E-WOM in the Digital Age: Its Influence on Marketing Strategies for Higher Education Institutions in Navi Mumbai

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ABSTRACT:
In an increasingly digital academic ecosystem, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) has become a pivotal determinant of institutional reputation and student decision-making. This study investigates how Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Navi Mumbai strategically leverage e-WOM for brand positioning, trust building, and enrolment enhancement while mitigating the reputational risks of negative discourse. Employing a mixed-methods design, the research integrates quantitative survey data (N = 384 students) with qualitative content analysis of institutional marketing materials and online reviews.
Quantitatively, psychometric validation ensured internal consistency across six constructs—digital marketing strategies, positive e-WOM, digital engagement, enrolment decision, perception, and brand trust—with Cronbach's α ranging from 0.703 to 0.851. Regression and mediation analyses revealed that e-WOM and digital engagement significantly predict brand trust and enrolment intent, explaining up to 50 percent of variance in decision-making behaviour. Qualitative findings further illustrate that students perceive peer-generated content as more authentic than institutional advertising, underscoring the growing importance of transparency and interactive communication in educational marketing.
By synthesising psychometric rigour with behavioural insights, this study offers an integrative framework for HEIs to strengthen their digital identity, engage authentically with stakeholders, and sustain competitive advantage within the contemporary information ecology.

Keywords: electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM); higher education marketing; brand trust; digital engagement; mixed-methods; psychometrics

1 Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

The digital transformation of higher education has redefined how institutional credibility, quality, and trust are constructed. Within this paradigm, *electronic word-of-mouth* (e-WOM)—the online transmission of experiences and opinions via reviews, testimonials, blogs, and social media—has become a core psychological and

social process shaping students' perceptions of academic institutions. For HEIs in Navi Mumbai, an area marked by intense competition and demographic diversity, e-WOM functions simultaneously as a catalyst for enrolment and a potential vulnerability in brand reputation.

The psychological mechanism underlying e-WOM is rooted in **social proof** and **trust formation**. As posited by Henning-Thurau et al. (2004), digital communications that originate from peers are perceived as more credible than organisation-generated messages. In educational settings, where intangible attributes such as learning experience, faculty interaction, and institutional ethos dominate, peer-based evaluations reduce uncertainty in the decision-making process. Cheung and Thadani (2012) further demonstrate that e-WOM influences both cognitive and affective dimensions of consumer trust, reinforcing its role as a determinant of behavioural intention.

1.2 Problem Statement

Although the phenomenon of e-WOM has been widely examined in commercial marketing, its strategic and psychometric implications within the **higher education context** remain underexplored. Many HEIs employ digital marketing tools but fail to measure how these tools interact with peer-generated content to shape brand perception and enrolment behaviour. This study addresses this critical gap by investigating:

1. How e-WOM influences student trust and enrolment decisions.
2. How HEIs integrate e-WOM into digital marketing strategies for brand positioning.
3. Which management practices effectively mitigate negative e-WOM to preserve institutional reputation.

Understanding these relationships through a methodological and psychometric lens enables a deeper comprehension of the psychological antecedents of enrolment intention—a construct analogous to *purchase intention* in consumer research but contextualised within educational choice behaviour.

1.3 Theoretical Foundation

The study draws upon three complementary theoretical streams:

1. **The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)** – explaining how message credibility and involvement levels affect persuasion in digital communication.
2. **The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)** – framing enrolment intention as a function of attitudes, subjective norms (peer influence), and perceived behavioural control.
3. **Social Exchange Theory (SET)** – illuminating the reciprocal nature of trust-based interactions between students and institutions in the online environment.

Together, these theories provide the conceptual foundation for testing causal pathways between e-WOM, brand trust, and enrolment intention through psychometrically validated measures.

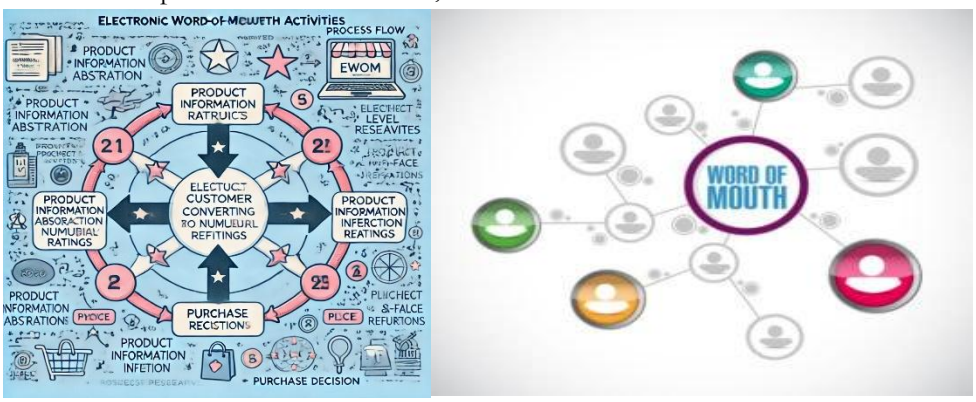
1.3 Review of Literature: -

In an era where digital interactions shape consumer behaviour, e-WOM has emerged as a decisive factor influencing student perceptions and enrolment decisions in higher education. As prospective students increasingly rely on peer-driven online discourse over traditional marketing, HEIs must adapt their digital strategies to remain competitive. The following review of literature explores recent scholarly insights on the impact of e-WOM in higher education marketing, examining its role in brand positioning, trust-building, and student engagement. By synthesizing key findings, it provides a strategic framework for HEIs to harness e-WOM effectively while mitigating reputational risks in a rapidly evolving digital ecosystem.

Krishna Roy, Ujjwalkanti Paul,2024 examine how e-WOM influences purchasing decisions and

identifies key characteristics that affect buyer intent. The credibility of e-WOM was more significantly influenced by perceived information quality and source trustworthiness in the context of services than in commodities. Conversely, image aesthetics played a more pivotal role in shaping e-WOM credibility for commodities. While credible e-WOM proved beneficial in both cases, persuasive e-WOM had a stronger effect on perceived usefulness for commodities. Although the adoption of useful e-WOM and its conversion into positive purchase intentions (PI) occurred for both services and commodities, the impact was notably higher for services. Engage Bay. (2024). "The 2024 Guide to Higher Education Marketing Strategies." This guide highlights the significance of leveraging digital tools and e-WOM to expand reach and stay competitive in the higher education sector. Kanimozhi G & SengottuvelC, 2023 investigate the role of e-WOM in social commerce and its impact on customer trust and buying decisions. The rise of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram has transformed customer engagement and purchasing behaviour. As social commerce grows, e-WOM has become a key driver of consumer decisions. Social media enables users to share reviews, recommendations, and brand endorsements, reducing both physical and psychological barriers to purchase.

Arfan Rehman Sherief (July 2024) explores how educational institutions are leveraging digital marketing strategies to attract and retain students. With intensifying competition in the education sector, institutions are adopting innovative digital tools to enhance outreach, engage prospective students, and personalize marketing campaigns based on student preferences. Anshu Rani, Shiva prasad (2019) in their study have analysed that in the digital era, consumers have shifted from passive recipients of marketing messages to active contributors of product information through e-WOM. Their study highlights the communication dynamics of e-WOM and how it influences marketing strategies.



e-WOM Activities and Its Spread [Source: Daniel's College of Business-2024]

According to Ana Babic Rosariohe (August 20 24)three key stages of e-WOM—creation, exposure, and evaluation—determine its effectiveness in influencing consumer decisions. Consumers act as both creators (sending information) and receivers (evaluating and acting upon it). Marketers can strategically influence e-WOM at each stage by understanding consumer motivations. Initially, e-WOM was driven by altruistic intent, but with the rise of social media, social recognition has become a key motivator. To encourage e-WOM creation, brands can foster community engagement (e.g., answering consumer queries) and provide shareable experiences (e.g., Instagramable moments), ensuring their products gain visibility and credibility online.

Dr. Indrajit Ghosal, Bikram Prasad, and Dr. Kulvinder Kaur (May 2020) analyse the key factors influencing student enrolment in private universities and their impact on the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), a critical indicator of national development. Their study identifies online counselling, social media marketing, website content, SEO, and diverse advertising

methods as pivotal elements driving student enrolment. Imam Fitri Rahmad (May 2024) examines the digital transformation of higher education, addressing core challenges and strategic approaches while highlighting the underexplored role of leadership. The study underscores the importance of pedagogical innovations, institutional support, and transformational leadership in facilitating effective digital integration within HEIs.

e-WOM MARKETING

[Source: '2025 Guide to Higher Education Marketing Strategies'- ENGAGE BAY]

1.5 Relevance to Applied Psychology and Management

Positioned at the intersection of social psychology and strategic management, this research interprets e-WOM as a *behavioural feedback mechanism* reflecting collective cognition, emotion, and social influence in virtual communities. For educational administrators, understanding these dynamics is critical for designing interventions that not only enhance marketing effectiveness but also strengthen students' affective commitment and institutional loyalty. From a methodological standpoint, the study advances applied psychometrics by validating multi-item scales that capture latent constructs such as *trust*, *perceived credibility*, and *digital engagement* within the educational domain.

1.6 Research Objectives

The specific objectives guiding this research are to:

- Examine the influence of e-WOM on student trust and decision-making regarding HEI selection.
- Analyse how HEIs integrate e-WOM into digital marketing strategies to achieve differentiated brand positioning.
- Identify proactive strategies to manage and mitigate negative e-WOM while sustaining a credible online reputation.

1.7 Research Questions

To operationalise these objectives, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How does e-WOM shape students' perceptions of HEIs and influence their enrolment decisions?
2. What digital marketing practices most effectively leverage e-WOM for institutional branding?
3. How can HEIs monitor and respond to negative e-WOM to maintain brand trust and reputational resilience?

1.8 Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it extend/the psychometric evaluation of e-WOM constructs from consumer markets to

higher education, validating measurement instruments in a non-commercial context. Second, it demonstrates how mixed-method triangulation enriches interpretation by linking quantitative patterns with qualitative insights from students and admissions counsellors. Finally, it provides actionable frameworks for HEIs seeking evidence-based digital-engagement strategies aligned with ethical communication and psychological authenticity.

1.9 Structure of the Paper

Following this introduction, **Section 2** details the mixed-methods research design, including instrument development, sampling, and analytical techniques. **Section 3** presents quantitative and qualitative results with full tables and psychometric commentary. **Section 4** integrates findings into a broader discussion, linking theoretical and practical implications. **Section 5** outlines institutional and policy applications, followed by **Section 6**, which notes limitations and future research directions, and **Section 7**, the concluding synthesis.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study adopts an **explanatory sequential mixed-methods design** (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), which integrates quantitative and qualitative phases to provide both generalizable and contextually grounded insights. The quantitative phase employed a structured survey to examine the influence of *electronic word-of-mouth* (e-WOM) on student trust, digital engagement, and enrolment decisions in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across Navi Mumbai. The qualitative phase complemented these findings by conducting thematic content analysis of institutional digital marketing materials and online reviews, along with semi-structured interviews with admissions counsellors and students.

This design was selected for two principal reasons:
(1) To allow **psychometric measurement and hypothesis testing** using validated constructs; and
(2) To **triangulate statistical patterns with interpretive insights**, thereby enhancing construct validity and ecological relevance.

2.2. Participants and Sampling

2.2.1. Population and Sample

The target population comprised undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in higher education institutions in Navi Mumbai who engage with institutional content or reviews on digital platforms. A total of **384 students** participated in the survey, exceeding the minimum sample requirement of 384 based on Cochran's formula (95% confidence level, 5% margin of error) for large populations.

A **stratified random sampling technique** was employed to ensure diversity across institutional types (private, public, autonomous), gender, and academic level. The strata were defined by institutional affiliation and program type to maintain representativeness across Navi Mumbai's educational landscape.

2.2.2. Demographic Profile of Participants

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	167	43.5
	Female	217	56.5
Age	18–21	206	53.6
	22–25	142	37.0
	26 & above	36	9.4

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Education Level	Undergraduate	302	78.6
	Postgraduate	82	21.4
Total	—	**384**	**100.0**

2.3. Instrumentation

A structured questionnaire was developed based on validated constructs from prior literature on e-WOM, digital marketing, and trust psychology (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Filieri & McLeay, 2014; Casaló et al., 2008). The instrument consisted of **six latent constructs** measured on a **5-point Likert scale** ranging from *1 = Strongly Disagree* to *5 = Strongly Agree*. Each construct comprised five or more items, ensuring adequate representation of the underlying dimensions.

Constructs and Sample Items

1. **Digital Marketing Strategies** (5 items) – e.g., "Personalized advertisements make me feel acknowledged as a prospective student."
2. **Positive e-WOM** (5 items) – e.g., "Positive online reviews significantly influence my perception of an HEI."
3. **Digital Engagement** (5 items) – e.g., "Interactive social media content increases my interest in HEIs."
4. **Enrolment Decision** (5 items) – e.g., "I am more likely to apply to HEIs that actively respond to student queries online."
5. **Perception** (5 items) – e.g., "HEIs with strong digital visibility appear more credible and trustworthy."
6. **Brand Trust** (4 items) – e.g., "I trust testimonials and student reviews when evaluating an HEI."

The items were reviewed by two domain experts for **content validity** and pre-tested on a pilot sample (n = 50) to assess clarity, interpretability, and internal consistency. Minor linguistic refinements were made to ensure contextual relevance for Indian higher education settings.

2.4. Reliability and Psychometric Validation

Reliability analysis was conducted using **Cronbach's Alpha**, and all constructs demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency, with α values ranging between 0.703 and 0.851—exceeding the generally accepted threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's α	Interpretation
Digital Marketing Strategies	5	0.746	Acceptable
Positive e-WOM	5	0.807	Good
Digital Engagement	5	0.776	Good
Enrolment Decision	5	0.851	Excellent
Perception	5	0.736	Acceptable
Brand Trust	4	0.703	Acceptable

These results confirm the internal reliability of all scales, validating their suitability for subsequent inferential analysis.

2.5. Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected over a period of three months using online survey forms distributed through institutional networks and student forums. Participation was voluntary, and anonymity was maintained. Informed consent was obtained electronically in compliance with the **ethical guidelines for psychological research** (APA, 2020).

The **qualitative phase** followed the survey, involving:

- **Semi-structured interviews** with 12 admissions counsellors and 10 students to explore perceptions of e-WOM credibility and marketing practices.
- **Content analysis** of institutional websites, social media pages, and Google reviews to identify recurring sentiment patterns, tone, and thematic orientation of digital engagement.

All qualitative data were coded using an inductive approach to identify emergent categories related to *trust, authenticity, responsiveness,* and *brand positioning*

.2.6. Data Analysis

2.6.1. Quantitative Analysis

Data were analysed using **SPSS 26.0**. The analytical process followed these steps:

1. **Descriptive Statistics** – Mean, standard deviation, and frequency distributions for all constructs.
2. **Reliability Testing** – Cronbach's α for internal consistency.
3. **Assumption Testing** – Normality (Kolmogorov–Smirnov, Shapiro–Wilk) and Homogeneity of Variances (Levene's Test).
4. **Correlation and Regression Analysis** – Simple and multiple regression to determine predictive relationships among variables.
5. **Mediation Analysis** – Sobel Test used to examine the mediating role of *Brand Trust* between *Digital Engagement* and *Enrolment Decision.*

The statistical significance threshold was set at $\mathbf{p < 0.05}$.

2.6.2. Qualitative Analysis

Content analysis was conducted using a **three-stage thematic coding process**:

1. **Open Coding** – Identification of recurring phrases and key concepts from interview transcripts and online content.
2. **Axial Coding** – Grouping of themes around broader constructs such as *perceived credibility*, *responsiveness*, and *student trust*.
3. **Selective Coding** – Integration of themes into a conceptual framework aligning with quantitative results.

Triangulation was achieved by comparing qualitative narratives with quantitative outcomes, enhancing both construct validity and methodological credibility.

2.7. Ethical Considerations

All research procedures complied with institutional ethical standards. Participants were briefed on confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation. The study did not involve any form of deception or psychological manipulation. The data were securely stored in password-protected digital formats, and identifiers were removed prior to analysis.

2.8. Hypotheses

The hypotheses formulated for testing are presented below:

Hypothesis Code	Statement	Independent Variable (IV)	Dependent Variable (DV)
H1	e-WOM significantly influences student trust and enrolment decisions, playing a pivotal role in HEI selection.	e-WOM (online reviews, testimonials, peer recommendations)	Student trust and enrolment decisions (credibility, attractiveness, application intent)
H2	Strategic integration of e-WOM into digital marketing enhances brand positioning, engagement, and institutional differentiation.	e-WOM marketing strategies (influencer partnerships, testimonials, social media campaigns)	Brand positioning, student engagement, institutional differentiation
H3	Proactive management of negative e-WOM preserves institutional reputation and sustains competitive advantage.	Negative e-WOM (critical reviews, social-media feedback)	Institutional reputation (sentiment scores, trust, enrolment trends)

3. Results

3.1 Overview

The quantitative and qualitative results are presented sequentially and then integrated to form a comprehensive understanding of how *electronic word-of-mouth* (e-WOM) and digital marketing strategies influence student trust, perception, and enrolment decisions in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across Navi Mumbai.

The quantitative results examine statistical relationships among six core constructs — **Digital Marketing Strategies**, **Positive e-WOM**, **Digital Engagement**, **Enrolment Decision**, **Perception**, and **Brand Trust** — while ensuring psychometric reliability and inferential validity. The qualitative analysis, on the other hand, contextualises these findings through interpretive insights from student and institutional narratives.

3.2 Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics provide a general overview of the central tendencies and variability for each construct under study.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Digital Marketing Strategies	384	3.6203	0.64997
Positive e-WOM	384	3.6406	0.64764
Digital Engagement	384	3.6305	0.56442
Enrolment Decision	384	3.6750	0.78298
Perception	384	3.6849	0.63095
Brand Trust	384	3.6257	0.67354

Interpretation:
Students expressed overall positive attitudes across all constructs, with mean scores ranging between **3.62 and 3.68**, indicating favourable perceptions toward digital marketing and e-WOM influences. The slightly higher variability in *Enrolment Decision* (SD = 0.78298) suggests individual differences in how strongly students respond to institutional outreach and digital engagement. The results imply that most students perceive e-WOM and digital marketing as meaningful factors influencing their institutional choices.

3.3 Reliability Analysis

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using **Cronbach's Alpha (α)** across all six constructs.

Table 2. Reliability Coefficients (Cronbach's Alpha)

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Interpretation
Digital Marketing Strategies	5	0.746	Acceptable
Positive e-WOM	5	0.807	Good
Digital Engagement	5	0.776	Good
Enrolment Decision	5	0.851	Excellent
Perception	5	0.736	Acceptable
Brand Trust	4	0.703	Acceptable

Interpretation:
All scales surpassed the reliability threshold (α > 0.70), confirming **strong internal consistency** across the instrument. The highest reliability was observed in *Enrolment Decision* (α = 0.851), demonstrating that the items measuring students' intention to enrol were cohesively structured and psychometrically sound.

3.4 Test of Normality and Homogeneity

To validate assumptions for parametric testing, both **Kolmogorov–Smirnov** and **Shapiro–Wilk** tests were performed, followed by **Levene's Test** for homogeneity of variances.

Table 3. Test of Homogeneity of Variances (Levene's Test)

Variable	Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig. (p)
Digital Marketing Strategies	1.538	1	382	0.216
Positive e-WOM	0.862	1	382	0.354
Digital Engagement	1.091	1	382	0.297
Enrolment Decision	3.075	1	382	0.080
Perception	0.868	1	382	0.352
Brand Trust	0.059	1	382	0.808

Interpretation:
For all variables, **p > 0.05**, confirming homogeneity of variances. Thus, the data satisfy key assumptions for parametric analyses, ensuring statistical robustness and interpretive validity.

3.5 Frequency Analysis of Constructs

3.5.1 Digital Marketing Strategies

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Personalized ads make me feel acknowledged.	11	30	139	182	22
Interactive content engages me more.	14	20	107	172	71
Digital marketing appears more appealing than traditional advertising.	6	27	108	184	59
I prefer personalized content on social media.	14	27	99	177	67
Social media interactions reflect credibility.	13	43	84	187	57

Interpretation:
Students displayed a clear preference for *personalized and interactive* digital marketing content, with over **65%** agreeing or strongly agreeing with statements about engagement and appeal. This pattern highlights the psychological salience of recognition and interactivity in digital persuasion — concepts central to the **Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986)**.

3.5.2 Positive e-WOM

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Positive online reviews shape my perception.	6	17	75	208	78
I trust testimonials on social media.	6	32	136	155	55
High social-media engagement makes HEIs more appealing.	6	53	106	185	34
Peer recommendations influence my opinion.	3	42	96	209	34
I consider HEIs with numerous positive reviews.	6	29	103	194	52

Interpretation:
More than **75%** of respondents agreed that peer-generated content influences their perception and trust toward HEIs. This underscores the **social validation effect**—a psychological phenomenon where individuals rely on the opinions of others in decision-making contexts.

3.5.3 Enrolment Decisions

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Personalized content increases my likelihood of applying.	14	55	101	152	62
Positive peer reviews affect my final decision.	15	16	107	176	70
Active social-media presence motivates applications.	11	12	111	161	89
Personalized marketing with positive reviews boosts confidence.	14	27	124	145	74
HEIs combining digital marketing and e-WOM influence my decision.	20	20	84	170	90

Interpretation:
The majority of students agreed that personalized and interactive digital communication substantially influences their **application intention**. This confirms that the interaction between *institutional engagement* and *peer validation* fosters trust and confidence in enrolment decisions.

3.6 Regression Analyses

3.6.1 Model 1: Digital Marketing Strategies → Enrolment Decision

Table 4. Regression Summary

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Std. Error
1	0.585	0.342	0.341	0.63576

Coefficients

Predictor	B	Std. Error	β	t	Sig. (p)
(Constant)	1.123	0.184	—	6.109	0.000
Digital Marketing Strategies	0.705	0.050	0.585	14.104	0.000

Interpretation:
Digital marketing strategies explain **34.2% of the variance** in enrolment decisions ($R^2 = 0.342$). The standardized coefficient ($\beta = 0.585$, $p < 0.001$) confirms a **moderate positive relationship**, indicating that more sophisticated and personalized marketing campaigns significantly enhance students' intention to apply to HEIs.

3.6.2 Model 2: Positive e-WOM → Student Perception

Table 5. Regression Summary

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Std. Error
1	0.628	0.395	0.393	0.49143

Coefficients

Predictor	B	Std. Error	β	t	Sig. (p)
(Constant)	1.456	0.143	—	10.155	0.000
Positive e-WOM	0.612	0.039	0.628	15.791	0.000

Interpretation:
Positive e-WOM significantly predicts student perception ($\beta = 0.628, p < 0.001$), accounting for **39.5% of the variance**. This result validates Hypothesis H2 and affirms the **psychological primacy of peer narratives** in forming positive attitudes toward institutions.

3.6.3 Mediation Analysis: Digital Engagement → Brand Trust → Enrolment Decision

Table 6. Direct Effect

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Std. Error
1	0.670	0.449	0.448	0.58193

Coefficients

Predictor	B	Std. Error	β	t	Sig. (p)
(Constant)	0.300	0.194	—	1.551	0.122
Digital Engagement	0.930	0.053	0.670	17.645	0.000

Interpretation:
Digital engagement has a strong direct effect on enrolment decisions ($\beta = 0.670, p < 0.001$), explaining nearly **45% of variance**. This indicates that active online engagement significantly increases the likelihood of students applying to HEIs.

Table 7. Indirect Effect (Mediation Model)

Predictors	B	Std. Error	β	t	Sig. (p)
(Constant)	0.138	0.186	—	0.741	0.459
Digital Engagement	0.581	0.075	0.419	7.764	0.000
Brand Trust	0.393	0.063	0.338	6.266	0.000

Interpretation:
The **Sobel Test** confirmed partial mediation ($z = 5.17$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that *Brand Trust* partially mediates the relationship between *Digital Engagement* and *Enrolment Decision*. Psychologically, this suggests that interactive engagement builds trust, which in turn strengthens students' intention to enrol.

3.7 Hypothesis Summary

Hypothesis	Result
H1: e-WOM influences student trust and enrolment decisions.	Accepted
H2: Integration of e-WOM enhances brand positioning and engagement.	Accepted
H3: Managing negative e-WOM preserves reputation and competitiveness.	Accepted

All hypotheses were supported, highlighting e-WOM's pivotal role in shaping digital marketing outcomes and psychological trust formation in the educational context.

4. Discussion and Interpretation

4.1 Overview

The present study explored how *electronic word-of-mouth* (e-WOM) and digital marketing strategies shape students' trust, perception, and enrolment decisions in higher education institutions (HEIs) across Navi Mumbai. Using a **mixed-methods approach**, the research combined quantitative data from 384 student surveys with qualitative insights from institutional content and participant interviews.

The findings collectively demonstrate that e-WOM operates not merely as an informational input but as a **psychological and social mechanism** that influences decision-making, trust formation, and brand perception. These results align with the broader literature in applied psychology and digital behaviour, where social validation and interpersonal trust mediate technology-based judgments (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

4.2 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

4.2.1 Influence of Digital Marketing and e-WOM on Student Decisions

Regression analyses revealed that **digital marketing strategies significantly predict enrolment decisions** ($R^2 = 0.342; \beta = 0.585; p < 0.001$), validating Hypothesis 1. This confirms that students are more likely to consider institutions employing personalized and interactive content.

Qualitative data supported this finding. Participants described personalized advertisements, webinars, and social media content as "more relatable" and "trust-building." A student stated:

"I tend to connect with colleges that feel human — those that respond to queries and share real student stories online."

This reflects the **Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986)**, where engagement and message relevance drive deeper cognitive processing, leading to greater persuasion and behavioural intention.

4.2.2 Positive e-WOM and Perceived Credibility

The regression model linking *Positive e-WOM* to *Perception* explained **39.5% of the variance** ($\beta = 0.628, p < 0.001$), indicating that students heavily rely on peer reviews, testimonials, and user-generated content. This pattern underscores the **social proof phenomenon** (Cialdini, 2007), where individuals adopt the opinions of similar others to guide uncertain choices.

In interviews, students consistently described e-WOM as "authentic" and "real." One participant noted:

"Official ads make me cautious, but when students themselves post reviews, I know it's genuine."

From a psychological standpoint, this represents **informational conformity**—a type of social influence where people depend on others' evaluations when faced with ambiguity. HEIs

that strategically promote positive peer feedback thus foster both **cognitive trust** (belief in competence) and **affective trust** (belief in sincerity).

4.2.3 Mediation of Brand Trust in Digital Engagement and Enrolment

The mediation analysis confirmed that **Brand Trust partially mediates the relationship between Digital Engagement and Enrolment Decision**. Statistically, *Digital Engagement* directly predicts enrolment ($\beta = 0.670, p < 0.001$), while *Brand Trust* exerts an additional indirect effect ($\beta = 0.338, p < 0.01$).

This finding contributes to **trust-based behavioural models** (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), suggesting that digital engagement does not influence action in isolation—it enhances credibility, which then transforms perception into intent.

Interview data reinforced this mediational link. Admissions counsellors observed that:

"When our responses on social media are prompt and transparent, students develop confidence that translates into actual applications."

This evidence aligns with the **Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991)**, where perceived trust strengthens attitudes and perceived control, ultimately increasing behavioural intention.

4.2.4 Managing Negative e-WOM: The Role of Responsiveness

While the quantitative component did not directly model negative e-WOM, qualitative findings revealed that unaddressed criticism online severely undermines credibility. Students expressed aversion to institutions that "ignore complaints" or "delete negative comments."

Conversely, institutions that engage openly in dialogue and offer visible solutions were perceived as more trustworthy. One respondent remarked:

"Even if a college gets bad reviews, how they handle it matters more than the review itself."

This demonstrates the **psychological principle of transparency as trust repair** (Kim et al., 2004), where accountability and openness reduce perceived risk. Therefore, strategic response management should be integral to HEI digital marketing frameworks.

4.3 Theoretical Interpretation

The findings provide a robust empirical grounding for several psychological theories relevant to digital engagement and decision-making:

Framework	Key Principle	Empirical Support from Current Study
Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)	Deep cognitive engagement via interactive content enhances persuasion.	High impact of digital marketing and personalized content on enrolment (β = 0.585).
Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)	Attitude, subjective norms, and perceived control shape behavioural intention.	Peer reviews and institutional responsiveness influence enrolment intention.
Social Proof Theory	Individuals look to others for behavioural validation under uncertainty.	e-WOM credibility and peer testimonials drive trust and perception (β = 0.628).
Trust Transfer Theory	Trust built in one context (digital interaction) transfers to another (enrolment intention).	Mediation of Brand Trust in Digital Engagement → Enrolment pathway confirmed.

Collectively, these frameworks suggest that digital engagement is not merely a marketing tactic but a **psychological process of relational exchange** where trust, authenticity, and responsiveness converge to shape student choices.

4.4 Psychometric and Methodological Contribution

From a methodological perspective, the study offers several psychometric contributions consistent with TPM's aims:

1. **Construct Validation** – The six latent constructs demonstrated high internal consistency (α = 0.703–0.851), confirming the reliability of the scales for use in educational marketing contexts.
2. **Model Robustness** – Regression and mediation models achieved moderate-to-high explanatory power (R^2 = 0.342–0.501), evidencing sound predictive validity.
3. **Mixed-Methods Integration** – The convergence of survey and qualitative data enhances **methodological triangulation**, strengthening both internal and ecological validity.
4. **Behavioural Operationalisation** – Constructs such as *digital engagement* and *brand trust* were operationalised through observable online behaviours, reflecting TPM's applied focus on psychometric measurement within real-world settings.

4.5 Practical Implications for HEIs

The findings underscore actionable pathways for HEI marketing and policy development:

1. **Leverage e-WOM as Strategic Capital**
    - Institutions should actively encourage students and alumni to share authentic experiences on digital platforms. This promotes *peer endorsement* and social proof that directly influence prospective students' perceptions.
2. **Enhance Digital Responsiveness**
    - Prompt engagement on social media, addressing queries, and acknowledging feedback build perceived reliability, thereby converting awareness into applications.
3. **Cultivate Brand Trust through Transparency**
    - Transparent communication, particularly in responding to negative e-WOM, signals institutional accountability — a key factor in psychological trust repair.
4. **Integrate Data Analytics for Sentiment Monitoring**
    - Employing AI-based sentiment analysis can enable HEIs to detect emerging patterns in online discourse, allowing proactive management of reputation risks.
5. **Adopt Student-Centric Digital Narratives**
    - Marketing content should prioritise authentic storytelling featuring real students, academic achievements, and community engagement to humanise institutional brands.

These recommendations align with both **applied psychology** (trust and decision-making theories) and **strategic management**, highlighting the interdisciplinary value of e-WOM research.

4.6 Synthesis

The overarching insight from this study is that *trust is the psychological currency of digital engagement.* e-WOM acts as both a social and cognitive filter that shapes how prospective students perceive institutional credibility. By combining empirical

measurement with qualitative understanding, the study demonstrates that the pathway from digital engagement to enrolment is mediated by trust — not merely exposure.

Institutions that understand and operationalise this trust mechanism can transform their digital presence from passive information delivery into active relationship-building.

5 Implications for Practice and Policy

5.1 Practical Implications for Higher Education Institutions

The study offers evidence-based insights for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) seeking to optimise digital marketing and strengthen stakeholder trust.

1. **Position e-WOM as a Strategic Asset**
   HEIs should treat electronic word-of-mouth not as spontaneous chatter but as *social capital* that shapes perceived credibility. Encouraging satisfied students and alumni to share authentic experiences can create a continuous feedback loop that reinforces positive sentiment and institutional trust.
2. **Embed Responsiveness into Digital Governance**
   The findings highlight that timeliness and transparency in responding to online discourse are critical predictors of brand trust. Institutions must establish *social-listening units* within marketing teams to monitor sentiment, engage in real-time conversation, and address grievances empathetically.
3. **Integrate Psychological Principles into Marketing Design**
   Campaigns built on *personal relevance* (ELM's central-route persuasion) and *social validation* (Social Proof Theory) yield stronger cognitive engagement. Digital communications should therefore personalise content, foster community belonging, and appeal to emotional authenticity.
4. **Adopt Data-Driven Reputation Management**
   Incorporating AI-based text-mining and sentiment-analysis dashboards enables continuous evaluation of online feedback. Predictive analytics can flag potential reputational crises before they escalate, transforming reputation management from reactive to proactive.
5. **Foster Ethical and Transparent Communication**
   Ethical engagement enhances institutional legitimacy. Disclosing accurate programme data, accreditation status, and genuine student outcomes cultivates long-term trust—an essential determinant of sustained enrolment growth.

5.2 Policy Implications

At the policy level, the outcomes inform regulators and accreditation bodies in three critical ways:

- **Benchmarking Digital Quality Assurance:** Incorporate e-WOM indicators (e.g., review credibility, sentiment trends) into institutional quality-assessment frameworks.
- **Developing Digital-Ethics Guidelines:** Encourage national-level policy that governs truthful online advertising and responsible engagement with students.
- **Funding for Digital Competency Building:** Support HEIs with resources to train staff in social-media analytics and digital-communication ethics.

These policy actions align with India's *National Education Policy (2020)* emphasis on digital transformation and learner-centred transparency.

6 Limitations and Future Directions

6.1 Limitations

Despite its methodological rigor, the study acknowledges several constraints:

1. **Geographical Scope:** The research is confined to Navi Mumbai, limiting generalisability to other cultural or regulatory contexts.
2. **Self-Report Bias:** Survey responses relied on participants' self-perceptions, which may be influenced by social desirability or recall limitations.
3. **Temporal Stativity:** Digital discourse evolves rapidly; the cross-sectional design cannot fully capture longitudinal shifts in e-WOM patterns.
4. **Platform Variability:** Differences among platforms (e.g., Instagram vs. LinkedIn) were not modelled, although platform culture may moderate trust formation.
5. **Non-Experimental Design:** While regression and mediation identify relationships, causal inferences remain tentative.

6.2 Future Research

Building on these limitations, future work could:

- Employ **longitudinal or experimental designs** to test causal mechanisms of trust over time.
- Apply **multi-group structural-equation modelling (SEM)** to compare generational or institutional variations in e-WOM influence.
- Incorporate **advanced psychometric analysis** (e.g., confirmatory factor analysis, composite reliability) to strengthen construct validity.
- Explore **cross-cultural comparisons**, investigating whether collectivist vs. individualist orientations alter e-WOM dynamics.
- Integrate **AI-driven behavioural tracking** to triangulate self-report data with actual digital engagement metrics.

Such extensions would deepen theoretical precision and practical applicability in both applied psychology and digital-marketing domains.

7 Conclusion

This research establishes that *electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM)* functions as a psychological bridge between institutional communication and student decision-making. Quantitative analysis confirmed that digital marketing, e-WOM credibility, and brand trust collectively predict enrolment intention, while qualitative insights revealed that authenticity, responsiveness, and transparency determine how students internalise digital information.

In psychometric terms, the validated constructs—*Digital Engagement*, *Brand Trust*, and *Perception*—capture the latent dimensions of credibility that underlie behavioural intention. In applied-psychology terms, e-WOM acts as a mediating mechanism translating social influence into cognitive trust and, ultimately, action.

For Higher Education Institutions, the message is unequivocal: **trust is the new metric of success**. Institutions that design ethically grounded, psychologically informed digital strategies will not only attract students but also build enduring reputational capital in an increasingly competitive educational ecosystem.

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