

Exploring the Role of Digital Marketing and e-WOM in Influencing Student Enrolment in Higher Education Institutions in Navi Mumbai

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines the impact of e-WOM and digital marketing on student enrolment decisions in Navi Mumbai, particularly in promoting sustainability initiatives. It explores how these digital tools influence student perceptions and identify the most effective marketing strategies for higher education institutions (HEIs). The research addresses key questions, including how e-WOM shapes students' views of digital marketing, which strategies drive enrolment, and what factors contribute to successful e-WOM campaigns. Additionally, it examines students' decision-making processes and the challenges institutions face in adopting digital marketing tools. Utilizing a mixed-method approach, the study gathered quantitative data through Google Forms surveys from students in Navi Mumbai and qualitative data through interviews with HEI marketing professionals. The findings highlight the effectiveness of digital platforms in attracting students and promoting sustainability, while also identifying barriers such as resource limitations and the need for better integration of digital marketing tools. The study provides actionable insights for HEIs to refine their marketing strategies and improve enrolment outcomes through targeted digital engagement and enhanced e-WOM practices.

Keywords: e-WOM, Digital Marketing, Student Enrolment, Sustainability Initiatives, Education Institutions.

1. INTRODUCTION:

In the digital era, HEIs in Navi Mumbai are increasingly leveraging e-WOM and digital marketing to attract and engage prospective students, and this study examines their combined impact on enrolment. **e-WOM** refers to the sharing of experiences and opinions via digital platforms like social media, blogs, forums, and review websites. In higher education, it encompasses feedback from students, alumni, and faculty, offering valuable insights into academic quality, campus culture, and extracurricular offerings—often beyond the scope of traditional marketing. As defined by [Henning-Thurau et al. \(2004\)](#), e-WOM includes any online comment, whether positive or negative, about a product or service. [Cheung and Thadani \(2012\)](#) further highlight its role in shaping consumer perceptions through various online channels. The effectiveness of e-WOM lies in its credibility. Prospective students often regard peer reviews as more trustworthy than institutional promotions. Additionally, the digital format allows these messages to circulate quickly and widely, reaching a global audience and significantly influencing enrolment decisions.

Digital Marketing enhances e-WOM by equipping HEIs with data-driven tools like SEO (search engine optimization), social media ads, content marketing, influencer partnerships, and targeted emails to engage students and promote key initiatives such as sustainability and scholarships. Advanced analytics help tailor messaging based on audience behaviour, creating a cohesive digital presence and strengthening brand identity. Kotler defines digital marketing as using online platforms to reach consumers, while [Chaffey \(2020\)](#) sees it as managing marketing via digital technologies for brand promotion or lead generation. Together, digital marketing and e-WOM allow HEIs to deliver personalized messages, build trust, and increase enrolment as students increasingly rely on online feedback.

2. RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY: -

This study explores how digital marketing and e-WOM influence student enrolment in Navi Mumbai's HEIs, offering

insights to enhance digital strategies:

- **Rising Influence of Digital Platforms:** Students increasingly rely on social media, websites, and peer reviews when choosing institutions.
- **Importance of Navi Mumbai's Market:** The region's competitive education landscape demands strong digital engagement for HEIs to stand out.
- **Combined Impact of e-WOM and Digital Marketing:** Testimonials and targeted campaigns significantly shape enrolment by boosting institutional appeal.
- **Filling a Research Gap:** This study uniquely addresses the joint effects of digital marketing and e-WOM in Navi Mumbai, contributing both academically and practically.
- **Strategic Guidance for HEIs:** Offers actionable strategies to improve digital outreach and student recruitment.
- **Societal Relevance:** Encourages transparency, informed choices, and sustainable practices to support inclusive, high-quality education.

3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

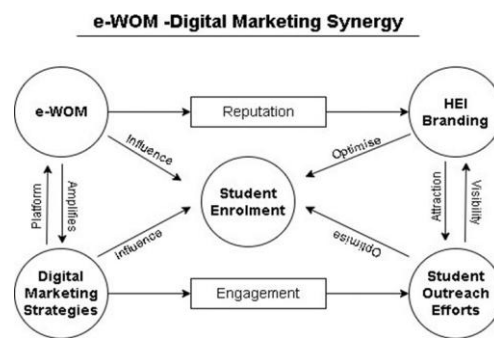
The study deepens understanding of student decision-making in choosing HEIs in Navi Mumbai and provides actionable insights for marketing strategies. It:

- Analyses student behaviour to support tailored enrolment campaigns.
- Assesses digital marketing and e-WOM to guide strategic promotions.
- Emphasizes the role of positive e-WOM in enhancing institutional reputation.
- Contributes to academic literature on digital marketing in Indian higher education.
- Offers practical, data-driven recommendations to boost enrolment and retention.

4. REVIEW OF LITERATURE: -

e-WOM is a major influence on student decisions in higher education, with prospective students relying on online reviews, forums, and social media for authentic insights [Filiari and McLeay \(2014\)](#). Experiences shared by students and alumni shape perceptions of reputation and quality [Casalo, Flavián, and Guinalíu \(2008\)](#) stress that peer feedback is often more trusted than traditional ads, reducing uncertainty in enrolment [\(Li, Lai, & Chen, 2011\)](#). Social proof boosts a university's brand and competitiveness, and due to its reach and speed, e- WOM now has a broader impact than face-to-face recommendations [Wang et al. \(2018\)](#).

Digital Marketing tools have transformed HEI recruitment through data-driven strategies, enabling behaviour tracking and personalized outreach [\(Rutter et al., 2016\)](#). Online ads, retargeting, and influencer partnerships enhance brand engagement [\(Kim & Ko, 2012\)](#). Social media platforms like Instagram and LinkedIn allow institutions to showcase their strengths, attracting students, particularly those focused on sustainability [Lee and Watkins \(2016\)](#). Rising competition has led HEIs to adopt innovative strategies [Arfan Rehman Sherief \(July, 2024\)](#) including online counselling, SEO, and content marketing, which influence enrolment and GER. [Dr. Indrajit Ghosal, Bikram Prasad, and Dr. Kulvinder Kaur \(May 2020\)](#). Digital transformation also requires leadership and organizational support to succeed, as highlighted by [Imam Fitri Rahmad \(May 2024\)](#) and [Alenezi \(2021\)](#).



- RESEARCH OBJECTIVES: -

This research aims to enhance understanding of how digital tools and peer-driven communication influence student enrolment, with attention to sustainability. Focusing on HEIs in Navi Mumbai, it offers insights and practical recommendations to help institutions strengthen their digital presence. The objectives of this study are:

1. To analyse how personalized digital marketing strategies and engagement efforts affect student enrolment in HEIs in Navi Mumbai.
2. To assess the impact of e-WOM—such as reviews, testimonials, and social media— on students' perceptions of HEIs.
3. To examine the combined effect of e-WOM and digital marketing on prospective students' decision-making.

5. HYPOTHESES:

Hypotheses	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Mediating Variable
H1: There is impact of digital marketing strategies on student decision making process in their choice of HEIs	Digital Marketing Strategies (personalization, Engagement)	Student Decision Making Process (Enrolment Decisions)	-
H2: Positive electronic word-of- mouth (e-WOM) significantly improves students' perceptions of higher education institutions in Navi Mumbai	Positive e-WOM (online Reviews, social media Interactions)	Student's Perception of HEI	-
H3: The relationship between digital engagement and student decision making process do mediated by brand trust	Digital Engagement (Digital Marketing Strategies + e-WOM)	Student Decision Making Process (Enrolment Decisions)	Brand Trust

Methodology: - This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative research techniques. This combination enables a thorough examination of how electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) and digital marketing influence student enrolment in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Navi Mumbai.

Data Collection:

1. Structured Online Questionnaire (Quantitative) – Gathers data on the impact of digital marketing and e-WOM on student decisions.

Platform: Google Forms

Design: Likert scale on digital marketing, e-WOM, trust, and enrolment decisions.

Data Collected: Digital marketing exposure, e-WOM influence, trust, and demographics.

Sample: 384 students from HEIs in Navi Mumbai.

Sampling: Stratified Random Sampling

2. In-Depth Interviews (Qualitative) –

To explore how digital marketing and e-WOM influence student decisions.

Participants: Admission Counsellors from various institutes

Focus: Experiences with digital marketing campaigns, e-WOM credibility, and campaign impact on enrolment.

Method: 10 one-on-one, unstructured interviews (25-30 mins), 5 from specialized and 5 from general colleges.

Sampling: Purposive and Snowball Sampling

6. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF STUDY-QUANTITATIVE:

6.1 Overview:

This study explores how digital marketing strategies and e-WOM influence student enrolment in Navi Mumbai's higher education institutions. It examines the role of personalized engagement, online reviews, and social media in shaping perceptions, with brand trust as a mediator. Statistical methods will test the impact of these factors on student decision-making.

6.2 Data Description:

Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire using Google Forms and a Likert scale to assess the impact of digital marketing, e-WOM, and digital engagement on prospective students' enrolment decisions. The survey measured attitudes toward social media, ads, emails, trust in online reviews and testimonials, perceptions of HEIs, digital engagement levels, and the role of brand trust in decision-making. Demographic details such as age, education level, program, and institution were also gathered. The study targeted HEI students in Navi Mumbai, with a sample size of 384 participants.

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	167	43.5
Female	217	56.5
Total	384	100.0
Age	Frequency	Percent
18-21	206	53.6
22-25	142	37.0
26&above	36	9.4
Total	384	100.0
Education	Frequency	Percent

UG	302	78.6
PG	82	21.4
Total	384	100.0

6.3 Descriptive Statistics:

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Digital Marketing Strategies	384	3.6203	.64997
Positive e- WOM	384	3.6406	.64764
Digital Engagement	384	3.6305	.56442
Enrolment Decision	384	3.6750	.78298
Perception	384	3.6849	.63095
Brand Trust	384	3.6257	.67354

Interpretation: Students generally have a positive view of key factors like digital marketing, e-WOM, engagement, enrolment decisions, HEI perception, and brand trust, with mean scores above 3.6. While most agree on their impact, varying standard deviations suggest different levels of influence. The enrolment decision shows the strongest influence, though opinions vary. Overall, all factors are seen positively, but their impact differs among students.

6.4 Reliability Testing:

Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Digital Marketing Strategies	.746	5
Positive e-WOM	.807	5
Digital Engagement	.776	5
Enrolment Decision	.851	5
Perception	.736	5
Brand Trust	.703	4

Interpretation: All constructs have Cronbach's Alpha values ranging from 0.703 to 0.851, hence good internal consistency and reliability in each scale as any value above 0.7 is acceptable. Since, the results show that Digital Marketing Strategies, Positive e-WOM, Digital Engagement, Enrolment Decision, Perception and Brand Trust are reliable to analyse further.

6.5 Test for Normality and of Homogeneity of Variances:

Tests of Normality							
		Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Brand Trust	Male	.153	167	0.12091	.959	167	0.107
	Female	.165	217	0.08588	.939	217	0.076
Positive e-WOM	Male	.117	167	0.18645	.954	167	0.165
	Female	.114	217	0.09379	.938	217	0.083
Digital Engagement	Male	.079	167	0.17402	.976	167	0.154
	Female	.101	217	0.08814	.979	217	0.078
Digital Marketing Strategies	Male	.113	167	0.12204	.969	167	0.108
	Female	.149	217	0.09831	.929	217	0.087
Perception	Male	.135	167	0.19775	.960	167	0.175
	Female	.136	217	0.09944	.928	217	0.088
Enrolment Decision	Male	.140	167	0.1243	.942	167	0.110
	Female	.156	217	0.09831	.901	217	0.087

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Interpretation: The Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests showed that the data for both male and female groups followed a normal distribution, with p-values above 0.05 for all variables (Brand Trust, Positive e-WOM, Digital Engagement, Digital Marketing Strategies, Perception, and Enrolment Decision). This indicates no significant deviation from normality, allowing the use of parametric tests for further analysis.

Test of Homogeneity of Variances				
	Levene Statistics	df1	df2	Sig.
Digital Marketing Strategies	1.538	1	382	.216
Positive e-WOM	.862	1	382	.354
Digital Engagement	1.091	1	382	.297
Enrolment Decision	3.075	1	382	.080
Perception	.868	1	382	.352
Brand Trust	.059	1	382	.808

Interpretation: Levene's test results show that most variables meet the assumption of equal variances, with p-values above 0.05: Digital Marketing Strategies (p = 0.216), Positive e-WOM (p = 0.354), Digital Engagement (p = 0.297), Perception (p = 0.352), and Brand Trust (p = 0.808). For Enrolment Decision (p = 0.080), the value is slightly above 0.05 and can still be considered to meet the homogeneity assumption.

6.6 Frequency Count:

Digital Marketing Strategies:

Digital Marketing Strategies	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The personalized advertisements I receive from an HEI make me feel acknowledged as a prospective student.	11	30	139	182	22
I am more likely to apply to an HEI that engages with me through interactive content like videos and quizzes.	14	20	107	172	71
Digital marketing efforts by HEIs make them appear more appealing to me compared to traditional advertising methods.	6	27	108	184	59
I am more interested in HEIs that offer personalized digital content through social media compared to those using generic advertising.	14	27	99	177	67

I believe that social media interactions (e.g., likes, shares) reflect the popularity and credibility of an HEI.	13	43	84	187	57
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Interpretation: Survey results indicate that students favour personalized and engaging digital marketing from higher education institutions (HEIs). A large majority felt recognized through personalized ads (182 agreed, 22 strongly agreed). Interactive content, like videos and quizzes, was well-received (172 agreed, 71 strongly agreed). Most students preferred digital marketing over traditional methods (184 agreed, 59 strongly agreed) and favoured personalized social media content over generic ads. Social media interactions, such as likes and shares, were viewed as indicators of an institution's popularity and credibility.

Positive e-WOM: -

Positive e-WOM	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Positive online reviews from other students significantly influence my perception of an HEI.	6	17	75	208	78
I trust testimonials and student reviews on social media when evaluating an HEI.	6	32	136	155	55
EIs with a high number of positive social media interactions (likes, shares, comments) are more appealing to me.	6	53	106	185	34
I believe peer recommendations on platforms like Facebook and Instagram have a significant impact on my opinion of HEIs.	3	42	96	209	34
I would seriously consider an HEI with numerous positive online reviews when deciding where to apply.	6	29	103	194	52

Interpretation: Survey findings show that positive e-WOM—such as online reviews and social media testimonials—strongly influences students' perceptions of HEIs. Most respondents (208 agree, 78 strongly agree) acknowledged the impact of positive reviews, while many (155 agree, 55 strongly agree) trusted social media testimonials. High engagement on platforms (likes, shares, comments) made HEIs appear more appealing to 185 students. Peer recommendations on platforms like Facebook and Instagram play a crucial role in enrolment decisions, underscoring the power of e-WOM.

Enrolment Decisions: -

Enrolment Decisions	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The use of personalized digital content (e.g., customized emails) increases my likelihood of applying to an HEI.	14	55	101	152	62

Positive peer reviews influence my final decision when choosing between HEIs	15	16	107	176	70
I am more likely to apply to an HEI that is active on social media and responds to student inquiries.	11	12	111	161	89
Seeing both personalized marketing and positive online reviews significantly boosts my confidence in applying to an HEI.	14	27	124	145	74
HEIs that successfully combine digital marketing and e-WOM have a greater influence on my final decision to enrol.	20	20	84	170	90

Interpretation: The survey on enrolment decisions shows that personalized digital content and peer reviews strongly influence students' application choices. Most respondents (152 agree, 62 strongly agree) said custom emails boost their likelihood to apply. Positive peer reviews (176 agree, 70 strongly agree) and responsive social media activity (161 agree, 89 strongly agree) also encourage applications. Optimism rises with personalized marketing and positive reviews (145 agree, 74 strongly agree), and the combined impact of digital marketing and e- WOM significantly shapes enrolment decisions (170 agree, 90 strongly agree).

Student's Perception:

Student's Perception	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
HEIs with a strong digital presence are more credible and trustworthy in my eyes.	16	29	97	189	53
My perception of an HEI improves when they have an active social media presence	11	35	118	168	52
HEIs that maintain an active online presence are more appealing to me than those without one.	6	23	108	190	57
A high level of positive student engagement on social media increases my trust in an HEI	9	24	83	198	70

Positive online reviews and testimonials enhance my perception of an HEI's reputation.	7	20	96	187	74
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Interpretation: A strong digital presence significantly shapes student perceptions of HEIs. Most respondents (189 agree, 53 strongly agree) view institutions with active digital profiles as more credible. Social media activity enhances perception (168 agree, 52 strongly agree), and 190 respondents (57 strongly agree) find HEIs with consistent online engagement more appealing. Positive student interactions (198 agree, 70 strongly agree) and online reviews (187 agree, 74 strongly agree) further strengthen institutional reputation and trust.

Brand Trust: -

Brand Trust	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I trust testimonials and student reviews on social media when evaluating an HEI.	8	30	137	158	51
HEIs with a strong digital presence are more credible and trustworthy in my eyes.	17	30	94	191	52
A high level of positive student engagement on social media increases my trust in an HEI	12	23	85	199	65
Seeing both personalized marketing and positive online reviews significantly boosts my confidence in applying to an HEI.	14	27	125	147	71

Interpretation: The Brand Trust survey shows that social media reviews, a strong online presence, and student engagement significantly enhance trust in HEIs. Most students trust reviews (158 agree, 51 strongly agree), value a strong digital presence (191 agree, 52 strongly agree), and feel more confident in applying with positive engagement and personalized marketing (147 agree, 71 strongly agree).

6.7 Regression Analysis and Sobel test:

To test the predictive power of the independent variable(s) on the dependent variable(s), performed regression analysis for each hypothesis. And for Mediation analysis Sobel Test will be used here.

H1: Digital Marketing Strategies → Enrolment Decisions Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.585 ^a	.342	.341	.63576

a. Predictors: (Constant), Digital Marketing Strategies

Interpretation: The model summary shows a moderate positive relationship between Digital Marketing Strategies and Enrolment Decisions ($R = 0.585$). Digital Marketing Strategies explain 34.2% of the variance in enrolment decisions ($R^2 = 0.342$), with an adjusted R^2 of 0.341. The standard error of 0.63576 indicates the average deviation of observed values from the regression line.

Coefficients ^a					
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	1.123	.184		6.109	.000
Digital Marketing Strategies	.705	.050	.585	14.104	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Enrolment Decision

Interpretation: The regression analysis confirms that Digital Marketing Strategies significantly influence Enrolment Decisions. A one-unit increase in digital marketing leads to a 0.705 rise in enrolment decision scores. The constant is 1.123, and the standardized coefficient (Beta) is 0.585, showing a moderate positive relationship. With a t-value of 14.104 and p-value of 0.000, the result is statistically significant thereby confirming the meaningful impact of digital marketing strategies on enrolment decisions.

H2: Positive e-WOM → Perception Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.628 ^a	.395	.393	.49143

a. Predictors: (Constant), Positive e-WOM

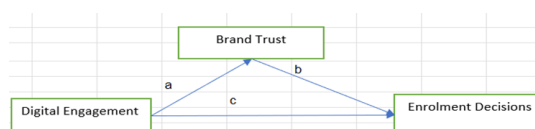
Interpretation: The Model Summary shows a moderate positive relationship between Positive e- WOM and Student's Perception ($R = 0.628$). Positive e-WOM explains 39.5% of the variance in Student's Perception ($R^2 = 0.395$), with an adjusted R^2 of 0.393. The standard error of 0.49143 indicates the average deviation of observed values from the regression line.

Coefficients ^a					
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	1.456	.143		10.155	.000
Positive e-WOM	.612	.039	.628	15.791	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Perception

Interpretation: The coefficients table shows that Positive e-WOM has a strong, significant positive impact on Student's Perception. With a constant of 1.456 and an unstandardized coefficient of 0.612, each unit increase in Positive e-WOM raises Student's Perception by 0.612 units. The standardized Beta of 0.628 confirms a strong relationship, and the t-value of 15.791 with a p- value of 0.000 indicates statistical significance and confirms that Positive e-WOM acts as a strong and significant predictor of Student's Perception.

H3: Digital Engagement → Brand Trust → Enrolment Decision Theoretical Model-



Where c = Direct Effect and $a*b$ = Indirect Effect Step 1: Direct Effect Analysis

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.670 ^a	.449	.448	.58193

a. Predictors: (Constant), Digital Engagement

Interpretation: The direct effect model indicates a moderately strong relationship between Digital Engagement and Enrolment Decision. With an R value of 0.670 and R Square of 0.449, the model explains 44.9% of the variance in Enrolment Decision. The Adjusted R Square is 0.448, confirming similar explanatory power. A Standard Error of 0.58193 suggests moderate prediction accuracy. Overall, Digital Engagement has a meaningful direct impact on Enrolment Decision.

Coefficients ^a					
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	.300	.194		1.551	.122
Digital Engagement	.930	.053	.670	17.645	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Enrolment Decision

Interpretation: The coefficients table indicates a strong, positive impact of Digital Engagement on Enrolment Decision. With a constant of 0.300, the unstandardized coefficient (0.930) shows that each unit increase in Digital Engagement raises Enrolment Decision by 0.930 units. The standardized Beta (0.670) confirms a strong relationship. The t-value (17.645) and p-value (0.000) indicate this effect is statistically significant.

Step 2: Indirect Effect Analysis**Model Summary**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.707 ^a	.501	.498	.55481

a. Predictors: (Constant), Brand Trust, Digital Engagement

Interpretation: The regression shows a strong indirect influence of Brand Trust and Digital Engagement on Enrolment Decision. With R = 0.707, there's a strong positive correlation. $R^2 = 0.501$ means the model explains 50.1% of the variance, and the adjusted $R^2 = 0.498$ confirms model reliability. The standard error (0.55481) reflects average deviation from the regression line. This indicates that both Brand Trust and Digital Engagement have a strong indirect influence on the Enrolment Decision.

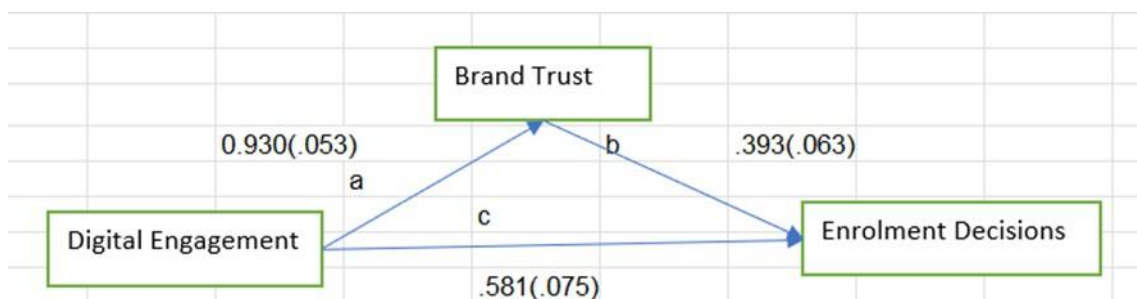
Coefficients ^a				
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.

	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	.138	.186		.741	.459
Digital Engagement	.581	.075	.419	7.764	.000
Brand Trust	.393	.063	.338	6.266	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Enrolment Decision

Interpretation: Regression analysis confirms that digital engagement ($B = 0.581$, $p < 0.05$) and brand trust ($B = 0.393$, $p < 0.05$) significantly influence enrolment decisions. Both are key predictors, highlighting the importance for HEIs to strengthen digital presence and trust to attract students. The results confirm that digital engagement and brand trust are key to enrolment decisions, emphasizing the need for HEIs to enhance their digital presence and credibility.

Step 3: Mediation Analysis



Interpretation: The proposed mediation analysis deals with the relationship between Digital Engagement and Enrolment Decisions, but in this study, Brand Trust acts as the mediating variable. Thus, the direct effect of Digital Engagement on Enrolment Decisions-the path c-is 0.581 (SE = 0.075). The mediation path then involves two paths: the effect of Digital Engagement on Brand Trust (path a = 0.930, SE = 0.053) followed by the subsequent effect of Brand Trust on Enrolment Decisions (path b = 0.393, SE = 0.063). This indirect effect is calculated as the product of paths a and b and quantifies the contribution of Brand Trust in linking Digital Engagement to Enrolment Decisions. This analysis captures the dual role of Digital Engagement, having both direct and mediated effects on enrolment decisions through Brand Trust.

Sobel Test:

<https://quantpsy.org/sobel/sobel.htm> [Sobel Test Calculator given by Kristopher J. Preacher (Vanderbilt

Input:	Test statistic:	Std. Error:	p-value:
a .93	Sobel test: 5.87771996	0.06218228	0
b .393	Aroian test: 5.86926444	0.06227186	0
s _a .053	Goodman test: 5.88621214	0.06209256	0
s _b .063	Reset all	Calculate	

University), Geoffrey J. Leonardelli (University of Toronto)]

Interpretation: The Sobel Test, along with Aroian and Goodman tests, was used to assess the mediation effect of Brand Trust between Digital Engagement and Enrolment Decisions. With path coefficients ($a = 0.93$, $b = 0.393$) and standard errors ($s_a = 0.053$, $s_b = 0.063$), the test statistics were: Sobel = 5.8777, Aroian = 5.8693, and Goodman = 5.8862. All tests yielded a p-value of 0, indicating a statistically significant mediation effect. Matching standard error values further support the result, confirming that Brand Trust significantly mediates the relationship.

6.8 Hypothesis Testing

Hypotheses	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Mediating Variable	Hypotheses Accepted/ Rejected
H1: There is impact of digital marketing strategies on student decision making process in their choice of HEIs	Digital Marketing Strategies (personalization, Engagement)	Student Decision Making Process (Enrolment Decisions)	-	Accepted
H2: Positive electronic word-of- mouth (e-WOM) significantly improves students' perceptions of higher education institutions in Navi Mumbai.	Positive e-WOM (online Reviews, social media Interactions)	Student's Perception of HEI	-	Accepted
H3: The relationship between digital engagement and student decision making process do mediated by brand trust	Digital Engagement (Digital Marketing Strategies + e-WOM)	Student Decision Making Process (Enrolment Decisions)	Brand Trust	Accepted

Interpretation: All three hypotheses were confirmed. Digital marketing strategies (H1) and positive e-WOM (H2) significantly influence student enrolment decisions. Brand trust (H3) mediates the relationship between digital engagement and enrolment, emphasizing the importance of digital marketing, e-WOM, and brand trust.

6.9 Take-out: The three accepted hypotheses highlight that digital marketing, e-WOM, and brand trust play a vital role in shaping student perceptions and enrolment decisions. Personalized digital strategies and strong online presence boost credibility, while positive e-WOM enhances an HEI's reputation. Brand trust acts as a key mediator between digital engagement and enrolment. Overall, the findings emphasize the strategic importance of using digital platforms to build trust and attract students in a competitive market.

7. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF STUDY-QUALITATIVE:

7.1 Overview: The study investigated how digital marketing and electronic word-of-mouth (e- WOM) influence student enrolment in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Navi Mumbai. In-depth interviews with admission counsellors from various management institutes, provides a nuanced understanding of the strategies, challenges, and perceptions surrounding digital outreach and its role in shaping enrolment trends. The study captured detailed insights from admission counsellors about their experiences and strategic approaches to digital marketing and e-WOM.

7.2 Content Analysis:

Digital marketing and e-WOM are transforming student recruitment in HEIs, especially in competitive areas like Navi Mumbai. Institutions are shifting to multi-channel digital strategies that enhance visibility, trust, and enrolment. Personalization is key—custom emails, social media posts, and targeted messaging boost engagement and application rates. Investing in CRM and AI tools helps tailor communication to student interests.

Brand trust significantly influences decisions, with students valuing transparency and real stories from peers. **HEIs** can build trust by showcasing student success, alumni outcomes, and offering authentic experiences through ambassador programs.

Positive e-WOM, especially student-generated content on platforms like Instagram, plays a powerful role. Testimonials, videos, and prompt responses to reviews enhance online reputation. Immersive content like VR campus tours and AI chatbots also help attract students. A **strong social media presence** boosts credibility. Platforms like Instagram and YouTube help HEIs connect through events, achievements, and live Q&As. A hybrid marketing approach—combining digital and traditional methods—ensures broader, more personal outreach.

7.3 Take-out: Digital marketing and e-WOM have become integral to student recruitment in Navi Mumbai. HEIs that prioritize personalization, encourage authentic user-generated content, and utilize new technologies can align more effectively with the expectations of today's students. Institutions that embrace transparency, adapt to digital trends, and innovate their strategies will be well-positioned to attract and retain future generations of students.

8. LIMITATIONS:

This study has several limitations, including a narrow geographic focus, limited sample diversity, and the subjectivity of e-WOM. Self-reported data may reflect socially desirable responses rather than true opinions. The sample size, while adequate for initial insights, may not represent all student perspectives. The focus on specific digital channels may overlook other key enrolment factors like finances or institutional reputation. Lastly, the rapid evolution of digital marketing may limit the long-term relevance of the findings.

9. CONCLUSION:

This study examines the role of digital strategies in influencing student enrolment in Navi Mumbai's competitive HEI landscape. It finds traditional marketing less effective and highlights the stronger, scalable impact of digital tools like SEO, social media, and email marketing. While e-WOM is important for building trust, it is less predictable. HEIs should integrate targeted digital campaigns with positive e-WOM to stay competitive. The study also calls for further research into the long-term effects of these strategies, particularly concerning demographics, retention, and satisfaction.

To enhance the synergy between digital marketing and e-WOM, the study suggests innovative approaches such as AR campus tours, micro-content on TikTok/Instagram, experiential events, AI-based peer matching, crowdfunding for student projects, real-time analytics, cross-institution collaborations, alumni engagement platforms, and educational podcasts. These strategies aim to ensure effective, engaging, and adaptive marketing in a fast-changing educational environment.

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