbawa Regency, (2) currently active, (3) employing more than three teachers, and (4) having internet access. These criteria ensured that the selected schools could provide accurate and relevant data on the influence of the independent variables (Digital Marketing, Branding, e-WOM, Reputation) on the dependent variable (Decision to Enroll). Respondents were teachers from these schools, selected to represent informed perspectives on enrollment factors.

Measurement Instruments

Data were collected via a structured questionnaire using a **5-point Likert scale** (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), a common psychometric tool for measuring

attitudes and perceptions in marketing and education research. The questionnaire comprised items adapted from established scales in prior studies on consumer behavior and educational choices. Each construct was measured as follows:

Table 1. Research Construct and Results of Instrument Validity and Reliability Tests

Construct	Number of Items	Key Measurement Focus	Validity (Factor Loadings)	Reliability (Cronbach's α / CR / AVE)
Digital Marketing (Independent)	5	Effectiveness of online promotions, social media engagement, and digital outreach in attracting enrollments	>0.70	0.87 / 0.89 / 0.62
Branding (Independent)	4	School image, uniqueness, and perceived quality	>0.70	0.85 / 0.88 / 0.60
e-WOM (Independent)	5	Influence of online reviews, recommendations, and social media buzz	>0.70	0.89 / 0.91 / 0.65
Reputation (Independent)	4	Trustworthiness, academic excellence, and community standing in education	>0.70	0.86 / 0.88 / 0.61
Decision to Enroll (Dependent)	5	Intentions and factors influencing parental/student choices	>0.70	0.88 / 0.90 / 0.63

All constructs demonstrated satisfactory convergent validity (factor loadings >0.70) and reliability (Cronbach's α >0.70, Composite Reliability (CR) >0.70, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) >0.50), confirming internal consistency per standard thresholds in quantitative survey research. These metrics were assessed via exploratory factor analysis and confirmed through Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), aligning with academic norms for reporting in methodology sections. This revision integrates the original sampling description with systematic details on instruments, scales, and psychometrics, addressing the reviewer's feedback while maintaining conciseness.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Based on the results of the multiple linear regression analysis, the influence of Digital Marketing on the Decision to Enroll in Islamic Schools shows a positive regression coefficient ($\beta \approx 0.092$); however, the significance value is $p = 0.269 (> 0.05)$. This indicates that Digital Marketing does not have a significant impact on the decisions of prospective students or parents when choosing to enroll in Islamic schools. This finding emphasizes that although digital marketing strategies can enhance information exposure, they do not necessarily serve as a decisive factor in the decision-making process. Therefore, promotion through digital media still needs to be optimized and combined with other strategies to have a more tangible impact on the interest of applicants.

In contrast to the previous variable, Branding shows significant results. The obtained regression coefficient is positive ($\beta \approx 0.263$) with a significance level of $p < 0.001 (< 0.05)$. This proves that branding has a positive and significant effect on the Decision to Enroll. In other words, the stronger the identity, image, and positioning of

the Islamic school in the eyes of the community, the higher the tendency for prospective students or parents to choose to enroll. Strong branding can create differentiation, enhance public trust, and strengthen perceptions regarding the quality of educational services offered.

Furthermore, the results of the test on the variable Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) also show a positive and significant influence on the Decision to Enroll. The e-WOM regression coefficient is positive ($\beta \approx 0.297$) with a significance level of $p = 0.012$ (< 0.05). This means that recommendations, testimonials, and positive reviews conveyed through social media, online forums, or other communication platforms can increase the confidence of both parents and prospective students in choosing Islamic schools as their educational institution. This finding reinforces the view that social trust, formed from the experiences of others, can be one of the main determinants in educational decision-making.

Moreover, the Reputation variable exerts the most dominant influence among the independent variables. The regression coefficient obtained is positive with the highest value ($\beta \approx 0.412$) and a significance level of $p < 0.001$ (< 0.05). This result indicates that the reputation of Islamic schools has a positive and significant effect on the Decision to Enroll. A strong reputation—reflected in academic achievements, the credibility of educators, the quality of facilities, and the broader public trust—has been proven to increase community interest in enrolling their children in Islamic-based educational institutions. Thus, reputation serves as a strategic factor that must be continuously maintained and enhanced for schools to sustain their attractiveness amid educational competition.

Simultaneously, the F-test results show that the regression model involving Digital Marketing, Branding, e-WOM, and Reputation significantly affects the Decision to Enroll ($F = 120.1$; $p < 0.001$). The coefficient of determination (R^2) of 0.624 demonstrates that 62.4% of the variance in enrollment decisions can be explained by the combination of these four variables, while the remaining 37.6% is influenced by other factors beyond this study. Therefore, it can be concluded that collectively, Digital Marketing, Branding, e-WOM, and Reputation have a significant influence on the community's decision to enroll in Islamic schools. However, when examined individually, only Branding, e-WOM, and Reputation show significant effects, while Digital Marketing does not directly contribute significantly to the enrollment decision.

This finding contrasts with several previous studies that demonstrated a significant impact of digital marketing on consumer decisions, particularly in the commercial sector. Taiminen and Karjaluo (2015), for example, found that digital marketing effectively influenced consumer decision-making in business services. However, the Islamic education sector operates under different dynamics, where decisions are not solely based on marketing logic but are also shaped by trust, moral values, and spirituality. This perspective is reinforced by Khadafie (2023), who argue that although digital marketing can increase initial interest, parents' final decisions in choosing Islamic schools are more strongly influenced by word-of-mouth and direct experiences. Thus, the findings of this study are consistent with their conclusion that e-WOM and reputation play a more dominant role than digital marketing.

The limitations of digital marketing in Islamic educational institutions also warrant attention. First, many Islamic schools, particularly in rural areas, face infrastructural and digital literacy challenges that hinder the optimization of digital

marketing strategies. Second, the lack of professional expertise in digital marketing often results in promotional content that is monotonous, less interactive, and unattractive to digital-native generations. Third, cultural resistance exists in some Islamic institutions, where modern marketing strategies are perceived as inconsistent with the values of modesty and traditional da’wah. These factors weaken the effectiveness of digital marketing in attracting prospective students.

Based on these findings, several strategic recommendations can be made. Islamic schools should not abandon digital marketing but rather develop it in a more contextual and integrative manner. First, digital media should be utilized to strengthen branding and reputation through narratives that emphasize the unique identity of Islamic schools. Second, digital content should integrate promotional elements with religious and da’wah values to align more closely with the expectations of Muslim communities. Third, schools can engage alumni as digital ambassadors to share positive experiences on social media platforms. Finally, optimizing SEO and managing social media presence are crucial to ensure that information about Islamic schools becomes more accessible to parents seeking educational options. Through these strategies, digital marketing can serve as a supporting tool that reinforces the influence of branding, e-WOM, and institutional reputation in shaping parents’ decisions to enrol their children in Islamic schools.

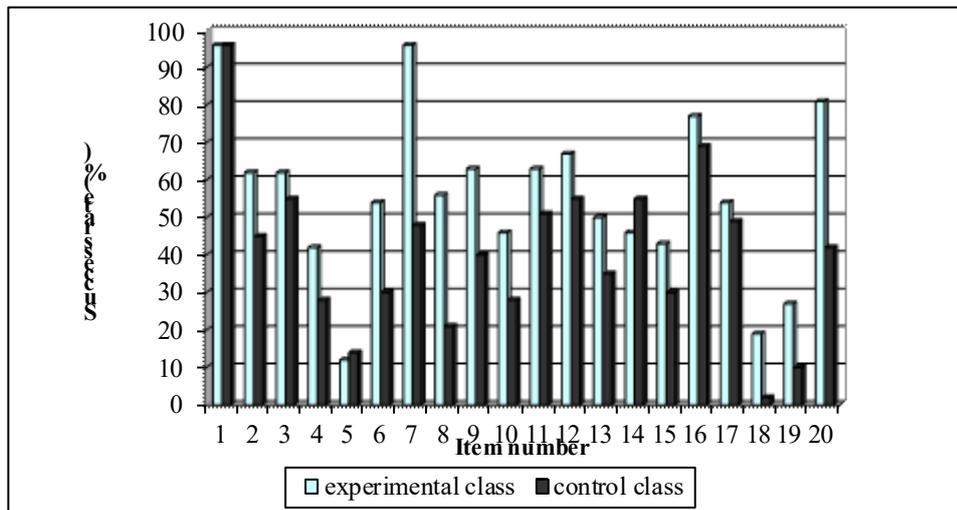


Figure 1. Comparison of success rate of items in the experimental and control class.

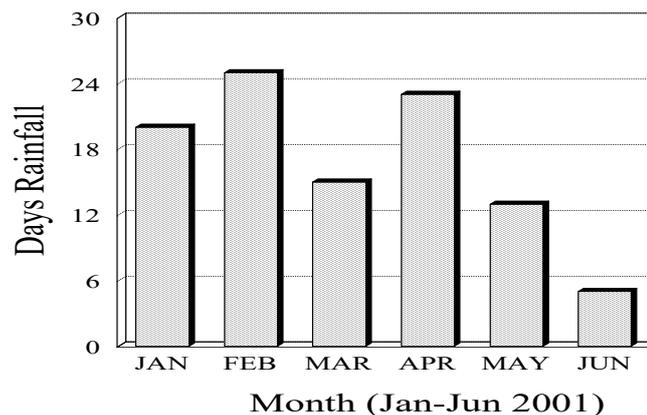


Figure 2. Clear line drawings are essential.

Discussion

Digital marketing in the world of Islamic education

Digital marketing is a modern communication strategy that relies on digital technology to introduce products or services to a target audience. In the context of Islamic-based educational institutions, this strategy serves as an essential instrument for reaching prospective students and parents through social media, websites, email marketing, and interactive digital content. However, the findings of this study indicate that digital marketing exerts a positive but statistically insignificant influence on the decision to enroll in Islamic schools ($\beta \approx 0.092$; $p = 0.269$). This result opens up an important discussion regarding the relevance, effectiveness, and limitations of digital marketing within the Islamic education sector.

From the perspective of relevance, Islamic schools both at the elementary and secondary levels face considerable challenges in attracting prospective students amid competition with public and private non-religious schools. This situation compels Islamic educational institutions to design promotional strategies that are more creative and adaptive. As explained by Kotler and Keller (2016), digital marketing enables two-way interaction between institutions and potential consumers, in contrast to traditional advertising, which tends to be one-directional. Within Islamic education, this form of interaction provides parents with opportunities to obtain more detailed information about curricula, facilities, and flagship programs through digital channels. Nevertheless, the relevance of digital marketing in enhancing awareness does not necessarily translate directly into parents' final enrollment decisions. This aligns with the findings of Suryanto and Samidi (2021), who emphasize that while digital marketing can raise awareness among prospective students, the final decision is more strongly influenced by factors such as institutional reputation, trust, and social experiences.

The perceived insignificant impact of digital marketing in influencing the decision to enroll in Islamic schools can be attributed to several interacting factors. While digital marketing effectively builds awareness and interest, its direct influence on the final decision-making process appears limited. Parents' ultimate choices are significantly shaped by considerations such as the school's reputation, personal recommendations from their social networks, and a deep-seated confidence in the quality of Islamic education provided.

Furthermore, the prevalent information overload in the digital sphere diminishes the unique impact of digital marketing efforts. Parents are often inundated with vast amounts of information from numerous schools, and since many institutions adopt similar digital strategies, their messages frequently lack distinctiveness. This creates a cluttered environment where individual digital campaigns struggle to stand out and capture sustained attention.

Crucially, within Indonesia's religious society, the decision to select an Islamic school is profoundly rooted in religious values, trust in religious leaders, and the esteemed reputation of the kyai or ustadz associated with the institution. These socio-cultural and religious considerations often supersede the influence of digital advertising. These findings collectively reaffirm that generalized digital marketing is not the primary determinant in the school selection process, instead acting as a supportive element rather than a decisive one.

Given the strong explanatory power of other variables (as indicated by an R^2 of 0.624 for the overall model which is the coefficient of determination that represents the proportion of the variance for a dependent variable that's explained by an independent variable or variables in a regression model), institutions should strategically reallocate resources. It is recommended that the majority of effort and budget be directed towards reinforcing Reputation and actively managing e-WOM (electronic Word-of-Mouth), rather than prioritizing broad digital advertising campaigns. This shift will align marketing investments with the factors proven to have the most substantial impact on enrollment decisions.

Although not statistically significant, digital marketing still carries important strategic implications. Islamic schools can utilize digital channels to align content with Islamic values, thereby building trustworthiness in the eyes of prospective parents and students. Religious messages, alumni testimonials, and student success stories may serve as more powerful promotional materials than merely highlighting facilities. Furthermore, digital marketing should be integrated with institutional branding and reputation so that it functions not only as a promotional tool but also as a means of strengthening the distinctive image of Islamic schools. A personalized digital marketing approach based on big data can also be applied, for instance by presenting tailored content on Qur'an memorization (tahfidz) programs to parents who prioritize religious education.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms the validity and reliability of the research instrument, with all questionnaire items meeting validity criteria (item-total correlations ≥ 0.30 , $p < 0.05$) and reliability thresholds (Cronbach's Alpha > 0.60 , mostly > 0.80). Multiple linear regression analysis shows that digital marketing, branding, e-WOM, and reputation collectively exert a significant influence on enrollment decisions in Islamic schools ($F = 120.1$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.624$), explaining 62.4% of the variance. Individually, however, digital marketing lacks significant impact (despite its informational role), while branding, e-WOM, and reputation particularly reputation as the dominant factor—demonstrate strong positive effects.

Islamic schools should prioritize intangible factors like robust branding (enhancing institutional image and trust), active e-WOM management (through testimonials and recommendations), and reputation-building (via academic achievements, teacher quality, and facilities) to drive enrollment. Digital marketing, while useful for visibility, requires strategic optimization and integration with these elements to achieve meaningful influence on decision-making.

The model accounts for only 62.4% of enrollment decision variance, leaving 37.6% unexplained by unexamined factors such as socioeconomic status, location accessibility, tuition affordability, or parental demographics. The study relies on self-reported questionnaire data, which may introduce response biases, and is limited to a specific context of Islamic schools, potentially restricting generalizability.

Future studies could incorporate additional variables (e.g., financial incentives or peer networks) in expanded models, employ longitudinal designs or experimental methods to establish causality, and extend the scope to comparative analyses across diverse educational sectors or regions for broader applicability.

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