



The Influence of Word of Mouth and Social Media Marketing on Students' Decisions to Choose Private Universities in Kediri

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Article Info

Received	30 Oct 2025
Revised	29 Dec 2025
Accepted	17 Apr 2026

Keywords : *Word of Mouth; Social Media Marketing; Brand Image; Students' Decision; Private Universities*



Abstract

Research aim : *This study aims to analyze the influence of Word of Mouth and Social Media Marketing on students' decisions in choosing a private university in Kediri, with Brand Image as a mediating variable.*

Design/Methods/Approach : *This study uses a quantitative approach. The research sample was 75 first-semester students from three private universities in Kediri selected by purposive sampling technique. Data analysis used the Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling method.*

Research Finding : *The results show that WOM and SMM have a positive and significant effect on Brand Image, which in turn has a strong influence on students' decisions. WOM has a small but significant direct effect, while SMM does not show a significant direct effect. However, both are proven to have a significant indirect effect through Brand Image.*

Theoretical contribution/Originality : *The novelty of this study lies in the testing of an integrative model that combines WOM and SMM in a single Brand Image mediation framework in the context of higher education, as well as the finding that SMM does not have a direct effect on decisions, but rather works indirectly through the formation of brand image—a result that enriches previous literature that generally places SMM as a direct determinant of decisions.*

Practitioner/Policy implication : *This study expands the application of Brand Equity Theory. Practically, private universities need to integrate WOM strategies and social media marketing to strengthen their brand image through authentic testimonials, alumni engagement, and interactive digital content.*

Research limitation : *This study is limited by its relatively small sample size and geographic focus in the Kediri region, thus limiting the generalizability of the findings. Future research is recommended to use larger samples, a longitudinal approach, and comparisons across regions or types of universities to increase generalizability and depth of analysis.*

Abstract

Tujuan Penelitian: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis pengaruh Word of Mouth dan Pemasaran Media Sosial terhadap keputusan mahasiswa dalam memilih perguruan tinggi swasta di Kediri, dengan Citra Merek sebagai variabel mediasi.



Desain/Metode/Pendekatan: Studi ini menggunakan pendekatan kuantitatif. Sampel penelitian sebanyak 75 mahasiswa semester pertama dari tiga perguruan tinggi swasta di Kediri yang dipilih dengan teknik purposive sampling. Analisis data menggunakan metode Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling.

Temuan Penelitian: Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa WOM dan SMM berpengaruh positif dan signifikan terhadap Citra Merek, yang pada gilirannya memiliki pengaruh kuat terhadap keputusan mahasiswa. WOM memiliki pengaruh langsung yang kecil namun signifikan, sementara SMM tidak menunjukkan pengaruh langsung yang signifikan. Namun, keduanya terbukti memiliki pengaruh tidak langsung yang signifikan melalui Citra Merek.

Kontribusi Teoretis/Orisinalitas: Kebaruan penelitian ini terletak pada pengujian model integratif yang menggabungkan WOM dan SMM dalam satu kerangka mediasi Brand Image pada konteks pendidikan tinggi, serta temuan bahwa SMM tidak berpengaruh langsung terhadap keputusan, melainkan bekerja secara tidak langsung melalui pembentukan citra merek suatu hasil yang memperkaya literatur sebelumnya yang umumnya menempatkan SMM sebagai determinan langsung keputusan.

Implikasi Praktisi/Kebijakan: Penelitian ini memperluas penerapan Teori Ekuitas Merek. Secara praktis, perguruan tinggi swasta perlu mengintegrasikan strategi WOM dan pemasaran media sosial untuk memperkuat citra merek melalui testimoni autentik, keterlibatan alumni, serta konten digital yang interaktif.

Keterbatasan penelitian: Penelitian ini memiliki keterbatasan pada ukuran sampel yang relatif kecil dan fokus geografis di wilayah Kediri, sehingga membatasi kemampuan generalisasi temuan. Penelitian selanjutnya disarankan menggunakan sampel yang lebih besar, pendekatan longitudinal, serta perbandingan lintas wilayah atau jenis perguruan tinggi untuk meningkatkan daya generalisasi dan kedalaman analisis.

Kata kunci : *Word of Mouth*; Pemasaran Media Sosial; Citra Merek; Keputusan Mahasiswa; Perguruan Tinggi Swasta.

Introduction

The higher education sector in Indonesia has experienced remarkable expansion over the past decade, both in terms of institutional quantity and student enrollment. Based on data from the *Badan Pusat Statistik* (BPS), Indonesia currently has more than 3,000 universities, and more than 70 percent of them are private higher education institutions located on the island of Java [1]. This rapid growth has led to increasingly fierce competition among private universities (Perguruan Tinggi Swasta/PTS), particularly in medium-sized cities such as Kediri. As a result, private universities must continuously innovate to attract new students and sustain institutional performance in a saturated educational market.

In this competitive environment, students' decision-making processes in selecting a university are becoming more complex and multidimensional. In the past, academic reputation and program quality were considered the dominant determinants of student choice. However, today's prospective students especially those belonging to Generation Z exhibit different behavioral patterns. They tend to rely not only on institutional rankings or



accreditation but also on various psychological and social factors such as peer recommendations, online information credibility, and brand perception [2]. The proliferation of digital technology and social media platforms has drastically altered how students seek, evaluate, and decide upon educational options.

The decision-making process in choosing a higher education institution is now strongly influenced by the accessibility of information through digital communication channels. Students can easily compare programs, tuition fees, and campus life through websites, forums, or social media posts shared by alumni and current students. These online interactions shape the perceived reputation and attractiveness of a university, serving as an alternative source of information beyond official promotional materials [3]. Consequently, communication strategies that emphasize engagement and authenticity have become critical for universities seeking to enhance their competitive positioning [4].

In the specific context of Kediri, this transformation is particularly relevant. As an emerging educational hub in East Java, Kediri hosts several established private universities. Each of these institutions competes not only through academic performance but also through how effectively they communicate their institutional image to the public. In this regard, marketing communication tools such as *Word of Mouth* (WOM) and *Social Media Marketing* (SMM) play a pivotal role in shaping how students perceive and evaluate universities before making enrollment decisions. Thus, understanding how communication dynamics both interpersonal and digital affect students' university choices has become increasingly vital for the sustainability of private higher education institutions. This study responds to that need by focusing on the influence of WOM and SMM, two dominant forms of communication in the digital era, in determining student decision-making within Kediri's private university ecosystem.

In the digital era, communication is no longer simply conveying information, but has become a strategic factor in shaping student perceptions and decisions [5], [6], [7], [8]. In higher education, Word of Mouth and Social Media Marketing are two primary channels influencing student choices, with WOM having the advantage of credibility due to its personal experience. Conventional Word of Mouth (WOM) and electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) have distinct characteristics, although both are based on experiences and recommendations [9]. Conventional WOM refers to interpersonal communication that occurs directly (face-to-face) within a limited social circle, such as between friends, family, or alumni. Its primary strength lies in relational closeness, a high level of trust, and a more personal and in-depth communication context. In the student context, conventional WOM often emerges through informal discussions about college experiences, the quality of lecturers, or campus life as experienced firsthand. Conversely, e-WOM is an evolved form of WOM that occurs through digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, or online forums. e-WOM is characterized by a broader reach, is documented, and can be repeatedly accessed by many prospective students. However, its level of social closeness tends to be lower than conventional WOM, so its credibility depends heavily on perceptions of the source (e.g., current students, alumni, or campus influencers). In the context of Generation Z, e-WOM has become very dominant because they tend to validate information through digital content such as video testimonials, comments, and online reviews before making decisions



[10]. Various studies have shown that positive WOM increases trust and enrollment intentions, although its influence is often indirect and mediated by brand image. In the context of Kediri, the role of WOM is increasingly important due to the strong social culture, where students rely more on recommendations from their immediate environment. Therefore, universities need to manage the student experience to encourage positive WOM.

SMM enables universities to communicate interactively, deliver personalized messages, and create brand engagement through visual and emotional storytelling [4]. Effective SMM not only increases brand awareness but also enhances consumer loyalty by fostering a sense of belonging [11]. In this study, SMM is positioned not merely as a promotional tool or digital advertising, but rather as a relational platform that emphasizes interaction, engagement, and building long-term relationships with prospective students. The most relevant dimension of SMM is not just promotion, but rather one that is able to build social connectedness and trust [12]. This approach aligns with the two-way communication perspective, where social media functions as a dialogue space that enables the exchange of values, experiences, and meaning between institutions and audiences [13]. Therefore, SMM in this study focuses more on engagement aspects such as content interactivity, user participation, message authenticity, and the institution's ability to build a digital community. This assertion is important because it distinguishes relational-based SMM from mere one-way promotional activities, while also explaining why its influence on student decisions tends to be indirect, but rather through the formation of a stronger and more meaningful brand image.

Empirical evidence supports this notion: consistent and creative social media content significantly influences students' intention to enroll in private universities [14]. Similarly, Suarmaja et al. found that WOM and SMM simultaneously influenced students' enrollment decisions, confirming that interpersonal and digital communication complement rather than substitute for each other [15]. Furthermore, Perera et al. highlighted that SMM enhances institutional credibility by facilitating two-way engagement, allowing students to experience the institution's culture and values before actual enrollment [2].

Both WOM and SMM play a crucial role in shaping student perceptions and choices. WOM offers credibility and trust rooted in personal experience, while SMM provides reach, visibility, and emotional engagement through digital interactions. The interplay between these two forms of communication creates a comprehensive pathway of influence that influences how prospective students evaluate and choose higher education institutions, particularly in the competitive environment of private universities in Kediri. Theoretically, the interaction between WOM and SMM can be explained through the framework of integrated marketing communications and consumer information processing theory [16], [17]. WOM functions as a highly credible source that triggers in-depth information processing (central processing), as it is based on interpersonal trust and real-life experiences [18]. Conversely, SMM acts as a channel that expands exposure and provides social cues such as visuals, comments, and the number of interactions that encourage peripheral processing. When the two interact, WOM provides cognitive and emotional validation of information, while SMM amplifies it through frequency of exposure and digital social proof [19]. From a brand equity perspective, this combination consistently strengthens brand



associations, thus forming stronger and more convincing perceptions. Thus, the influence of WOM and SMM does not operate separately, but rather through a synergistic mechanism that integrates interpersonal credibility and digital amplification in shaping student decisions.

Brand image is a core component of brand equity, determining how a brand is recognized, differentiated, and selected by consumers [20]. Within a theoretical framework, brand image is formed through two main processes: direct experience and exposure to marketing communications [21]. However, in the context of higher education, this concept needs to be understood more specifically. Brand image not only reflects commercial attributes but also reflects students' perceptions of academic quality, institutional reputation, credibility, campus environment, and the values represented by the university. Thus, brand image in higher education is more complex, encompassing functional (educational quality), symbolic (social status and reputation), and emotional (pride and attachment) dimensions. When students are repeatedly exposed to information from various sources, whether through direct interactions, social media, or recommendations from their social circle, they develop mental representations that form the basis for their decision-making process.

Within the marketing communications framework, brand image acts as a mediating mechanism that translates communication stimuli into meaningful internal evaluations. Word of Mouth provides credible, experience-based information, SMM broadens exposure and enriches associations through digital interactions. These two sources do not directly influence decisions but first shape perceptions, trust, and associations toward the institution. This process aligns with the integration of Brand Equity Theory and Consumer Decision-Making Theory, where external stimuli are processed through cognitive and emotional processes before producing behavioral responses. Thus, brand image functions as an "interpretive lens" that determines how students assess and interpret the information received.

Brand image is a central construct representing the accumulation of perceptions, associations, and emotional responses to an institution. It thus serves as the primary mechanism linking communication stimuli (such as word of mouth and social media marketing) to behavioral responses (student decisions). Compared to other psychological variables such as trust or perceived value, brand image has a broader scope because it conceptually integrates cognitive (perceived quality), affective (emotional attachment), and symbolic (reputation and status) dimensions.

Empirically, various studies support the mediating role of brand image in linking communication to student decisions. Anfas et al. demonstrated that WOM indirectly influences enrollment decisions by strengthening institutional credibility [7]. Meanwhile, Perera et al. found that engagement in social media increases brand associations and trust, ultimately driving university choice intentions [2]. Similar findings were presented by Septiana et al., who emphasized that brand image is a key determinant of student decisions, while also mediating the influence of SMM through the formation of consistent and emotional perceptions [22]. Furthermore, Mourad et al. emphasized that university image is not only built through formal communication, but also through experiences and perceived authenticity experienced by stakeholders [23].

This research provides an integrative understanding of how communication and branding mechanisms function collectively. WOM, as a credible and emotionally driven form



of interpersonal communication, complements SMM, which leverages digital interactivity and visual engagement. Their combination through a strengthened brand image can significantly enhance students' trust and emotional attachment to a university. This theoretical integration highlights the importance of multidimensional communication strategies in shaping institutional reputation and student decision-making. From a practical perspective, the findings of this study are expected to offer actionable insights for higher education institutions, particularly private universities in Kediri. By identifying which communication channels most effectively enhance brand image and influence enrollment, universities can allocate resources more strategically. Strengthening WOM through alumni networks, testimonial campaigns, and peer recommendations, alongside developing engaging and authentic social media content, can serve as efficient tools to boost institutional competitiveness and brand loyalty among prospective students. This study aims to test the influence of WOM and SMM on students' decisions, with brand image as a mediating variable.

Based on the conceptual framework described above, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: *Word of Mouth (WOM) has a positive and significant effect on Brand Image.*

H2: *Social Media Marketing (SMM) has a positive and significant effect on Brand Image.*

H3: *Word of Mouth (WOM) has a positive and significant effect on Students' Decision.*

H4: *Social Media Marketing (SMM) has a positive and significant effect on Students' Decision.*

H5: *Brand Image has a positive and significant effect on Students' Decision.*

H6: *Brand Image mediates the relationship between Word of Mouth (WOM) and Students' Decision.*

H7: *Brand Image mediates the relationship between Social Media Marketing (SMM) and Students' Decision.*

The research model illustrating the relationships among these variables is presented in Figure 1 below.

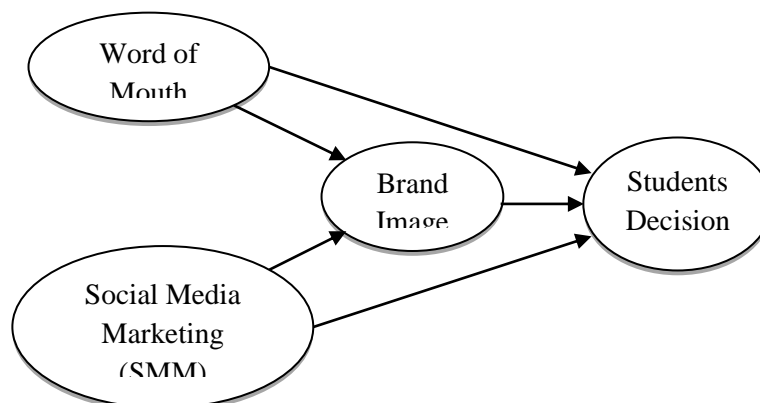


Figure 1. Research Model

Source: Data processed by researchers (2025)



Method

This research employed a quantitative approach with a causal-associative design to examine the relationship between *Word of Mouth* (WOM), *Social Media Marketing* (SMM), *Brand Image*, and *Students' Decision*. The quantitative design was chosen because it enables the identification of causal relationships between variables through numerical data analysis [24]. Data were analyzed using the *Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling* (PLS-SEM) technique with the assistance of SmartPLS 4 software. This method was selected as it is suitable for testing complex models with mediating variables and relatively small sample sizes [25]. The overall research procedure consisted of model specification, data collection, evaluation of measurement and structural models, and hypothesis testing using the bootstrapping method.

The study population consisted of students from several private universities (Perguruan Tinggi Swadaya/PTS) in Kediri City, East Java. This population was selected because Kediri is a growing educational hub where competition among private universities is increasingly influenced by digital communication and reputation management. The sample was determined using a purposive sampling technique with clear inclusion criteria to ensure relevance and reduce selection bias. Respondents were required to (1) be active undergraduate students enrolled at a private university in Kediri, (2) be in their first or second semester to ensure recent decision-making experience in choosing a university, (3) have been exposed to university-related information through social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, YouTube) and interpersonal sources (e.g., peers, family, or alumni), and (4) be willing to participate voluntarily. These criteria were designed to capture respondents who had direct and recent experience with digital and interpersonal communication channels relevant to the research variables.

A total of 75 valid responses were collected and used for analysis. Although relatively small, this sample size was considered adequate for PLS-SEM given the model complexity and exploratory nature of this study [25]. Demographic information such as gender, age, faculty, and year of study was also collected to describe the respondents' characteristics and assess sample heterogeneity. The majority of respondents were between 18 and 22 years old, representing a segment of Generation Z that is highly exposed to digital media and peer-based information exchange. By applying these selection criteria, this study seeks to enhance the internal validity of the findings while acknowledging limitations associated with generalizability.

Primary data were obtained through a structured questionnaire distributed both online via Google Form and offline during campus events. Data collection took place between June and July 2025. Prior to data collection, respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and assured that their participation was voluntary and confidential. The questionnaire was divided into two sections: demographic information and statements measuring the main research variables using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Each variable in this study was operationalized using established indicators adopted and modified from prior research to fit the context of private higher education in Kediri.



WOM was measured using four indicators developed by Arndt and Harahap et al., covering recommendation strength, credibility of information, emotional expression, and willingness to share experiences. SMM was assessed using five indicators derived from Kim and Ko (2013), namely entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and word-of-mouth facilitation. Brand Image was measured using four indicators based on Aaker (1996) and Keller (2013), including brand association, trust, attractiveness, and emotional connection. Lastly, Students' Decision was measured using four indicators adopted from Harahap et al. and Septiana et al., including information search, evaluation of alternatives, enrollment intention, and final choice.

To ensure construct reliability and validity, each variable was tested using reflective measurement criteria in the PLS-SEM framework. Convergent validity was verified through indicator loadings (>0.70) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE >0.50), while reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (both >0.70) [10]. The analysis proceeded with evaluating the structural model to determine collinearity, coefficient of determination (R^2), and the path coefficients between variables. Hypothesis testing was conducted using the bootstrapping method with 5,000 subsamples. The hypothesis was accepted if the *t-statistic* exceeded 1.96 and the *p-value* was below 0.05 [26].

The chosen methodology and statistical approach ensure that the study's findings are analytically robust and replicable. The clear procedural explanation also enables future researchers to reproduce or extend the present study within similar contexts of higher education marketing communication.

Results and Discussion

Result

Respondent Description

The data in this study were obtained from seventy five respondents, consisting of first-semester students from three private universities in Kediri, East Java. The demographic profile of the respondents is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

No	Data	Frequency	Percentage
1	Gender		
	Male	45	60%
	Female	30	40%
2	University		
	University 1	32	43%
	University 2	22	29%
	University 3	21	28%



No	Data	Frequency	Percentage
3	Faculty		
	Economics	30	40%
	FKIP	3	4%
	Law	21	28%
	Agriculture	12	16%
	Engineering	6	8%
	Economics	3	4%

Source: Data processed by researchers (2025)

Most respondents were male (60%), indicating that perceptions regarding word of mouth and social media marketing in the context of choosing a private university were primarily shaped by male perspectives. The largest proportion of respondents came from University 1 (43%), followed by University 2 (29%) and University 3 (28%), showing a relatively balanced distribution among the three institutions. In terms of academic background, most respondents were from the Faculty of Economics (40%), which suggests a higher awareness and understanding of marketing, branding, and communication strategies compared to other faculties.

This distribution confirms that the targeted sample appropriately represents the population of private university students in Kediri, particularly those exposed to both *Word of Mouth* (WOM) and *Social Media Marketing* (SMM) as dominant communication channels. The demographic profile also reflects the study's emphasis on the interaction between digital engagement and interpersonal influence in shaping students' enrollment decisions.

Validity and Reliability Testing

The measurement model was assessed to ensure that the constructs used in this study met the required standards of validity and reliability. Convergent validity was evaluated using outer loading and average variance extracted (AVE), while reliability was examined through Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability.

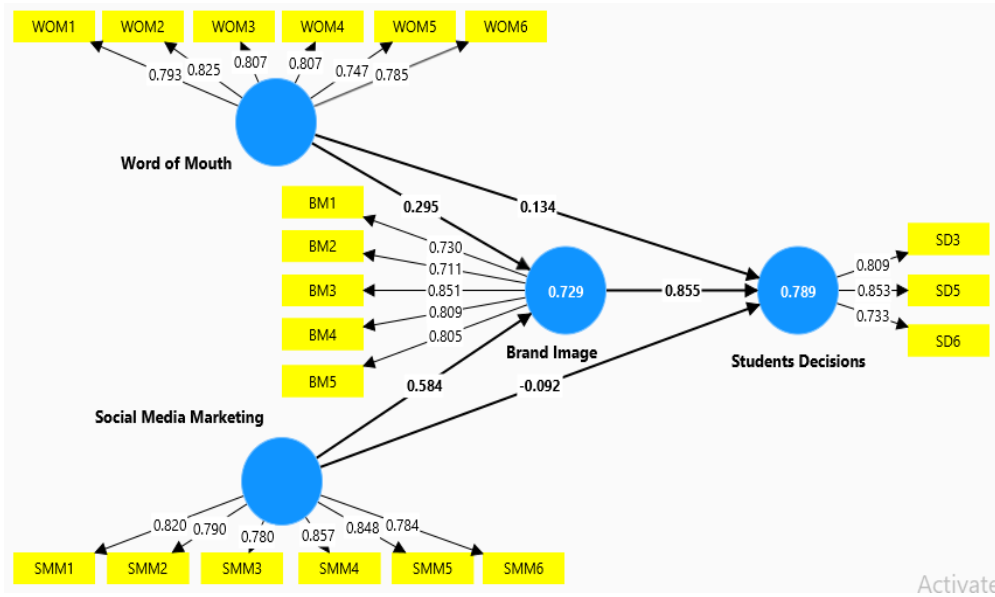


Figure 2. Partial Least Squares (PLS) Analysis – Outer Model Evaluation
Source: SmartPLS 3.0 Output (2025)

As shown in the outer model (Figure 2), all indicator loadings for the constructs Word of Mouth (WOM), Social Media Marketing (SMM), Brand Image (BI), and Students' Decisions (SD) exceeded the minimum threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory convergent validity [25]. The loading values ranged from 0.733 to 0.857, suggesting that each indicator was a valid measure of its corresponding latent construct.

Furthermore, Table 2 presents the results of reliability and validity testing. All constructs demonstrated Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values above 0.70, confirming internal consistency reliability [25]. The AVE values for all variables were also greater than 0.60, indicating that each construct explained more than half of the variance in its respective indicators, which fulfills the requirement for convergent validity [27].

Table 2. Reliability and Validity Results

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (pa)	Composite Reliability (pc)	AVE
Brand Image	0.841	0.851	0.887	0.613
Social Media Marketing	0.898	0.901	0.922	0.663
Students' Decisions	0.720	0.740	0.841	0.640
Word of Mouth	0.883	0.883	0.911	0.631

Source: SmartPLS 3.0 Output (2025)

The findings indicate that all constructs are both valid and reliable, confirming that the measurement model meets the required psychometric standards. Therefore, all indicators were retained for subsequent analysis in the structural model.



Table 3. Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) Results

Construct	Brand Image	Social Media Marketing	Students' Decisions	Word of Mouth
Brand Image				
Social Media Marketing	0,567			
Students' Decisions	0,707	0,714		
Word of Mouth	0,736	0,877	0,732	

Source: SmartPLS 3.0 Output (2025)

Based on table 3, all HTMT values < 0.90 , thus meeting the discriminant validity criteria (Hair et al., 2022). The indicators in this study were adapted from previously validated literature and then contextualized to the environment of Private Higher Education Institutions (PTS) in Kediri through several stages. First, content adaptation was carried out by changing general terms such as brand or product to the context of higher education such as university and campus experience. Second, indicators were adjusted to local characteristics, where WOM includes direct communication and e-WOM, while SMM focused on engagement aspects such as interactivity and authenticity of content relevant to Generation Z students. Third, expert judgment was conducted to ensure the suitability of the content, followed by a pilot test on PTS students in Kediri to test the clarity and relevance of the items. Through this process, the research instrument remained conceptually valid and contextual to the dynamics of student communication in Kediri.

Structural Model Test Results (Inner Model)

R-Square (R^2)

The structural model was assessed by evaluating the coefficient of determination (R^2) to determine how much variance in the endogenous variables can be explained by the exogenous constructs. According to Hair et al. (2021), an R^2 value of 0.75, 0.50, and 0.25 can be considered substantial, moderate, and weak, respectively [25].

As shown in Table 3, the R^2 value for Brand Image is 0.729, while the R^2 value for Students' Decisions is 0.789. These results indicate that 72.9% of the variance in Brand Image is explained by Word of Mouth and Social Media Marketing, while 78.9% of the variance in Students' Decisions is explained by Word of Mouth, Social Media Marketing, and Brand Image. Both values fall within the *strong category*, suggesting that the model has substantial explanatory power and that the independent variables collectively provide a strong prediction of the dependent constructs.

Table 4. R^2 Values

Variable	R^2	R^2 Adjusted
Brand Image	0.729	0.727
Students' Decisions	0.789	0.787

Source: SmartPLS 3.0 Output (2025)

The high R^2 value indicates that, theoretically, Brand Image is a central variable with a dominant influence on student decisions, so a large variance contribution is still substantively acceptable. To minimize the risk of overfitting, the analysis was conducted



using the bootstrapping procedure in PLS-SEM, which does not rely on distributional assumptions and is more robust to small sample sizes. Furthermore, the effect size (f^2) value was also used to ensure that the model has adequate predictive ability, not simply a fit to the sample data.

Effect Size (f^2)

The effect size (f^2) test was conducted to determine the magnitude of the influence of each exogenous construct on the endogenous constructs. According to Hair et al., an f^2 value of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 indicates a small, medium, and large effect, respectively [25].

As shown in Table 4, the f^2 values indicate that Social Media Marketing has a moderate effect on Brand Image ($f^2 = 0.304$), while Word of Mouth has a small effect ($f^2 = 0.078$). Furthermore, Brand Image shows a very large effect on Students' Decisions ($f^2 = 0.940$), confirming its dominant role in influencing students' decision-making.

Meanwhile, Social Media Marketing and Word of Mouth both have very small direct effects on Students' Decisions, with f^2 values of 0.007 and 0.019, respectively. This suggests that their contribution is indirect, primarily mediated through Brand Image.

Table 5. Effect Size (f^2) Values

Construct	Brand Image	Social Media Marketing	Students' Decisions	Word of Mouth
Brand Image	—	—	0.940	—
Social Media Marketing	0.304	—	0.007	—
Students' Decisions	—	—	—	—
Word of Mouth	0.078	—	0.019	—

Source: SmartPLS 3.0 Output (2025)

These findings imply that Brand Image acts as the most powerful variable in the model, serving as a bridge that strengthens the indirect influence of both Word of Mouth and Social Media Marketing on Students' Decisions.

Path Coefficient (Direct Effects)

The path coefficient test aims to determine the magnitude and direction of the influence between latent variables within the structural model. The results of the path coefficient test obtained through bootstrapping in SmartPLS are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Path Coefficient Results

Path	Original Sample (O)	T Statistics	P Values	Description
Brand Image → Students Decisions	0.855	16.648	0.000	Significant
Social Media Marketing → Brand Image	0.584	9.882	0.000	Significant
Social Media Marketing → Students Decisions	-0.092	1.615	0.106	Not significant
Word of Mouth → Brand Image	0.295	4.710	0.000	Significant



Path	Original Sample (O)	T Statistics	P Values	Description
Word of Mouth → Students Decisions	0.134	1.979	0.048	Significant

Source: SmartPLS 3.0 Output (2025)

The path analysis results indicate that Word of Mouth (WOM) has a positive and significant effect on Brand Image ($\beta = 0.295$; $p < 0.05$), meaning that positive information or recommendations about a university contribute to strengthening its image in the minds of prospective students. WOM also shows a direct and significant influence on Students' Decisions ($\beta = 0.134$; $p < 0.05$), implying that favorable word-of-mouth communication helps shape students' choices of higher education institutions.

Social Media Marketing (SMM) demonstrates a strong positive and significant influence on Brand Image ($\beta = 0.584$; $p < 0.05$), confirming that the more engaging and consistent promotional content is on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, the stronger the brand image formed. However, SMM's direct influence on Students' Decisions is negative and statistically insignificant ($\beta = -0.092$; $p > 0.05$). This suggests that while social media promotions attract attention, they do not directly determine student choices unless mediated by a strong brand image.

Based on the persuasion knowledge model, individuals are able to recognize persuasive intent in marketing messages. When students perceive social media content as promotional, they tend to reduce their level of trust and engagement, thus weakening or even negatively impacting their decision-making [28]. Therefore, the negative coefficient of SMM does not merely indicate ineffectiveness, but rather indicates that the role of SMM is more indirect through brand image formation, rather than as a direct decision-making driver. This finding reinforces the importance of a relational and authentic approach in social media strategies, particularly in the context of Generation Z students.

Furthermore, Brand Image has the most substantial positive and significant influence on Students' Decisions ($\beta = 0.855$; $p < 0.05$), indicating that students tend to choose universities that are perceived to have a positive reputation, credibility, and academic quality.

Overall, these findings confirm that the indirect effect of Social Media Marketing and Word of Mouth on Students' Decisions through Brand Image is stronger than their direct effects. Hence, Brand Image serves as an essential mediating variable that amplifies the impact of communication strategies on students' decision-making.

Indirect Effects (Mediation Analysis)

The indirect effect analysis was conducted to evaluate the mediating role of Brand Image in the relationship between Word of Mouth (WOM) and Social Media Marketing (SMM) on Students' Decisions. The *bootstrapping* results for the indirect effects are presented in table 7.

Table 7. Indirect Effects (Mediation Testing)

Path	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics ((O/STDEV))	P Values
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Path	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (O/STDEV)	P Values
Social Media Marketing → Brand Image → Students Decisions	0.500	0.498	0.064	7.829	0.000
Word of Mouth → Brand Image → Students Decisions	0.252	0.254	0.053	4.786	0.000

Source: SmartPLS 3.0 Output (2025)

The results indicate that Brand Image successfully mediates the relationship between both Word of Mouth and Social Media Marketing with Students' Decisions. The indirect effect of WOM on Students' Decisions through Brand Image ($\beta = 0.252$, $p < 0.001$) shows that positive interpersonal communication and recommendations primarily influence students' choices by shaping their perception of the institution's image rather than directly affecting their decisions. Similarly, the indirect effect of Social Media Marketing on Students' Decisions through Brand Image ($\beta = 0.500$, $p < 0.001$) confirms that social media promotions become more effective when they contribute to building a positive and credible institutional image. Thus, the mediation test supports the notion that Brand Image acts as a key intermediary variable linking external communication efforts (both interpersonal and digital) to students' enrollment behavior. This finding aligns with prior studies emphasizing that perceived brand credibility strengthens the decision-making process of prospective students [15][29].

Discussion

The Influence of Word of Mouth on Brand Image

The first hypothesis (H1) proposed that Word of Mouth (WOM) has a positive and significant influence on Brand Image. The result of the structural equation modeling confirmed this relationship, with a path coefficient of $\beta = 0.295$ and a p-value of 0.000, indicating that WOM significantly contributes to the enhancement of a university's brand image among prospective students.

This finding aligns with Arndt's (1967) classic theory of WOM, which conceptualizes it as informal person-to-person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and a receiver concerning a brand, product, or service. Arndt emphasized that WOM is one of the most influential forms of communication because it conveys credibility and personal trust elements that formal advertising often lacks. Within the higher education context, such interpersonal communication becomes even more relevant, as students rely heavily on trusted sources (friends, family, alumni) when making academic decision.

The result is consistent with the study by Ningsi and Ekowati (2021), who found that WOM serves as one of the most credible communication tools in shaping consumer perceptions and influencing purchasing behavior [7]. Similarly, Suarmaja et al. (2023) demonstrated that positive WOM significantly shapes students' attitudes toward higher education institutions [15]. This suggests that positive experiences shared by alumni and



current students function as powerful endorsements that build the institution's credibility and image.

The role of WOM is crucial for Generation Z in Indonesia due to their digital-savvy, socially connected nature, and tendency to rely on authentic experiences from their communities. They not only rely on direct communication from friends, family, or alumni, but also extend WOM to the digital realm through social media, review platforms, and online forums. They trust user-generated content such as student testimonials on TikTok, Instagram, or YouTube more than formal institutional advertising. Furthermore, in a collectivistic culture like Indonesia, recommendations from the social environment have a strong influence on educational decision-making. Therefore, the findings of this study confirm that WOM functions not only as a traditional communication tool but has evolved into a social-digital influence that is crucial in shaping the brand image of higher education institutions among Generation Z in Indonesia.

Theoretically, this result reinforces the notion that brand image formation begins in the social communication layer. WOM serves as an antecedent that introduces potential students to a university's values and reputation before they engage directly with institutional marketing content. A credible WOM environment acts as a filter through which marketing messages are interpreted meaning that even strong media promotions can be ineffective without the reinforcement of trustworthy interpersonal recommendations.

From a managerial perspective, these findings highlight the need for private universities in Kediri to strategically manage and stimulate positive WOM. Institutions can formalize this through alumni ambassador programs, peer-to-peer engagement, testimonial campaigns, or digital community spaces where student experiences are organically shared. By encouraging authentic communication rather than scripted promotion, universities can strengthen their perceived image and build lasting trust within their target audience.

The Influence of Social Media Marketing on Brand Image

The second hypothesis (H2) proposed that Social Media Marketing (SMM) positively and significantly affects Brand Image. The empirical results from the structural model supported this hypothesis, with a path coefficient of $\beta = 0.584$ and a p-value of 0.000, indicating a strong and significant relationship. This suggests that effective utilization of social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube enhances how potential students perceive and emotionally connect with a university brand.

This finding is in line with Mangold and Faulds (2009), who argue that social media has transformed the traditional communication paradigm by merging direct marketing and word-of-mouth communication [5]. Through interactive engagement, institutions can build stronger emotional associations, increasing brand familiarity and trust. Furthermore, Keller's (2013) concept of brand equity supports the idea that consistent and value-driven communication across social media channels contributes to a favorable brand image by reinforcing associations of quality, credibility, and relevance in the consumer's mind [21].

For Generation Z in Indonesia, social media platforms (SMM) are a primary source of information and reference. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube serve not only as entertainment but also as a means of exploring campus life, academic culture, and career prospects. Furthermore, in Indonesia's collectivist society, interactions, comments, and



reviews on social media serve as important forms of social validation. Therefore, the effectiveness of SMM in this study reflects how universities need to build authentic, interactive, and relevant communication to build a strong brand image among Generation Z Indonesians.

Empirically, the result supports previous findings by Sulfitra and Nuzulman (2024), who concluded that social media marketing significantly influences students' decisions to choose a university by shaping their perceptions and expectations [14]. Likewise, Setyowati et al. (2025) demonstrated that social media content consistency and interactivity play a crucial role in strengthening institutional image and engagement [30]. These studies confirm that digital platforms are not just channels for promotion but are integral tools for brand storytelling and community building.

Theoretically, this result underscores that brand image construction in higher education now operates through dual pathways: informational exposure and emotional resonance. While traditional media once dominated institutional branding, today's prospective students base their perceptions on visual storytelling, peer interaction, and social proof available on digital platforms. Effective use of social media enables universities to communicate authenticity, campus culture, and academic excellence in ways that traditional methods cannot.

From a managerial standpoint, the findings suggest that private universities in Kediri must invest strategically in social media branding efforts that go beyond simple advertising. The focus should be on content authenticity, consistency, and interactivity including behind-the-scenes campus videos, student testimonials, faculty highlights, and alumni success stories. Additionally, collaboration with micro-influencers or student ambassadors can amplify reach and enhance credibility among Generation Z audiences, who tend to rely heavily on peer recommendations and digital engagement when evaluating educational options.

The Influence of Word of Mouth on Students' Decisions

The third hypothesis (H3) proposed that Word of Mouth (WOM) has a positive and significant effect on Students' Decisions. The statistical analysis indicated a path coefficient (β) of 0.134 with a p-value of 0.048 (<0.05), signifying that WOM exerts a positive yet relatively weak direct influence on students' decisions to choose a private university in Kediri. This result implies that although interpersonal recommendations contribute to students' decision-making, their impact tends to be more substantial when combined with other factors such as institutional image and social media exposure.

Generation Z in Indonesia more often validates recommendations from friends, family, or alumni through social media before making a final decision. Furthermore, a collectivist culture maintains the importance of social opinions, but final decisions are typically influenced by a combination of WOM, campus image, and readily accessible digital information. This explains the relatively smaller direct influence of WOM, as for Generation Z, personal recommendations become more powerful when reinforced by visual evidence, online reviews, and narratives shared across digital platforms.

Theoretically, this finding aligns with Arndt (1967), who defined word of mouth as "oral, person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the



receiver perceives as non-commercial, regarding a brand, product, or service” [31]. Arndt’s conceptualization emphasizes the credibility and trust embedded in interpersonal exchanges, which are often more persuasive than formal advertising. In the context of higher education, personal testimonials from peers, family members, or alumni carry significant weight, especially when students face uncertainty about academic quality or campus environment.

The positive relationship between WOM and students’ decisions found in this study is consistent with Ningsi and Ekowati (2021), who found that personal recommendations and shared experiences strongly affect prospective students’ trust and eventual enrollment decisions [8]. Similarly, Suarmaja et al. (2023) demonstrated that word of mouth has a substantial role in influencing students’ enrollment behavior, particularly when complemented by digital communication channels that extend WOM effects beyond immediate social circles [15].

However, the relatively small coefficient value ($\beta = 0.134$) suggests that WOM’s direct influence may be limited when compared to other determinants such as brand image ($\beta = 0.855$). This outcome aligns with Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), who argue that the effectiveness of WOM depends heavily on the strength of emotional attachment and the perceived expertise of the message source [32]. In the modern educational landscape, WOM often interacts with social media communication, where testimonials and shared experiences are amplified digitally, blurring the line between interpersonal and mediated influence.

From a managerial perspective, private universities in Kediri should recognize that WOM remains a powerful but indirect marketing tool. Encouraging satisfied students and alumni to share their authentic experiences both offline and online can organically enhance the institution’s reputation and attract potential students. Initiatives such as alumni networks, campus ambassador programs, and student-led events can be leveraged to stimulate positive WOM that supports long-term brand equity.

Moreover, integrating WOM with digital storytelling strategies can expand its reach. By featuring student testimonials, success stories, and campus experiences on social media, universities can transform personal narratives into persuasive public endorsements. This synergy between personal recommendation and digital dissemination ensures that WOM not only builds trust but also strengthens emotional engagement with the institution’s brand identity.

The Influence of Social Media Marketing on Students’ Decisions

The fourth hypothesis (H4) posited that Social Media Marketing (SMM) has a positive and significant effect on Students’ Decisions. However, the findings of this study show otherwise the path coefficient ($\beta = -0.092$) with a p-value of 0.106 (>0.05) indicates that the direct influence of social media marketing on students’ decisions is negative and not statistically significant. This suggests that while exposure to social media marketing activities may increase awareness, it does not directly lead to enrollment decisions among students in private universities in Kediri.

In the Indonesian context, particularly for Generation Z, these results reflect that high exposure to Social Media Marketing (SMM) does not automatically drive college choice decisions. Generation Z in Indonesia, highly familiar with digital media, tends to be more critical and selective of promotional content, often experiencing information overload.



Furthermore, in collectivist cultures, educational decisions are still influenced by social considerations such as family recommendations, institutional reputation, and validated real-life experiences. Therefore, SMM plays a more significant role as a means of shaping initial perceptions, while the final decision of Generation Z students in Indonesia is determined by a combination of a strong campus image, trust, and broader social validation.

This result offers an interesting theoretical insight. According to Keller (2013), effective marketing communication must move beyond mere exposure and instead aim to create meaningful associations and emotional resonance with the audience [21]. In the context of higher education, social media marketing that focuses solely on promotional content such as registration campaigns or advertisements may fail to generate genuine engagement or trust. This finding echoes Alalwan a (2018), who found that the impact of social media marketing on behavioral intention depends significantly on perceived informativeness, credibility, and interactivity of the content [33].

Moreover, the negative yet insignificant coefficient might reflect the “information overload” effect, where students especially Generation Z are constantly exposed to a flood of digital advertisements from multiple institutions [34]. This oversaturation can lead to fatigue and skepticism, diminishing the persuasive effect of social media campaigns. Therefore, social media marketing alone may not be sufficient to drive enrollment unless it is supported by strong institutional reputation and positive interpersonal influence.

This interpretation aligns with findings from Sulfitra & Nuzulman (2024), who observed that while social media marketing enhances brand visibility and awareness, it does not necessarily translate into immediate enrollment decisions [14]. Instead, the study revealed that SMM becomes more effective when it strengthens brand image, which in turn mediates students’ final choices. In line with this reasoning, the indirect effect found in this research ($\beta = 0.500$; $p < 0.001$) confirms that SMM exerts its influence through brand image rather than direct persuasion.

From a managerial standpoint, private universities should shift their focus from promotional-based to relational-based content strategies. Social media platforms should not merely function as advertisement channels, but as spaces for storytelling, interaction, and community building. Posts highlighting student achievements, campus culture, alumni success, and faculty expertise can foster trust and emotional attachment elements essential for shaping long-term student loyalty and brand equity [35].

Furthermore, collaboration with credible micro-influencers or student ambassadors can strengthen authenticity and peer relatability, two factors proven to enhance message credibility among Generation Z [36]. Thus, universities in Kediri must understand that while social media marketing is indispensable, its true strength lies in cultivating positive brand perception and emotional engagement rather than direct persuasion.

The Influence of Brand Image on Students’ Decisions

The fifth hypothesis (H5) proposed that Brand Image has a positive and significant effect on Students’ Decisions to choose private universities in Kediri. The results of the structural model confirm this hypothesis, showing a path coefficient of 0.855 with a t-value of 16.648 and $p < 0.001$, indicating a very strong and significant influence. This finding



demonstrates that students' perceptions of a university's reputation, credibility, and quality play a central role in shaping their final enrollment decisions.

The power of brand image in influencing student decisions is very dominant because this generation tends to seek institutions that are not only academically superior, but also have an image relevant to their identity and aspirations. Generation Z in Indonesia pays close attention to the reputation of the campus, which is reflected through its digital presence, student testimonials, and public perception on social media. Furthermore, in a culture that still considers the opinions of family and social circles, a strong brand image provides a sense of security and reduces uncertainty in choosing a university. Therefore, this finding confirms that for Generation Z Indonesia, the decision to choose a university is highly dependent on the image of the institution that can build trust, pride, and emotional connection.

Theoretically, this aligns with Keller's (2013) Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model, which emphasizes that a positive brand image fosters trust, reduces perceived risk, and increases the likelihood of consumer choice [21]. In the higher education context, brand image functions as a symbolic and emotional cue it reflects the institution's values, academic excellence, campus life, and social standing. When prospective students associate these positive attributes with a university, they are more inclined to view it as a desirable choice for their academic future.

Empirically, this result supports the findings of Septiana et al. (2025), who found that brand image serves as a crucial determinant in shaping students' intentions to enroll in private universities, as it reflects the institution's credibility and emotional appeal [22]. Similarly, Alves & Raposo (2010) argued that brand image in higher education is built not only through marketing communication but also through student experience, alumni reputation, and word-of-mouth advocacy [37]. This reinforces the notion that building a sustainable image requires a consistent alignment between institutional identity and stakeholder perception.

The dominance of brand image in influencing student decisions is further reflected in the high R^2 value of 0.789 for Students' Decisions, suggesting that most of the variance in students' choices can be explained by the strength of institutional image. This finding corroborates Helgesen & Nettet (2007), who emphasized that institutional image is one of the most powerful drivers of student loyalty and recruitment success in competitive higher education markets [38].

From a practical standpoint, this finding underscores the need for strategic brand management in private universities. Institutions must cultivate a coherent and authentic image that resonates with prospective students' aspirations. This includes maintaining consistent visual identity, showcasing real academic achievements, enhancing campus facilities, and highlighting graduate employability outcomes. More importantly, universities should encourage student-generated content such as testimonials, short videos, or campus diaries to enhance perceived authenticity and emotional engagement.

In the case of private universities in Kediri, where competition is growing and differentiation remains limited, a strong and trusted brand image can serve as a decisive factor in attracting new students. Thus, brand management should not be treated as a marketing afterthought, but as a strategic, institution-wide effort that integrates communication, academic excellence, and student experience into a unified brand identity.



The Mediating Role of Brand Image between Word of Mouth and Students' Decisions

The sixth hypothesis (H6) proposed that Brand Image mediates the relationship between Word of Mouth (WOM) and Students' Decisions in choosing private universities in Kediri. The results of the indirect effect analysis confirm this mediation, with a path coefficient of 0.252, $t = 4.786$, and $p < 0.001$, indicating a positive and significant indirect relationship. This means that WOM influences students' choices primarily through its impact on Brand Image, rather than directly shaping the decision itself.

The finding that brand image mediates the relationship between word of mouth, SMM, and students' decisions has important theoretical implications. Conceptually, these results confirm that in the context of higher education, marketing communications do not directly affect behavior, but rather through the process of forming perceptions and meanings. This strengthens the integration between brand equity theory and consumer decision-making theory, where external stimuli (WOM and SMM) are first internalized into associations, beliefs, and institutional image before influencing decisions.

Generation Z in Indonesia tends to confirm recommendations from friends, family, or alumni through various digital sources, so positive WOM will be stronger when it can consistently strengthen the campus image. Furthermore, in collectivist cultures, social validation has a significant influence, but the final decision is still based on the overall perception of the institution's reputation. Therefore, these findings suggest that for Generation Z in Indonesia, WOM is effective not because of its direct influence, but because of its ability to build and strengthen a trusted brand image.

Theoretically, this finding aligns with Keller's (2013) concept of brand knowledge, which posits that consumer perception of a brand is built progressively through information sharing and social experience [21]. WOM serves as a key mechanism in this process, functioning as a socially driven source of brand meaning that contributes to image formation [31]. When students hear positive testimonials or recommendations from trusted peers, family members, or alumni, these communications strengthen the perceived credibility and emotional value of the university brand ultimately influencing their final decision.

In the relationship between WOM and Students' Decisions, both the direct influence ($\beta = 0.134$; $p = 0.048$) and the indirect influence through Brand Image ($\beta = 0.252$; $p < 0.001$) were significant. This indicates partial mediation. This means that WOM has two channels of influence: directly through interpersonal trust and indirectly through brand image formation. This finding suggests that recommendations from friends, family, or alumni not only shape perceptions of an institution but can also directly drive decisions without going through a complex evaluation process.

This result is consistent with prior research. Suarmaja et al. (2023) found that WOM has a significant indirect effect on students' enrollment decisions through the mediating role of brand image, indicating that credibility and emotional resonance play a larger role than direct persuasion [15]. Similarly, Mourad, Ennew, and Kortam (2011) emphasized that in higher education, WOM is an experiential signal that shapes institutional reputation before formal interactions occur [23]. Thus, positive WOM enhances the symbolic and emotional appeal of the institution, which in turn increases student trust and enrollment likelihood.



In the context of private universities in Kediri, this mediation effect is particularly relevant. The findings suggest that students are more responsive to information that reinforces image-based cues such as the perceived professionalism, academic quality, and social recognition of the institution rather than purely rational arguments. WOM acts as a relational bridge that validates these attributes through authentic social proof. When friends or family recommend a university with enthusiasm and credibility, the message contributes to building a more compelling brand narrative in the minds of prospective students.

Managerially, these insights imply that higher education institutions should strategically manage and amplify WOM as a tool for brand image development. Encouraging alumni engagement, student testimonials, and online community participation can enhance the authenticity of institutional messaging. Furthermore, universities should foster meaningful academic and social experiences that students naturally share, ensuring that every interaction becomes a potential source of positive WOM that reinforces institutional image.

In summary, the mediating role of Brand Image reveals that WOM alone is not sufficient to drive student decisions; instead, its effectiveness depends on how well it strengthens the institution's image in the eyes of prospective students. This underscores the intertwined nature of interpersonal communication and brand perception in shaping enrollment behavior within the higher education sector.

The Mediating Role of Brand Image between Social Media Marketing and Students' Decisions

The seventh hypothesis (H7) proposed that Brand Image mediates the relationship between Social Media Marketing (SMM) and Students' Decisions in choosing private universities in Kediri. The indirect effect analysis confirms this mediation, with a path coefficient of 0.500, $t = 7.829$, and $p < 0.001$, indicating that the influence of SMM on students' enrollment decisions is largely indirect through the enhancement of Brand Image rather than a direct persuasive impact.

In the relationship between Social Media Marketing (SMM) and Students' Decisions, it was found that the direct effect was not significant ($\beta = -0.092$; $p = 0.106$), while the indirect effect through Brand Image was significant ($\beta = 0.500$; $p < 0.001$). This indicates the presence of full mediation. Conceptually, this finding confirms that SMM is not able to directly influence student decisions, but must first form a positive perception through Brand Image. In other words, social media functions as a means of forming meaning and brand associations, not as a direct persuasion tool.

These findings suggest that SMM is more effective when it builds and strengthens brand image rather than simply delivering promotional messages. Generation Z in Indonesia, highly active on social media, tends to seek meaning, identity, and values from an institution through the digital content they consume. Furthermore, in a culture that emphasizes social validation, a consistent and positive campus image on social media is more likely to be trusted and internalized. Therefore, SMM influences student decisions not directly, but through its ability to build an authentic, relevant brand image and create emotional bonds with Generation Z Indonesia.

This result reinforces the theoretical framework of Keller's (2013) Brand Equity Theory, which highlights that digital marketing efforts contribute to decision-making by



shaping how consumers perceive a brand's value, credibility, and emotional appeal [21]. Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube provide universities with opportunities to build visual identity, consistency, and engagement, which together strengthen brand associations in the minds of potential students. When these associations become positive and credible, they influence decision-making more effectively than direct promotional content.

Empirically, this study's findings are consistent with Sulfitra and Nuzulman (2024), who found that social media marketing significantly influences students' enrollment choices through perceived institutional image [14]. Similarly, Mourad et al., argued that digital communications in higher education are most effective when they enhance relational value and trust in the brand, rather than functioning merely as advertising tools [23]. Furthermore, Ismail and Spinelli, demonstrated that a strong institutional image, supported by online visibility, plays a central role in increasing student recruitment and retention [39].

The negative and insignificant direct relationship between SMM and Students' Decisions ($\beta = -0.092$, $p = 0.106$) further strengthens the conclusion that social media content alone is insufficient to drive student enrollment decisions. Students may engage with posts, videos, or advertisements, but without a coherent brand identity behind these messages, the marketing effort fails to convert engagement into actual enrollment. In contrast, when digital marketing is designed to reinforce values such as credibility, innovation, and belonging, it contributes meaningfully to a stronger brand image that motivates students to choose the institution.

From a managerial perspective, these findings suggest that private universities in Kediri should strategically reposition their social media marketing to focus on brand storytelling rather than transactional promotion. Universities can integrate authentic student experiences, academic achievements, and community engagement into their digital campaigns to build an aspirational and trustworthy brand image. Collaborating with micro-influencers particularly alumni or current students can also enhance authenticity and emotional connection among prospective students.

In conclusion, the mediation of Brand Image in the relationship between Social Media Marketing and Students' Decisions underscores the importance of emotional and symbolic branding in higher education marketing. Social media's true power lies not in direct persuasion, but in its ability to create and sustain a meaningful institutional identity that students find credible and inspiring. Strengthening brand image through consistent, relatable, and value-driven communication thus becomes a vital strategy for increasing enrollment in an increasingly competitive educational landscape.

In hypothesis testing, the correlation between constructs is measured by observing the path coefficient and its significance level. Next, the significance level is compared with the established hypothesis, using a significance limit of 5% in this study. After the data is processed with SmartPLS and initial calculations are performed using the PLS algorithm, the next step is bootstrapping the created model. The confidence level used is 95% or an α of 0.05. The t-table value at the 5% significance level is 1.96, and the P-value must be less than 0.05. Therefore, the hypothesis is considered accepted and significant if the t-calculated value



is greater than the t-table and the P-value is less than 0.05. Based on the data processing results in Table 8, the hypothesis testing can be further explained as follows.

Conclusion

This study aims to examine the influence of Word of Mouth (WOM) and Social Media Marketing (SMM) on students' decisions to choose a private university in Kediri, with Brand Image as a mediating variable. The findings confirm that WOM and SMM significantly shape students' perceptions; however, their mechanisms of influence differ. WOM exerts both direct and indirect influences on students' decisions, while SMM does not directly influence decisions but operates indirectly through Brand Image. This highlights the central role of Brand Image as a key mechanism that transforms communication exposure into trust, perceived credibility, and institutional preference.

Theoretically, this study contributes by demonstrating that brand image functions as a core cognitive-affective mediator linking communication strategies to decision-making in higher education. More specifically, this study reveals distinct mediation patterns—partial mediation for WOM and full mediation for SMM—that extend Brand Equity Theory by demonstrating that not all communication channels influence behavior through the same pathways. These findings underscore that interpersonal communication (WOM) can directly drive decision-making due to its credibility, while digital communication (SMM) requires image building to be effective.

From a practical perspective, these findings demonstrate the need for a prioritized and phased communication strategy. In the short term, universities should focus on strengthening credible and relevant communications by activating student and alumni ambassadors, promoting authentic testimonials, and increasing interactive engagement on social media platforms. In the medium term, institutions should invest in building a consistent and distinct brand image by integrating WOM and SMM into a cohesive branding strategy, emphasizing academic quality, campus experience, and graduate outcomes. Developing digital communities that facilitate student interaction and experience sharing is also crucial for maintaining long-term engagement and trust among prospective students.

Policy recommendations for private universities should focus on a phased and integrated communication strategy. In the short term (0–1 year), institutions should prioritize strengthening student perceptions through credible and authentic communication, such as activating student and alumni ambassador programs to encourage word of mouth, shifting social media content from mere promotions to real-life experiences (testimonials, campus life, and success stories), and increasing interactivity through Q&A sessions, live engagement, and rapid audience responses.

Meanwhile, in the medium term (1–3 years), strategies should focus on building a strong and sustainable brand image through a consistent brand narrative across all communication channels, encompassing academic excellence, graduate career opportunities, and campus culture. Furthermore, WOM and SMM need to be integrated within a unified branding framework, supported by the development of a digital student community



ecosystem such as experience-sharing platforms and alumni forums to strengthen trust and long-term engagement among prospective students.

While contributing, this study is limited by its relatively small sample size and focus on private universities in Kediri, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, future research is encouraged to test this model in broader and more diverse contexts and to incorporate additional psychological constructs such as trust or perceived value to enrich the understanding of student decision-making processes. Nonetheless, this study provides a strong foundation for advancing theoretical and practical insights into communication-based brand building in higher education.

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