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Brand Image as Mediator of Social Media Marketing and eWOM in Bekasi Private Higher Education Enrollment Decisions

Kuwat Riyanto*
Universitas Pelita Bangsa, Indonesia

Rahmat Hidayat
Universitas Pelita Bangsa, Indonesia

***Corresponding author:**
Kuwat Riyanto, Universitas Pelita Bangsa, West Java, Indonesia.
✉kuwat.riyanto@pelitabangsa.ac.id

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Abstract

Background: Competition among private higher education institutions requires universities to understand how digital marketing communication and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) contribute to prospective students' enrollment decisions. Brand image may serve as an important mechanism connecting these marketing activities with institutional choice.
Objective: This study examines the relationships among social media marketing, eWOM, brand image, and enrollment decisions in private higher education institutions in Bekasi Regency, with brand image positioned as a mediating variable.
Methods: A quantitative explanatory design with a cross-sectional survey approach was employed. Data were collected from 272 first-year students selected using accidental sampling. The relationships among variables were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with LISREL 8.8.
Results: Social media marketing and eWOM significantly affected brand image, with t-values of 3.33 and 5.56, respectively. Brand image also significantly affected enrollment decisions (t = 4.34). The indirect effects of social media marketing and eWOM through brand image were 25.92% and 45.36%, respectively, exceeding their reported direct effects.
Conclusion: Private higher education institutions should integrate social media communication, positive eWOM management, and institutional brand development to strengthen prospective students' enrollment decision processes.

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education serves a vital function in improving the caliber of human resources and preparing individuals to meet the demands of the workforce and the increasingly dynamic social and economic landscape. Higher education institutions serve not only as providers of educational services but also as entities that build reputation, trust, and value within society. This context has intensified competition among institutions, particularly between public and private universities. Amidst this competitive environment, private universities must develop effective marketing strategies to attract prospective students and influence their enrollment decisions.

Choosing a university is a complex process, as prospective students must weigh various factors before making a decision. These considerations may include academic quality, available study programs, tuition costs, facilities, location, graduate employment prospects, accreditation, reputation, and personal experiences or recommendations from others. Advancements in information technology have also transformed the way prospective students search for information about universities. Today, students can access information not only through conventional media but also via digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook,

and official university websites. This shift in information-seeking behavior has made social media marketing increasingly vital for private universities seeking to build relationships and communicate with prospective students.

The one strategy universities can employ to reach prospective students is social media marketing. This involves using social media platforms to disseminate information, foster interaction, boost audience engagement, and establish relationships between the organization and its consumers. Universities can leverage social media to share details about study programs, academic and non-academic activities, student achievements, campus facilities, student organization events, faculty profiles, new student admissions, and the overall student experience. Content that is informative, engaging, interactive, and consistent has the potential to capture the attention of prospective students and spark their interest in a particular university (Hermann, 2025). Hermann's (2025) study focused on online information-seeking attention and interest among prospective students, whereas the present study examines actual enrollment decision outcomes and tests mediating mechanisms. This distinction is important because information exposure (attention) does not necessarily translate to enrollment choice; intermediate factors such as institutional image formation are required to complete this causal chain. Therefore, this study extends Hermann's findings by incorporating brand image as a mediator and examining decision-making rather than information-seeking behavior alone.

Daga et al., (2024) stated that social media marketing influences business decisions; this is because social media allows consumers to gain a better understanding of products and determine whether a product is suitable for them. Similarly, if private higher education institutions wish to attract prospective students, they must promote their campuses using social media. Although Daga et al. (2024) examined product purchase contexts, their findings regarding social media marketing effectiveness remain transferable to higher education because: (1) both contexts involve consumer decision-making with multiple information sources; (2) brand perception mechanisms operate similarly regardless of product category; and (3) emerging market dynamics (which characterize both Indonesia's consumer and higher education sectors) produce comparable competitive pressures. However, education decisions involve higher involvement, longer consideration periods, and greater consequentiality than typical consumer products, potentially amplifying the influence of institutional image and peer recommendations.

However, the mere presence of social media is not necessarily sufficient to drive an enrolment decision. Information received via social media needs to shape a specific perception of the university in the minds of prospective students. Utari et al. (2023) stated that social media marketing does not influence the decision to acquire or consume a product. Consequently, the effectiveness of social media marketing cannot be measured solely by the frequency of content uploads by a higher education institution, but also by the extent to which such activities successfully build a positive perception of the institution. In this context, brand image is a crucial aspect to consider, as it serves as a basis for prospective students to evaluate an institution's credibility, quality, and appeal.

Apart from Social Media Marketing, prospective students' decisions can also be influenced by Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM). Romadhoni et al. (2023) indicated that eWOM positively influences and significantly affects the choices to buy or choose a product. Word of Mouth refers to personal communication related to experiences, insights, assessments, or suggestions about a product or service. In the context of higher education, eWOM can arise through conversations between prospective students and parents, relatives, friends, alumni, other students, teachers, or the general public on social media. Information obtained from sources perceived to possess experience or knowledge about a higher education institution may command a different level of trust compared to information conveyed directly by the institution through promotional activities.

Word-of-mouth communication is becoming increasingly relevant amidst the public's growing access to digital information. The experiences of students and alumni can be shared through direct conversations, social media, and various other digital platforms. Positive experiences regarding the quality of education, administrative services, facilities, student activities, and graduate prospects can generate positive recommendations. Conversely, negative experiences can shape an unfavorable perception of the higher education institution. Therefore, an institution's ability to manage student experiences and build strong relationships with alumni

is crucial for fostering positive electronic word-of-mouth.

Meng et al., (2022) noted that, given the growing importance of eWOM in the business world and private education, understanding the characteristics of eWOM information and how the behavior of consumers or prospective students influences the intention to enroll is significant for practitioners in competitive educational sectors, such as private higher education institutions.

Social media promotion and informal communication can ultimately shape the brand image of a higher education institution. Brand image refers to the collection of impressions and connections established in a person's mind about a brand. Within the realm of private higher education establishments, brand image is reflected in prospective students' perceptions of educational quality, institutional reputation, professionalism, modernity, credibility, facilities, and the success of graduates. Institutions with a positive image tend to more easily attract the attention and trust of prospective students when they are comparing various higher education options.

Brand image also holds an important position in the decision-making process, since potential students face a variety of higher education institutions with relatively diverse characteristics (Solihin & Setiawan, 2021; Tarmidi & Mulyani, 2023). When faced with an abundance of information, the image formed in the minds of prospective students can serve as a basis for simplifying the process of evaluating alternatives. In other words, social media marketing and word-of-mouth communication not only have the potential to provide information to prospective students but can also influence how they perceive a higher education institution. Such perceptions can, in turn, play a role in either encouraging or discouraging the decision to choose a particular institution.

Bekasi Regency is an area experiencing rapid economic, industrial, and population growth. This development is accompanied by an increasing demand for human resources possessing the competencies and education required by the labor market. This situation presents both an opportunity and a challenge for private higher education institutions in Bekasi Regency. On one hand, the rising demand for higher education creates opportunities for these institutions to attract prospective students. On the other hand, prospective students have an increasing number of alternatives when choosing an institution; consequently, each private higher education institution must possess distinct advantages and an image that sets it apart from others.

Amidst this competitive landscape, marketing communication strategies have become increasingly crucial. Private higher education institutions in Bekasi Regency need to understand how prospective students acquire and evaluate information, as well as the factors that ultimately drive their decision-making. Effective use of social media can serve as a means to showcase an institution's strengths to a wider audience, while word-of-mouth communication can reinforce the brand image associated with the information received. Furthermore, these factors are believed to shape brand image, which ultimately influences prospective students' decisions regarding the choice of a private higher education institution.

The purpose of social media is to highlight visual content showcasing resources and institutional representation in order to attract student interest; participants perceived that universities indirectly utilize this approach to influence decision-making (Husseiny & Youness, 2023). A shared perspective emerged from the participants' reflections, noting that experiences, exposure to various activities, and an interactive atmosphere are integral to the social media strategies employed by universities in their marketing efforts. When elaborating on elements reflecting these perspectives, they cited terms such as "presentations, workshops, events, conferences, competitions, and challenges."

Although both social media marketing and word-of-mouth have the potential to influence consumer decisions, the relationship is not always direct. In the context of choosing a higher education institution, prospective students do not merely consider the promotional messages or recommendations they receive; they also interpret this information to form perceptions regarding the institution's image (Ismail, 2025; Le et al., 2018). Therefore, brand image can be positioned as an intervening variable that explains the mechanism by which social media marketing and word-of-mouth influence the decision to choose a private higher education institution.

Positioning brand image as an intervening variable is crucial for determining whether marketing activities via social media and word-of-mouth communication directly influence the decision to choose an institution, or whether that influence is strengthened when a positive image

of the higher education institution is established first (Kadek et al., 2020; Tafolli et al., 2025). Consumer purchasing decisions are not only influenced by eWoM and social media. Purchasing decisions are also influenced by brand image as an intervening variable (Andrianto et al., 2020; Laksono & Maulana, 2026). An understanding of this relationship can make an academic contribution by explaining the behavior of prospective students when selecting higher education institutions, while also offering practical benefits to private higher education administrators in designing more effective marketing strategies.

Based on the foregoing, it is evident that competition among private higher education institutions hinges not only on the ability to provide educational services but also on the capacity to establish relevant marketing communications, create positive experiences that foster word-of-mouth, and build a strong brand image in the minds of prospective students. Brand image acts as an essential intermediary between eWOM, social media marketing, and students' choices (Economics et al., 2024). A robust, favorable brand image boosts credibility, nurtures emotional ties, and strengthens the enrollment choice. Consequently, there is a need for research to empirically investigate the connections between social media marketing, word-of-mouth, brand image, and the choice to select a private higher education institution, especially in the context of Bekasi Regency. The urgency of this research is driven by several important considerations. The rapid growth of the higher education sector in Bekasi has intensified competition among institutions in attracting prospective students. At the same time, the shift from traditional marketing approaches to digital channels requires empirical evidence to assess the effectiveness of these strategies. Although higher education institutions increasingly invest in social media marketing, there is still limited understanding of how such investments translate into student enrollment outcomes. Therefore, evidence-based marketing strategies are needed to support institutional sustainability, strengthen competitiveness, and promote sustainable enrollment growth in an increasingly competitive higher education environment.

Social marketing, like commercial marketing, is a marketing discipline that utilizes theory and research to design campaigns aimed at influencing the behavior of a target audience (Hübscher & Hensel-börner, 2026). Consequently, behavior change lies at the heart of social marketing; in other words, a social marketing campaign is considered successful if that behavioral change is achieved. Kotler and Zaltman introduced the concept of social marketing and formulated its initial definition, while other authors subsequently developed the concept further (Muhammad Rizki & Dety Mulyanti, 2023; Tuti & Dwiyanti, 2021).

Social media includes online applications developed on the technological and conceptual principles of Web 2.0, enabling the production and dissemination of content generated by users. Due to its engaging qualities that enhance knowledge sharing and collaborative involvement within a larger community, social media is regarded as the most essential communication medium for spreading brand information, surpassing traditional formats like radio, TV, and print (Jamil et al., 2022).

According to Kotler and Keller, social media marketing consists of digital initiatives and offerings aimed at involving customers or potential clients that, either directly or indirectly, enhance awareness, bolster brand perception, or drive sales of goods and services (Li, 2021; Varela-Neira et al., 2023). The phrase "social media marketing" describes marketing communication efforts that employ electronic channels to engage consumers through diverse strategies, with the goal of increasing sales of products or services while enhancing awareness and strengthening brand identity (Rifqi et al., 2023).

eWOM represents the way consumers absorb information to form an intention to engage in a behavior or adopt a technology whether new or existing much like how they form intentions to accept an idea (new or existing) or a behavior. (Sardar et al., 2024). Word-of-Mouth is traditionally a method of direct exchange among peers regarding brands or products without any commercial purpose (Calista et al., 2023). With the rapid expansion of the internet, it has transformed word-of-mouth into an electronic format, referred to as Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM). EWOM encompasses various platforms including social media networks, blogs, online discussion boards, review sites, news groups, and e-commerce.

E-WOM is characterized as verbal, written, and digital exchanges among individuals about the advantages of, or experiences related to, buying or utilizing products or services. WOM acts as a catalyst in influencing consumer perceptions and steering consumer behavioral intentions

(Ahdiany, 2021; Mbete, 2026). Word of mouth refers to discussions regarding products and services among individuals who are viewed as unbiased toward the companies offering those products or services (Roli et al., 2020.; Zahid & Ruswanti, 2024, 2024) . This communication can be a dialogue or simply a one-sided testimonial. For instance, conversing directly through phone calls, emails, social networks, websites, or various other communication methods. Electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) involves utilizing the internet to generate news effects through word of mouth to aid business and marketing objectives (Ardiansyah & Tajuddien, 2026; Babi, 2019).

Brand image is a consumer's understanding of a brand, representing the associations linked to it in their mind. (Gede et al., 2020; Rizky, 2025). Brand image is a collection of brand associations that exists in the consumer's mind. Brand image refers to the mental associations that arise when individuals think about a specific brand.. (Husen et al., 2018; Kamila & Chaerudin, 2023). Brand image refers to the thoughts and emotions that consumers associate with a brand and the information they gather about it.. (Kamila & Chaerudin, 2023; Pradiva et al., 2021).

Brand image refers to the perceptions and beliefs that consumers hold regarding a specific brand. Consequently, the stronger the brand image of a product, the greater the likelihood of consumers making a purchase (Arianty & Andira, 2021; Wulandari & Kencana, 2026). Brand image, according to Guliyev, refers to how consumers perceive and interpret a brand, encompassing their emotions, attitudes, beliefs, and connections. Expand on this definition by emphasizing the different elements that influence brand images, including visual identity (like logos, colors, packaging), messaging (such as advertising, slogans, brand storytelling), product quality, customer service, and overall brand reputation. (Sarpong & Zungu, 2025).

Brand image refers to the overall perception held by consumers, which can lead to personal connections and memory of associated product lines. A brand refers to a name, term, symbol, design, or a combination of these elements that differentiates goods and services from rivals. (Liang et al., 2024)

A purchase decision is an act of commitment made after evaluating alternatives; it represents the next step in the consumer decision-making process. At this stage, consumers form preferences among the brands or products/services under consideration and intend to purchase their chosen brand. (Al-azzam & Al-mizeed, 2021; Khanfar & Al-Qaisi, 2026). The decision to choose is the first step in the buyer decision-making process. Internal or external stimuli make consumers aware of a need—specifically, the discrepancy between their current state and their desired state. This is generally viewed as the trigger for a purchase decision and the starting point for all subsequent consumer actions (Etuk et al., 2022). The choice that gives rise to this need may depend on a variety of personal characteristics. It is explained that consumers become aware of a problem when there is a discrepancy between their current situation and their desired situation a discrepancy significant enough to trigger the decision-making process. (Rizky et al., 2025; Tanjung & Hidayat, 2021).

Regarding the purchase decision, Kotler & Keller define the evaluation stage as one where consumers form preferences among the brands in their choice set and may also develop an intention to purchase the most preferred brand. (Husen et al., 2018; Kamila & Chaerudin, 2023). Before discussing the flow of consumer decision making in relation to marketing theory, it is important to provide a brief overview of the true meaning of a final decision. “A decision implies the end of the deliberation process and the start of action (Enrollment & Quarterly, 2023; Juhaidi et al., 2026). A purchase decision involves buying the most preferred brand, but two factors can intervene between the buyer's intention and the actual purchase decision (Muhammad Rizki & Dety Mulyanti, 2023; Tuti & Dwiyanti, 2021).

Based on these issues and phenomena, this study aims to investigate how social media marketing and word-of-mouth communication influence prospective students' decisions in choosing private higher education institutions both directly and indirectly via brand image as a mediating factor. The results are anticipated to act as a guide for private higher education leaders in creating marketing approaches, overseeing social media, improving the student experience, and bolstering the institution's reputation, thus allowing them to more effectively draw in and convince potential students amid increasing rivalry in the tertiary education landscape.

METHOD

This research employed a quantitative method focused on investigating relationships between variables by collecting numerical data and analyzing it using statistical methods. The quantitative method was chosen because the research aimed to analyze the impact of social media marketing and brand image on the decision to enroll in higher education, with brand image serving as a mediating variable. By utilizing this method, the researcher was able to obtain objective and quantifiable results that facilitated the evaluation of the proposed hypotheses (Hidayat, 2021; Khasanah et al., 2026). Specifically, this study employed a quantitative explanatory research design with a cross-sectional survey approach, in which data were collected from respondents at a single point in time. This design was appropriate for testing mediation models and relationships between variables using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), as it enabled the simultaneous estimation of both direct and indirect effects within the hypothesized conceptual framework.

The population of this study consisted of new students enrolled at private higher education institutions in Bekasi Regency during the 2025–2026 academic year. This population was selected because these students had undergone the decision-making process of selecting a private higher education institution in Bekasi Regency for their further education. Consequently, the respondents possessed relevant experience in evaluating digital marketing strategies, university image, institutional trust, and the factors influencing their decision to enroll in a private higher education institution. The total population (N) comprised 1,147 new students enrolled at private higher education institutions in Bekasi Regency during the 2025–2026 academic year.

The sampling technique employed in this study was non-probability sampling, specifically accidental sampling (convenience sampling), in which respondents were selected based on their availability and willingness to participate during the data collection period.

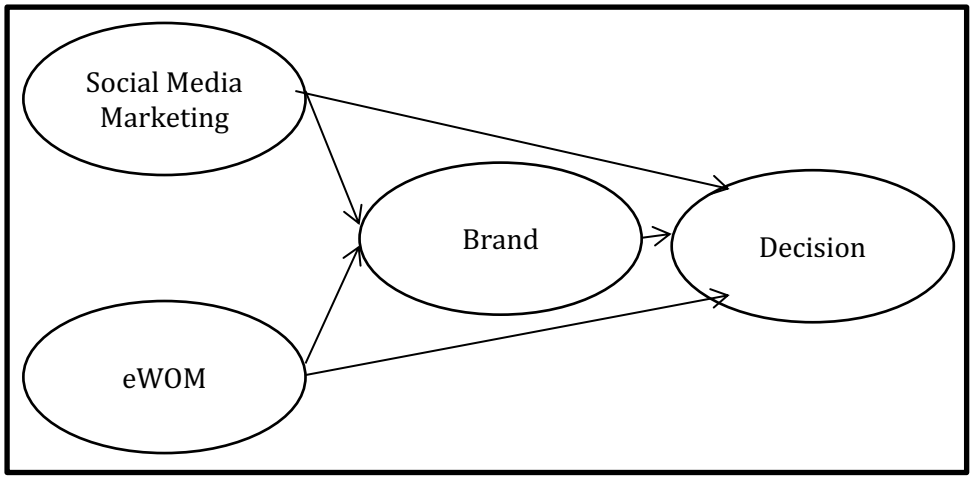


Figure 1. Research Design

The population of this study consisted of first-year students enrolled at private higher education institutions in Bekasi Regency. First-year students were selected because they were in the initial stages of adjusting to the academic and social environments, as well as the learning systems, of higher education. Sampling was conducted using the accidental sampling technique. This technique involved selecting respondents based on the researcher's ease of access to individuals who met the study's criteria at a specific time and location (Nur'aeni & Hidayat, 2017).

Data collection was carried out by directly distributing questionnaires to first-year students encountered by the researcher at specific times and locations. Respondents who met the criteria of being first-year students were given the opportunity to complete the questionnaire, which served as the research instrument. Based on this sampling process, a total of 272 students were recruited as respondents. This group subsequently served as the research sample and the source of data for the analysis conducted to address the study's objectives.

The data processing method applied in this research was Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to evaluate the proposed hypotheses. SEM was utilized to assess the relationships among the variables specified in the research hypotheses. The capability of SEM lies in its ability to test

complex relationships among multiple variables simultaneously and to measure latent variables that cannot be measured directly (Avengelista et al., 2022). The SEM procedure comprised several stages, including model formulation, path diagram construction, development of measurement and structural equations, data input and model estimation, and model identification.

The researcher employed the SEM approach to examine the influence of the independent variables on the dependent and mediating variables. Prior to conducting the structural analysis, the researcher examined the data through the standardized loading factor (SLF) test, goodness-of-fit testing, and validity and reliability assessments. According to (Priliana & Hidayat, 2025), SEM is a broad and systematic measurement approach that can be used to examine relationships among variables within a conceptual model. SEM combines elements of factor analysis and regression analysis to evaluate relationships among observed and latent variables (Pragusti et al., 2023). Data validation was also conducted using the triangulation method.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The method of statistic to test the hypotheses in this study is the multivariate Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) technique, utilizing the LISREL 8.8 software. Consequently, it is necessary to evaluate the fit of the proposed model using goodness-of-fit criteria. As peer (Firmansyah & Hidayat, 2023) indicates that certain characteristics must be evaluated to determine goodness of fit, such as: if the RMSEA value nears 1, the model is deemed adequate; additionally, if the GFI and AGFI values nears 1, the model signifies a good fit.

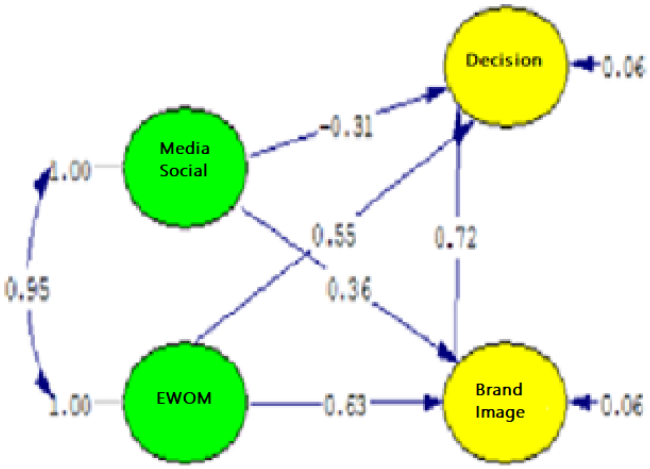


Figure 2. Standardized Result

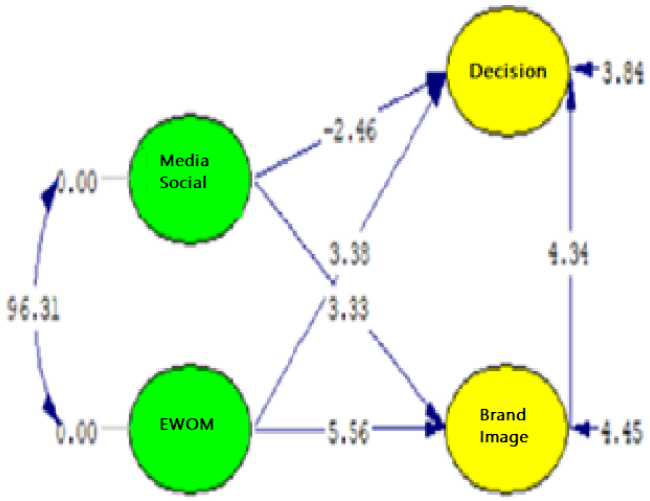


Figure 3. Tvalue Result

Table 1
Significant among variables

Structure	T*value*	t*table*	Result test
Social Media Marketing => Brand Image	3,33	1,96	Significant
EWOM => Brand Image	5,56	1,96	Significant
Social Media Marketing => enrolment decision	-2,46	1,96	Significant
EWOM=> enrollment decision	3,38	1,96	Significant
Brand Image => enrollment decision	4,34	1,96	Significant

Table 2
Cross structure variables through brand image

Cross Structure	Direct	Indirect	Result
Social Media Marketing => enrollment decision through brand image	$(0,31)^2 100$ = 9,61%	0,36 x 0,72 x 100 = 25,92%	TL>L (mediating)
EWOM=> enrollment decision through brand image	$(0,55)^2 100$ = 30,25 %	0,63 x 0,72 x 100 = 45,36 %	TL>L (mediating)

Social media marketing activities not only directly influence prospective students in their choice of university, but this influence is further strengthened when such marketing successfully builds a positive brand image. The more effectively social media marketing shapes the university's image, the greater the likelihood that prospective students will decide to enroll there. The same applies to eWOM. The indirect influence outweighs the direct influence; in other words, information, reviews, comments, recommendations, or experiences shared by others via electronic media (eWOM) can shape the decisions of prospective students. However, this influence is amplified when eWOM succeeds in fostering a positive brand image for the higher education institution. Drawing from the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986, as cited in (2021) and Varela-Neira et al., (2023) Social Cognitive Theory, these findings suggest that social media marketing functions through two persuasion routes, namely a central route involving detailed evaluation of institutional quality as represented by Brand Image and a peripheral route involving simple exposure to institutional content. The stronger indirect effects indicate that, in the higher education context, prospective students employ the central route by critically evaluating institutional messages and integrating them with peer recommendations through eWOM before forming perceptions of the institution. This theoretical lens explains why digital marketing content alone, as a peripheral route, has a limited direct impact, while its influence operates through more elaborate image formation processes. Furthermore, the mediation by Brand Image aligns with Attribution Theory, as students may attribute greater credibility to institutional claims when these claims are consistent with peer-generated eWOM, resulting in stronger enrollment influence when both information sources convey consistent perceptions of institutional quality.

The Influence of Social Media Marketing on Brand Image

The first hypothesis (Ha) states that Social Media Marketing influences Brand Image. Based on the figure, t-count is greater than the t-table value (3.33 > 1.96), indicating significance. Thus, Social Media Marketing has a positive and significant influence on the brand image of private higher education institutions in Bekasi Regency; in other words, Hypothesis 1 (Ha) is accepted.

The Influence of eWOM on Brand Image

Practical Implications for private higher education institutions in Bekasi Regency, these findings indicate that integrated marketing strategies should prioritize brand image development alongside social media marketing investments. Institutions should: (1) ensure consistency between social media messaging and actual institutional quality; (2) actively encourage positive eWOM through alumni engagement and student satisfaction programs; (3) monitor online reviews and peer commentary to identify brand perception gaps; and (4) develop targeted social media content that highlights unique institutional strengths rather than generic promotional messages. Resources allocated to social media marketing should be coupled with investments in institutional quality improvements, as these create the foundation for positive brand image

formation.

The hypothesis number three states that Brand Image influences the enrolment decision in private higher education institutions in Bekasi Regency. Based on the figure, the calculated t-value is greater than the t-table value (5.56 > 1.96), indicating significance. Thus, Brand Image is proven to influence the brand image of private higher education institutions in Bekasi Regency, so the conclusion, Hypothesis number 2 (Ha) is accepted.

This study examined how Social Media Marketing and Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) influence private higher education institution choice in Bekasi Regency, with Brand Image as a mediating variable. Analysis using Structural Equation Modeling revealed that Brand Image partially mediates both relationships. Social Media Marketing and eWOM both significantly influence Brand Image ($t=3.33$ and $t=5.56$, respectively, $p<0.05$) and Enrollment Decision. Importantly, the indirect effects through Brand Image (25.92% and 45.36% respectively) exceed the direct effects, indicating that institutional reputation and perceived quality amplify the impact of digital marketing communications on student enrollment decisions. These findings suggest that private higher education institutions should develop integrated marketing strategies that build positive brand perceptions while maintaining consistent messaging across social media and ensuring eWOM resonance.

This study is limited to private higher education institutions in Bekasi Regency during a single time period, potentially limiting generalizability to other regions and institutional types. Future research should examine public institutions, compare rural versus urban contexts, and employ longitudinal designs to trace decision-making processes over time. Additionally, while this study measured eWOM broadly through social media, future research could differentiate between platforms (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, etc.) and examine platform-specific effects. Investigation of moderating variables such as student socioeconomic status, information literacy, and family influence would enhance understanding of how these variables amplify or attenuate social media and eWOM effects. Qualitative research exploring prospective students' information-seeking processes and enrollment decision-making could complement these quantitative findings by providing deeper insight into how students respond to digital marketing information. This need is increasingly important as the higher education sector in Bekasi expands and competition for prospective students intensifies. The shift from traditional marketing to digital channels also requires empirical evidence regarding their effectiveness. Despite growing investment in social media marketing, limited evidence explains how such investments contribute to enrollment outcomes. Therefore, this research is important for developing evidence-based marketing strategies that support competitiveness, institutional sustainability, and sustainable enrollment growth.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that social media marketing, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), and brand image are important components of the enrollment decision process in private higher education institutions in Bekasi Regency. Social media marketing and eWOM significantly contribute to the formation of brand image, while brand image significantly contributes to enrollment decisions. The findings also show that the indirect effects of social media marketing and eWOM through brand image are greater than their reported direct effects, with indirect effects of 25.92% and 45.36%, respectively. These findings confirm the mediating role of brand image in connecting digital marketing communication and electronic recommendations with students' decisions to enroll in private higher education institutions.

The findings imply that private higher education institutions should not rely solely on increasing social media exposure or encouraging online recommendations. Digital communication should be accompanied by consistent efforts to develop a credible and positive institutional image through relevant content, institutional quality, student experiences, and positive electronic word-of-mouth. Since this research was conducted among private higher education students in Bekasi Regency within a single research period, future studies may extend the analysis to other regions and institutional types and employ longitudinal approaches to obtain a broader understanding of students' enrollment decision processes.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Kuwat Riyanto contributed to the conceptualization, research implementation, data collection, data analysis, and preparation of the manuscript. Rahmat Hidayat contributed to the research methodology, supervision, interpretation of the findings, and refinement of the manuscript. Both authors contributed to the development of the study, approved the final version of the manuscript, and agreed to be accountable for the published work.

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