

The Impact of Electronic Word of Mouth on Brand Image and the Intention to Choose Private Universities among High School Students in Ho Chi Minh City.

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Abstract:

This study aims to assess the impact of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on the brand image and the intention to choose a private university of high school students in Ho Chi Minh City, through interviews with 498 12th-graders of high school in Ho Chi Minh City. The linear structure model (SEM) was used to test the relationship between the proposed variables. The results indicate that eWOM positively impacts brand image and intention to choose a university; brand image positively impacts intention to choose a university. Moreover, the study has also shown that brand image acts as an intermediary in the relationship between eWOM and the university selection intention of students. The results of this study help managers in universities have a basis to pay attention to and promote electronic word-of-mouth activities, and build a good brand image to increase the intention to choose the learning environment of high school students.

Keywords: *electronic word-of-mouth, brand image, intention to choose university, private university, Ho Chi Minh City*

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Introduction

Education and training in general, as well as higher education in particular, is one of the top priorities of most countries. At present, the issue of choosing a university is not only a concern of learners, but higher education institutions are also very interested in influencing the existence and development of the school. Therefore, there is strong and comprehensive competition from universities. To develop, the schools have implemented professional marketing communication campaigns with a large investment cost, showing that universities are targeting the market as professional service providers and learners are customers who use the services. However, in marketing, word of mouth (WOM) is highly effective and does not cost much. (Chi & Giao, 2022)

Traditional word of mouth has always played an important role in marketing communication, and now with the strong development of the internet, Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) has increased the power and scale of word of mouth. According to the "Digital 2024: Vietnam" report by DataReportal, as of January 2024, Vietnam had 78.44 million Internet users, accounting for 79.1% of the total population. Compared to early 2023, the number of Internet users increased by 502,000, representing a growth rate of 0.6%. In addition, the popular development of technology and Internet-based applications with a series of social networking sites such as Facebook, Zalo, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter... has created motivation and brought the Internet to play a very important role in communication and marketing. Through the Internet, it is easy for customers to collect information from others through eWOM. (Moran et al., 2024) Unlike traditional word of mouth, eWOM allows users to receive and screen information more comprehensively without being limited in space and time. (Cheung, 2014) Currently, in Vietnam, there are also many studies on the influence of eWOM on brand image and consumer intentions in many fields such as retail, financial services, and real estate.

In Vietnam, numerous studies have examined the influence of eWOM on brand image and consumer intentions across different industries such as retail, financial services, and real estate. However, research focusing on the higher education sector remains limited. In particular, few studies have investigated how eWOM affects students' university choice intentions, even though eWOM has become a primary source of information for prospective students when evaluating and comparing educational institutions. Previous research has mainly focused on consumer goods and commercial services, neglecting the context of educational service decision making, where the perceived risk, information asymmetry, and long-term commitment are much higher.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by examining the impact of eWOM on the intention to choose a university in Vietnam, thereby contributing to the existing literature

on online communication and educational marketing, and providing implications for higher education institutions in attracting and retaining students.

Theoretical structure and research model

Basic concepts

Intention to choose a school

Behavioral intention can be seen as the first step to a decision, according to Ajzen (1985). In today's digital age, studies also use purchase intent to understand and measure the effectiveness of electronic oral transmissions. (Dehghani et al., 2016) According to Dehghani & Tumer (2015), eWOM is believed to be influential in shaping purchasing decisions for products and services.

Choosing the learner's university refers to the intended behavior based on the preference of the university to participate in learning. Choosing universities can also be considered high-risk intangible goods because there is little chance of correction if the choice is wrong. Some studies have also examined and found that eWOM has a strong influence on university choice. (Sessa, 2014)

Brand image

According to Keller (1993), the image of the organization is the perceptions that are reflected and kept in the minds of customers. The image of the organization is the way of seeing and evaluating stakeholders about the business, it represents the imprint of the organization to the outside world such as the perception of customers, shareholders, communication, and community. Applying to the university, it is possible to see the image of the university as the perception of students, the community about the school (Jo Hatch & Schultz, 1997). The image of a positive brand can be established by connecting originality and brand strengths with consumer experiences of that brand and supported by effective marketing campaigns. (Keller, 2001)

Word of mouth (WOM)

Word-of-mouth (WOM) refers to the informal and personal transmission of insights or evaluations between individuals, in which one person shares their subjective perspective on products, services, or brands with another, without commercial intent. (Anderson, 1998; Buttle, 1998)

According to Kirby & Marsden (2006), "word of mouth is the word, communication between people, between recipients and people communicating information related to a service, brand or certain information in the market" or "the conversation between two or more people related to products and services independent of any business".

WOM is seen as a form of informal corporate marketing communication that uses the customer as a spokesperson and communicator of marketing messages (Westbrook, 1987). It enables consumers to exert influence in a communicative manner and serves as a benchmark for assessing service quality. (Chi & Giao, 2022)

Electronic word of mouth (eWOM)

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) was born based on the Internet, giving consumers the power to influence other consumers. (Chu & Kim, 2020) To leverage the influence of eWOM, companies strengthen eWOM promotion and management in their communication strategy mix (Kim et al., 2015). With the swift evolution of the Internet, electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) has emerged as an efficient avenue for consumers to engage in non-commercial promotion, enabling them to share and discuss firsthand experiences related to specific products and brands. (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006) Overall, electronic Word-of-mouth (eWOM) can function in dual capacities both as informants providing product information that aligns with the needs of information seekers and as recommenders endorsing products or services based on their own past consumer experiences. (Park & Lee, 2009)

Previous researchers have pointed out many internal factors of eWOM, in this study 3 factors correspond to 3 selected concepts that are: (1) eWOM quality, (2) eWOM quantity, and (3) eWOM sender expertise.

eWOM quality is the assessment's quality is evaluated based on information properties such as relevance, timeliness, accuracy, and inclusiveness of that information. (DeLone & McLean, 2003) According to Bhattacharjee & Sanford (2006), it refers to "the persuasive power of referenced comments in an informational message". Consumer decisions can be based on perceptions of the quality of information they receive (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). The eWOM Quality Scale is referenced by Lin et al. (2013), and Bataineh (2015).

eWOM quantity that includes both the intensity and frequency of communication (Park & Lee, 2009), consumers are heavily influenced by the large number of comments, the frequency of messages as well as consumer reviews, as it shows the number of consumers who have purchased goods, thus proving they get good things. Berger et al., (2010) found a significant relationship between the number of online reviews and consumer choice intention. The Quantity of Information Scale is referenced in Park & Lee, 2009, Lin et al., (2013), and Bataineh (2015).

eWOM sender expertise is the professional ability and trustworthiness of contributors to be able to accept or reject posted information. (Cheung & Thadani, 2012) In the online environment, as per Cheung & Thadani (2012), individuals possess nearly unrestricted freedom to exchange and articulate their sentiments regarding specific products or services, all without the necessity of disclosing their true identity. If consumers think that opinions

posted by individuals have high expertise and credibility, then they will have a higher awareness of the usefulness of opinions and comments. (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Gefen & Straub, 2004)

Hypothesis and research model

University choice intention represents a critical decision for students, directly influencing their academic trajectories and personal development. According to Ajzen (1985) in the Theory of Planned Behavior, behavioral intention is a strong predictor of actual behavior. In the educational context, studies have shown that university selection decisions are influenced by information obtained from peers, social media, and online reviews. (bin Khairani & Razak, 2013; Filieri & McLeay, 2014)

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), characterized by the quality, quantity, and expertise of the source, provides reliable information that helps reduce perceived risk and enhances students' confidence in their decisions. (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014; Mayzlin, 2006) Through the information shared on media channels, consumers actively contribute to the creation and enhancement of the brand image. (Jansen et al., 2009; Muniz & O'guinn, 2001) eWOM not only exerts a direct influence on university choice intention but also affects it indirectly by shaping and reinforcing the university's brand image. Brand image, as defined by Keller (1993) and Aaker (2012), conveys the institution's values regarding reputation, quality, and trustworthiness, thereby increasing the likelihood of students choosing the university. (Kala & Chaubey, 2018; Wu & Wang, 2011)

With the above analysis, the proposed hypotheses and research models are proposed as shown in Figure 1.

Hypothesis:

Hypothesis H1: eWOM has a positive impact on university brand image

Hypothesis H2: eWOM has a positive impact on the intention to choose a university

Hypothesis H3: Brand image has a positive impact on the intention to choose a university

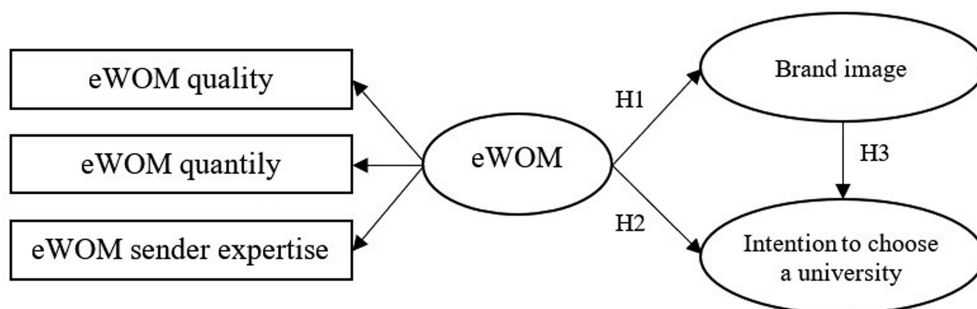


Figure 1. Proposed research model

(Source: Recommended by the authors)

Methodology

The study was conducted through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate the influence of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on brand image and university selection intentions among high school students. Initially, qualitative in-depth interviews with education and marketing experts, along with high school seniors, were conducted to explore the dimensions of the constructs, refine the measurement scales, and ensure their contextual relevance. Results from this phase indicated that eWOM functions as a second-order construct with multiple underlying dimensions, whereas brand image and university selection intention are first-order constructs. Building on these insights, a quantitative survey was administered to 12th-grade students in Ho Chi Minh City using convenience sampling through both paper-based and online questionnaires between July and September 2024, yielding 498 valid responses from 550 distributed questionnaires. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, and construct validity was examined via exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses (EFA and CFA). The proposed hypotheses were subsequently tested using structural equation modeling (SEM), allowing simultaneous evaluation of the effects of eWOM on brand image and university selection intentions. Overall, this mixed-methods approach provided both exploratory insights and confirmatory validation, enhancing the robustness and credibility of the findings.

Research results

Descriptive Statistics of the study sample

Convenience sampling was employed in this study. Following the refinement of the measurement scale through qualitative research using expert interviews, the questionnaires were distributed to 12th-grade students enrolled in both public and private high schools in Ho Chi Minh City. A total of 550 questionnaires were disseminated, yielding 498 valid responses, equivalent to a response rate of 90.55%. The respondents were categorized based on gender, academic interests, and school type. Detailed characteristics of the survey sample are summarized in Table 1

Table 1. Descriptive table of research samples

		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	230	46.2
	Female	268	53.8

		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Field of interest	Economics and Finance	171	34.3
	Communications	106	21.3
	Technology - Engineering	87	17.5
	Other	134	26.9
Type of high school	Private School	291	58.4
	Public School	207	41.6

(Source: Data analysis results, 2024)

Descriptive Statistics of the study sample

The scale is evaluated based on the criterion that variables with a correlation coefficient sum below 0.3 will be excluded. Furthermore, the scale must meet a minimum Cronbach's Alpha reliability of 0.6. Table 2 displays all the scales that satisfy the requirements for exploratory factor analysis (EFA).

Table 2. Cronbach's Alpha results of scales

No.	Scales	Symbols	Number of observed variables	Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient	Smallest Item-total correlation
1	eWOM Quality	eQua	5	0.859	0.813
2	eWOM Quantily	eQuan	3	0.833	0.698
3	eWOM sender expertise	eSE	5	0.854	0.808
4	Brand Image	Bra	4	0.824	0.754
5	Intention to choose a university	InChoi	4	0.825	0.533

(Source: Data analysis results, 2024)

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted for the components of electronic word-of-mouth, brand image, and university enrollment intention. The results indicated that the KMO values for all constructs exceeded 0.5, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant (Sig. = 0.000 < 0.05). Additionally, the total variance explained (TVE) surpassed 50%, and all factor loadings were above 0.5. Detailed results are presented in Table 3

Table 3. Exploratory factor analysis EFA

Scales	Number of variables	KMO	P-value	TVE (%)
Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)		0.865	0.000	58.350
eWOM Quality (eQua)	5			
eWOM Quantily (eQuan)	3			
eWOM sender expertise (eSE)	5			
Brand Image (Bra)	4	0.726	0.000	54.590
Intention to choose a university (InChoi)	4	0.796	0.000	55.799

(Source: Data analysis results, 2024)

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) results

The results of the model evaluation based on the official sample (N = 498) indicate that the model fit criteria are met. Specifically, the Chi-square/df ratio is 2.846, which is less than 3; the CFI is 0.910, TLI is 0.926, and GFI is 0.936, all exceeding the threshold of 0.9; the RMSEA value is 0.061, which is below the acceptable level of 0.08. Factor loadings greater than 0.5 confirm the convergent validity of the factors, while correlations between variables lower than 1 demonstrate their discriminant validity. Additionally, the composite reliability for all analytical variables exceeds 0.6, indicating that the factors possess adequate reliability, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Results of convergence analysis and distinguishing values of factors in the critical measurement model.

	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)	InChoi	Bra	eWOM
InChoi	0.832	0.558	0.311	0.854	0.747		
Bra	0.810	0.527	0.311	0.875	0.558	0.726	
eWOM	0.766	0.523	0.213	0.776	0.461	0.363	0.723
Significance level p < 0.05							

(Source: Data analysis results, 2024)

Model Testing Results via SEM

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to assess the theoretical model. The model demonstrates a good fit to the data, as evidenced by the following fit indices: Chi-square = 515.119 (P = .000), degrees of freedom (df) = 181, Chi-square/df = 2.846 (which

is less than 3), GFI = 0.910, TLI = 0.926, CFI = 0.936, and RMSEA = 0.061, which is below the acceptable threshold of 0.08 (Figure 2).

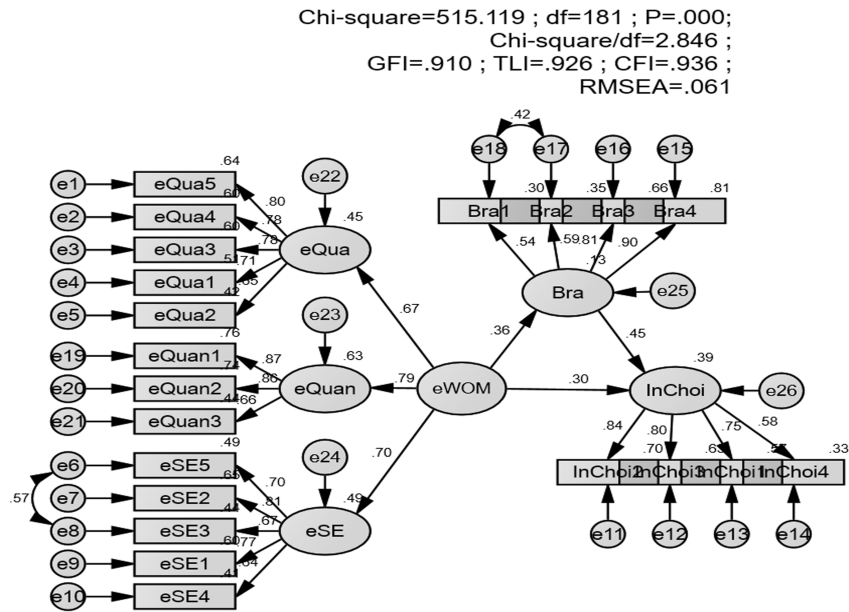


Figure 2. Results of SEM model analysis (standardized).

All the correlations proposed in the research model were confirmed through the SEM analysis. The estimated (unnormalized) results for the main parameters are provided in Table 5. These findings indicate that the cause-and-effect relationships are statistically significant, as all p-values are less than 0.05. Based on these results, it can be concluded that the measurement scales of the constructs in the model demonstrate theoretical validity.

Table 5. Unstandardized regression coefficients of the theoretical model

Correlations	Estimated	S.E	C.R.	P	Hypothesis	Conclusion
Bra←eWOM	.537	.091	5.921	***	H1	Accepted
InChoi←Bra	.464	.054	8.529	***	H3	Accepted
InChoi←eWOM	.455	.090	5.067	***	H2	Accepted

(Source: Data analysis results, 2024)

Table 6: Normalized regression coefficients

Correlations	Normalized regression coefficient
Bra←eWOM	.363
InChoi←Bra	.449
InChoi←eWOM	.298

(Source: Data analysis results, 2024)

Conclusion and implications

Conclusion

The study was conducted to identify the components of the eWOM concept, brand image, and intention to select a private university of students in Ho Chi Minh City. proposed research model with 3 component concepts of eWOM should be measured in addition to the concept of brand image and intention to choose a private university of students in Ho Chi Minh City. Where eWOM is an omnidirectional concept as measured by component variables are eWOM quality, eWOM quantity, and eWOM sender expertise. Brand image and intention to choose a university are unidirectional concepts.

The research results show that eWOM has a positive impact on the brand image and school selection intentions of students in Ho Chi Minh City. In addition, the results also show the mediating role of brand image in the correlation relationship between eWOM and school selection intention. At the same time, this result also supports the research results of previous studies on the relationship between eWOM and brand image such as (Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012; Cheung and Thadani, 2012), or consider the eWOM relationship with university selection intention and consider the impact of brand image on university selection intention. (Solikhah et al., 2016)

Regarding research methods, the majority of previous studies used multivariate linear regression models to analyze correlations, in this study, the author uses a structural model. The choice of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) over multiple linear regression is justified, as SEM enables the measurement of latent constructs, the analysis of both direct and indirect relationships among variables, and the simultaneous validation of measurement and structural models. This approach is particularly suitable given that eWOM is a second-order construct, and it allows for the elucidation of the mediating role of brand image, an analysis that cannot be adequately addressed using traditional multiple regression techniques.

Thus, the research results have measured two specific goals: (1) identifying the internal factors of eWOM; and (2) determining the level of influence of eWOM, and brand image on the intention to choose a private university of students in Ho Chi Minh City. The test results show that all independent factors have the same effect on the dependent factors. In particular, the brand image factor has a higher impact on students' intention to choose a private university in Ho Chi Minh City (standardized regression weight of 0.449) than the eWOM factor (standardized regression weight of 0.298).

Implications

In the era of Industry 4.0, the rapid spread of information through electronic media is posing many challenges and opportunities for educational institutions, especially private

universities. In this context, electronic word of mouth and brand image play an important role in helping students determine their intention to choose a university. Choosing a university is not an easy experience, and for the most part only once in a lifetime. On the other hand, in an internet environment, a large amount of information must be received, so the ability to accept and apply when finding quality and useful information is very high. Information needs to be controlled to ensure: accuracy, timely, relevant, and complete. Therefore, for the quality of eWOM, universities should strengthen the network administration team professionally and separately to control and respond to online assessment information in an appropriate and timely manner; plan the transmission of information that is the strength of the university on communication information; optimize websites and forums with a lot of information, images, and videos professionally; link to many social networking platforms to easily convey the university's information. For the number of eWOM, it is easy to see that in addition to the quality of eWOM, quantity also plays a critical role in the transmission of information, as the number of reviews and comments increases, the more widely the information is spread, the higher the attention to the school and the effect on the intention tends to increase. Therefore, universities must integrate commenting systems for their websites, faculties, departments, and functional departments. Creates information-controlled discussions; elicits pre-selected topic-driven discussions; creates two-way interaction and prompt, timely responses. Another extremely important factor is the expertise of the eWOM sender. The information coming from qualified people is often received in a more positive and prestigious way. In particular, in the education sector, the comments and opinions of teachers, who are directly involved in teaching, have a great influence. In addition, the experience shared by alumni also has a significant impact on students' intention to choose a school. Therefore, in addition to admission activities, schools should also invite reputable experts and collaborators to participate in discussions at forums; promote the role of the Youth Union; and regularly organize seminars and scientific reports on reputable forums or newspapers. In addition to promoting the advantages of eWOM to convey information, it is also necessary to build a stronger university brand image to promote the intention of high school students to choose a university. Universities need to design marketing strategies in a unified way; constantly improve the quality of teaching and facilities; select and design specific associations in addition to developing and implement appropriate brand communication programs.

Limitations and directions for further research

Although the study has successfully achieved its objectives, certain limitations exist due to objective constraints. These limitations include: (1) the survey was restricted to students from public and private high schools in Ho Chi Minh City, without extending to other relevant groups that may influence university selection intentions, such as international

students or parents, and (2) the research model examining the impact of eWOM on brand image and university selection intention among high school students in Ho Chi Minh City revealed that eWOM accounted for only 38.8% of the variation in brand image and 40.6% of the intention to select a university. This suggests that other variables, not addressed in the study, should be considered in future research.

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