

The Influence of E-Word of Mouth Marketing on Students' Selection of Management Degrees

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the influence of electronic word-of-mouth marketing on students' selection of management degrees. A structured questionnaire was employed to gather data. The target population consisted of management undergraduates during the period from 2016 to 2022 in Sri Lanka, as well as potential students interested in pursuing a management degree program. A sample size of 384 respondents was initially selected, and 312 responses were collected from the management undergraduates of the Open University of Sri Lanka and five other private universities in Sri Lanka. After removing outliers, a total of 283 responses were considered for analysis. Due to the unknown size of the total population, a convenience sampling technique was utilized to select the responses from the undergraduates. The regression analysis results revealed significant and positive effects of e-word of mouth (eWOM) quality, eWOM quantity, and eWOM credibility on students' intention to select management degree programs. Notably, it was found that eWOM credibility exerted the strongest influence on students' intentions in this regard. These findings highlight the importance of considering the quality, quantity, and credibility of eWOM when assessing its impact on students' decision-making process of degree selection. The findings of this study contribute to the existing body of knowledge on e-word-of-mouth marketing in the context of higher education. The results provide insights into the extent to which eWOM marketing influences students' decision-making process and their intention to choose management degree programs. Educational institutions and marketers can leverage these insights to design effective marketing strategies and enhance their online reputation to attract and retain prospective students in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Degree selection, e-word of mouth, students' intention

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Introduction

Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) refers to the continuous and interactive exchange of information among potential, current, or past consumers about a product, service, brand, or company. This information exchange occurs through the Internet and is accessible to a wide range of individuals and institutions (Ismagilova, et al., 2020). With changing customer behaviors, online forums have become a significant source of information for customers (Doerr et al., 2011). The power of social media in rapidly spreading information has proven effective not only in facilitating various types of communication but also in influencing diverse realms such as political and marketing campaigns. EWOM takes various forms, including opinions, online ratings, feedback, reviews, reactions, likes, shares, comments, and personal experiences shared on the internet (Sulthana & Vasantha, 2019). In today's social marketplaces, customers no longer solely rely on information provided by company websites. Consequently, online marketers and social media managers leverage social media platforms to foster customer-to-customer electronic word-of-mouth, aiming to enhance marketing activities significantly (Bughin, et al, 2010). The effectiveness of advertising has been overshadowed by eWOM marketing, as its impact on specific advertisements posted plays a crucial role in determining advertising efficiency (Yang & Mutum, 2015).

Despite its numerous advantages for both marketers and customers, the abundance of information available online has increased the risk of customers being misled and drawing incorrect conclusions. To counteract this, marketers make efforts to encourage consumers to engage in word-of-mouth communication based on their direct consumption experiences, such as customer reviews and comments, in order to attract potential customers. In this research, the aim was to investigate the impact of e-word-of-mouth marketing on students' intention to select management degree programs.

The influence of electronic word-of-mouth marketing on customer purchasing intention is significant. According to Yang & Mutum (2015), eWOM online forums are the preferred information source for university students, showcasing the commitment of individuals towards these forums. Positive comments and high-quality content are highly valued by eWOM receivers, and false information is promptly identified and addressed by the community members. This collaborative effort helps individuals in selecting the most suitable university for their studies.

Furthermore, certain universities and companies benefit from positive ratings provided by consumers who share valuable content, while negative reviews can have adverse effects (Cova, & Dalli, 2009). Additionally, Paul, aged 23, from the TW group found that the perceived truthfulness of opinions increases when more people are consulted, and if everyone shares the same sentiment, it further enhances credibility and truthfulness (Yang & Mutum, 2015).

The study also revealed that online sources are considered more credible than marketer-generated information sources. EWOM reviewers, seen as internal parties in the higher education industry, contribute to the perceived truthfulness of information (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). Receiver consideration of the sender's expertise is crucial in the decision-making process, particularly in selecting a degree program (Veloutsou et al., 2005). Previous

research has consistently highlighted eWOM as the most credible source for students when making decisions (Bickart & Schindler, 2001).

During the research, the researchers engaged in discussions with management undergraduates, who highlighted the significance of receiving both positive and negative eWOM feedback through online portals and groups. These reviewers were a mix of familiar and unknown individuals. Furthermore, potential degree applicants emphasized that such eWOM experiences played a pivotal role in motivating or demotivating their intention to pursue specific degree programs. While state universities are prominent in the educational landscape, profit-oriented higher educational institutions also engage in marketing campaigns to attract students. Consequently, the value of e-word of mouth becomes particularly important for profit-oriented entities. Interestingly, the existing literature reveals a lack of research exploring the influence of eWOM on students' intention to select a degree program. Therefore, this empirical research study represents the first attempt to assess the impact of eWOM marketing specifically in the context of management degree selection.

It is crucial to acknowledge that management students possess distinct perceptions, cognitive processes, aspirations, and expectations compared to other students. Therefore, findings from previous research cannot be readily applied in this context. As noted by Gapp and Fisher (2011), the majority of management students prefer utilizing virtual groups, Facebook, and social media apps for problem-solving, deviating from traditional information sources.

This research aimed to investigate various facets of electronic Word-of-mouth (eWOM) and its impact on students' selection for management degrees, with a specific focus on management degrees. The study investigated the quality of eWOM, seeking to understand how the perceived value and relevance of information shared electronically influenced students' intentions when choosing a degree. Additionally, the research explored the quantity of eWOM and its role in shaping students' intentions, examining whether the sheer volume of information available played a significant role in decision-making. Credibility, as a crucial factor in information evaluation, was also scrutinized to discern its influence on students' intentions toward degree selection. Furthermore, the study aimed to identify the most salient variable among these factors, providing insights into the primary determinants that affected students' intentions in opting for a management degree program. Through a comprehensive exploration of these research objectives, this study sought to contribute valuable insights to the understanding of the decision-making process in educational choices among students.

Notably, there is a dearth of research on the influence of eWOM marketing on students' intention toward degree selection within the Sri Lankan context. Therefore, this paper makes a valuable contribution to academic research, providing a consolidated body of knowledge on eWOM marketing and students' intentions towards degree selection in Sri Lanka. Future researchers in this field will benefit from referring to this research as a valuable resource.

Literature Review

This literature review discusses the theoretical and conceptual aspects related to the purchase decision-making of students. It discusses how the earlier research studies have been conducted on particular areas of eWOM impacting student intention.

According to Nyilasy (2006), the definition of word of mouth consists of three important and vital parts. It includes interpersonal communication, drifting it apart from advertising, and influences. Word-of-mouth communication is perceived by customers as highly credible and trusted as it is generated from those who have previously purchased the product, and not the service or product provider, making this communication more reliable than the communication provided by the company or through the form of advertising (Arndt, 1967; Silverman, 2011).

EWOM is the influencing strength of comments provided in a message (Bhattacharjee, 2006), and positive and negative statements are made by potential, actual, or former consumers or commonly used website visitors via the internet concerning products or services that they have used which is easily available to other consumers or internet users as well as to the marketers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Moreover, it is the act of exchanging marketing information among customers, which plays an essential and important role in changing consumer attitudes and behavior toward products and services (Chu & Kim, 2011). Customers have become increasingly interdependent, and they need online social, emotional, and information support before making a purchasing decision (Ahmad & Laroche, 2016). With the development of e-business platforms, online customer reviews and comments have become a vital tool for providing information about products and services through electronic word of mouth (Chen et al., 2017). The conceptual model of this study is based on the combination of past research developed by Ismagilova et al., (2020), Azizul & Aziizam (2014), and Hanandeh et al., (2019); it emphasizes that eWOM has a positive influence on customer selection intention. Azizul and Aziizam (2014) proposed an integrated model that involves three main variables named quality, quantity, and credibility of eWOM that affect customer purchasing intention positively.

Electronic Word of Mouth Quality

The importance of e-WOM quality is represented in the quality of the user's reviews. Most users study the quality of the reviews through the measures of whether they are logical, can be trusted, real, truthful, and accurate. Delone & McLean, (2003) and Park et al., (2006) define that the information quality which is available online for the purpose of it is related to the objective, the level of recognizing, perception, and accuracy, and the level of significance which provides most receivers the ability to construct their plans based on the usefulness of information and purpose. Moreover, it has the convincing power of reviews and comments embedded in an informational message (Bhattacharjee, 2006). When customers are searching for information, the quality of the information highly affects the customer's acceptance or rejection of it with regard to eWOM communication channels (Cheung et al., 2009). Argument quality, reviewer expertise, and usefulness were adopted in constructing the variables of eWOM quality (Ismagilova et al., 2020). EWOM Quality can have a positive impact on purchase intention (Hanandeh et al., 2019) and thus the following hypothesis is suggested.

H1 - The quality of electronic word-of-mouth marketing has a significant influence on the intention of management degree selection.

Electronic Word of Mouth Quantity

The importance of e-WOM quantity can be taken into consideration as evidence for representing a product's performance within the market and it is the total number of reviews and comments posted online (Lim., 2016). Moreover, it represents the degree to which it helps to make decisions (Cheung, 2014). Also, Park et al., (2006) concluded that the volume is the total number of posted online reviews and the quantity of reviews is the main quantitative factor to be considered. The more quantity of electronic word-of-mouth, the more likely that consumers are to know about the information (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Attributes such as the amount of information, level of involvement, and membership length are prominent factors in constructing the variables of eWOM quantity (Azizul & Aziizam, 2014). When consumers are positively influenced through eWOM communication, their attitudes are enhanced accordingly. Conversely, more negative comments can discount the effect of eWOM communication and lead to negative feelings in consumers' minds. EWOM quantity can have a positive impact on purchase intention (Hanandeh et al., 2019) and thus the following hypothesis is suggested.

H2 - Quantity of Electronic word-of-mouth marketing has a significant influence on the intention of management degree selection.

Electronic Word of Mouth Credibility

EWOM credibility can be identified as the degree to which an individual perceives the recommendation from others (Wang, 2015). The early stage in the message persuasion process is the receiver's final judgment or evaluation of the message's credibility (Wathen & Burkell, 2002) Further, the persuasion process should be also applied to the online context, such as online reviews or recommendations (Sussman & Siegal, 2003). Thus, a reader who supposes that the received review is credible will have more self-confidence in adopting the eWOM comments, and recommendations and using them for selecting decisions (Nabi & Hendriks, 2003) However, half a century ago Yale's model clarified that three major factors, message, source, and audience will affect people's attention, comprehension, and acceptance of a message respectively, which could ultimately influence their opinions, perceptions, and finally actions (Janis & Hovland, 1959). When constructing the variable of eWOM credibility factors such as reviewer credibility, Trust in the message, and source credibility were considered as they can influence customer intention. (Ismagilova., et al, 2019). Thus, a reader who supposes that the received review is credible will have more self-confidence in adopting the eWOM comments, and recommendations and using them for selecting decisions (Nabi & Hendriks, 2003). Thus, the following hypothesis is suggested.

H3 - The credibility of Electronic word-of-mouth marketing has a significant influence on the intention of management degree selection.

Student Intention

Many studies on ‘student decision-making’ rely on economics and sociological theoretical frameworks to examine factors of students’ choice (Jackson, 1978; Tierney, 1983; Somers et al., 2006). Purchasing decision, which in this study is student decision, is one important factor that needs to be evaluated by every college to attract student interest (Yang & Mutum, 2015). The decision made by students to continue their studies in a college is the key to the continuity of the college cycle because students are an asset to every college. The decision taken is an individual action in choosing a university as a place to study that is broadly described in consumer behavior (Harahap et al., 2017). When students are making a decision they must follow several steps to arrive at the decision; namely, realizing the necessity to make a decision, determining the goals to be achieved, generating alternatives that lead to attaining the proposed goals, evaluating whether the alternatives meet one’s expectations and, lastly, selecting the best alternative (Halpern, 2014). Among variables that affect the students’ intention to select a management degree program, credibility is a key dimension of eWOM that encompasses the trustworthiness and reliability of the information provided. Studies (e.g., Zhang & Liu, 2019; Yang & Mutum, 2015) have consistently shown that the credibility of eWOM significantly influences selection intentions. Prospective students are more likely to trust and act upon information that is perceived as credible, often derived from sources with a proven track record or authoritative voices within the online community. In synthesizing the existing literature, it is evident that the quality, quantity, and credibility of eWOM all play crucial roles in influencing the selection intention for management degree programs. While high-quality eWOM provides detailed insights, a substantial quantity contributes to a more comprehensive understanding, and credibility enhances trustworthiness.

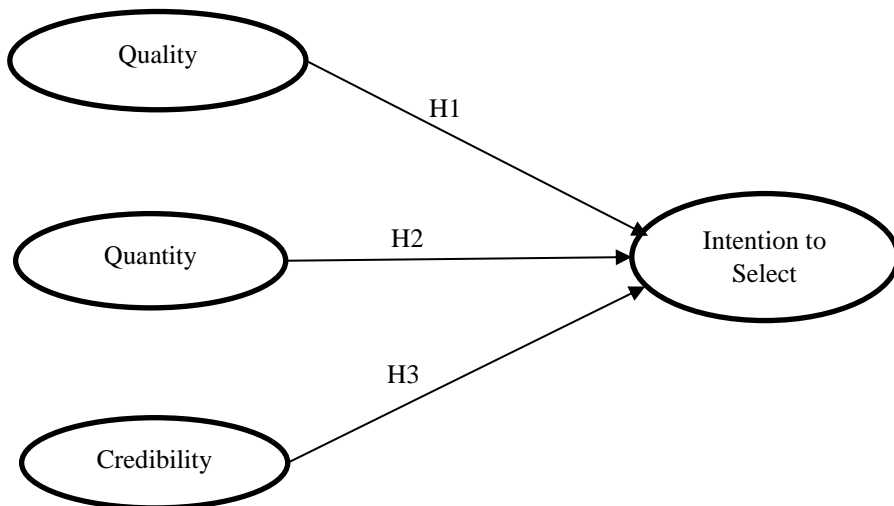


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Study Design and Methods

The research methodology section of a research paper outlines the overall approach and methods employed to address the research objectives. This section provides a comprehensive description of the research design, data collection techniques, sampling procedures, and data analysis methods. By explaining the chosen methodology, researchers aim to ensure the validity, reliability, and generalizability of their findings. This section serves as a guide for readers to understand how the study was conducted and to evaluate the rigor and credibility of the research.

The research design employed in this study is explanatory in nature. The primary objective of this research is to explain the influence of independent variables; namely, eWOM quality, quantity, and credibility, on the dependent variable of students' intention to select a management degree. Through this explanatory research design, the study aims to investigate deeper into the relationship between these variables and provide a comprehensive understanding of how they interact and impact students' decision-making process when choosing a management degree program in Sri Lankan higher education. By employing this design, the research seeks to offer valuable insights and explanations regarding the factors influencing students' intention in the context of management degree selection in the Sri Lankan context.

The targeted population for this study comprised all the undergraduates enrolled in management degree programs from 2016 to 2022 in Sri Lanka. Due to the unavailability of a sampling frame, the convenience sampling technique was employed to select the sample. The sample size consisted of 384 management undergraduates of the Open University of Sri Lanka and five other private universities in Sri Lanka (ICBT, SLIIT, ACBT, NSBM, KIU). Data collection was conducted through a survey method, utilizing a self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire utilized a 7-point Likert scale to gather responses from the participants. The questionnaires were distributed among the respondents to collect the necessary data for the study.

The study's findings reveal notable insights into the demographic characteristics and socio-economic profiles of the respondents. Gender composition indicates a predominant presence of female respondents, comprising 78.1% of the sample, contrasting with the 21.9% of male respondents. Occupation-wise, a significant portion of respondents (36.7%) identifies as full-time students, with equal percentages (8.5%) for those anticipating employment and government sector employees. Additionally, 35% are business owners, and 11.3% work in the private sector. Notably, many respondents (42%) report spending 3-5 hours on social media daily, while smaller percentages engage for less than an hour (4.6%) or over 7 hours (4.6%), with 22.6% falling into the 1–3-hour range. These findings provide valuable insights into the demographic and socio-economic composition of the surveyed population, highlighting trends in gender, age, education, occupation, and social media usage patterns.

The primary objective of this research is to investigate the impact of e-word-of-mouth (eWOM) marketing on students' intention towards selecting a management degree program. Building upon existing literature, it was determined, in line with Yang & Mutum (2015), that expanding the population size and including both existing and potential students would yield

more comprehensive insights. The conceptual model for this study was developed by integrating the key variables of quality, quantity, and credibility from the hybrid approaches of Hanandeh et al., (2019) and Ismagilova et al., (2020). Each independent variable in the model consists of three dimensions, and a total of 16 indicators were employed to measure these dimensions.

Data Analysis

Test of Validity

Validity indicates the items that are used in measuring the variable and the more accurate concepts. Validity can be identified as the most important aspect of the quality of the test. Therefore, measuring validity is important and a prerequisite before carrying out further analytical tests.

Table 1: Test of Validity

Variable	Chi-square Value	Significance Value 0.05>	KMO Value 0.5<	Composite Reliability 0.7<	Average Variance Extracted (AVE) 0.5<	Discriminant Validity		
						Quality	Quantity	credibility
E- word of Mouth Quality	435.15	0.000	0.848	0.710	0.550			
E- word of mouth Quantity	752.70	0.000	0.889	0.833	0.705	0.376		
E- word of mouth Credibility	692.259	0.000	0.873	0.809	0.675	0.635	0.376	
Student's Intention	1123.638	0.000	0.917	0.880	0.780	0.675	0.388	0.759

Source: Survey Data (2022)

To ensure construct validity, the measurement of convergent validity was conducted by assessing the composite reliability (CR) value, which needed to be greater than the average variance extracted (AVE). Additionally, the AVE values were found to be higher than the shared variance values, further confirming the convergent validity of the constructs. Discriminant validity was also established, indicating that the constructs were distinct from one another. By employing these validity assessments, the study ensured the robustness and accuracy of the measurement instruments, reinforcing the overall construct validity of the research.

Table 2: Test of Reliability

Variable	Cronboch's Alpha
Electronic word of mouth quality	.783
Electronic word of mouth quantity	.893
Electronic word of mouth credibility	.879
Student's intention	.891

Source: Survey Data (2022)

In this study, the reliability analysis was conducted for all the variables, and the results are presented in Table 2. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which indicates the average correlation among items within a variable, was calculated for each variable. All four variables demonstrated Cronbach's alpha values above 0.7, indicating acceptable levels of internal consistency. According to Cronbach (1951), reliabilities below 0.60 are considered poor, those in the 0.70 range are acceptable, and those exceeding 0.80 are considered good. Therefore, based on these criteria, the questionnaire used in this study can be deemed reliable. Furthermore, all items showed corrected item-total correlations above 0.4. This finding suggests that no items needed to be deleted, as their removal would not significantly increase Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Thus, it can be concluded that the questionnaire used in this study is reliable, as it demonstrates satisfactory internal consistency.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive analysis was conducted to assess the levels of the independent and dependent variables. The mean, which represents the arithmetic average of all the responses, was used as a measure of central tendency. As mentioned in Shayamunda (2015), the standard deviation was employed as a stable measure to describe the dispersion of observations around the mean.

Among the variables, eWOM credibility exhibited the highest mean value ($M=5.4841$) with a standard deviation of 1.19745. On the other hand, eWOM quantity displayed the lowest mean value ($M=5.2064$) with a standard deviation of 1.32326. The remaining two variables, student intention, and eWOM quality, demonstrated the following mean values and standard deviations: student intention ($M=5.2336$, $SD=1.05637$) and eWOM quality ($M=5.2568$, $SD=0.99952$).

These descriptive statistics provide valuable insights into the distribution and central tendencies of the variables, allowing for a better understanding of their levels within the study.

Relationship between eWOM and Student Intention

To evaluate the research hypotheses, both correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis were employed. These statistical methods were utilized to investigate the impact of the independent variables, namely eWOM credibility, eWOM quality, and eWOM quantity, on the dependent variable, which is students' intention.

Correlation analysis was utilized to assess the relationships between the independent variables and the dependent variable. This analysis helps determine the strength and direction of the associations between the variables. Multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the combined influence of the independent variables on the dependent variable. This analysis allows for the identification of the unique contributions of each independent variable in predicting the students' intentions. By employing these analyses, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the influence of eWOM credibility, eWOM quality, and eWOM quantity on students' intention toward the selection of a management degree program.

Based on the correlation analysis, it can be observed that eWOM quality exhibits a strong positive relationship with students' intention toward degree program selection. The Pearson's correlation coefficient for this relationship is 0.822, which is statistically significant at a 95% confidence level ($p < 0.001$). Furthermore, eWOM quantity demonstrates a moderate positive relationship with students' intentions. The Pearson's correlation coefficient for this relationship is 0.623, also significant at a 95% confidence level ($p < 0.001$).

Moreover, the strongest positive relationship is observed between eWOM credibility and students' intention toward degree program selection. The Pearson's correlation coefficient for this relationship is 0.870, which is highly significant at a 95% confidence level ($p < 0.001$). These findings indicate that eWOM credibility has the highest influence on students' intentions when selecting a degree program. The results suggest that eWOM quality, eWOM quantity, and eWOM credibility all play important roles in shaping students' intentions toward degree program selection.

Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple linear regression analysis was used to test the research hypothesis.

Table 3: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.898 ^a	.806	.804	.46750

Source: Survey Data (2022)

As depicted in Table 3, the coefficient of determination (R^2) indicates the proportion of the variance in the dependent variable that is explained by the independent variables. Based on the adjusted R^2 value, it can be concluded that 80.6% of the variance in the dependent variable, student intention, is accounted for by eWOM quality, eWOM quantity, and eWOM credibility in this study. This implies that these independent variables have a substantial impact on students' intention towards degree selection.

However, it is important to note that approximately 20% of the variance in student's intention toward degree selection is still influenced by other predictors that were not examined in the current study. These unexplored factors contribute to the remaining variability in students'

intentions and may warrant further investigation in future research. Nonetheless, the findings suggest that eWOM quality, eWOM quantity, and eWOM credibility play a significant role in explaining students' intention toward the selection of a management degree program.

Table 4: ANOVA

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1					
Regression	253.715	3	84.572	386.955	.000
Residual	60.977	279	.219		
Total	314.692	282			

Source: Survey Data (2022)

The significance of the regression model was assessed using an ANOVA test, with a critical value of 0.05 at a 95% confidence level indicating significance. Analysis of the model revealed a significant value of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$), confirming the significance of the fitted model. This implies that the student's intention toward degree selection is significantly influenced by eWOM quality, eWOM quantity, and eWOM credibility, as evidenced by the ANOVA results in Table 4.

Table 5: Coefficient Table

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error				Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	.378	.152		2.494	.013		
Credibility	.498	.040	.564	12.489	.000	.340	2.938
Quality	.344	.048	.326	7.207	.000	.340	2.939
Quantity	.061	.028	.076	2.205	.028	.580	1.724

Source: Survey Data (2022)

Table 5 depicts the coefficient table of the regression analysis. Based on the outcomes derived from the conducted analyses, the hypothesis testing can be succinctly summarized. The obtained β coefficients underscore the significance of the variables under examination in influencing students' choices concerning management degree selection. Specifically, eWOM quality, as evidenced by a β coefficient of 0.344 ($p < 0.001$), shows a substantial impact, indicating that a unit increase in eWOM quality corresponds to a 0.344-unit augmentation in students' propensity towards selecting management degrees, all other variables held constant. Similarly, eWOM quantity demonstrates a statistically significant effect, with a β coefficient of 0.061 ($p = 0.028$), suggesting that each unit increment in eWOM quantity leads to a 0.061 unit rise in students' inclination towards management degree selection when controlled for other factors. Moreover, eWOM credibility displays a notable influence, depicted by a β coefficient of 0.498 ($p < 0.001$), indicating that one-unit enhancement in eWOM credibility results in a 0.498-unit elevation in students' preference for management degree programs, while maintaining the constancy of other variables. These findings affirm the hypotheses positing the significant impact of eWOM

quality, eWOM quantity, and eWOM credibility on students' decisions regarding degree program selection. Moreover, the analysis revealed that the tolerance values exceed 0.2, while the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values are below 5. This suggests that both the tolerance values and VIF values fall within the anticipated range, mitigating concerns of multicollinearity.

The results indicate that eWOM has a significant impact on student intention, as evidenced by the regression coefficients. Interestingly, the findings reveal that eWOM credibility has the highest standardized coefficient (beta) compared to the other two variables. This suggests that eWOM credibility carries more weight in influencing student intention toward degree selection. These results differ to some extent from findings in previous literature, highlighting the unique contribution of this study. However, there are also similarities between the findings of this study and earlier research, demonstrating the importance of eWOM in shaping student intention. Based on the above results, the summary of hypothesis testing results is indicated in Table 6.

Table 6: Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	p-value	Accepted / Rejected
<i>H1</i> . Quality of Electronic word-of-mouth marketing has a significant influence on the intention of management degree selection.	0.000	Accepted
<i>H2</i> . Quantity of Electronic word-of-mouth marketing has a significant influence on the intention of management degree selection.	0.000	Accepted
<i>H3</i> . Credibility of Electronic word-of-mouth marketing has a significant influence on the intention of management degree selection.	0.028	Accepted

Source: Survey Data (2022)

Results and Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to examine the impact of eWOM marketing on students' intention towards selecting a management degree. Previous research has indicated that eWOM quality, eWOM quantity, and eWOM credibility are important factors influencing customer purchasing intention (Hanandeh et al., 2019). However, Mehayar et al. (2020) found that eWOM quality and quantity positively and significantly influence customer purchase intention, while credibility has no impact.

In contrast to Mehayar et al. (2020), the findings of this study suggest that eWOM credibility is the most influential factor in student intention toward degree selection. This differs from the emphasis on eWOM quantity found in their study. Furthermore, Ismagilova et al. (2020) highlighted the influence of eWOM message, source, and receiver on purchasing intention, with 18 dimensions, encompassing factors such as eWOM credibility, trust in the message, argument quality, eWOM usefulness, valence, and source credibility.

To capture the key dimensions of eWOM quality, eWOM quantity, and eWOM credibility, this study selected nine factors from Ismagilova et al. (2020) and Hanandeh et al. (2019) frameworks, forming a hybrid conceptual framework. The first objective of this study was to examine the influence of eWOM quality on students' intention towards selecting a management degree. Consistent with previous research by Mehyar et al. (2020), Azizi et al. (2019), and Hanandeh et al. (2019), the findings of this study revealed a positive and statistically significant relationship between eWOM quality and students' intention.

Furthermore, the study found that eWOM quantity significantly influences students' intention toward degree selection. However, it is worth noting that eWOM credibility and eWOM quality emerged as the primary influential factors, with eWOM quantity being the third most important factor. This suggests that while eWOM quantity, measured through factors such as the number of comments, level of involvement, and membership length, does impact students' intention, it is surpassed in importance by eWOM credibility and eWOM quality.

Theoretical Contribution

Previous research studies have often overlooked the role of students as customers in the degree selection process. From a marketing perspective, eWOM has received less attention compared to other marketing tools, despite its significance as an uncontrollable factor for organizations. Therefore, this research provides valuable insights for organizations to better understand the involvement of eWOM in the customer decision-making process. In the era of internet culture, eWOM has become a determining factor in the flow of advertising and marketing efforts.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of eWOM in building customer decision-making. It raises the question of how to effectively generate positive eWOM, which is more critical than designing advertisements and other promotional instruments. While past research studies have emphasized the qualitative and quantitative factors of eWOM in customer decision-making, this research demonstrates that eWOM credibility is the most influential factor. Contrary to the findings of Mehyar et al. (2020), this study emphasizes the significance of eWOM credibility, especially in the context of high consumer involvement purchases such as selecting a degree.

When purchasing an item of long-term importance, consumers tend to be highly rational and rely on eWOM rather than daily essential items. Given that selecting a degree is a high-involvement consumer purchase, customers are more likely to place a strong emphasis on eWOM credibility in their decision-making process.

Practical Implications

Examining the influence of e-WOM on students' intention toward degree selection holds significant value for both universities and potential degree applicants. The insights derived from this study will go beyond conventional advertising efforts, prompting universities to reassess their strategies. Additionally, profit-oriented higher educational institutes can benefit from the findings, as they heavily rely on comments, reviews, and likes in their social media presence. Social media managers and advertisers can leverage these findings to effectively manage and maintain their social media groups and fan pages.

Furthermore, future researchers will find value in the study's findings, as they shed light on customer behavior in relation to purchasing decisions. The results emphasize that customer attraction cannot solely rely on the qualitative and quantitative factors of e-WOM, but must also consider the credibility of e-WOM. This insight highlights the need for considerable attention to be given to e-WOM credibility when formulating marketing strategies and campaigns.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

For future researchers, it is recommended to explore different variables beyond those utilized in this study. Additionally, it would be beneficial to collect data through both online and offline methods, as this research solely relied on online data collection. The length of the questionnaire should be carefully considered, as it was observed that males were less inclined to fill out lengthy questionnaires compared to females. Furthermore, it is important to note that this research specifically focused on management undergraduates and potential students' perceptions. Future studies could encompass a wider range of degree programs to obtain a more comprehensive understanding.

To enhance the generalizability of findings, it is advisable to conduct research in various contexts such as the banking or insurance sectors, as the conclusions drawn from this study may not be directly applicable to all fields. Additionally, researchers should explore alternative motivators that influence customer purchasing decisions, expanding beyond the scope of e-WOM. Overall, future researchers should consider these suggestions to broaden the scope of their studies, incorporate different variables, diversify data collection methods, and explore alternative contexts and motivators to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of customer decision-making processes.

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