Original Article

Social Media Marketing, eWOM, and Enrollment Intention: The Mediating Role of Brand Awareness

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Abstract: This study examines the role of digital marketing strategies in influencing prospective students' enrollment decisions in higher education. With the increasing importance of social media, universities are adopting Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA) and Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) to enhance brand positioning and attract students. This study aims to analyze the effects of SMMA and eWOM on Brand Awareness and their impact on Intention to Enroll among prospective students of the Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Pakuan. A quantitative explanatory approach was employed using survey data collected from 100 respondents through purposive sampling. Data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling–Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) with SmartPLS 4.0. The results indicate that SMMA has a positive and significant effect on Brand Awareness, while eWOM has a positive but insignificant effect on Brand Awareness. Furthermore, eWOM and Brand Awareness significantly influence Intention to Enroll, whereas SMMA does not have a direct significant effect on enrollment intention. Mediation analysis reveals that Brand Awareness significantly mediates the relationship between SMMA and Intention to Enroll but does not mediate the relationship between eWOM and enrollment intention. These findings suggest that social media marketing strategies primarily influence enrollment decisions indirectly through the formation of Brand Awareness, while eWOM directly affects students' decision-making. The study concludes that higher education institutions should integrate SMMA and eWOM strategies by focusing on brand-building and encouraging positive peer-generated content to enhance student enrollment outcomes.

Keywords: Social Media Marketing; Electronic Word of Mouth; Brand Awareness; Intention to Enroll; Higher Education Marketing.

1. Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technology has fundamentally transformed how organizations communicate with and engage their target audiences. The evolution from traditional marketing to digital marketing has shifted the focus toward interactive, customer-centric communication, where organizations must continuously adapt to changing consumer behavior and technological innovation (Chaffey et al., 2009; Boufim & Barka, 2021). In this context, social media has emerged as a dominant marketing channel, enabling real-time, two-way communication and fostering closer

relationships between institutions and consumers (Kotler & Keller, 2016). This transformation is particularly evident in the higher education sector, where institutions increasingly rely on digital platforms to disseminate information, build institutional image, and influence prospective students' decision-making processes (Nguyen et al., 2021; Wijaya et al., 2023).

One of the most widely adopted strategies in this digital landscape is Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA). SMMA encompasses various forms of online engagement, including content creation, interactivity, entertainment, customization, and trend-based communication (Kim & Ko, 2012; Godey et al., 2016). These activities are not merely promotional tools but also serve as strategic mechanisms to enhance brand awareness, engagement, and long-term relationships with audiences (Bilgin, 2018; Mohseni & Titkanloo, 2022). In higher education, SMMA has been shown to significantly influence students' perceptions, engagement, and enrollment-related decisions (Pasaribu & Achmadi, 2024; Kharisma & Haryono, 2023). Moreover, effective social media strategies can strengthen institutional visibility and brand positioning, which are critical in increasingly competitive educational environments (Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022).

In addition to firm-generated content, consumer-generated information, particularly Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM), plays a crucial role in shaping brand perceptions in digital environments. eWOM refers to the exchange of opinions, experiences, and recommendations among consumers through online platforms (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Unlike traditional advertising, eWOM is perceived as more credible and trustworthy because it originates from independent users, thereby exerting a stronger influence on consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Adhikari et al., 2025). In the context of higher education, eWOM, such as student reviews, testimonials, and peer recommendations has become a key determinant of students' enrollment decisions (Ismail, 2025; Wahab et al., 2024). This highlights the growing importance of peer-driven communication in shaping institutional reputation and attractiveness.

A central construct linking these marketing activities to behavioral outcomes is brand awareness, which refers to consumers' ability to recognize and recall a brand within a given category (Keller, 2016). Brand awareness is a fundamental component of brand equity, influencing consumers' consideration sets and decision-making processes (Kotler & Keller, 2016). In digital contexts, brand awareness is not only shaped by institutional communication but also by interactive engagement and social information flows, including eWOM (Godey et al., 2016; Setiadi & Basri, 2022). High levels of brand awareness increase the likelihood that a brand will be selected, thereby playing a crucial role in driving outcomes such as purchase intention or enrollment intention.

Despite the growing body of literature, several critical issues remain. First, although SMMA and eWOM are widely recognized as influential factors, their relative and combined effects on brand awareness and enrollment intention are not yet fully understood, particularly in higher education contexts. Second, existing studies report inconsistent findings regarding the direct and indirect relationships among these variables. For instance, while some studies find that SMMA significantly influences behavioral intention (Bilgin, 2018; Pasaribu & Achmadi, 2024), others suggest that its effect is indirect and mediated through constructs such as brand awareness or brand image (Nguyen et al., 2021; Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022). Similarly, eWOM has been found to strongly influence intention in some contexts (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012), while in others its effect on brand awareness is limited or context-dependent (Setiadi & Basri, 2022).

These inconsistencies reveal a clear research gap. There is a need for an integrated model that simultaneously examines the roles of SMMA and eWOM in shaping brand awareness and their subsequent impact on enrollment intention, particularly using robust analytical techniques such as PLS-SEM, which is suitable for complex models and predictive analysis (Hair et al., 2014). Furthermore, most prior studies focus on either commercial products or isolated constructs, with limited attention to the higher education sector as a unique service context, where decision-making involves higher involvement, perceived risk, and long-term commitment. In addition, the rapid evolution of digital platforms and changing behavior of Generation Z students, who are highly active on social media, necessitate updated empirical evidence on how digital marketing strategies influence their decisions (Wijaya et al., 2023; Adhikari et al., 2025). Universities must therefore understand not only how to attract attention but also how to convert that attention into actual enrollment intention through effective integration of SMMA and eWOM. Thus, This study aims to analyze the effect of Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA) and Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) on Brand Awareness, and to examine their impact on Intention to Enroll among prospective students of the Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Pakuan.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Digital Marketing and Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA)

The rapid evolution of digital technologies has transformed marketing practices from traditional, one-way communication into interactive, customer-centric engagement systems (Chaffey et al., 2009; Boufim & Barka, 2021). In this context, social media has become a critical platform for organizations to communicate, engage, and build relationships with their audiences (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Social media marketing activities (SMMA) represent a set of

strategic actions carried out through social platforms, including content creation, interaction, entertainment, customization, and trend responsiveness (Kim & Ko, 2012; Godey et al., 2016). Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that SMMA plays a significant role in shaping consumer perceptions and behavioral outcomes. For instance, Bilgin (2018) finds that SMMA has the greatest impact on brand awareness among branding constructs. Similarly, Setiadi and Basri (2022) show that SMMA elements such as entertainment, interaction, and customization significantly enhance brand awareness in digital environments. In the higher education context, SMMA has been shown to increase student engagement, institutional visibility, and enrollment intention (Pasaribu & Achmadi, 2024; Kharisma & Haryono, 2023). Moreover, SMMA contributes to broader branding constructs, including brand identity, perceived value, satisfaction, and brand equity (Mohseni & Titkanloo, 2022; Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022). These findings suggest that SMMA is not only a promotional tool but also a strategic mechanism for building long-term relationships and enhancing brand positioning, particularly in competitive sectors such as higher education.

2.2 Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM)

Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) refers to online consumer-generated communication about products, services, or brands (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Unlike traditional marketing communication, eWOM is perceived as more credible, authentic, and trustworthy, as it originates from independent users rather than organizations (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). Research indicates that eWOM significantly influences brand image, brand awareness, and behavioral intentions. Jalilvand and Samiei (2012) demonstrate that eWOM strongly affects both brand image and purchase intention. In higher education, eWOM has been identified as a key determinant of students' enrollment decisions, as prospective students rely heavily on peer reviews, testimonials, and online discussions (Nguyen et al., 2021; Ismail, 2025). Furthermore, eWOM is driven by various motivations, including social interaction, self-enhancement, and concern for others (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). The increasing importance of peer-generated content is also highlighted by Adhikari et al. (2025), who emphasize that credible and informative content has a stronger influence on enrollment decisions than purely promotional messages.

2.3 Brand Awareness

Brand awareness refers to consumers' ability to recognize and recall a brand within a specific category (Keller, 2016). It is a fundamental component of brand equity, influencing consumer perception and decision-making (Kotler & Keller, 2016). High brand awareness increases the likelihood that a brand will be included in consumers' consideration sets, thereby affecting behavioral outcomes such as purchase or enrollment intention. In digital marketing contexts, brand awareness is shaped by both institutional communication and social interactions, including SMMA and eWOM (Godey et al., 2016). Empirical evidence suggests that SMMA significantly enhances brand awareness by increasing visibility and engagement (Bilgin, 2018), whereas eWOM contributes by disseminating user-generated content (Setiadi & Basri, 2022). In higher education, brand awareness plays a critical role in influencing students' perceptions of institutional credibility and attractiveness, ultimately affecting their enrollment decisions (Pasaribu & Achmadi, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2021).

2.4 Intention to Enroll

Intention to enroll refers to a prospective student's willingness and likelihood to choose and register at a particular institution. It is conceptually similar to purchase intention in marketing literature and is influenced by factors such as brand perception, information credibility, and social influence (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Previous studies highlight that both SMMA and eWOM significantly influence enrollment intention, either directly or indirectly. For example, Nguyen et al. (2021) find that social media engagement affects enrollment intention through brand image and eWOM, while Wijaya et al. (2023) demonstrate that digital marketing strategies significantly influence students' interest and enrollment decisions. Additionally, brand-related constructs such as brand awareness, brand equity, and engagement mediate the relationship between enrollment intention and other variables (Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022; Pasaribu & Achmadi, 2024). This indicates that students' decisions are not only driven by marketing exposure but also by perceptions and cognitive evaluations formed through digital interactions.

2.5 Hypothesis Development

Align with the theoretical and empirical literature, the following hypotheses are proposed:

SMMA enhances brand visibility and engagement, leading to increased brand awareness (Bilgin, 2018; Setiadi & Basri, 2022).
H1: Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA) have a positive effect on Brand Awareness.

eWOM provides credible and influential information that shapes brand perceptions (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012).
H2: Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) has a positive effect on Brand Awareness.

SMMA can influence behavioral intentions by enhancing engagement and brand perception (Kharisma & Haryono, 2023).
H3: Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA) have a positive effect on Intention to Enroll.

eWOM significantly affects decision-making through trust and peer influence (Nguyen et al., 2021; Ismail, 2025).
H4: Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) has a positive effect on Intention to Enroll.
Higher brand awareness increases the likelihood of selection and decision-making (Keller, 2016).
H5: Brand Awareness has a positive effect on Intention to Enroll.

Brand awareness acts as an intermediary linking marketing activities to behavioral outcomes (Godey et al., 2016; Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022).
H6: Brand Awareness mediates the relationship between SMMA and Intention to Enroll.
H7: Brand Awareness mediates the relationship between eWOM and Intention to Enroll.

On the basis of the proposed hypotheses, this study develops a conceptual framework integrating SMMA and eWOM as independent variables, Brand Awareness as a mediating variable, and Intention to Enroll as the dependent variable.
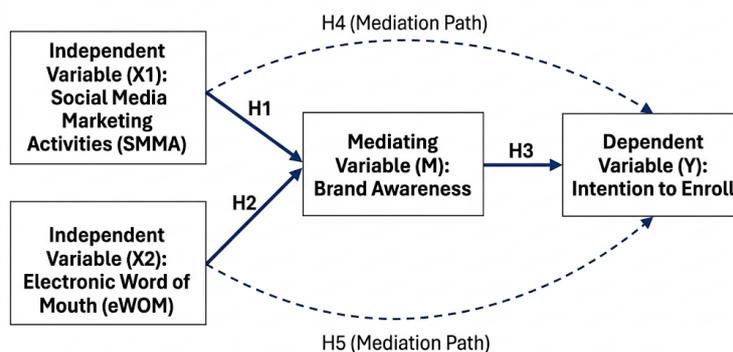

Figure 1. Research Framework

3. Materials and Methods

This study employs a quantitative explanatory research design to examine the causal relationships among Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA), Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM), Brand Awareness, and Intention to Enroll. The population consists of prospective students of the Faculty of Economics and Business at Universitas Pakuan, with a sample of 100 respondents selected using the Slovin formula. A purposive sampling technique was used to ensure respondents had sufficient exposure to social media content and online information about the institution. Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire, with measurement items adapted from prior studies to ensure content validity. All responses were measured using a four-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree to minimize neutral responses. The constructs were measured using reflective indicators: SMMA includes content quality, interaction, and engagement; eWOM covers online reviews, recommendations, and information sharing; Brand Awareness is assessed through brand recognition and recall; and Intention to Enroll reflects respondents' willingness and likelihood to enroll. Data analysis was conducted using Structural Equation Modeling–Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) with SmartPLS 4.0, which is suitable for predictive analysis, complex models, and small sample sizes (Hair et al., 2014). The analysis involved two stages: evaluation of the measurement model (validity and reliability) and assessment of the structural model (hypothesis testing using path coefficients, t-statistics, p-values, R^2, and effect sizes). Ethical considerations were addressed by ensuring voluntary participation, confidentiality of responses, and the use of data solely for academic purposes, with no sensitive personal information collected.

4. Results

4.1 Measurement Model Evaluation

The results of the measurement model evaluation, including indicator loadings, reliability, and convergent validity, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Result of Construct Validity and Reliability

Construct	Indicator	Loading Factor	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Composite Reliability (CR)	AVE
SMMA	SMMA14	0.759	0.935	0.943	0.51
	SMMA15	0.768			
	SMMA16	0.715			
	SMMA17	0.752			
	SMMA18	0.621			
	SMMA19	0.707			
	SMMA1	0.685			
	SMMA11	0.650			
	SMMA13	0.639			
	SMMA10	0.650			
	SMMA2	0.642			
	SMMA5	0.688			
	SMMA6	0.770			
	SMMA7	0.719			
	SMMA20	0.735			
eWOM	eWOM3	0.695	0.934	0.941	0.54
	eWOM6	0.655			
	eWOM8	0.655			
	eWOM10	0.800			
	eWOM13	0.687			
	eWOM14	0.683			
	eWOM17	0.721			
	eWOM18	0.731			
	eWOM20	0.764			
	eWOM21	0.654			
	eWOM22	0.681			
	eWOM23	0.739			
	eWOM24	0.771			
Brand Awareness (BA)	BA1	0.639	0.927	0.936	0.51
	BA2	0.691			
	BA3	0.665			
	BA5	0.640			
	BA6	0.700			
	BA7	0.768			
	BA8	0.811			
	BA9	0.646			
	BA10	0.734			
	BA11	0.751			
	BA12	0.623			
	BA13	0.704			
	BA14	0.776			
Intention to Enroll (ITE)	ITE1	0.700	0.945	0.951	0.57
	ITE2	0.794			

ITE3	0.649
ITE4	0.569
ITE5	0.725
ITE6	0.762
ITE7	0.658
ITE8	0.667
ITE9	0.725
ITE10	0.790
ITE11	0.806
ITE12	0.831
ITE13	0.849
ITE14	0.844
ITE15	0.830

Table 1 presents the results of the construct validity and reliability assessment, including factor loadings, Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for all constructs. Overall, the measurement model demonstrates satisfactory reliability and convergent validity, as all constructs meet the recommended thresholds of Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability above 0.70 and AVE above 0.50 (Hair et al., 2014). The Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA) construct shows loading factors ranging from 0.621 to 0.770, indicating acceptable indicator reliability. It achieves a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.935 and Composite Reliability of 0.943, confirming strong internal consistency, while the AVE value of 0.51 indicates adequate convergent validity. Similarly, the Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) construct exhibits loading values between 0.654 and 0.800, with high reliability reflected in Cronbach's Alpha (0.934) and Composite Reliability (0.941). Its AVE value of 0.54 further confirms strong convergent validity, suggesting that the indicators sufficiently capture the underlying construct.

For Brand Awareness (BA), the loading factors range from 0.623 to 0.811, with Cronbach's Alpha (0.927) and Composite Reliability (0.936) indicating high internal consistency. The AVE of 0.51 meets the minimum threshold, indicating that the construct explains more than half of the variance in its indicators. Meanwhile, the Intention to Enroll (ITE) construct shows the strongest measurement properties, with loadings ranging from 0.569 to 0.849 and most indicators exceeding 0.70. This construct records the highest Cronbach's Alpha (0.945) and Composite Reliability (0.951), along with an AVE of 0.57, indicating excellent convergent validity. Although a few indicators exhibit moderate loadings slightly above 0.60, they are retained due to their theoretical relevance and contribution to construct representation. The refinement process, which involved removing low-loading indicators, successfully improved AVEs across all constructs, thereby exceeding the recommended threshold. Therefore, the measurement model can be considered reliable and valid, providing a strong foundation for subsequent structural model analysis.

This study applies the Fornell–Larcker criterion to assess whether each construct is empirically distinct from the others in the model. According to this criterion, the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct displayed along the diagonal should be greater than the correlations with other constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 2. Result of Discriminant Validity using Fornell–Larcker Criterion

Construct	SMMA	eWOM	BA	ITE
SMMA	0.711			
eWOM	0.450	0.736		
BA	0.528	0.161	0.712	
ITE	0.045	0.473	0.377	0.752

Table 2 presents the results of discriminant validity using Fornell–Larcker criterion. The results indicate that all constructs meet this requirement. Specifically, Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA) has a square root of AVE of 0.711, which is higher than its correlations with eWOM (0.45), Brand Awareness (0.528), and Intention to Enroll (0.045). Similarly, Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) demonstrates a square root of AVE of 0.736, exceeding its correlations with SMMA (0.45), Brand Awareness (0.161), and Intention to Enroll (0.473). For Brand Awareness (BA), the square root of AVE is 0.712, which is greater than its correlations with SMMA (0.528), eWOM (0.161), and Intention to Enroll (0.377). Likewise, Intention to Enroll (ITE) shows the highest square root of AVE at 0.752, surpassing its correlations with SMMA (0.045), eWOM (0.473), and Brand Awareness (0.377). These findings confirm that each construct accounts

for more variance among its indicators than among indicators of other constructs, indicating clear discriminant validity across all variables. Furthermore, the relatively moderate correlations between constructs suggest that while the variables are related, consistent with the proposed theoretical model, they remain sufficiently distinct. Therefore, the measurement model satisfies the discriminant validity requirement and is appropriate for subsequent structural model analysis.

4.2. Structural Model Evaluation

Table 3 presents the results for the coefficient of determination (R^2), the adjusted R^2, and the effect size (f^2), which are used to assess the explanatory power and predictive relevance of the structural model. The R^2 value indicates the proportion of variance in the endogenous variables explained by their respective predictors, while the f^2 value evaluates the magnitude of the impact of exogenous variables on endogenous constructs (Hair et al., 2014).

Table 3. Result of Coefficient Determination and Effect Size

Variable(s)	R-Square (R^2)	Adjusted R^2	f-Square (f^2)
Brand Awareness (BA)	0.429	0.417	0.212
Intention to Enroll (ITE)	0.617	0.605	

The results show that Brand Awareness (BA) has an R^2 of 0.429 and an adjusted R^2 of 0.417, indicating that approximately 42.9% of the variance in BA is explained by Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA) and Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM). This level of explanatory power is moderate, suggesting that SMMA and eWOM play a meaningful role in shaping brand awareness among prospective students. Furthermore, the f^2 value of 0.212 indicates a moderate effect size, implying that the combined influence of SMMA and eWOM contributes substantially to the formation of Brand Awareness. In contrast, Intention to Enroll (ITE) shows a higher R^2 of 0.617 and an adjusted R^2 of 0.605, indicating that 61.7% of the variance in enrollment intention is explained by SMMA, eWOM, and Brand Awareness. This suggests a high level of predictive accuracy, highlighting the model's strong explanatory power in capturing factors influencing students' enrollment decisions. Although the table does not explicitly report the f^2 value for ITE, previous analyses indicate that Brand Awareness and eWOM have moderate effects, while SMMA has a negligible direct effect, suggesting that its influence on enrollment intention is primarily indirect through Brand Awareness. This study confirms that the structural model possesses adequate explanatory power and predictive relevance, with Brand Awareness serving as an important mediating variable between digital marketing factors and enrollment intention. The results support the theoretical assumption that integrated digital marketing strategies, particularly through SMMA and eWOM, play a critical role in influencing prospective students' decision-making processes in higher education.

Table 4 presents the results of hypothesis testing for the direct relationships among the constructs, based on path coefficients (β), t-statistics, and p-values obtained from the SEM-PLS analysis. A hypothesis is considered significant when the t-statistic exceeds 1.96, and the p-value is below 0.05 (Hair et al., 2014).

Table 4. Result of Hypothesis Testing for Direct Effect

Hypothesis	Relationship	Path Coefficient (β)	t-Statistic	p-Value	Decision
H1	SMMA → Brand Awareness	0.528	4.308	0	Supported
H2	eWOM → Brand Awareness	0.161	1.329	0.184	Not Supported
H3	SMMA → Intention to Enroll	0.045	0.276	0.782	Not Supported
H4	eWOM → Intention to Enroll	0.473	2.195	0.028	Supported
H5	Brand Awareness → Intention to Enroll	0.377	3.905	0	Supported

The results in Table 4 indicate that Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA) have a positive and significant effect on Brand Awareness, with a path coefficient of 0.528, a t-statistic of 4.308, and a p-value of 0.000. This supports H1, suggesting that effective social media marketing activities significantly increase brand awareness among prospective students. This finding highlights the importance of interactive, engaging social media strategies for strengthening institutional visibility. In contrast, the relationship between Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) and Brand Awareness is found to be positive but not statistically significant (β = 0.161, t = 1.329, p = 0.184), leading to the rejection of H2. This suggests that although eWOM contributes to brand awareness, its influence is not strong enough to produce a

significant effect in this context, possibly due to variations in the credibility or exposure of online information. Regarding behavioral outcomes, the findings show that SMMA does not have a significant direct effect on Intention to Enroll (β = 0.045, t = 0.276, p = 0.782), thereby rejecting H3. This indicates that social media marketing activities alone are insufficient to directly influence students' enrollment decisions, implying that their impact may operate indirectly through other variables such as brand awareness.

On the other hand, eWOM demonstrates a positive and significant effect on Intention to Enroll (β = 0.473, t = 2.195, p = 0.028), supporting H4. This finding underscores the critical role of peer-generated information, such as reviews and recommendations, in shaping prospective students' decisions, as such information is often perceived as more credible and trustworthy. Finally, Brand Awareness has a significant positive effect on Intention to Enroll (β = 0.377, t = 3.905, p = 0.000), supporting H5. This confirms that higher levels of brand awareness increase the likelihood that prospective students will choose and enroll in the institution, emphasizing its role as a key determinant of behavioral intention. The results reveal that while SMMA primarily influences enrollment intention indirectly through Brand Awareness, eWOM exerts a direct and significant influence on students' decisions, and Brand Awareness serves as a critical linking mechanism between marketing efforts and enrollment intention.

Table 4. Result of Hypothesis Testing for Mediating (Indirect Effect)

Hypothesis	Indirect Relationship	Indirect Effect (β)	t-Statistic	p-Value	Mediation Type	Decision
H6	SMMA → Brand Awareness → Intention to Enroll	0.199	3.102	0.002	Partial Mediation	Supported
H7	eWOM → Brand Awareness → Intention to Enroll	0.061	1.21	0.226	No Mediation	Not Supported

Table 4 presents the results of the mediation analysis, examining the indirect effects of Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA) and Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) on Intention to Enroll through Brand Awareness. The findings reveal that Brand Awareness significantly mediates the relationship between SMMA and Intention to Enroll, as indicated by an indirect effect coefficient of 0.199, a t-statistic of 3.102, and a p-value of 0.002. Therefore, H6 is supported, suggesting that SMMA influences prospective students' intention to enroll primarily through enhancing brand awareness. This implies that social media marketing activities are more effective in shaping enrollment decisions when they successfully build strong brand recognition and recall. Given that the direct effect of SMMA on Intention to Enroll is not significant, this result reflects an indirect-only mediation, highlighting Brand Awareness as a crucial mechanism linking SMMA to behavioral outcomes.

In contrast, the indirect effect of eWOM on Intention to Enroll through Brand Awareness is not statistically significant (β = 0.061, t = 1.21, p = 0.226), leading to the rejection of H7. This indicates that Brand Awareness does not mediate the relationship between eWOM and enrollment intention. Instead, eWOM appears to directly influence students' decision-making, as evidenced by its significant direct effect on Intention to Enroll in the previous analysis. This suggests that prospective students rely more directly on peer-generated information, such as reviews and recommendations, rather than on the formation of brand awareness. The results demonstrate that Brand Awareness plays a selective mediating role, being significant in the SMMA–Intention to Enroll relationship but not in the eWOM–Intention to Enroll relationship. This finding underscores the importance of integrating social media strategies with brand-building efforts, while also recognizing the direct persuasive power of eWOM in influencing students' enrollment decisions.

5. Discussion

This study aims to examine the effects of Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA) and Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) on Brand Awareness and their impact on prospective students' Intention to Enroll. The findings provide important insights into how digital marketing strategies influence decision-making in the higher education context and contribute to the existing literature on digital marketing and consumer behavior. The results show that SMMA has a positive and significant effect on Brand Awareness, supporting Hypothesis 1. This finding is consistent with prior studies indicating that social media marketing activities enhance brand visibility and recognition through interactive and engaging content (Bilgin, 2018; Godey et al., 2016; Setiadi & Basri, 2022). The result also aligns with the theoretical perspective of digital marketing, which emphasizes the importance of two-way communication and customer engagement in shaping brand perception (Chaffey et al., 2009; Kotler & Keller, 2016). In the context of higher education, this suggests that well-designed social media strategies, such as informative content, interactivity, and engagement, are effective tools for strengthening institutional brand awareness among prospective students.

However, the findings reveal that eWOM does not have a significant effect on Brand Awareness, thereby rejecting Hypothesis 2. This result contrasts with previous studies that found eWOM significantly enhances brand awareness by

disseminating user-generated content (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Setiadi & Basri, 2022). A possible explanation is that while eWOM is influential, its impact on awareness may depend on factors such as message credibility, exposure, and platform dynamics. As suggested by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), eWOM behavior is driven by diverse motivations, and not all online interactions contribute equally to brand recognition. Additionally, in higher education contexts, prospective students may prioritize official institutional communication over peer-generated content when forming initial awareness.

Regarding behavioral outcomes, the study finds that SMMA does not have a significant direct effect on Intention to Enroll, thereby rejecting Hypothesis 3. This finding supports previous research indicating that social media marketing primarily functions as a brand-building mechanism rather than a direct driver of behavioral intention (Nguyen et al., 2021; Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022). Similarly, Mohseni and Titkanloo (2022) highlight that SMMA influences behavioral outcomes indirectly through mediating variables such as brand identity, perceived value, and satisfaction. This suggests that while SMMA increases awareness and engagement, it does not directly translate into enrollment decisions without the presence of intermediary constructs.

In contrast, the results indicate that eWOM has a positive and significant effect on Intention to Enroll, supporting Hypothesis 4. This finding is consistent with prior studies emphasizing the strong influence of peer-generated information on consumer decision-making (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2021; Ismail, 2025). eWOM is often perceived as more credible and trustworthy than institutional communication, making it a powerful determinant of behavioral intention. In the higher education context, this implies that prospective students rely heavily on reviews, testimonials, and recommendations when making enrollment decisions. This finding is also supported by Adhikari et al. (2025), who highlight the importance of authenticity and credibility in digital content for influencing student choices.

Furthermore, the study confirms that Brand Awareness has a positive and significant effect on Intention to Enroll, supporting Hypothesis 5. This result aligns with the brand equity theory, which posits that greater brand awareness increases the likelihood that a brand is considered in the decision-making process (Keller, 2016; Kotler & Keller, 2016). Empirical studies in higher education also support this relationship, demonstrating that strong brand awareness enhances institutional attractiveness and influences students' enrollment decisions (Pasaribu & Achmadi, 2024; Kharisma & Haryono, 2023). Therefore, brand awareness serves as a critical factor in converting marketing exposure into actual behavioral intention. The mediation analysis provides further insights into the underlying mechanisms of these relationships. The findings show that Brand Awareness significantly mediates the relationship between SMMA and Intention to Enroll, indicating an indirect-only mediation effect. This supports the notion that SMMA influences enrollment primarily through enhancing brand awareness rather than directly affecting decision-making. This result is consistent with prior studies highlighting the mediating role of brand-related constructs in digital marketing (Godey et al., 2016; Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022). It also reinforces the idea that social media marketing should focus on building strong brand recognition as a pathway to influencing behavioral outcomes.

In contrast, Brand Awareness does not mediate the relationship between eWOM and Intention to Enroll, as the indirect effect is not significant. This suggests that eWOM operates through a direct mechanism, influencing students' decisions without necessarily passing through brand awareness. This finding is consistent with studies showing that eWOM directly affects behavioral intentions due to its perceived credibility and relevance (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Wahab et al., 2024). It also indicates that eWOM may influence other constructs, such as trust or perceived value, rather than brand awareness. The findings of this study highlight that SMMA and eWOM play distinct but complementary roles in influencing enrollment intention. SMMA primarily contributes to brand-building and awareness formation, while eWOM directly influences decision-making through trust and peer influence. These results are consistent with the broader digital marketing literature, which emphasizes the integration of firm-generated and user-generated content in shaping consumer behavior (Chaffey et al., 2009; Boufim & Barka, 2021). From a theoretical perspective, this study extends existing research by providing an integrated model that combines SMMA, eWOM, Brand Awareness, and Intention to Enroll within the higher education context. It also contributes to the literature by clarifying the mediating role of brand awareness and highlighting the direct influence of eWOM. From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that higher education institutions should focus on developing engaging social media strategies to build brand awareness, while simultaneously encouraging positive eWOM through student experiences and testimonials.

6. Conclusions

This study examines the effects of Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA) and Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) on Brand Awareness and their impact on prospective students' Intention to Enroll in the higher education context. The findings reveal that SMMA significantly enhances Brand Awareness but does not directly influence enrollment intention. In contrast, eWOM has a significant direct effect on Intention to Enroll but does not significantly affect Brand Awareness. Furthermore, Brand Awareness is found to have a significant positive effect on Intention to Enroll and plays a crucial mediating role in the relationship between SMMA and enrollment intention. These results indicate that digital marketing strategies operate through distinct mechanisms: SMMA primarily contributes to brand-building, while eWOM directly influences decision-making through credibility and peer influence. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to digital marketing and higher education literature by providing an integrated model

that combines SMMA, eWOM, Brand Awareness, and Intention to Enroll. The findings support brand equity theory by confirming the importance of Brand Awareness as a key driver of behavioral intention. In addition, the study extends prior research by demonstrating that Brand Awareness acts as an indirect-only mediator between SMMA and enrollment intention, while eWOM operates through a direct pathway. This distinction enriches the understanding of how different digital marketing elements influence consumer behavior in service-based contexts such as higher education.

From a practical and policy perspective, the results suggest that higher education institutions should adopt a dual strategic approach. First, universities should invest in effective social media marketing activities, such as engaging content, interactive communication, and consistent branding to strengthen Brand Awareness. Second, institutions should actively manage and encourage positive eWOM, for example by leveraging student testimonials, alumni experiences, and online reviews, as these directly influence prospective students' enrollment decisions. Policymakers and university management should also consider integrating digital marketing strategies into institutional planning, ensuring alignment between marketing communication, student experience, and brand positioning in increasingly competitive educational environments. Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the sample size is relatively small and limited to prospective students from a single faculty at Universitas Pakuan, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study adopts a cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to capture changes in students' perceptions and behavior over time. Third, the model focuses on a limited number of variables, whereas other relevant factors, such as brand image, trust, perceived value, or institutional reputation may also influence enrollment intention.

Future research is therefore recommended to expand the model by incorporating additional variables, applying larger and more diverse samples, and employing longitudinal or mixed-method approaches to provide deeper insights. Comparative studies across different universities or countries may also enhance the generalizability of the findings. Thus, this study highlights the importance of integrating social media marketing and electronic word of mouth strategies to effectively influence prospective students' enrollment decisions. By combining strong brand-building efforts with credible peer-driven communication, higher education institutions can enhance their competitiveness and attract more students in the digital era.

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