



Understanding Generation Z Enrollment Decisions in Private Higher Education: The Roles of University Image, Electronic Word of Mouth, and Digital Marketing

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to examine the influence of university image, electronic word of mouth (eWOM), and digital marketing on students' enrollment decisions in private higher education institutions (PHEIs) in West Java, Indonesia. **Method:** Grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior, Information Processing Theory, and Social Influence Theory, this study employed a quantitative research design. Data were collected from 200 prospective students using purposive sampling and analyzed through Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to evaluate the relationships among the proposed constructs. **Results:** The findings reveal that university image ($\beta = 0.312$; $p < 0.001$), eWOM ($\beta = 0.285$; $p < 0.001$), and digital marketing ($\beta = 0.247$; $p < 0.001$) have positive and significant effects on students' enrollment decisions. Among the predictors, university image emerged as the strongest determinant. The structural model explains 68.4% of the variance in enrollment decisions ($R^2 = 0.684$), indicating substantial predictive capability and confirming the importance of both institutional reputation and digital communication channels in influencing prospective students' choices. **Novelty:** This study contributes to the higher education marketing literature by simultaneously integrating university image, eWOM, and digital marketing within a single SEM-PLS framework. Unlike previous studies that examined these factors separately, this research provides a comprehensive model contextualized for Generation Z prospective students in Indonesia, offering a more holistic understanding of enrollment decision-making in the digital era.

INTRODUCTION

The higher education sector has become increasingly competitive due to the rapid growth of private higher education institutions (PHEIs) and the changing behavior of prospective students in searching for educational information. According to data from Indonesia's Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, more than 4,500 PHEIs operate across the country, with West Java representing one of the regions with the highest concentration of institutions. In such a competitive environment, attracting prospective students is not only important for institutional growth but also essential for long-term sustainability. Consequently, universities are required to understand the factors influencing students' enrollment decisions in an increasingly digitalized environment.

The emergence of Generation Z has significantly transformed the university selection process. Unlike previous generations, Generation Z extensively relies on digital platforms, including social media, online reviews, websites, and search engines, when evaluating educational alternatives. Recent studies have shown that digital communication channels play a crucial role in shaping students' perceptions and decision-making processes (Harman & Nguyen, 2023; Huang & Zhang, 2024). As a result,

traditional promotional approaches are becoming less effective, while digital-based communication strategies are gaining strategic importance in higher education marketing.

Previous studies have identified several determinants of university choice. University image has consistently been recognized as a critical factor influencing students' perceptions, trust, and enrollment intentions (Matus-López et al., 2022; Rachmawati et al., 2022). A strong institutional image, reflected through accreditation, academic reputation, graduate employability, and campus culture, contributes positively to students' confidence in selecting a university. Similarly, electronic word of mouth (eWOM) has emerged as an influential source of information in the digital era. Positive recommendations and testimonials from alumni, current students, and peer networks significantly affect prospective students' attitudes and enrollment intentions (Kim & Park, 2023; Tran & Nguyen, 2021). Furthermore, digital marketing activities through social media, websites, search engines, and online communication platforms have become important tools for universities to reach and engage prospective students (Huang & Zhang, 2024; Lestari et al., 2024).

Although these factors have been widely examined, several research gaps remain. First, previous studies have generally investigated university image, eWOM, and digital marketing independently, providing limited understanding of their combined influence on enrollment decisions. Second, empirical evidence integrating these three constructs within a single analytical framework remains scarce, particularly in the context of private higher education institutions. Third, most existing studies have been conducted in developed countries, while research focusing on Indonesian Generation Z students remains limited despite their distinct social, cultural, and digital characteristics.

To address these gaps, this study integrates university image, electronic word of mouth, and digital marketing within a single research model to explain enrollment decisions among prospective students in private higher education institutions in West Java, Indonesia. The study is grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior, Information Processing Theory, and Social Influence Theory, which collectively explain how institutional perceptions, digital information processing, and social influences shape students' decision-making behavior. The novelty of this research lies in the simultaneous examination of these three determinants within a unified SEM-PLS framework and its contextualization within the Generation Z segment in Indonesian private higher education.

Therefore, this study aims to: (1) examine the influence of university image on enrollment decisions; (2) analyze the influence of electronic word of mouth on enrollment decisions; (3) investigate the influence of digital marketing on enrollment decisions; and (4) evaluate the combined influence of these factors on students' enrollment decisions in private higher education institutions in West Java, Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

The purposive sampling procedure was conducted through several sequential steps. First, five private higher education institutions (PHEIs) located in different regions of West Java were contacted and agreed to participate in the study through their academic coordinators. Second, the coordinators identified newly enrolled undergraduate students who met the predefined inclusion criteria, namely being actively enrolled in the

2023/2024 or 2024/2025 academic year, aged between 17 and 22 years, and having been directly involved in the university selection process, either independently or with family assistance. Third, an online questionnaire created using Google Forms was distributed to the eligible students through institutional communication channels, including official student WhatsApp groups and academic mailing lists. Before completing the questionnaire, respondents were provided with an informed consent statement explaining the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality of their responses. Finally, all submitted questionnaires were screened for completeness and duplicate responses. Incomplete questionnaires and duplicate submissions were excluded from the final dataset, resulting in 200 valid responses for subsequent analysis (Hair et al., 2022).

Table 1. Operationalization of Research Variables

Variable	Dimension	Indicator	Code	Source
University Image (X1)	Academic	Program accreditation meets expectations	CI1	(Al-Tarawneh, 2022)
	Reputation	Graduate reputation in the job market	CI2	
	Program Alignment	Program aligns with personal interests and strengths	CI3	(Rachmawati et al., 2022)
		Curriculum relevance to future career	CI4	
	Institutional Character	Campus culture fits personal identity	CI5	(Harman & Nguyen, 2023)
eWOM (X2)	Information Quality	Alumni information is accurate and trustworthy	EW1	(Kim & Park, 2023)
		Current student testimonials are relevant	EW2	
	Source Credibility	Family/friend recommendations are trusted	EW3	(Saputra & Widodo, 2023)
		School counselor advice is relied upon	EW4	
	eWOM Volume	Abundant positive reviews on social media	EW5	(Chen & Liu, 2022)
Digital Marketing (X3)	Social Media Content	Instagram content is relevant and engaging	DM1	(Wiratama & Handayani, 2023)
		TikTok content resonates with Gen Z characteristics	DM2	
	Website & SEO	Institutional website is informative and accessible	DM3	(Mogaji et al., 2020)
		Information easily found via Google search	DM4	
	Digital Communication	Fast response via WhatsApp/digital messaging	DM5	(Lestari et al., 2024)
	Digital Events	Online open house/exhibition information available	DM6	
Enrollment Decision (Y)	Decision Conviction	Confident this PHEI is the best choice	KP1	(Nguyen et al., 2022)
	Program Fit	Program aligns with passion and goals	KP2	
	Financial Consideration	Tuition fee fits family's financial capacity	KP3	(Dewi & Prastowo, 2024)
	Accessibility	Campus proximity to place of residence is acceptable	KP4	
	Reference Influence	Parental approval strengthens the decision	KP5	

Population and Sample

The target population consisted of newly enrolled students from private higher education institutions in West Java during the 2023/2024 and 2024/2025 academic years. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that respondents possessed relevant experience in the university selection process. The inclusion criteria were: (1) active enrollment in a private higher education institution in West Java; (2) age between 17 and 22 years; and (3) direct involvement in selecting the institution, either independently or with family assistance. The minimum sample size was determined based on the ten-times rule recommended for PLS-SEM, which requires at least ten observations for the largest number of indicators associated with a construct (Hair et al., 2022). Although the minimum requirement was substantially lower, this study collected data from 200 respondents to improve statistical power and estimation accuracy (Ringle et al., 2023).

Table 2. Respondent Profile (n=200)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	118	59.0
	Male	82	41.0
Age	17-18 years	95	47.5
	19-20 years	84	42.0
	21-22 years	21	10.5
PHEI Region	Bandung	92	46.0
	Bekasi/Depok/Bogor	61	30.5
	Cimahi/Sukabumi/others	47	23.5
Primary Info Source	Instagram/TikTok	97	48.5
	Family/Friends/Alumni	63	31.5
	Website/Google	40	20.0

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the respondents. Female respondents accounted for 59.0% of the sample, while male respondents represented 41.0%. Most respondents were aged between 17 and 20 years (89.5%), reflecting the typical age range of first-year university students. Instagram and TikTok were identified as the primary information sources by 48.5% of respondents, highlighting the growing importance of social media in university selection decisions.

Research Instrument and Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire distributed online through Google Forms. The questionnaire was developed based on established measurement scales from previous studies and adapted to the context of higher education enrollment decisions in Indonesia. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire consisted of four constructs: University Image, Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM), Digital Marketing, and Enrollment Decision. University Image was measured using five indicators reflecting academic reputation, program alignment, and institutional character. eWOM was measured using five indicators related to information quality, source credibility, and online review volume. Digital Marketing was measured using six indicators representing social media content, website quality, digital communication, and digital events. Enrollment Decision was measured using five indicators reflecting decision confidence, program fit, financial considerations, accessibility, and social influence. Prior to the main survey, the questionnaire was reviewed by experts in higher education marketing and

pilot-tested to ensure clarity and content validity. The final questionnaire was distributed through academic coordinators at five private higher education institutions in West Java.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SmartPLS 4.0 following a two-stage PLS-SEM procedure. First, the measurement model (outer model) was evaluated to assess reliability and validity. Indicator reliability was examined through outer loadings, while internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR). Convergent validity was evaluated using Average Variance Extracted (AVE), with recommended thresholds of $CR > 0.70$ and $AVE > 0.50$ (Hair et al., 2022). Second, the structural model (inner model) was assessed to test the proposed hypotheses. Path coefficients, t-values, and p-values were estimated using a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples. The coefficient of determination (R^2) was used to evaluate explanatory power, while predictive relevance was assessed using Stone-Geisser's Q^2 statistic. Effect sizes (f^2) and model fit indices, including the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) and Normed Fit Index (NFI), were also examined to evaluate model quality and predictive performance. The significance level for hypothesis testing was established at $p < 0.05$. Hypotheses were accepted when the corresponding path coefficients were positive and statistically

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Measurement Model Evaluation

The measurement model evaluation demonstrated satisfactory reliability and convergent validity for all constructs. As presented in Table 3, all indicator loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, ranging from 0.775 to 0.856, indicating that each indicator contributed substantially to its corresponding latent construct. Among the indicators, DM1 showed the highest loading (0.856), suggesting that this indicator was the strongest representative of the Digital Marketing construct, whereas CI5 had the lowest loading (0.775) but still exceeded the acceptable threshold, confirming its adequacy for construct measurement.

The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.634 to 0.672, all exceeding the recommended minimum value of 0.50. These results indicate that each construct explained more than half of the variance in its indicators, providing adequate evidence of convergent validity. Furthermore, Composite Reliability (CR) values ranged from 0.896 to 0.921, while Cronbach's Alpha (CA) values ranged from 0.862 to 0.899. Since all reliability coefficients were well above the recommended threshold of 0.70, the constructs demonstrated strong internal consistency. Overall, the measurement model satisfied the required reliability and convergent validity criteria, indicating that the measurement instrument was appropriate for subsequent structural model analysis.

Table 3. Measurement Model Results (Outer Model)

Code	Variable	Loading	AVE	CR	CA	Assessment
CI1	University Image (X1)	0.812	0.634	0.896	0.862	Valid & Reliable
CI2		0.789				
CI3		0.831				
CI4		0.798				
CI5		0.775				

Code	Variable	Loading	AVE	CR	CA	Assessment
EW1	eWOM (X2)	0.843	0.651	0.904	0.877	Valid & Reliable
EW2		0.802				
EW3		0.818				
EW4		0.791				
EW5		0.809				
DM1	Digital Marketing (X3)	0.856	0.663	0.921	0.899	Valid & Reliable
DM2		0.832				
DM3		0.778				
DM4		0.791				
DM5		0.818				
DM6		0.803				
KP1	Enrollment Decision (Y)	0.847	0.672	0.909	0.882	Valid & Reliable
KP2		0.823				
KP3		0.808				
KP4		0.794				
KP5		0.831				

Note: AVE > 0.50; CR > 0.70; CA > 0.70 = meets convergent validity and reliability criteria (Hair et al., 2022).

All indicator loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, ranging from 0.775 to 0.856. The AVE values ranged from 0.634 to 0.672, indicating that each construct explained more than 50% of the variance of its indicators. Furthermore, Composite Reliability values ranged from 0.896 to 0.921, while Cronbach's Alpha values ranged from 0.862 to 0.899. These results demonstrate satisfactory convergent validity and internal consistency reliability for all constructs.

Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was evaluated using the Fornell-Larcker criterion. As shown in Table 4, the square root of AVE for each construct exceeded its correlations with other constructs. Specifically, the square root of AVE values were 0.796 for University Image, 0.807 for eWOM, 0.814 for Digital Marketing, and 0.820 for Enrollment Decision.

Table 4. Fornell-Larcker Matrix (Discriminant Validity)

Construct	Univ. Image	eWOM	Dig. Marketing	Enroll. Decision
University Image	0.796			
eWOM	0.521	0.807		
Digital Marketing	0.487	0.513	0.814	
Enrollment Decision	0.612	0.574	0.548	0.820

Note: Diagonal values (bold) are square roots of AVE; must exceed inter-construct correlations (Fornell & Larcker, 1981)

These findings indicate that each construct is empirically distinct from the others. In addition, all HTMT values were below the recommended threshold of 0.90, confirming adequate discriminant validity.

Structural Model Assessment and Hypothesis Testing

The structural model was evaluated using a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 subsamples. Table 5 presents the path coefficients, t-values, p-values, and effect sizes. The results indicate that University Image has a positive and significant effect on Enrollment Decision ($\beta = 0.312$, $t = 4.588$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1. eWOM also has a positive and significant effect on Enrollment Decision ($\beta = 0.285$, $t = 4.014$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H2. Similarly, Digital Marketing positively influences Enrollment Decision ($\beta = 0.247$, $t = 3.384$, $p = 0.001$), supporting H3.

Table 5. Hypothesis Testing Results (Path Coefficients)

Relationship	β (Path Coeff.)	SE	t-stat	p-value	f ²	Decision
H1: University Image → Enrollment Decision	0.312	0.068	4.588	<0.001	0.142	Supported
H2: eWOM → Enrollment Decision	0.285	0.071	4.014	<0.001	0.118	Supported
H3: Digital Marketing → Enrollment Decision	0.247	0.073	3.384	0.001	0.093	Supported

Among the three predictors, University Image demonstrates the strongest effect on Enrollment Decision, followed by eWOM and Digital Marketing.

Model Fit and Predictive Evaluation

The model explains 68.4% of the variance in Enrollment Decision, as indicated by the coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.684$). The adjusted R^2 value of 0.679 indicates consistency after adjustment for model complexity. Predictive relevance was confirmed through the Stone-Geisser Q^2 value of 0.471, indicating satisfactory predictive capability. Regarding model fit, the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) value was 0.052, which is below the recommended threshold of 0.08. The Normed Fit Index (NFI) value was 0.923, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.90.

Table 6. Model Fit and Predictive Evaluation

Criterion	Value	Interpretation
R^2 (Coefficient of Determination)	0.684	Model explains 68.4% of variance in enrollment decisions
Adjusted R^2	0.679	Consistent after model complexity adjustment
Q^2 (Predictive Relevance)	0.471	$Q^2 > 0$: adequate predictive relevance confirmed
SRMR	0.052	<0.08: good model fit (Henseler et al., 2021)
NFI (Normed Fit Index)	0.923	>0.90: adequate model fit
f ² University Image	0.142	Medium effect size (Cohen, 1988)
f ² eWOM	0.118	Medium effect size
f ² Digital Marketing	0.093	Small-to-medium effect size

The effect size analysis revealed that University Image produced the largest effect on Enrollment Decision ($f^2 = 0.142$), followed by eWOM ($f^2 = 0.118$) and Digital Marketing ($f^2 = 0.093$). These results indicate that all exogenous variables contribute meaningfully to explaining students' enrollment decisions.

Discussion

University Image and Enrollment Decision

The findings indicate that university image is the strongest predictor of enrollment decisions among prospective students in private higher education institutions. This result suggests that prospective students place substantial importance on institutional reputation, accreditation status, graduate employability, and the perceived fit between the university and their personal aspirations. The descriptive findings further support this conclusion, as accreditation quality and graduate reputation emerged as the most influential considerations during the university selection process.

From a theoretical perspective, this finding supports the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which posits that favorable attitudes toward an object increase the likelihood of behavioral intention and subsequent decision making. A positive university image appears to create confidence and reduce uncertainty during the enrollment process, thereby increasing the probability of selecting a particular institution. The result also

highlights that institutional branding remains a critical strategic asset even in an increasingly digitalized educational environment.

Electronic Word of Mouth and Enrollment Decision

The positive effect of eWOM demonstrates the importance of social influence in shaping enrollment decisions. Recommendations, testimonials, and online experiences shared by alumni, current students, family members, and peers provide information that prospective students perceive as credible and trustworthy. In the context of higher education, where enrollment decisions involve substantial financial and career consequences, individuals tend to seek validation from social networks before making a final choice.

This finding can be explained through Social Influence Theory, which suggests that attitudes and behaviors are strongly affected by information obtained from significant others. The relatively strong effect of eWOM indicates that interpersonal communication remains highly influential despite the availability of institutional marketing communications. The result suggests that universities should not only focus on formal promotional activities but also encourage positive engagement among students and alumni to strengthen institutional advocacy.

Digital Marketing and Enrollment Decision

Digital marketing was found to have a positive and significant influence on enrollment decisions, although its effect size was smaller than those of university image and eWOM. This finding indicates that digital marketing functions primarily as an information facilitator rather than the principal determinant of enrollment decisions. Social media content, institutional websites, online communication channels, and virtual events provide prospective students with accessible and timely information that supports decision making.

The finding is consistent with Information Processing Theory, which emphasizes that individuals actively search for, evaluate, and process information before making decisions. Generation Z students are highly accustomed to digital environments, making digital marketing an important channel for delivering relevant information. However, the comparatively smaller coefficient suggests that digital marketing alone may not be sufficient to persuade prospective students unless supported by a strong institutional image and positive social recommendations.

From a practical perspective, these findings indicate that digital marketing should be positioned as a strategic information facilitation mechanism rather than merely a promotional tool. Instead of focusing exclusively on increasing online visibility, private higher education institutions should prioritize delivering transparent, accurate, and comprehensive information regarding academic programs, accreditation status, graduate employability, tuition fees, scholarships, and campus life through their digital platforms. Universities can further enhance the effectiveness of digital marketing by integrating authentic student testimonials, alumni success stories, virtual campus tours, webinars, and responsive online communication channels. Such initiatives reduce information uncertainty, strengthen institutional credibility, and complement the influence of university image and electronic word of mouth, thereby supporting prospective students in making well informed enrollment decisions.

Integrated Model and Research Implications

The structural model explains 68.4% of the variance in enrollment decisions, indicating that university image, eWOM, and digital marketing collectively provide substantial explanatory power. The findings suggest that enrollment decisions are influenced by a combination of institutional perceptions, social influences, and digital communication factors rather than by a single determinant.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the higher education marketing literature by integrating the Theory of Planned Behavior, Information Processing Theory, and Social Influence Theory within a single framework. The findings demonstrate that students' enrollment decisions are shaped through a multidimensional process involving attitudinal evaluations, social validation, and digital information processing. This integrated perspective extends previous studies that examined these determinants independently by demonstrating how they collectively influence Generation Z students' university selection decisions within the Indonesian private higher education context.

Practically, the findings imply that private universities should adopt an integrated marketing strategy in which institutional branding, positive electronic word of mouth, and digital marketing complement one another rather than operate independently. Investments in accreditation quality, graduate employability, and institutional reputation should be reinforced through active alumni engagement, student advocacy programs, and digital communication strategies that emphasize information quality, transparency, and responsiveness. Such an integrated approach enables universities not only to increase promotional effectiveness but also to build trust, reduce prospective students' uncertainty, and strengthen institutional competitiveness in an increasingly digital higher education environment.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study employed a cross sectional design, which limits the ability to infer causal relationships over time. In addition, the sample was restricted to private higher education institutions in West Java, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions and educational contexts.

Future research could adopt longitudinal designs to examine how enrollment preferences evolve over time. Researchers may also investigate potential mediating variables such as institutional trust, perceived quality, or student engagement, as well as moderating variables including socioeconomic background, digital literacy, and academic achievement. Furthermore, comparative studies between public and private universities or across different regions and countries would provide broader insights into student enrollment behavior in higher education.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Findings: This study examined the influence of university image, electronic word of mouth (eWOM), and digital marketing on enrollment decisions among students in private higher education institutions in West Java, Indonesia. The findings demonstrate that all three factors positively and significantly influence enrollment decisions. Among these determinants, university image emerged as the strongest predictor, indicating that accreditation quality, academic reputation, and graduate employability remain the primary considerations in students' university selection processes. eWOM also exhibited a substantial influence, highlighting the importance of recommendations and experiences shared by alumni, peers, and family members.

Meanwhile, digital marketing significantly contributed to enrollment decisions by facilitating information accessibility and engagement through digital platforms. Collectively, these factors explained 68.4% of the variance in enrollment decisions, emphasizing the multidimensional nature of student choice behavior in the digital era. These findings demonstrate that effective student recruitment is no longer driven by institutional reputation or digital promotion alone but by the strategic integration of institutional quality, credible social influence, and transparent digital communication. Consequently, higher education institutions should adopt evidence-based marketing and communication strategies that not only attract prospective students but also strengthen institutional sustainability and competitiveness in an increasingly digital educational environment. **Implications:** The findings contribute to higher education marketing literature by demonstrating that enrollment decisions are shaped by the combined effects of institutional perceptions, social influence, and digital communication. The integration of the Theory of Planned Behavior, Information Processing Theory, and Social Influence Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding student decision-making in contemporary higher education contexts. From a practical perspective, private universities should strengthen institutional branding, encourage positive alumni advocacy, and develop integrated digital marketing strategies that align with the preferences and information-seeking behaviors of Generation Z students. **Limitations:** Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design restricts the ability to establish causal relationships over time. Second, the study focused exclusively on private higher education institutions in West Java, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other educational contexts and geographical regions. Third, the model did not incorporate potential mediating or moderating variables that may further explain enrollment decision behavior. **Future Research:** Future studies are encouraged to employ longitudinal research designs to capture changes in student decision-making over time. Researchers may also investigate the mediating roles of institutional trust, perceived quality, or student engagement, as well as moderating variables such as digital literacy, socioeconomic background, and academic achievement. Comparative studies involving public and private universities, as well as cross-regional or cross-country analyses, would provide broader insights into enrollment behavior and enhance the generalizability of the findings. Such efforts will contribute to a deeper understanding of how higher education institutions can effectively respond to evolving student expectations in an increasingly digital and competitive environment.

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