

INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATION
(IMC) MOTIVATES STUDENT'S eWoM INTENTION
AND CHOICE OF UNIVERSITY THROUGH BRAND
EQUITY

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BY

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A final year project submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirement for the degree of

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that:

- (1) This undergraduate FYP is the end result of my own work and that due acknowledgement has been given in the references to ALL sources of information by they printed, electronic, or personal.
- (2) No portion of this FYP has been submitted in support of any application for any other degree or qualification of this or any other university, or other institutes of learning.
- (3) Sole contribution has been made by me in completing the FYP.
- (4) The word count of this research report is 23059 words.

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DEDICATION

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LIST OF ABBREVIATION

CoU	Choice of University
eWoM	Electronic Word of Mouth
IMC	Integrated Marketing Communication
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEI BE	Higher Education Institution Brand Equity
PR	Public Relations
Ads	Advertising
SP	Sales Promotion
PS	Personal Selling
DM	Direct Marketing
Gen Z	Generation Z
S-O-R	Stimulus Organism Response
R ²	R-square
PLS-SEM	Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modelling
VIF	Variance Inflation Factor
AVE	Average Variance Extracted
HTMT	Heterotrait-monotrait ratio

PREFACE

This study is based on the requirements for the Bachelor of International Business (Honours) at Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR). As the number of students attending the university continues to increase, I wanted to delve into whether university students are aware of their university through current communication channels. In addition, I also wanted to find out the extent to which university students are concerned about the reputation of their university. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore how universities utilize promotional channels to enhance their reputation in order to attract and retain students.

ABSTRACT

In Malaysia's increasingly competitive higher education sector, universities must build strong brand equity to attract and retain students. Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) serves a vital strategy, not only to enhance product or service sales but also to enable Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to customize content while delivering consistent messages. This enhances brand equity and influences students' electronic word-of-mouth (eWoM) intentions as well as their university choice. However, in the Malaysian HEI context, research on the direct impact of IMC on HEI brand equity (BE) remains limited. However, limited research has examined the direct effects of individual IMC components—such as public relations, advertising, sales promotion, direct marketing, and personal selling—on HEI brand equity in Malaysia, especially among Generation Z.

Addressing these gaps, this study investigates the relationship between IMC tools and HEI BE, alongside the impact of HEI BE on students' eWoM intentions and their choice of university. Grounded in the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, this research offers a framework for analysing the psychological processes connecting marketing stimuli to student decision-making.

This study gathered 274 valid questionnaires from Generation Z students aged 17 to 28 years old in the Klang Valley region of Malaysia. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed to analyze the data. The findings revealed that advertising, direct marketing, and personal selling positively influence HEI brand equity (BE), ultimately driving students' electronic word-of-mouth (eWoM) intentions and their choice of university. However, public relations and sales promotion showed no significant impact on HEI BE.

These results offer valuable insights for practitioners in the higher education sector, guiding the development of more effective branding and communication strategies. By strengthening brand equity, practitioners can enhance student engagement and ensure the sector's long-term sustainability.

CHAPTER 1: RESEARCH OVERVIEW

1.0 Introduction

Chapter 1 begins with an outline of integrated marketing communications (IMC) and explains how it can help higher education institutions (HEIs) achieve sustainable development in the industry. Subsequently, this chapter identifies research gaps and clarifies the significance of this study.

1.1 Research Background

Sustainable development in higher education refers to the integration of environmental, social, and economic factors into institutional practices, curriculum design, and values to cultivate the ability of future generations to address global sustainable development challenges (Filho et al., 2019). Given the growing importance of sustainability principles in public discourse, universities and higher education institutions are incorporating sustainability into their curricula (Gatti et al., 2019). Therefore, it can be concluded that incorporating sustainability into HEI curricula not only enables universities to reduce costs and regulatory burdens but also enhances their brand positioning, reputation, leading to better economic outcomes (Castro-Gomez et al., 2024). Additionally, it enhances competitiveness in attracting students, maintaining programs, and recruiting high-quality faculty (Castro-Gomez et al., 2024).

Sustainability-based education can shape the HEI BE and yield various positive outcomes, such as enhancing student satisfaction and loyalty, which in turn influence student behaviour—including eWoM intentions and university choice (Manzoor et al., 2020; Reyes-Menendez et al., 2020). Electronic word-of-mouth

(eWoM) refers to any positive or negative online content, posted by current or past consumers via the Internet or other information technology platforms about goods or services (Perera et al., 2021). Previous research has explored the impact of eWoM strategies and their significant influence on online consumer behaviours (Reyes-Menendez et al., 2020). Perera et al. (2021) also found that consumers tend to trust reviews from other customers, which is eWoM, more than company advertisements, making eWoM a significant factor in shaping firm performance and customer relationships. In addition, with the growing awareness of sustainability and the increasing preference for sustainable practices, students are increasingly influenced by the brand equity shaped by universities' sustainability-related information, thereby influencing their choice of university (Panda et al., 2020). Thus, sustainability plays an important role in shaping consumers' perceptions and is positively influenced by students' perceptions of higher education quality, thereby contributing to their eWoM intentions and university choices (Halim et al., 2022; Balroo & Saleh, 2019).

On the other hand, brand equity plays a crucial role in higher education institutions as an important antecedent factor influencing student decision-making, including their eWoM intentions and university choice. As Bashir et al. (2019) pointed out, strong brand equity significantly predicts consumer brand preference—when organizations successfully maintain excellent sustainable brand equity, they not only cultivate positive consumer attitude and eWoM intentions but also enhance their purchase intentions. Similarly, Mim et al. (2022) emphasize that enhancing brand equity positively influences consumers' eWoM intentions, purchase intentions and behaviours. Therefore, brands are increasingly focusing on sustainable positioning through credible sources to strengthen brand equity, thereby generating positive eWoM intentions and promoting purchase decisions.

Besides that, the importance of IMC in building brand equity is increasingly being widely recognized by organizations (Theodora, 2021). IMC can establish strong, beneficial, and unique connections for HEIs, enabling them to stand out in their industry and establish a trustworthy and outstanding image (Anabila, 2019). IMC

tools such as public relations, sales promotions, advertising, direct marketing, and personal selling are popular in Malaysia, especially among the tech-savvy younger generation (Mandagie & Rana, 2023; Kliatchko, 2005). However, this study points out that the impact of IMC on university brand assets and its subsequent influence on students' eWoM intentions and university choice remains a major gap in the field of university brand research. Studies such as those by Kushwaha et al. (2020) and Anabila (2019) have provided substantial evidence that actively engaging in brand building or repositioning by using IMC tools. However, academic research on university branding remains limited. This literature gap underscores the need for further research to explore how integrated marketing communication strategies influence brand equity, which in turn affects eWoM intentions and university choice in the higher education context.

1.2 Problem Statement

Building a unique brand equity for itself is an important strategy for universities to cope with the challenging competitive environment (Panda et al., 2019). Aaker (1991) noted that brand equity is a multidimensional concept that consists of several key components: brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. Students' university experience is largely influenced by brand equity, and a unique brand image positively impacts brand equity. Therefore, students' satisfaction with the university's brand equity will depend on the company's brand equity. Schlesinger et al. (2021) and Seo and Park (2018) mentioned that eWoM intention and brand equity have a significant relationship. However, their studies from other countries, such as Spain and Korea, show this area remains underexplored in the Malaysian context. Furthermore, Joseph et al. (2012) and Lu et al. (2015) have clear explanations about the relationship between purchase intentions and brand equity, but there was little scholarly attention paid to this specific topic within HEI. In the emerging context, they may lack research to

understand the impact of IMC on brand equity, which leads to students' eWoM intention and university choice.

According to Theodora (2021), creating brand awareness, communicating brand messages, and enhancing the brand's favourable image and product and brand relevance are the goals of any integrated marketing communications (IMC) process. However, both Šeric and Mikulić (2022) and Theodora (2021) point out that there is limited understanding of how IMC works in dynamic and diverse contexts and that its impact on brand equity varies by audience, context, and geographic location, highlighting the critical research gaps in higher education institutes (HEIs) that explore how IMC impacts brand equity. This emphasizes the need for more targeted research on how IMC contributes to brand equity growth in HEIs. Besides that, different IMC elements have varying impacts on brand equity. Public relations and advertising play notable roles, though their effects depend on stakeholders and context (Armutlu, 2023; Buil et al., 2013), while sales promotions, direct marketing, and personal selling yield mixed or unclear outcomes (Chan et al., 2025; Joseph et al., 2020; Prayudi & Nugraha, 2022; Lubis et al., 2023; Harikedua et al., 2023). Therefore, these gaps highlight the need to explore how IMC strategies and BE can drive eWoM intentions and university choice in HEIs.

Furthermore, while brand equity and IMC have been extensively explored in sectors such as the microfinance industry (Anabila, 2019), foreign higher education institutions (Gordon-Isasi et al., 2020), Croatia (Šeric & Mikulic, 2022), this body of research remains limited in the Malaysian HEI. For Malaysian HEIs, the lack of attention in the literature is an essential challenge since they lack the knowledge and experience needed to successfully develop and maintain brand equity through IMC. To fill this gap and gain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which brand equity can be achieved through IMC in the context of Malaysian HEIs, further exploration and analysis are needed.

1.3 Research Question

As discussed in the previous section, student's eWoM intention and choice of university can significantly impact how a higher education institution in maintaining their sustainability. Furthermore, the findings remain inconclusive, and there is limited research specifically addressing this relationship within the HEI. Therefore, the general research questions for this study:

1. Does BE influence the students' eWoM intention and choice of university?
2. Does IMC (Public Relations, Advertising, Sales Promotion, Direct Marketing, and Personal Selling) influence HEI BE?

Specifically,

RQ1: Does HEI BE has relationship with eWoM Intention?

RQ2: Does HEI BE has relationship with Choice of University?

RQ3: Do PR have a relationship with HEI BE?

RQ4: Do Ads have a relationship with HEI BE?

RQ5: Do SP have a relationship with HEI BE?

RQ6: Do DM have a relationship with HEI BE?

RQ7: Do PS have a relationship with HEI BE?

1.4 Research Objective

This study aims to explore how IMC influences the HEI BE, thereby motivating students' eWoM intentions toward a university and their university choice in the context of Malaysia. This research's overall objectives include:

1. To evaluate the connection between HEI BE, students' eWoM intention and choice of university.
2. To determine the influence of IMC (Public Relations, Advertising, Sales Promotion, Direct Marketing, and Personal Selling) on HEI BE.

Therefore, the specific research objectives of this study are as below:

RO1: To investigate the relationship between HEI BE and eWoM Intention.

RO2: To investigate the relationship between HEI BE and Choice of University.

RO3: To investigate the relationship between PR and HEI BE.

RO4: To investigate the relationship between Ads and HEI BE.

RO5: To investigate the relationship between SP and HEI BE.

RO6: To investigate the relationship between DM and HEI BE.

RO7: To investigate the relationship between PS and HEI BE.

1.5 Scope of the Study

This research investigates how the IMC influences HEI BE to motivate students' eWoM intention and choose a higher education institution among Generation Z students. The study uses a questionnaire survey to collect the feedback from higher education students in Malaysia's Klang Valley. The unit of analysis will consist of individual students aged 17 to 28 who are currently enrolled in higher education.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This research targets to deliver Malaysian HEIs with in-depth insights and practical recommendations on IMC. Brand equity is particularly important for universities because it represents the value and reputation that students and the public perceive in their educational services. Other than that, with the increasing importance of IMC, universities now have more channels to strengthen their brand image and promote their courses and services. However, there is still under-researched in the literature on the relationship between IMC, brand equity, students' eWoM intention, and choice of university.

First, this study deepens our theoretical understanding of the relationship between IMC, HEI BE, students' eWoM intention, and choice of university, and shows that

building strong brand equity through IMC can help HEI attract more students and maintain long-term sustainability. The findings provide valuable insights into the relationship between IMC and HEI BE and how the latter affects students' eWoM intentions and choice of university.

From a management perspective, this study provides important managerial insights for HEIs. Decision-makers can improve HEI BE and engage more students by creating a more successful IMC strategy plan by comprehending how IMC influences HEI BE. This might facilitate HEI's efforts to enhance its entire marketing strategy and increase student recruitment. Additionally, by using IMC to enhance brand equity and engage students, this study offers valuable guidance for HEIs to improve their practical marketing efforts.

Applying the S-O-R theoretical model, external stimuli (S) influence an individual's internal state (O), which in turn leads to a behavioural response (R). This research will help the marketing team understand how IMC influences HEI BE. This understanding can lead to more effective marketing campaigns, ultimately promoting stronger brand equity and supporting HEIs' overall success and sustainability.

1.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter outlines the study's focus on how IMC influences HEI BE in Malaysian HEIs, which in turn affects students' eWoM intentions and university choice. It highlights research gaps, presents key questions and objectives, and introduces the use of the S-O-R model as a theoretical framework. The chapter also emphasizes the study's significance in offering practical and theoretical insights for improving HEI branding and sustainability.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

Chapter 2 divided two sections on the literature review of this study. The first section introduces the theoretical basis of this study—the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) model theory—and conceptualizes its variables. The second sections focus on the construction of hypotheses and the exploration of the relationships between these variables. These two sections aim to provide readers an in-depth knowledge of the S-O-R model and the main concepts covered in this research.

2.1 Underlying Theory: S-O-R Model

The S-O-R model was originally proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) to explain consumer behavioural responses. They proposed a framework in which an external stimulus (S) influences an individual's internal state (O), which in turn leads to a behavioural response (R). The S-O-R model provides a theoretical foundation for understanding consumer behaviour and is based on environmental psychology (Bigne et al., 2020). Focusing on factors internal to the person, the S-O-R model has been widely used to systematically study human behavioural intentions. It consists of three structures: stimulus, organism, and response (Zhang et al., 2021; Kim & Park, 2019).

This SOR model assumes that the various external stimuli (S) associated with decision-making, like in the case of recommendation intention, affect the internal state of the individual, related to subsequent decisions in the subsequent recommendation and choice process (Kim & Park, 2019; Han et al., 2022). Stimuli

(S) may affect students' perception of university and IMC. In this study, the stimulus was IMC, and it had an effect on the students' responses.

On the other hand, an organism is any internal condition in which a person is influenced by a stimulus and determines the ultimate responses, such as sensory, emotional, or cognitive responses (Alanadoly & Salem, 2022; Kim & Park, 2019). An individual's mental and emotional stability may be affected by sudden changes in the surrounding environment, which can further lead to behavioural changes (Zhang et al., 2021).

Response is a behavioural reaction, including mental attitudes or behavioural reactions, that results from external environmental stimuli and internal states of the organism (Kim & Park, 2019). Student response (R) is essentially the desire to enter or exit a particular environment, often known as approach or avoidance behaviour (Bigne et al., 2020). Moreover, as stated by Han et al. (2022), response also refers to the final outcome or behaviour, including psychological responses such as attitudes and/or behavioural intentions.

2.2 Review of Variables

2.2.1 eWoM Intention

Word-of-mouth marketing (WoM) used to be a personal form of communication between customers and tragic products. With the rapid development of the Internet, new communication channels have been brought about—electronic word-of-mouth (eWoM) has become ubiquitous, making it easier for organizations, their customers, and consumers to share information (Sagynbekova et al., 2020). As a result, the online world has become an important platform for sharing brand experiences (Perera et al., 2021).

Sijoria et al. (2018) conceptualized eWoM as referring to any online content, whether positive or negative, about a product or service posted by current or past customers using the Internet or other information technology. For instance, the performance of the company and its relationship with customers can be greatly impacted by this content, whether it is positive or negative, since customers share their thoughts and opinions about the brand or product, which influences how other consumers view it as well (Perera et al., 2021; Sagynbekova et al., 2020).

In addition, in relation to HEIs, Sagynbekova et al. (2020) define eWoM as generally referring to the online communication of students and customers about the university or HEI in question through various online platforms, with students being the main customers of HEIs. As defined by Carvalho et al. (2020), eWoM refers to the act of reposting or sharing messages about a company's products or brands to existing customers, potential customers, or ordinary consumers. Thus, positive eWoM can lead to a positive impact on the university, and conversely, this can have a negative impact. For instance, in order to increase student loyalty and retention, as well as to spread eWoM, popularize eWoM, and attract new students, the university administration must ensure student satisfaction (Rehman et al., 2020). Therefore, the eWoM intention in this study is conceptualized as students' willingness to talk about the good aspects of the university and to recommend the university digitally.

2.2.2 Choice of University (CoU)

According to Obermeit (2012), selecting a university is sometimes referred to as a "high-risk, high-engagement buying process." Earlier research by Bowers & Pugh (1973) highlights that while parents place a high value on academic, geographic, and economic considerations, students typically concentrate on social, cultural, and word-of-mouth effects when selecting a college. Similarly, Aurand et al. (2006) found that four primary factors—image or reputation, cost, location, and majors offered—have an impact on a student's choice of university. In addition, it has been

argued that human and personal factors—such as personal beliefs about religion and safety and the influence of friends, family, professors, and intermediary advice—are also important drivers of students' decisions. Social networks and consumer websites are increasingly influencing students (Wilkins et al., 2012).

According to Kotler and Armstrong (1994), purchase decisions arise from consumers' ranking of alternatives, which leads to the formation of purchase intentions. As suggested by Price et al. (2003), two factors may intervene. The first is the attitudes of others, the influence of which depends both on the attitudes of others towards purchase intention and the motivation of the consumer to comply with the wishes of others. For potential students, this may include parents' attitudes and opinions about their children's college and course choices. Second, the influence of unanticipated situations, such as failing to achieve the grades required for the intended college and program, achieving higher grades than expected and thus obtaining new opportunities, or obtaining a good job and thus having more options (Kotler & Armstrong, 1994).

The concept of “choice of university” has been understood differently by different studies, which has led to limitations in obtaining a universally accepted definition. Therefore, in this study, Price et al.'s (2003) conceptualization of “choice of university” was adopted. In HEI, the extent to which students choose a particular university because of its perceived superiority is referred to as 'university choice.' Selection of one's preferred university is done through cognitive factors, emotional factors, and social influences such as family expectations, peers' recommendations, and perceived reputation of the institution.

2.2.3 Higher Education Institution Brand Equity (HEI BE)

Lassar et al. (1995) conceptualized brand equity from the perspective of the individual consumer and that customer-based brand equity arises when consumers are familiar with the brand and hold some favourable, strong, and unique brand

associations in their memory. Moreover, Keller (1993) has defined customer-based brand equity as “the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand.” Aaker (1991) describes brand equity as a set of assets and liabilities associated with a brand, brand name, and symbols that add to or subtract value for both company and consumers.

Brand equity is widely regarded as a multidimensional construct. As previously noted by Aaker (1991), brand equity consists of several key components; in his model, it includes four dimensions: brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. Other researchers have also identified similar dimensions of brand equity. For instance, Keller (1993) proposed that brand equity is rooted in brand knowledge, which comprises brand awareness and brand image. Yoo et al. (2000) also identified perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand awareness as its core elements.

Brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty are the core elements that constitute brand equity. Aaker (1991) believed that brand associations are anything associated with a brand in memory, and when these associations are strong and meaningful, they will resonate with the brand image, thereby enhancing the brand equity. Similarly, Yoo et al. (2000) pointed out that brand association generates high brand awareness and is positively related to brand equity because it serves as a signal of quality and commitment and helps buyers consider the brand when purchasing, thereby generating favourable behaviours toward the brand. Moreover, Zeithaml (1988) stated that perceived quality is the consumer's uniqueness of the product as a whole, and long-term brand experience helps to strengthen this cognition and thus enhance brand equity. In addition, brand loyalty as a loyal commitment to continue to make repeated purchases even under external image or market services, which will enhance consumers' positive response to the brand equity (Oliver, 1997; Grover & Srinivasan, 1992).

From the consumer's perspective, brand equity reflects perceived benefits in terms of improved product quality, decreased perceived risk, and increased brand

reputation (Mourad et al., 2011). In the context of this research, Aaker's (1991) customer-based model of brand equity is adopted, since it offers a comprehensive and applicable theoretical framework for the higher education context. Since students are regarded as HEIs' customers, the elements of brand equity, such as awareness, associations, perceived quality, and loyalty, can be viewed as suitable measures. For instance, perceived academic quality, geographical location, and cost, and their own experience all affect students' impression of a university's brand (Mourad et al., 2011).

2.2.4 Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC)

Kliatchko (2005) described IMC as “an audience-driven business process that strategically manages stakeholders, content, channels, and outcomes of a brand communication program.” In order to promote university activities to students, the university uses IMC, which is one of the common tools used by business organizations, along with public relations, advertising, sales promotions, direct marketing, and personal selling (Sammassut, 2021). For instance, open days, higher education exhibitions, conferences, direct mailings, and advertisements are just a few of the tools that universities use to inform, remind, and persuade potential students to choose their institution (Ivy, 2008).

2.2.4.1 Public Relations (PR)

Research studies such as Gurău (2008) assert that the association between public relations and IMC achieves the purpose of creating a long-term customer-centric mindset and enhancing customer relationships. According to Algharabat et al. (2020), public relations is a communication activity that communicates with the public and maintains the organization's image. Krstić & Lazarević (2013) define it as a process of strategic communication that creates a relationship of mutually

beneficial relationship between the public and the organization. Kushwaha et al. (2020) say that public relations is a crucial component of an organization's communication strategy.

Additionally, Kushwaha et al. (2020) stated that public relations is the most economical pre-positioning that enables customers to build a lasting relationship with the organizations. According to Bruning and Ledingham (2000), customers' perceptions about their relationship with a company affect their assessments of their level of happiness, their intentions, and their actual behaviour. Therefore, public relations can be understood as an activity that promotes community development and creates, maintains, and develops beneficial relationships for the organization.

At no cost, public relations aim to produce and manage brand news, announcements, and warnings published by the media; to maintain relations with the company's public; and to rely on success, legitimacy, and growth (Ekhlassi et al., 2012; Melewar et al., 2017). Through favourable associations, public relations can protect and build a positive company image, introduce products, or increase brand awareness (Theodora, 2021). In order to highlight the services or certain initiatives of higher education institutions, higher education institutions plan special events. Special events are widely publicized and receive extensive media attention, including planning conferences and seminars, participating in fairs, and organizing exhibitions or competitions (Pickton & Broderick, 2001). Presenting an HEI or its services at fairs, seminars, high school tours, and any other opportunity to interact with students is another important public relations activity.

In this study, the conceptualization of public relations is adopted from Krstić and Lazarević (2013), who define it as a strategic communication process aimed at building mutually beneficial relationships between the organization and its public. Based on the discussion above, public relations are conceptualized as offline or online media with various events and conferences to enable organizational communication of university goals so that more and more people are affected by it.

2.2.4.2 Advertising (Ads)

As referred to by Kittle (2000), advertising is a common element of integrated marketing communication tools. Ekhlassi et al. (2012) defined advertising as paid, impersonal merchandising by companies using a variety of print, outdoor, broadcast, and interactive media to build brand awareness and image and compel consumers to take action. Likewise, Kotler and Armstrong (1997) stated that advertising is any form of presentation and promotion of concepts, goods, or services conducted for a fee by an organization, individual, or advertising agency.

According to Krstić and Lazarević (2013), advertising has proven to be quite effective in promoting higher education institutions. Due to its wide visibility and suggestiveness, many experts consider this tool sufficient to stimulate consumers. Unlike personal selling, advertising is able to reach the target market and a large number of potential customers (Kushwaha et al., 2020). Existing literature on the topic of higher education advertising suggests that advertising is increasingly multi-modal, combining print and electronic, textual and visual messages to convey information (Papadimitriou & Ramírez, 2015). For instance, the media used for advertising are press, audio-visual entertainment, and means of advertising: radio, television, movies, the Internet, and graphic treatments used for advertising purposes such as billboards, posters, neon signs, and advertising spaces (Krstić & Lazarević, 2013).

In this study, Following Ekhlassi et al. (2012) and Krstić and Lazarević (2013), advertising is conceptualized as the set of paid promotional efforts conducted by HEI via both traditional media and digital platforms. Thus, advertising is defined as the use of offline or online advertising by HEIs to disseminate any announcement or persuasive message.

2.2.4.3 Sales Promotion (SP)

According to Nikabadi et al. (2015), in the IMC program, promotion is one of the main factors affecting brand equity. Salelaw et al. (2016) defined sales promotion as the most commonly used tool to build brand equity; it provides temporary incentives to encourage customers to try and use a promoted brand. Similarly, Ekhlassi et al. (2012) stated that sales promotions are a short-term value-added concept that encourages students to respond immediately and try the service. Therefore, sales promotions can provide a meaningful point of difference for a brand if they are not attributed to other brands or are not considered general promotions for the product category (Palazn-Vidal & Delgado-Ballester, 2005).

Sales promotion can be divided into monetary promotion and non-monetary promotion as its basis (Kotler, 2000). Discounts, coupons, and refunds are examples of monetary promotions that are often used to increase market share, boost sales and customer trial, increase brand switching rates, and generate short-term financial profits (Nikabadi et al., 2015; Salelaw et al., 2016; Yoo et al., 2000). However, frequent use of financial promotions may damage brand image and perceived quality (Yoo et al., 2000; Villarejo-Ramos and Sanchez-Franco, 2005). Besides that, non-monetary promotions that do not involve cash, such as free samples, giveaways, sweepstakes, and contests, are becoming increasingly important (Palazon & Delgado-Ballester, 2009). Because consumers may not directly associate perceived benefits with non-monetary promotions, they may not have the same adverse impact on brand equity and are therefore less likely to affect internal reference prices (Campbell & Diamond, 1990).

Based on the above discussion, this study will adopt the concept of Salelaw et al. (2016) and Kotler (2000). In higher education institutions, many monetary and non-monetary sales promotions can be held, such as sponsorships, waivers of registration fees, giveaways, free talks, and many more, to attract students to respond immediately and choose to study at that university.

2.2.4.4 Direct Marketing (DM)

According to Walker (2004), direct marketing is considered an interactive marketing system that uses one or more promotional combinations to influence prospective consumers within a specific geographic area. In addition, Ekhlassi et al. (2012) defined direct marketing as a database-driven, direct, interactive form of communication that uses a range of media to solicit responses from customers. Solomon and Stuart (2003) define direct marketing as any communication made directly to a consumer or recipient of a business to place an order, request more information, and/or generate a response in the form of a visit to a store or other place of business to purchase a product. For instance, it includes persuasion, influence, and information activities designed to induce customers to buy, accept, and remain loyal to a product (Nurkariani & Febriani, 2024).

In addition, the main advantage of direct marketing is that it is one of the tools for customer retention, and its promotional materials can be delivered through various channels or media (Kushwaha et al., 2020). Likewise, direct marketing can influence each other, albeit in an unstructured way, such as through referrals to friends and family (Tapp et al., 2004). Therefore, in the HEI context, direct marketing can be used to connect with potential customers, attract potential students, and facilitate transactions in the digital age by employing strategies such as catalogues, telemarketing, kiosk marketing, mobile marketing, and internet marketing (Nurkariani & Febriani, 2024; Kotler et al., 2019).

Therefore, this study will adopt Walker's (2004) conceptualization, due to its relevance to HEIs' targeted and interactive communication strategies. Direct marketing, in relation to HEI, refers to the strategic use of interactive and direct communication methods by universities to attract prospective students, retain current students, and facilitate enrolment through various channels.

2.2.4.5 Personal Selling (PS)

According to Sofi et al. (2023) and Sadek et al. (2016), personal selling refers to a form of interpersonal communication in which a company's salespeople make presentations in their personal capacity with the aim of achieving a sale and building a relationship with the customer and attempting to assist or influence the potential customer to choose a product or service. In addition, they define that all employees in personal selling should have the necessary attitude, knowledge, and relationship-building skills to ensure that customers receive the services they are paying for (Sadek et al., 2016).

Furthermore, personal selling is a two-way communication strategy in which salespeople attempt to entice prospects to buy while gathering information about them (Supardin, 2022). In a personal selling connection, the salesperson fulfills the consumer's needs to the benefit of both parties. Through the salesperson's attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge of the customer, they develop a perception of the quality of the service, which in turn motivates the customer to purchase the product (Sadek et al., 2016). Therefore, personal selling is the most costly and successful IMC strategy (Ekhlassi et al., 2012).

In the HEI context, if each prospective student does not have adequate sources of information to refer to, it will be difficult to decide on choosing a university (Nasib et al., 2020). Providing adequate sources of information will be very helpful for prospective students to find a variety of information that meets their needs (Aditi et al., 2022). Based on the discussion above, this study adopted Sofi et al.'s (2023) and Sadek et al.'s (2016) conceptualization. In HEI, personal selling, with university staff as personal salespersons, needs to have face-to-face, two-way communication with prospective new students through attitude, knowledge, and relationship-building skills so that students can get more information that they want.

2.3 Hypothesis Development

2.3.1 HEI BE and eWoM intention

A significant relationship between BE and eWoM intention has been demonstrated in numerous studies, highlighting why brand equity affects student behaviour. Perera et al. (2021) and Sagynbekova et al. (2020) examined this relationship in the HEI context. Perera et al. (2021) recognized that subjective norms and eWoM can increase brand credibility, thereby enhancing brand equity, while Sagynbekova et al. (2020) revealed that eWoM plays an important mediating role in the brand equity relationship. These findings are important because they reveal how communication and perception influence institutional value. However, both studies primarily examined the direction from eWoM intention to brand equity (eWoM intentions → BE), while the current study examines the reverse relationship—how brand equity influences students' eWoM intention (BE → eWoM intentions). Therefore, their findings can only provide limited support for this research direction, while this study focuses on how brand equity shapes or guides students' behavioural intentions through others' eWoM.

Schlesinger et al. (2021), in their study of two Spanish public universities, found that university brand image significantly influences eWoM. Similarly, Balroo and Saleh (2019) discovered that among Saudi high school students, eWoM strongly impacts their intention to pursue higher education—highlighting the practical relevance for university decision-makers. In the consumer brand context, Mim et al. (2022) found that brand attachment and trust, key elements of brand equity, positively affect eWoM in the apparel industry. These studies collectively suggest that brand equity plays an essential role in shaping positive eWoM intentions. However, this is not conducted in the Malaysian context and might have a different result. Additionally, Seo and Park (2018) researched Korean airlines and found brand equity have a significant impact on eWoM. Seo and Park (2018) said that a positive brand image is important for industries such as service-oriented sectors, as

it encourages customers to recommend the company to others. However, the results of this study are limited to Korean airlines and may not apply to HEIs in Malaysia.

As discussed above, studies from other countries, such as Spain and Saudi Arabia, have demonstrated the significant influence of HEI BE on eWoM intentions. However, this area remains underexplored in the Malaysian context, where cultural, social, and educational dynamics may lead to different outcomes. It is crucial to determine how HEI BE impacts eWoM intentions within Malaysia, as this insight could provide valuable guidance for university administrators in shaping their branding and communication strategies. Therefore, this study aims to explore the relationship between HEI BE and eWoM intention in the context of Malaysian HEIs. The following research hypotheses are proposed:

H1: HEI BE has a significant effect on eWoM intention.

2.3.2 HEI BE and CoU

HEI's branding conveys assurance of their products and outcomes, which in turn influences students' decision to enrol (Perera et al., 2020). Mourad et al. (2011) and Joseph et al. (2012) conducted research that highlights that HEI BE and CoU have a significant relationship. Mourad et al. (2011) conducted the research and show that higher education branding largely influences the student choice of university through the social image and overall market position of an educational institution. Joseph et al. (2012) provided valuable insights into the factors that influence college choice, emphasizing the importance of branding in influencing students' decisions. Their findings indicate that students at public and private universities prioritize different attributes, suggesting that BE plays a subtle role in meeting different student preferences. However, this study was conducted in the United States and is therefore not appropriate for the Malaysian context, and the results may vary.

Additionally, Lu et al. (2015) conducted research on college students in the northwestern United States to investigate their brand choice intentions toward ethnic restaurants and found that brand perception played a significant role in influencing student preferences. Lu et al. (2015) concluded that brand perception affects the consumers' decisions about which restaurants to choose. Although these studies have revealed the influence of brands on consumer behaviour in the food service industry, research on HEI BE at the HEI level remains limited, and further investigation is needed.

Thus, it is clear from the explanation above that there is a substantial correlation between HEI BE and choice of university. However, there was little scholarly attention paid to this specific topic within HEI. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine, within the framework of Malaysian HEI, the relationship between HEI BE and choice of university. The following research hypotheses are proposed:

H2: HEI BE has a significant effect on choice of university.

2.3.3 PR and HEI BE

Chung et al. (2013) highlight the key role of PR in marketing by emphasizing the important role it plays in brand equity in terms of cultivating positive and long-lasting customer relationships. Their research shows that relationship attributes are the most important factor in building customer-based brand equity (CBBE), suggesting that effective PR strategies can enhance overall brand attitudes and engagement. Similarly, Chan et al. (2025) find that public relations has a significant positive impact on university reputation. They explain that public relations serve as a strategic communication bridge between universities and their stakeholders by conveying consistent, responsible, and ethical messages, such as promoting the university's image, social responsibility initiatives, and government agency certifications. These efforts shape stakeholders' perceptions of the university and ultimately enhance institutional reputation and brand equity.

Armutlu (2023) and Nyagadza and Mazuruse (2021) similarly highlight the important role of PR in shaping brand equity. Armutlu's (2023) study emphasises a constructivist approach, demonstrating the varied impact of PR on stakeholders in the highly perceived global mobile system industry in Turkey, and predicts the increasing importance of PR in future strategy and implementation. Similarly, Nyagadza and Mazuruse (2021) explored the role of public relations in building relationships, increasing awareness, shaping a positive corporate image and corporate image of private colleges, and ultimately enhancing their brand assets. While these two studies contribute to the understanding of how public relations builds brand image and identity in other contexts, it may be different in the context of higher education institutions in Malaysia.

These findings suggest that there is a lack of research on the impact of public relations on university brand equity and how it affects students' preference for universities, especially in Malaysia. This shows that PR has a significant effect on brand equity. However, limited academic attention has been given to this topic in the context of HEI. Thus, this study aims to explore the relationship between PR and HEI BE in Malaysian HEI. The following is the formulation of the research hypotheses:

H3: PR have a significant effect on HEI BE.

2.3.4 Ads and HEI BE

Alhaddad (2015) found that advertising awareness has a significant positive impact on brand awareness, brand image, and brand equity in social media. It enhances brand equity by increasing brand awareness and improving brand image. However, as the research findings focus on social media, they may not be applicable to other areas. In addition, Chan et al. (2025) confirmed the positive impact of advertising on the reputation of private higher education institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia,

emphasizing that consistent and persuasive messages conveyed through advertising can enhance perceptions of institutional identity and credibility. However, Chan et al.'s (2025) study highlighted the importance of Malaysian private HEI's perceptions of advertising, which has not received much attention in studies of advertising on brand equity in Malaysian public and private HEIs.

Nikabadi et al. (2015) showed that in the consumer sector in Iran, advertising has a significant impact on brand equity in Iran. Their study highlighted that advertising can enhance brand equity among Iranian consumers. However, since the results of the study were focused on general businesses and Iranian consumers, the findings and conclusions drawn from the study may be applicable in HEI but may differ in the context of an HEIs in Malaysia. Similarly, Buil et al. (2013) examined how advertising can contribute to brand equity in the UK and showed that advertising can increase brand awareness. Furthermore, Buil et al.'s (2013) study highlighted the importance of individuals' perceptions of advertising, which has not received much attention in brand equity research.

As mentioned earlier, these results highlight the need to examine the impact of advertising on HEI BE among Malaysian HEI and students, a topic that has not received sufficient attention in the literature. Some studies have shown that advertising has a significant impact on brand equity, while others have argued that advertising is not emphasized enough when discussing brand equity. This makes the research results inconclusive and highlights the need for more research to verify the link between advertising and brand equity in Malaysian higher education institutions. Therefore, this study aims to explore the relationship between advertising and brand equity in Malaysian higher education institutions. The following research hypotheses were developed:

H4: Ads have a significant effect on HEI BE.

2.3.5 SP and HEI BE

Sales promotions can enhance a company's reputation among post-purchase customers and become an important part of brand equity, as confirmed in several supporting studies (Theodora, 2021). Joseph et al. (2020) showed that sales promotions have a significant impact on brand equity. Brand equity varies across market segments with different levels of loyalty when sales promotions are introduced. Likewise, Salelaw et al. (2016) examined the impact of monetary and non-monetary promotions on brand equity in the Ethiopian beer industry and found that the two are complementary. According to Salelaw et al. (2016) study, non-monetary promotions can increase brand equity but have a negative impact on perceived quality, while monetary promotions have a positive impact on brand equity. In addition, Palazn-Vidal and Delgado-Ballester (2005) also studied the impact of promotions on BE among female consumers and concluded that non-monetary promotions are more beneficial than monetary promotions. According to Palazn-Vidal and Delgado-Ballester (2005) research, non-monetary marketing is more effective than monetary marketing in establishing positive, unique, and important brand connections. Although these studies have revealed the impact of promotions on consumer and brand building in the beer industry, there is still a lack of research on the extent to which Malaysian HEIs themselves assess brand equity.

Chan et al. (2025) found that sales promotional activities did not significantly affect university reputation, which is an important component of brand equity. Chan et al. (2025) argued that sales promotional strategies such as offering discounts or partial tuition waivers may be difficult for universities to implement consistently and effectively and may damage brand equity in the long run. Similarly, Yoo et al. (2000) showed that promotions may weaken brand equity and should therefore be used with caution. Yoo et al. (2000) emphasized that sales promotions may be inconsistent with the high quality and image of the brand equity; although they may lead to financial success in the short term, they may weaken brand equity in the long term. These findings suggest that promotions have no effect on brand equity and may even damage long-term brand perception. However, there is still a lack of

research on the Malaysian higher education institutions' own assessment of whether sales promotions will have an impact on brand equity.

Therefore, based on the discussions above, this study argues that there have been inconclusive findings to examine the relationship between SP and HEI BE in the context of Malaysian HEIs, which may yield different results. This highlights the need for further investigation to clarify this relationship. The research hypotheses are as follows:

H5: SP have a significant effect on HEI BE.

2.3.6 DM and HEI BE

Prayudi and Nugraha (2022) and Theodora (2021) confirm that the DM variable has a significant effect on BE. DM in general can affect the BE through the formation of a positive image in the minds of consumers and also the perception of good quality. Moreover, Dameh & Ghadeer (2019) conducted a study on the impact of direct marketing on creating brand equity at IKEA in Jordan and found a significant effect between DM and BE. To show that DM can achieve brand awareness in the customers' minds. However, this study and related concepts have not yet been applied in HEIs in Malaysia. Therefore, some argue that the research results may differ in the specific context of HEIs in Malaysia.

Besides that, Chan et al.'s (2025) study showed that direct marketing has no significant effect on the brand equity (i.e., university reputation). Chan et al. (2025) indicates that the impact of DM on BE is insignificant due to the fact that the flourishing of many private higher education institutions has resulted in cluttered and disorganized information on university websites, creating 'noise', as there is also a lot of other more interesting content on the virtual platform, resulting in a lack of awareness of university websites among students. However, Malaysian HEIs have

not yet implemented this study or idea. Consequently, it is thought that this result would differ in Malaysian HEI.

As discussed above, several studies showed the significant influence of DM on HEI BE, but Chan et al. (2025) found no significant relationship between DM and HEI BE. Thus, this study intends to explore the relationship between DM and HEI BE in the context of Malaysian HEIs due to inconclusive findings. The following is the formulation of the research hypothesis:

H6: DM have a significant effect on HEI BE.

2.3.7 PS and HEI BE

A study by Lubis et al. (2023) shows that personal selling has a direct impact on building the brand equity of educational institutions and has a positive impact on brand equity in the context of Politeknik Unggul LP3M in Indonesia. Similarly, Sadek et al.'s (2016) study showed that personal selling has a significant positive direct impact on brand equity dimensions (brand awareness, brand associations, and brand trust), which have a significant positive direct impact on overall brand equity in the Egyptian market. Therefore, personal selling must be emphasized in any industry that is committed to building brand equity. However, research on whether personal selling affects the HEI BE in Malaysia is still insufficient, so further investigation is needed.

On the other hand, the relationship between personal selling and brand equity has shown mixed results. Contrasting findings were conducted by Harikedua et al. (2023) and Armstrong (2019), who concluded that personal selling does not influence brand equity. Harikedua et al. (2023) research conducted in the insurance industry shows that more agents' personal selling power only has limited direct influence on brand equity, particularly in XYZ Insurance, where brand equity is primarily attributed to the reputation of the company, ongoing digitalization, and

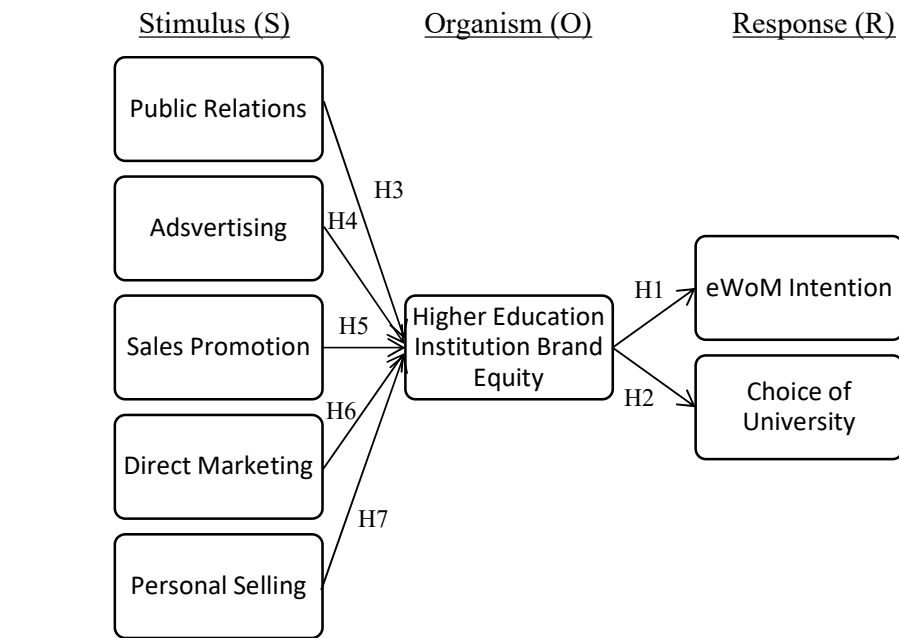
well-recognized product lines. These discrepancies suggest that the effectiveness of personal selling may vary depending on the industry, context, or measurement parameters.

Thus, based on the discussion above, this study argues that the relationship between PS and HEI BE remains inconclusive, and the findings may differ if examined in the Malaysian HEI context. Further research is essential to clarify the role of PS in shaping HEI BE, particularly in its ability to motivate students' eWOM intention and influence their choice of university. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H7: PS have a significant effect on HEI BE.

2.4 Proposed Conceptual Framework

Figure 2.1 Proposed Conceptual Framework



Source: Developed for the research

Higher education provides a special and important context for this study, given that institutions of higher education are increasingly becoming “marketing oriented” and students are becoming “consumers” (Ram et al., 2017). This study combines the IMC and brand equity frameworks to provide a conceptual multidimensional framework for the influencing factors of brand equity. Most private higher education institutions in Malaysia are striving to improve their brand equity to facilitate student recommendation and university selection (Ram et al., 2017). The purpose of this research is to investigate how IMC influences eWoM intention and university choice through brand equity as shown in Figure 2.1, based on the structure of the S-O-R model.

Based on the literature review, this study adopts the S-O-R model as an important analytical framework, viewing it as the mechanism through which external stimuli influence eWoM intentions and university choice, with brand equity serving as a mediating variable. Since consumers' perceptions of external stimuli from IMC determine their attitude changes, HEI BE may influence their internal state (Jiang & Lyu, 2024). According to Malarvizhi et al. (2022), emotional states influencing consumers' internal states may also include brand perception and brand image. Therefore, this study regards higher education institution brand assets as the emotional states exhibited by an organism. Consequently, eWoM intention and university choice are used to measure students' responses to the organism.

2.5 Chapter Summary

In nutshell, the conceptualization of variables was discussed in Chapter 2. Based on the S-O-R model, which served as the underlying theory, a conceptual framework is proposed. The S-O-R model and previous studies are then being used to formulate hypotheses.

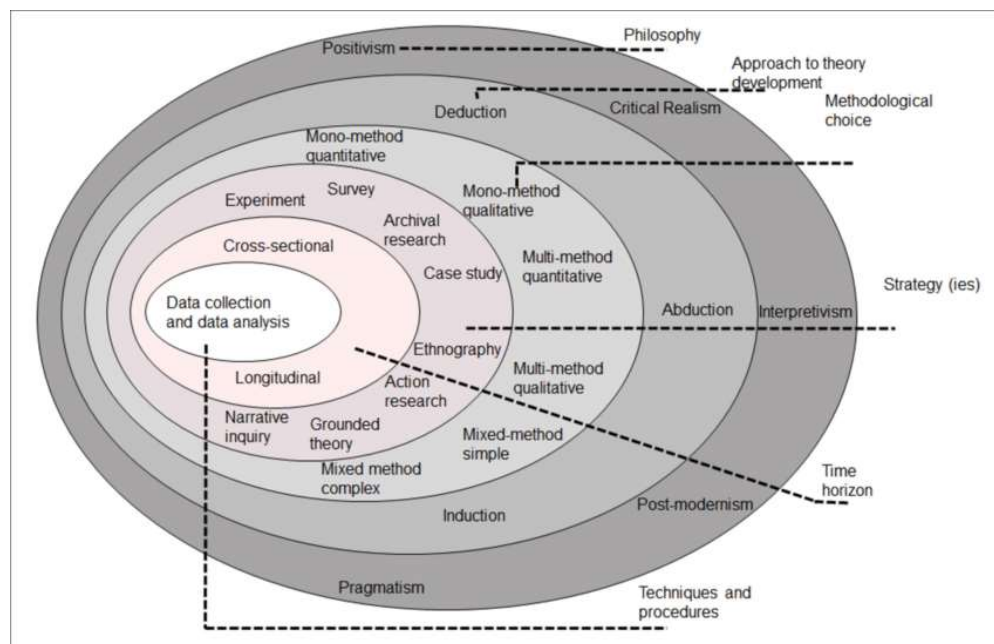
Chapter 3: Methodology

3.0 Introduction

Chapter 3 discusses and explains all functional aspects involved in the data collection process. This includes research philosophy, research design, sampling design, and data analysis tools collected from previous studies, all of which will be clearly explained through specific examples.

3.1 Research Philosophy

Figure 3.1 Research Onion



Source: Seuring, S., Stella, T., Stella, M. (2021). *Developing and Publishing Strong Empirical Research in Sustainability Management—Addressing the Intersection of Theory, Method, and Empirical Field*. Frontiers in Sustainability

Positivism aims to produce generalisations that have characteristics similar to scientific laws. It involves studying observable aspects of social reality and encompasses philosophical positions held by natural scientists (Saunders et al., 2019). While positivist philosophy recognizes that things such as concepts or social structures exist apart from people, it ignores how people fit into social reality (Melnikovas, 2018). Therefore, this study adopts a positivist philosophy, arguing that by gathering enough data, human behaviour can be explained.

The deductive approach is usually applied to conduct theory testing, involving reasoning from general rules to specific classes of laws (Melnikovas, 2018; Saunders et al., 2019). Since deductive reasoning produces specific conclusions that are logically required and generated theories are evaluated or validated through data collection, deductive theory development methods may be relevant to prediction (Melnikovas, 2018). Thus, this study adopted a deductive approach to collect and verify the sufficient data.

3.2 Research Design

The origins of qualitative research design are anthropological and sociological corrections (Mehrad & Zangeneh, 2019). According to Melnikovas (2018), positivism can be chosen as the main philosophical perspective of research by collecting specific quantitative facts as a basis for “calculating” the future and making accurate predictions. Post-positivist principles, such as causal reasoning, reduction to specific variables, hypotheses and questions, measurement and observation, and testing theories, are the main tools used by researchers to advance knowledge in quantitative research (Mehrad & Zangeneh, 2019). Additionally, quantitative research methods comprehensively explore causal relationships between variables through rigorous hypothesis testing.

Quantitative methods often use strategies such as experiments and surveys, as well as predetermined tools to generate statistics during data collection (Mehrad & Zangeneh, 2019). It is based on a structured process of gathering and synthesizing knowledge from a panel of experts through a series of questionnaires and controlled feedback of opinions, known as “structured dialogues” (Saleh et al., 2008). Therefore, this study uses quantitative methods and surveys questionnaires to verify how IMC tools influence students' eWoM intention and choice of university through brand equity.

Compared to case-control or cohort studies, cross-sectional studies are the most straightforward individual-level observational study design. They are usually easy to implement, reasonably priced, and allow for data collection at a specific point in time (Pandis, 2014). Each study component, such as participant selection, data collection, and definition of the condition or characteristic being studied, needs to have a clear temporal dimension (Kesmodel, 2018). Therefore, this study aims to explore the behaviours and attitudes of Generation Z toward universities during a particular duration, thereby enhancing the relevance of cross-sectional research designs.

3.3 Sampling Design

3.3.1 Target Population

This research's target population is Malaysia's Generation Z. Generation Z in Malaysia are exposed to digital technology, which makes them proficient in both real and virtual worlds; they are technologically adaptable, value education, aspire to higher education, and are keen on entrepreneurship (Ariffin et al., 2024). Therefore, this study will investigate their behaviour to understand how they recommend university to others and their choice of university in HEIs. Gen Z, who were born from the late 1990s to the late 2000s, are those who are 13–28 in the year

2025. To achieve this research objective: focus on those who are between 17 and 28 years old who currently study in university pursuing foundation and undergraduate or postgraduate.

3.3.2 Sampling Frame and Sampling Location

The set of units from which samples are taken is called a sampling frame (DiGaetano, 2013). The probability sampling method is designed to ensure that all units in the sample frame are eligible to participate in the study, but it is not possible to create a list for this study. Therefore, this study will use the non-probability sampling method—the judgmental sampling method—for sampling and will use social media platforms to contact students enrolled in colleges and universities within the designated area or visit the colleges and universities in person to distribute the questionnaires.

Furthermore, to ensure the coverage of the sampling locations, this study focuses on the main areas in the Klang Valley and Selangor. Since Klang Valley and Selangor have the largest number of universities in Malaysia, with a total of 94 universities in Malaysia and almost 60 universities in Klang Valley and Selangor alone, it is sufficient to collect enough data for this study (StudyMalaysia.com, 2024).

3.3.3 Sampling Technique

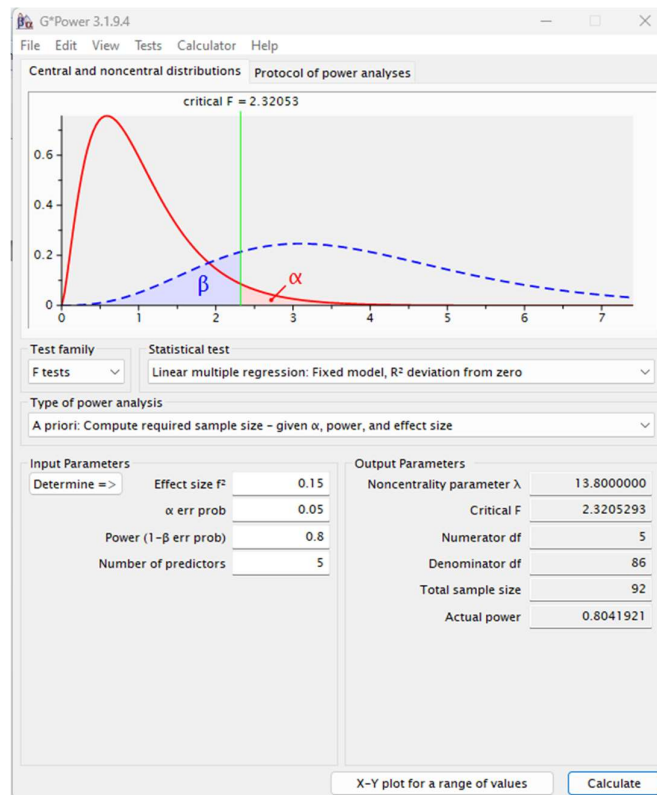
Judgmental sampling technique used in this research, also called purposive sampling, which is the intentional selection of people or events in a particular setting to provide important information that cannot be obtained from other choices (Maxwell, 2012). Researchers include cases or participants in their samples because they believe they are worthy of inclusion (Taherdoost, 2016). Therefore, this study

aims to explore how IMC influences the HEI BE, thereby influencing students' eWoM intentions toward universities and their university choice in Malaysia. This research utilized the judgmental sampling technique to collect data from the target population, Generation Z, who will be 17-28 years old and pursuing higher education in 2025.

3.3.4 Sample Size

Sample size can be defined as a subset selected from a population, the size of which is sufficient to ensure that enough information is obtained to draw conclusions (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010). Sample size arguments should consider the amount of information in the data under the inferential objective, such as estimating effect sizes or testing hypotheses (Lakens, 2022). However, most questions revolve around how to determine the appropriate sample size and/or how large the sample size should be (Memon et al., 2020). This research used a non-probability sampling technique and will follow Kline's SEM sample size guidelines. Kline (2005) argues that samples over 200 are considered large and most appropriate for data analysis. Therefore, this study attempts to collect 300 samples for data analysis.

Figure 3.1 G*Power Analysis



Source: Developed for the research

Additionally, power analysis was conducted using G*Power in this study. In Figure 3.1, specify the effect size at 0.15 (medium effect), α at 0.05, and power at 0.80 in the input parameters (Memon et al., 2020). This indicates that at least 92 responses need to be collected for this study to produce valid results. According to the power analysis, the intended sample size was greater than the minimum sample size.

3.3.5 Data Collection Method

This study used a Google Form survey to collect data. This study distributed online questionnaires to the target audience by visiting universities, sending emails, scanning QR codes, and using social media (such as Xiaohongshu and Instagram) to find the target respondents and allow the respondents to access and answer the

survey questions. This study distributed questionnaires to respondents from 2 public universities (UNITEN and UPM) and 4 private universities (including UTAR, UCSI, APU, and Taylor University). These universities were selected primarily based on their geographical proximity to UTAR, which helped to collect data more efficiently given the limited resources and time available.

3.4 Instrument and Measurement

3.4.1 Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire of this study will consist of numerous sections:

In Section A, a question about acknowledgement of notice has been included to protect the rights of respondents. Respondents who do not wish to have their personal information recorded may select "No."

In Section B, the questions are a screening question to screen out people who do not belong to Generation Z (i.e., those aged under 17 to over 28), do not belong to the Klang Valley region, and are not currently enrolled in HEI in order to avoid unnecessary errors.

In Section C, demographic questions asked respondents about their gender, age, ethnicity, and so on.

In Sections D to F, the questions regarding the IMC (i.e., PR, Ads, SP, DM, and PS), HEI BE, and also the eWoM intention and choice of university are being established.

3.4.2 Instrument Development

Table 3.1 showed the measurement items of this study's questionnaire.

Table 3.1 Information of Measurement Items

Constructs	Original Source	Item	Original Statement
PR	Melewar et al., 2017	PR 1	The hotel is active in online and offline media (Internet, TV and radio, publications, books and newspapers and magazines).
		PR 2	This hotel is very active in content management and information services (refer to complete explanation about it).
		PR 3	Various events and conferences are held at the hotel.
		PR 4	The hotel is active in participating in many social events.
Ads	Cham et al., 2020	Ads 1	The advertisements by this hospital is appealing to me.
		Ads 2	I pay attention to the advertisement message by this hospital.
		Ads 3	The advertisement by the hospital is important to me as a medical tourist.
		Ads 4	The advertisement by this hospital provides me with useful information about its medical services.
		Ads 5	My preference toward the brand of this hospital is influenced by their repeated advertisement.
		Ads 6	The advertisement by this hospital has an influence on me.
SP	Melewar et al., 2017	SP 1	The hotel is announcing its new service noisily (making a lot of media, video, Internet, etc.).
		SP 2	The hotel has many sponsoring and sponsorship activities in various areas.
		SP 3	The hotel hosts many promotional events, such as celebrations, competitions.
		SP 4	The hotel offers the right incentives for loyalty to its customers.
DM	Radder & Huang, 2008	DM 1	In-store advertising for coffee/sportswear clothing usually draws my attention.
		DM 2	Television advertising for coffee/sportswear clothing usually draws my attention.
		DM 3	Magazine advertising for coffee/sportswear clothing usually draws my attention
		DM 4	Internet advertising for coffee/sportswear clothing usually draws my attention

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PS	McFarland et al., 2006	PS 1	The salesperson tried to get me excited about the product.
		PS 2	The salesperson described the advantages of the product with enthusiasm and conviction.
		PS 3	The salesperson frequently appealed me to my emotions during the sales pitch.
		PS 4	The salesperson tried to convince me via information about the product.
		PS 5	The salesperson explained the different features of the product to me.
		PS 6	The salesperson ensured that I received all product information materials relevant to my purchasing decision.
HEI BE	Lassar et al., 1995	HEI BE 1	From this brand of television, I can expect superior performance.
		HEI BE 2	During use, this brand of television is highly unlikely to be defective.
		HEI BE 3	This brand of television is made so as to work trouble free.
		HEI BE 4	This brand will work very well.
		HEI BE 5	This brand of television fits my personality.
		HEI BE 6	I would be proud to own a television of this brand.
		HEI BE 7	This brand of television will be well regarded by my friends.
		HEI BE 8	In its status and style, this brand matches my personality.
		HEI BE 9	This brand is well priced.
		HEI BE 10	Considering what I would pay for this brand of television, I will get much more than my money's worth.
		HEI BE 11	I consider this brand of television to be a bargain because of the benefits I receive.
		HEI BE 12	I consider the company and people who stand behind these televisions to be very trustworthy.
		HEI BE 13	In regard to consumer interests, this company seems to be very caring.
		HEI BE 14	I believe that this company does not take advantage of consumers.
		HEI BE 15	After watching this brand of television, I am very likely to grow fond of it.
		HEI BE 16	For this brand of television, I have positive personal feelings.
		HEI BE 17	With time, I will develop a warm feeling toward this brand of television.
eWoM	Mim et al., 2022	eWoM 1	I will recommend (piped text).

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		eWoM 2	I will strongly recommend people buy products from (piped text).
		eWoM 3	I will speak of good sides of (piped text).
		eWoM 4	I will speak favorably of (piped text) to others.
CoU	Lu et al., 2015	CoU 1	Even if this restaurant is similar to others, it seems smarter to choose this restaurant.
		CoU 2	This restaurant is always a better choice compared to its rival restaurants.
		CoU 3	It makes sense to choose this restaurant instead of any other ethnic restaurants, even if they are the same.
		CoU 4	This restaurant is my favorite restaurant among all the other competing ethnic restaurants.

Source: Developed for the research

3.4.3 Measurement Scale

Tables 3.2 and 3.3 show the measurement scales. The study used nominal, ordinal, and 5-point Likert scales for categorical data and 5-point Likert scales for continuous data.

Table 3.2 Scale for Categorical Data

Constructs	Item	Measurement	Coding
Acknowledgement of Notice		Nominal	1=Yes 2=No
Current Residence		Nominal	1=Kuala Lumpur 2=Selangor
Enrolment Status		Nominal	1=Yes 2=No
Age		Ordinal	1=17 to 19 years old 2=20 to 22 years old 3= 23 to 25 years old 4= 26 to 28 years old 5= Others
Gender		Nominal	1=Male 2=Female
Ethnicity		Nominal	1=Malay 2=Chinese 3=Indian 4= Others

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What type of university /higher education institution (HEI) are you enrolled in?	Nominal	1=Public university/ institution 2=Private university/ institution
Education Level	Ordinal	1=Pre-university/ Foundation/ Diploma 2=Bachelor's degree 3=Master's degree
What is your field of study?	Nominal	1=Art and Humanities 2=Business and Management 3=Engineering and Technology 4=Health and Medicine 5=Science 6=Social Science 7=Others
Who primarily influenced your decision to choose this university/ higher education institution (HEI)?	Nominal	1=Myself 2=Parents/Guardian 3=Others
Who provided the most guidance during your university/ higher education institution (HEI) selection process?	Nominal	1=Myself 2=Parents/Guardian 3=Teachers/ Counselors 4=Friends/ Peers 5=Others
How much influence did your parents/guardians have on your choice of university/ higher education institution (HEI)?	Ordinal	1=None 2=Some 3=Significant 4=Complete
What was the primary reason you chose to study at this university/ higher education institution (HEI)? (multiple choices)	Nominal	1=Academic reputation 2=Specific programs or courses offered 3=Location 4=Campus facilities 5=Scholarships/ Financial aid 6=Recommendations from others
How often do you use the internet?	Ordinal	1=Daily 2=Several times a week 3=Once a week

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			4=Less than once a week
How often do you use social media?	Ordinal		1=Daily 2=Several times a week 3=Once a week 4=Less than once a week
How did you first hear about your current higher education institutions (HEI)?	Nominal		1= Social media 2=University website 3=Online advertisements 4=Print media 5=Word of mouth 6=Events and fairs 7=Others
Which communication channels do you prefer for receiving information from your university/ higher education institutions (HEI)?	Nominal		1=Email 2=SMS 3=Social media 4=University website 5=Online advertisements 6=Print media 7=Events and fair 8=Others
How effective do you find the following marketing channels in providing information about your higher education institutions (HEI)?	Scale	1=Email 2=SMS 3=Social media 4=University website 5=Online advertisements 6=Print media 7=Events and fair 8=Direct email 9=Webinar/ Seminar 10=Telemarketing	1 = Not effective 2 = Slightly effective 3 = Moderately effective 4 = Effective 5 = Very effective
How often do you come across marketing messages from your university/ higher education institutions (HEI)?	Ordinal		1=Daily 2=Several times a week 3=Once a week 4=Less than once a week 5=Rarely/ Never
How often do you engage with marketing content from your university/ higher education institutions (HEI)?	Ordinal		1=Always 2=Often 3=Sometimes 4=Rarely 5=Never

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To what extent did the following marketing channels influence your decision to enroll in your current university/ higher education institutions (HEI)?	1=Email 2=SMS 3=Social media 4=University website 5=Online advertisements 6=Print media 7=Events and fair 8=Direct email 9=Webinar/ Seminar 10=Telemarketing	Scale	1=Not influential 2=Slightly influential 3=Moderate influential 4=Influential 5=Very influential
How satisfied are you with the marketing communication from your university/ higher education institutions (HEI)?	1=Email 2=SMS 3=Social media 4=University website 5=Online advertisements 6=Print media 7=Events and fair 8=Direct email 9=Webinar/ Seminar 10=Telemarketing	Scale	1 = Very dissatisfied 2 = Dissatisfied 3 = Neutral 4 = Satisfied 5 = Very satisfied

Source: Developed for the research

Table 3.3 Scale for Continuous Data

Constructs	Item	Measurement	Coding
PR	4		
Ads	6		1= Strongly Disagree 2= Disagree
SP	4		3= Neutral 4= Agree
DM	4	Scale	5= Strongly Agree
PS	6		
HEI BE	17		
eWoM Intention	4		
Choice of University	4		

Source: Developed for the research

3.5 Pre-testing and Pilot Test

3.5.1 Pre-testing

According to Sletto (1940), pretesting is essentially a trial-and-error procedure in which successful experiments are repeated to avoid errors when the final questionnaire is sent to the final panel. In pre-testing experiments, more attention can be paid to discovering possible errors that may occur when the final questionnaire is sent out, such as misinterpretation of the meaning of the content, and to devising ways of avoiding these errors. The questionnaire will be presented to experts and target respondents to obtain professional opinions in the field, ensuring that the questions are clear, concise, and unambiguous and that there is no bias or ambiguity. In this study, the opinions of five lecturers from UTAR will be collected, and 5-8 target respondents from UTAR, Help University, and Taylor's University will be invited to participate in the pre-test.

3.5.2 Pilot Test

Pilot testing refers to preliminary testing conducted on participants with characteristics similar to those of the target population in a comprehensive study in order to collect data (Zikmund et al., 2009). In developing the final questionnaire, it is important to ensure that appropriate data are collected for the pilot test and to identify items that are not clear to respondents (Aslam et al., 2020). Therefore, in this study, questionnaires were spread to 35 individuals to evaluate the clarity and reliability of the questionnaire.

Two pilot tests were conducted in this study. The questionnaire was modified to make it more precise and easier for the respondents to understand. In this study, for the pilot test, 35 data points were collected after removing missing values; 30 respondents were used for this pilot test. The results are shown in Table 3.4. The

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results indicated that most Cronbach's alpha values exceed the threshold of 0.7. However, the DM construct shows a slightly lower alpha value, falling below 0.7. Despite this, the composite reliability indicators (rhoA and rhoC) meet the required thresholds, and the AVE for all constructs is above 0.5. Therefore, the reliability of the measurement is still supported, even though one item has a lower loading.

Table 3.4 Pilot Test (Reliability Test)

Construct	Alpha	rho_a	rho_c	AVE
Ads	0.811	0.826	0.864	0.523
CoU	0.898	0.918	0.929	0.767
DM	0.690	0.772	0.807	0.525
HEI BE	0.943	0.949	0.950	0.534
PR	0.883	0.956	0.917	0.734
PS	0.953	0.960	0.962	0.811
SP	0.821	0.883	0.879	0.649
eWoM	0.878	0.887	0.917	0.735

Source: Developed for the study

Table 3.5 Final Survey Questions After Pre-testing and Pilot Test

Constructs	Original Source	Item	Statement
PR	Melewar et al., 2017	PR 1	University/ higher education institution (HEI) is active in online and offline media (Internet, TV and radio, publications, books and newspaper and magazines)
		PR 2	University/ higher education institution (HEI) actively update content across various platforms. (e.g., social media, university website, email newsletters)
		PR 3	Various events or conferences are held at the university/ higher education institution (HEI). (e.g. seminars, open day)
		PR 4	University/ higher education institution (HEI) is active in participating in many social events. (e.g. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR))
Ads	Cham et al.,2020	Ads 1	The advertisements by university/ higher education institution (HEI) are appealing to me. (e.g. open day, scholarship offer, program offered)

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		Ads 2	The advertisement message by university/ higher education institution (HEI) capture my attention. (e.g. open day, intake, scholarship)
		Ads 3	The advertisement by university/ higher education institution (HEI) is important to me as a student. (e.g. open day, intake, scholarship)
		Ads 4	The advertisement by university/ higher education institution (HEI) provides me with useful information about its higher education services. (e.g. registration day, intake, scholarship, academic achievement)
		Ads 5	My preference/choice toward the brand of university/ higher education institution (HEI) is influenced by their repeated advertisement.
		Ads 6	The advertisement by university/ higher education institution (HEI) has an influence/impact on my impressions.
SP	Melewar et al., 2017	SP 1	The university/ higher education institution (HEI) is announce new services through various media channels (e.g., video marketing campaigns, social media posts) repeatedly.
		SP 2	University/ higher education institution (HEI) engage in sales promotion activities (e.g., sponsorships, open days, education fairs, school seminars) frequently.
		SP 3	The university/ higher education institution (HEI) hosts promotional events (e.g., university celebrations, competitions, open day)
		SP 4	University/ higher education institution (HEI) offers some incentive such scholarship, registration waver, etc for new students.
DM	Radder & Huang, 2008	DM 1	Social media marketing usually draws my attention. (e.g. open day, scholarship)
		DM 2	The telemarketing (cool call about the promotion, information about the university/ higher education institution (HEI), or programmes offer) from the university/ higher education institution capture my attention.
		DM 3	Webinars or education fairs hosted by the university/ higher education institution (HEI) draw my interest.
		DM 4	Direct email (information about the university/ higher education institution, programme offer) from the university/ higher education institution (HEI) capture my attention.
PS	McFarland et al., 2006	PS 1	The staff from the university/ higher education institution (HEI) generate excitement about the university.
		PS 2	The staff describe the advantage of the university/ higher education institution (HEI) services (e.g. mode of teaching and learning, facilities) with enthusiasm.

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		PS 3	The staff tailor their explanations or provide information to align with my preferences for programme to study.
		PS 4	The staff use information (e.g. quality of the program, mode of teaching, learning facilities) to convince me about the good of the university/ higher education institution (HEI).
		PS 5	The staff explain the different features of the university/ higher education institution (HEI) services (e.g. program offered, mode of teaching and learning, learning environment).
		PS 6	The staff ensure that I understood all the relevant information about the university/ higher education institution (HEI).
HEI BE	Lassar et al., 1995	HEI BE 1	I will expect high performance from this university/ higher education institution (HEI). (in term of academic achievement, university ranking, overall reputation)
		HEI BE 2	During my studies at this university/ higher education institution (HEI), I expect it to always provide accurate information. (e.g., announcement, events provided)
		HEI BE 3	I will expect this university/ higher education institution (HEI) to perform professionally. (e.g., handling problem well in all aspect)
		HEI BE 4	University/ higher education institution (HEI) excels in its operations. (e.g., quality of program, mode of teaching, and learning facilities)
		HEI BE 5	My university/ higher education institution (HEI) matches my personal values and goals. (e.g., academic success, goods reputation)
		HEI BE 6	I feel proud to study in this university/ higher education institution (HEI).
		HEI BE 7	My friends think highly of my university/ higher education institution (HEI). (e.g., for its academic excellence and high rankings)
		HEI BE 8	My university/ higher education institution (HEI) represents what I value most (e.g. academic excellence, good reputation)
		HEI BE 9	My university/ higher education institution (HEI) offers great value for the programs and quality of teaching and learning it provides.
		HEI BE 10	Considering the tuition fees I paid, I get much more worth of value.
		HEI BE 11	I will consider this university to be well-priced because of the certification, knowledges that I will receive.
		HEI BE 12	I trust my university/ higher education institution (HEI).
		HEI BE 13	My university/ higher education institution (HEI) cares about its students' interests.

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		HEI BE 14	I believe my university/ higher education institution (HEI) treat students fairly.
		HEI BE 15	After seeing the social media marketing from my university/ higher education institution (HEI), I feel a positive connection to the university. (e.g., proud to be part of university community)
		HEI BE 16	Social media marketing from my university/ higher education institution (HEI) gives me positive feelings about the university.
		HEI BE 17	Social media marketing from my university/ higher education institution (HEI) makes me feel warmly towards the university.
eWoM	Mim et al., 2022	eWoM 1	I would recommend my university/ higher education institution (HEI) to others.
		eWoM 2	I would encourage people to choose my university/ higher education institution (HEI).
		eWoM 3	I would talk about the positive aspects of my university/ higher education institution (HEI) to others.
		eWoM 4	I would speak favourably of my university/ higher education institution (HEI) to others.
CoU	Lu et al., 2015	CoU 1	Even if other universities is similar, choosing my university/ higher education institution (HEI) feels like a smarter decision.
		CoU 2	My university/ higher education institution (HEI) is a better choice compared to other universities.
		CoU 3	It makes sense to choose my university/ higher education institution (HEI) over other similar universities.
		CoU 4	I have a strong preference for my university/ higher education institution (HEI).

Source: Developed for the study

3.6 Common method bias

In the case of PLS-SEM, common method bias is a phenomenon caused by the measurements used in the SEM study rather than by the causal network in the model under study (Kock, 2015). It arises from common raters, common measurement contexts, common item contexts, or characteristics of the items themselves that may influence the retrieval phase of the response process (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Questionnaires using Likert scales are an integral part of SEM research

measurement methods. Common methodological bias is a phenomenon caused by the measurement methods used in SEM research, rather than by the causal network between the underlying variables in the model under study (Kock, 2015). Therefore, the statistical and procedural approach of MacKenzie and Podsakoff (2012) was used in this study to minimize its harmful effects.

3.6.1 Statistical Approach

In this study, the full collinearity test would be used to detect common method bias. As proposed by Kock (2017), this full collinearity test acts as a comprehensive procedure in which all latent variables in the model generate VIFs in a fully automated VIF generation process. Therefore, if all VIFs generated by the full collinearity test are equal to or less than 3.3, the model can be considered as free of common method bias.

3.6.2 Procedural Approach

The overall goal of the procedural approach is to ensure that respondents have the ability to more accurately answer the questions in the study measurements without systematic bias (Jordan & Troth, 2019). Therefore, keeping the questions simple and easy to understand and minimizing redundant measurements and overlaps should help participants give more accurate responses in this study. Furthermore, respondents will be informed of the study's purpose, and if they have any questions about any aspect of the questionnaire, explanations will be provided. Participants' responses will be kept strictly secret and used only for scholarly purposes.

3.7 Data Processing

3.7.1 Data screening

To achieve the goal of measuring Generation Z behavior in this study, participants who are not between the ages of 17 and 28 will be screened out.

3.7.2 Data coding

Each question in this study will be assigned a number value to facilitate data analysis.

3.7.3 Questionnaire Checking

In order to make sure that all of the information gathered from the respondents is complete, this study will review each questionnaire in this stage.

3.7.4 Data Editing

In this step, any unclear or contradictory information gathered from participants will be eliminated from the research. Furthermore, non-differential misclassified data will be eliminated as well. Before the data is analysed, this is done to make sure it is valid.

3.7.5 Missing Value

In order to prevent missing values from the data, this study used Google Forms as a last step. This is due to a feature in the Google Form that requires the respondent to answer every question; if they don't, they won't be able to move on to the next section or submit.

3.8 Multivariate assumption test

3.8.1 Normality Test

Tsagris and Pandis (2021) stated that the assumption of normality is powerful and implies some nice theoretical properties. The normality test is a crucial step as it determines which central tendency measure and statistical method to use in data analysis (Mishra et al., 2019). It is a complementary tool to visual inspection of the normal distribution of data (Ghasemi and Zahediasl, 2012). Das and Imon (2016) proposed that it is essential to assess the normality of data before any formal statistical analysis. Otherwise, the result might draw erroneous inferences and wrong conclusions. Normality can be assessed both visually and through normality tests (Das & Imon, 2016). Therefore, a normality test is conducted by using Jamovi in this study.

3.8.2 Multicollinearity Test

Multicollinearity refers to a phenomenon that occurs when more than one independent variable is highly correlated (Tsagris & Pandis, 2021). It leads to inaccurate coefficient estimates and standard errors, as well as erroneous inferences (Grewal et al., 2004). Therefore, Mason and Perreault (1991) pointed out that increasing the explanatory variance of the dependent variable can mitigate the

effects of multicollinearity. Eliminating measurement errors should increase the explanatory variance of the structural model, thereby mitigating multicollinearity (Grewal et al., 2004). This study employs a tool to detect multicollinearity, which is the VIF. The empirical rule for VIF is that if the VIF value of a dependent variable exceeds 5 or 10, the multicollinearity of that variable may be too high (Tsagris & Pandis, 2021).

3.9 Data Analysis

3.9.1 Descriptive Analysis

Descriptive analysis is a method used to objectively describe the nature and degree of sensory characteristics. It provides detailed, accurate, reliable, and objective sensory information about a product. It uses humans as measurement tools to minimize bias under controlled conditions to generate such data (Kemp et al., 2018). Therefore, descriptive analysis is to interpret the demographic profile of the respondents in this study (Shmueli et al., 2020).

3.9.2 Inferential Analysis

PLS-SEM is a widely used regression-based technique in marketing and other social science fields, which estimates relationships in path models with latent and manifest variables. PLS-SEM shows almost no bias when estimating data from a composite model population (Sarstedt et al., 2016). Therefore, this study decided to use PLS-SEM as a regression-based technique to perform the accurate data. When deciding whether PLS-SEM is the appropriate structural modelling approach, researchers often question whether their research is confirmatory or exploratory research (Hair et al., 2017). It overcomes the apparent dichotomy between

explanation and prediction. In PLS-SEM, there are two stepwise methods: the assessment of measurement model and structural model.

Referring to the study by Hair et al. (2019), the reliability and validity of the measurement model will be examined, followed by a structural model assessment. The factor loadings for the indicators will be tested. If the factor loading value is greater than or equal to 0.708, the indicator is considered to meet the requirements. To assess internal consistency reliability, alternative criteria include Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. Cronbach's alpha (CA) should be greater than or equal to 0.708, average variance extracted (AVE) greater than or equal to 0.5, variance inflation factor (VIF) less than or equal to 5, and heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) less than 0.85 (Guenther et al., 2023).

If the measurement model meets the requirements, the researcher will need to evaluate the structural model (Hair et al., 2013). As a secondary justification for the use of PLS-SEM, complex structural modeling is relatively underutilized, although it has merit in business marketing environments where complex models are needed for in-depth research (Guenther et al., 2023). In this research, the p-value will be determined, and if it is less than 0.05, the structure is statistically significant (Hair et al., 2019).

Like most statistical methods, PLS-SEM is a causal prediction method that has a number of rules of thumb that serve as guidelines for evaluating the results of the model, which are broad guidelines for suggesting how the results should be interpreted and usually vary depending on the specific situation (Hair et al., 2019). Therefore, the final step in interpreting PLS-SEM results is to conduct one or more robustness tests to support the stability of the results. Lastly, the software used for PLS-SEM analysis was SMARTPLS.

3.10 Chapter Summary

In this chapter explained the overall procedures taken to conduct this research. This research utilized a research onion, including positivism, a deductive approach, and a quantitative cross-sectional questionnaire. This study also implemented a single method of data collection; thus, it is probable that CMB occurred. Therefore, data analysis included descriptive analysis and PLS-SEM to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS

4.0 Introduction

Chapter 4 discusses the statistical analysis that was conducted on the data collected from the respondents, and the results of the analysis were discussed. A total of 308 survey questionnaires were gathered between March 3 and March 19, 2025. Additionally, Jamovi 2.6.26 was used for the descriptive data analysis, while SMARTPLS 4.1.0.9 was used for the inferential data analysis. Lastly, to guarantee the accuracy of the data, data cleaning was examined prior to data analysis.

4.1 Data Screening and Data Cleaning

In this section, the data screening was implemented to remove those who answered no to the screening questions of the questionnaire. Through this process, 12 respondents have been removed, leaving 296 responses. In conjunction with that, data cleaning was performed before data analysis in this study.

4.1.1 Multivariate Outliers Detection

In this study, a total of 23 outliers were detected. After removing the outliers, 273 valid responses were available for this study from the 296 valid responses.

4.2 Common Method Bias

4.2.1 Full Collinearity Test

To identify the common method bias issue discussed in Chapter 3, this study performed a full collinearity test on all variables. Table 4.1 presents the findings. According to the results, there is no common method bias issue, which shows that the VIF of all variables is less than 3.3.

Table 4.1 Full Collinearity Test

Construct	Full Collinearity VIF
Advertising	2.45
Choice of University	2.67
Direct Marketing	2.35
Higher Education Institution Brand Equity	3.24
Public Relation	1.69
Personal Selling	2.41
Sales Promotion	2.30
Electronic Word of Mouth	3.16

Source: Developed for the study

4.3 Descriptive Data Analysis

4.3.1 Respondent Profile

Table 4.3 presents the relevant results of the demographic profile of the 273 respondents and their IMC behaviour about HEI.

Table 4.3 Respondent Profile

Constructs	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
17 to 19 years old	20	7.3%
20 to 22 years old	187	68.5%
23 to 25 years old	58	21.2%
26 to 28 years old	8	2.9%
Gender		
Female	187	68.5%
Male	86	31.5%
Ethnicity		
Chinese	254	93.0%
Malay	11	4%
Indian	8	3%
Type of University		
Private University/ Institution	243	89%
Public University/ Institution	30	11%
Education Level		
Pre-University/ Foundation/ Diploma	29	10.7%
Bachelor's Degree	231	84.6%
Master's Degree	13	4.7%
Field of Study		
Arts and Humanities	39	14.3%
Business and Management	140	51.2%

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Engineering and Technology	42	15.4%
Health and Medicine	11	4%
Science	13	4.8%
Social Science	28	10.3%
Who primarily influenced your decision to choose this university/ higher education institution (HEI)?		
Myself	201	73.6%
Parents/ Guardian	62	22.7%
Both (Myself & Parents/ Guardian)	2	0.7%
Friends	4	1.5%
Agent Recommended	1	0.4%
Sister	2	0.7%
Government (UPU System)	1	0.4%
Who provided the most guidance during your university/ higher education institution (HEI) selection process?		
Myself	132	48.3%
Parents/ Guardian	78	28.6%
Teachers/ Counsellors	27	9.9%
Friends/ Peers	34	12.4%
Sister	2	0.8%
How much influence did your parents/guardians have on your choice of university/ higher education institution (HEI)?		
None	44	16.1%
Some	138	50.5%
Significant	74	27.1%
Complete	17	6.2%
How often do you use the internet?		
Daily	261	95.6%
Several times a week	10	3.7%
Once a week	1	0.4%
Less than once a week	1	0.4%

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How often do you use social media?

Daily	254	93%
Several times a week	12	4.4%
Once a week	4	1.5%
Less than once a week	3	1.1%

How did you first hear about your current university/ higher education institution (HEI)?

Social Media	80	29.3%
University/ Higher Education Institution (HEI) Website	48	17.6%
Online Advertisements	9	3.3%
Print Media (newspapers, magazines)	2	0.7%
Word of mouth	89	32.6%
Events and fairs (e.g education fair/ open day)	45	16.5%

How often do you come across marketing messages from your university/ higher education institution (HEI)?

Daily	60	22.0%
Several times a week	79	28.9%
Once a week	46	16.8%
Less than once a week	58	21.2%
Rarely/ Never	30	11.0%

How often do you engage with marketing content from your university/ higher education institution (HEI)? (e.g., liking, sharing, commenting on social media posts)

Always	33	12.1%
Often	34	12.5%
Sometimes	96	35.2%
Rarely	88	32.2%
Never	22	8.1%

Source: Developed for the study

Table 4.3 shows the results that, when categorised by age, the largest age group was 20 to 22 years old, with 187 individuals, accounting for 68.5%. Additionally, the second-largest age group was 23 to 25 years old, with 58 participants, accounting for 21.2%. The third-largest age group was 17 to 19 years old, with 20 participants, accounting for 7.3%. Finally, the smallest age group was 26 to 28 years old, with only 8 participants, accounting for 2.9%.

Subsequently, a total of 187 respondents were identified as female, accounting for 68.5%, and 86 respondents were identified as male, accounting for approximately 31.5%. This result indicates that the number of female respondents in this study was greater than that of male respondents.

In addition, in terms of ethnicity of respondents, the majority of respondents are identified as Chinese, comprising 254 individuals, constituting 93% of the total. Following closely behind, 11 individuals, or 4% of the respondents, are Malay, while 8 individuals are Indian, making up 3% of this section.

Similarly, in terms of the type of educational institution attended by the respondents, the result shows that a large number of respondents attended private educational institutions, totalling 243, constituting 89%. In addition, 30 respondents attended public educational institutions, accounting for 11% of the total.

Next, in terms of education level, most of the respondents are students who are studying for bachelor's degrees, comprising 231 individuals or 84.6% of the total. Next, there are also 29 individuals, representing 10.7%, who possess a pre-university/foundation/diploma. Moreover, master's degrees make up 13 individuals, constituting 4.7%.

The field of study of the participants highlights a diverse range of their studies. In this research, business and management students make up the largest segment, comprising 140 individuals, which is 51.2%. Moreover, engineering and

technology account for 42 individuals, which is 15.4%, while arts and humanities make up 39 individuals, which is 14.3% in this research. Next, the smaller proportions are social science, science, and health and medicine, which have 28 individuals, which is 10.3%; 13 individuals, which is 4.8%; and 11 individuals, which is 4%, respectively.

Regarding the results, the majority of respondents, which is 201 individuals, accounting for 73.6%, made their own decisions when choosing a university or higher education institution. Additionally, parents or guardians influenced 62 individuals, accounting for 22.7%, while the proportion of respondents influenced by both themselves and their parents or guardians was small, totalling 2 individuals, representing 0.7%. Friends influenced 4 individuals, accounting for 1.5%, while the influence of intermediaries, sisters, and the government (UPU system) was negligible, each accounting for 0.4%.

Regarding guidance during university selection, 132 individuals relied on themselves, accounting for 48.3%. Followed by 78 individuals (28.6%) who received guidance from parents or guardians. Teachers and counsellors guided 27 individuals, or 9.9%, while 34 individuals, or 12.4%, sought guidance from friends or peers. A very small proportion, only 2 individuals, received guidance from their sisters, representing 0.8%.

When assessing parental influence, 138 individuals (50.5%) reported receiving some influence, while 74 individuals (27.1%) experienced significant influence. Meanwhile, 44 individuals reported no influence by the parents or guardians, and 17 individuals were completely influenced by their parents or guardians, representing 16.1% and 6.2% of the total number of respondents, respectively.

In terms of internet usage, 261 individuals reported daily use, accounting for 95.6% of the total. Besides that, 10 individuals used it several times a week, constituting 3.7%. There is 1 individual who used the internet once a week, and another 1 individual used it less than once a week, with each accounting for 0.4%.

Similarly, in terms of social media usage, 254 individuals use it daily, which is about 93%. Followed by 12 individuals using it several times a week, making up 4.4% in this section. A smaller number, 4 individuals (1.5%), accessed social media once a week, while 3 individuals (1.1%) used it less than once a week.

Regarding how respondents first heard about their university or higher education institutions, 89 individuals (32.6%) heard about it through word of mouth, followed by 80 individuals (29.3%) through social media. Additionally, 48 individuals (17.6%) heard about the university through its official website, while events and exhibitions informed 45 individuals (16.5%). Online advertising and print media are the lowest, with only 9 individuals (3.3%) and 2 individuals (0.7%), respectively.

Regarding exposure to marketing messages from the university, 79 individuals encountered them several times a week and represent 28.9%, while 60 individuals saw them daily, which is about 22%. Additionally, 46 individuals came across marketing messages once a week, constituting 16.8%. Another 58 individuals saw them less than once a week, accounting for 21.2%. Only 30 individuals rarely or never encountered such messages, representing 11%.

Lastly, engagement with university marketing content, with 96 individuals engaging sometimes, constituting 35.2% of the total. Other than that, 88 individuals engage rarely, representing 32.2%. Additionally, 34 individuals, or 12.5%, engaged often, while 33 individuals, or 12.1%, engaged always. Meanwhile, 22 individuals never engaged with university marketing content, accounting for 8.1%.

4.3.2 Multi-Response Analysis

Tables 4.4 and 4.5 showed that this study employed the multiple-response analysis method to analyse the multiple-choice question.

Table 4.4 Multi Response Analysis

What was the primary reason you chose to study at this university/ higher education institution (HEI)? (multiple choices)

Option	Frequency	Percentage of responses	Percentage of cases
Academic Reputation	147	23.11	53.8
Specific Program or courses offered	145	22.80	53.1
Location	128	20.13	46.9
Campus Facilities	53	8.33	19.4
Scholarships/ Financial aid	94	14.78	34.4
Recommendation from others	69	10.85	25.3
Total:	636	100.00	233.0

Source: Developed for the study

Table 4.4 shows the main reasons for choosing a university to study at. Of the options provided, academic reputation and specific programs or courses offered were the most popular choices, with 147 and 145 respondents making their choices, representing 23.11% and 22.8% of the total responses, respectively. Location also received significant use with 128 respondents, or 20.13%. This was followed by scholarships or financial aid and recommendations from others with 94 (14.78%) and 69 (10.85%), respectively. Campus facilities were chosen as the primary reason by a smaller number of respondents, with 53 respondents representing 8.33%.

Table 4.5 Multi Response Analysis

Which communication channels do you prefer for receiving information from your university/ higher education institutions (HEI)? (multiple choices)

Option	Frequency	Percentage of responses	Percentage of cases
Email	169	25.68	61.90
SMS	33	5.02	12.09

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Option	Frequency	Percentage of responses	Percentage of cases
Social media	167	25.38	61.17
University/ higher education institution (HEI) website	146	22.19	53.48
Online advertisements	51	7.75	18.68
Print media	12	1.82	4.40
Events and fairs (e.g. education fair/ open day)	80	12.16	29.30
Total:	658	100.00	241.03

Source: Developed for the study

Moreover, Table 4.5 provides insight into the students preferred communication channel to receive information from a university or higher education institution. Email is the most preferred channel, with 169 respondents, and accounts for 25.68%, indicating its pervasive importance in integrated marketing communication. Next, social media follows closely behind with 167 respondents, representing 25.38% of responses, showing the importance of social media. Moreover, university or higher education institution websites emerged as a notable use, showing 146 respondents, 22.19% of responses. Apart from that, there are 80 respondents who prefer to attend events and fairs to receive the information, constituting 12.16% of responses. There are also 51 respondents who are likely to receive information from online advertisements, representing 7.75% of the responses. Finally, respondents are less frequently using SMS and print media to receive information, with only 33 respondents and 12 respondents, with each representing 5.02% and 1.82% of responses.

4.3.3 Ordinal Data Analysis

Moreover, this study utilized ordinal data analysis to examine the Likert scale questions. Table 4.6, Table 4.7, and Table 4.8 present the results.

Table 4.6 Ordinal Data Analysis

How effective do you find the following marketing channels in providing information about your university/ higher education institution (HEI)?
(Rate on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = Not effective and 5 = Very effective)

Name	Mean	Median	Standard deviation	Frequency	Excess kurtosis	Skewness
Email	3.487	4	1.252	1=23 2=41 3=59 4=80 5=70	-0.825	-0.455
SMS	2.575	2	1.293	1=70 2=74 3=58 4=44 5=27	-0.959	0.39
Social Media	4.117	4	0.969	1=7 2=9 3=45 4=96 5=116	1.127	-1.136
University Website	3.905	4	1.138	1=11 2=24 3=53 4=77 5=108	-0.163	-0.832

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Online Advertisement	3.505	4	1.116	1=13 2=39 3=76 4=87 5=58	-0.602	-0.379
Print Media	2.861	3	1.175	1=44 2=56 3=89 4=62 5=22	-0.832	-0.027
Events and Fair	3.883	4	1.042	1=7 2=24 3=52 4=101 5=89	-0.007	-0.78
Direct Email	3.447	4	1.295	1=28 2=39 3=61 4=73 5=72	-0.904	-0.427
Webinar/ Seminar	3.19	3	1.161	1=24 2=55 3=75 4=83 5=36	-0.807	-0.208
Telemarketing	2.7	3	1.203	1=57 2=60 3=84 4=52 5=20	-0.9	0.126

Source: Developed for the study

Based on Table 4.6, the result indicates the effectiveness of marketing channels in providing information about universities or higher education institutions. Social media received the highest effectiveness rating, with a mean of 4.117, a median of 4, and a standard deviation of 0.969, indicating that most respondents found it highly effective, with relatively low variability. It also has an excess kurtosis of 1.127 and a negative skewness of -1.136, suggesting that responses were concentrated towards higher ratings. In terms of frequency, the majority of respondents rated social media highly, with 45 respondents rating social media as 3, 96 rating it as 4, and 116 rating it as 5, while only 7 rated it as 1 and 9 rated it as 2.

Similarly, the university or higher education institution website was rated highly, with a mean of 3.905, median of 4, and standard deviation of 1.138. It has an excess kurtosis of -0.163 and skewness of -0.832, indicating a slightly left-skewed distribution, meaning more respondents rated it as effective. The frequency of responses shows that 53 respondents rated websites as 3, 77 rated them as 4, and 108 rated them as 5, while only 11 rated them as 1 and 24 rated them as 2.

Additionally, events and fairs were also rated as effective, with a mean of 3.883, median of 4, and standard deviation of 1.042. Its excess kurtosis of -0.007 and skewness of -0.78 suggest that most ratings were clustered around higher values. In terms of frequency, 52 respondents rated events and fairs as 3, 101 rated them as 4, and 89 rated them as 5, while only 7 rated them as 1 and 24 rated them as 2.

Online advertisements had a mean of 3.505, a median of 4, and a standard deviation of 1.116, with excess kurtosis of -0.602 and skewness of -0.379, indicating a moderate spread of responses. The frequency of responses shows that 76 respondents rated online advertisements as 3, 87 rated them as 4, and 58 rated them as 5, while 13 rated them as 1 and 39 rated them as 2.

Moreover, email also showed moderate effectiveness, with a mean of 3.487, median of 4, and standard deviation of 1.252, while its excess kurtosis of -0.825 and

skewness of -0.455 suggest that responses were slightly skewed towards higher ratings. The frequency of responses indicates that 59 respondents rated email as 3, 81 rated it as 4, and 70 rated it as 5, with 23 rating it as 1 and 41 rating it as 2.

Direct email was rated similarly, with a mean of 3.447, median of 4, and standard deviation of 1.295. Its excess kurtosis of -0.904 and skewness of -0.427 indicate a slightly left-skewed distribution, meaning respondents leaned towards higher ratings. The frequency distribution shows that 61 respondents rated direct email as 3, 73 rated it as 4, and 72 rated it as 5, with 28 rating it as 1 and 39 rating it as 2.

Other than that, webinars/seminars received a mean of 3.19, a median of 3, and a standard deviation of 1.161, with an excess kurtosis of -0.807 and skewness of -0.208, suggesting a relatively even spread of responses. The frequency distribution shows that 75 respondents rated webinars or seminars as 3, 83 rated them as 4, and 36 rated them as 5, with 24 rating them as 1 and 55 rating them as 2.

Print media such as newspapers and magazines were rated slightly lower, with a mean of 2.861, median of 3, and standard deviation of 1.175. Its excess kurtosis of -0.832 and skewness of -0.027 indicate a relatively flat distribution of responses. The frequency of responses indicates that 89 respondents rated print media as 3, 62 rated it as 4, and 22 rated it as 5, with 44 rating it as 1 and 56 rating it as 2.

Telemarketing had a mean of 2.7, a median of 3, and a standard deviation of 1.203, with an excess kurtosis of -0.9 and skewness of 0.126, suggesting a slight right skew, meaning more respondents rated it as less effective. The frequency of responses shows that 84 respondents rated telemarketing as 3, 52 rated it as 4, and 20 rated it as 5, with 57 rating it as 1 and 60 rating it as 2.

SMS received the lowest effectiveness rating, with a mean of 2.575, median of 2, and standard deviation of 1.293, along with an excess kurtosis of -0.959 and skewness of 0.39, indicating that more respondents rated it at the lower end of the

scale. The frequency distribution shows that 70 respondents rated SMS as 1 and 74 rated it as 2, with 58 rating it as 3, 44 rating it as 4, and 27 rating it as 5.

Table 4.7 Ordinal Data Analysis

**To what extent did the following marketing channels influence your decision to enrol in your current university/ higher education institution (HEI)?
(Rate on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = Not influential and 5 = Very influential)**

Name	Mean	Median	Standard deviation	Frequency	Excess kurtosis	Skewness
Email	3.011	3	1.381	1=55 2=45 3=64 4=60 5=49	-1.219	-0.07
SMS	2.418	2	1.296	1=93 2=57 3=58 4=46 5=19	-1.025	0.426
Social Media	3.824	4	1.144	1=17 2=18 3=51 4=97 5=90	0.178	-0.919
University Website	3.795	4	1.159	1=16 2=21 3=58 4=86 5=92	-0.111	-0.801
Online Advertisement	3.425	4	1.137	1=21 2=32 3=78	-0.427	-0.483

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				4=94 5=48		
Print Media	2.696	3	1.225	1=61 2=56 3=81 4=55 5=20	-0.978	0.105
Events and Fair	3.722	4	1.181	1=21 2=20 3=53 4=99 5=80	-0.049	-0.841
Direct Email	3.099	3	1.315	1=45 2=43 3=71 4=68 5=46	-1.062	-0.174
Webinar/ Seminar	2.985	3	1.272	1=46 2=49 3=77 4=65 5=36	-1.008	-0.08
Telemarketing	2.637	3	1.268	1=67 2=64 3=65 4=55 5=22	-1.06	0.22

Source: Developed for the study

Table 4.7 shows the research results, indicating the extent to which marketing channels can influence a student's decision to choose a university or higher education institution (HEI). Social media is the most influential in enrolling in

university or HEI, with a mean of 3.824, a median of 4, and a standard deviation of 1.144, indicating that many respondents found it influential. Its excess kurtosis of 0.178 and negative skewness of -0.919 suggest that responses were concentrated toward higher influence. The frequency of responses shows that 17 respondents rated it as 1, 18 rated it as 2, 51 rated it as 3, 97 rated it as 4, and 90 rated it as 5.

Similarly, the university or HEI website was also highly influential, with a mean of 3.795, a median of 4, and a standard deviation of 1.159. It has an excess kurtosis of -0.111 and skewness of -0.801, showing a left-skewed distribution. The frequency distribution reveals that 16 respondents rated the website as 1, 21 rated it as 2, 58 rated it as 3, 86 rated it as 4, and 92 rated it as 5.

Events and fairs also played a significant role, with a mean of 3.722, median of 4, and standard deviation of 1.181, along with an excess kurtosis of -0.049 and skewness of -0.841, suggesting responses leaned toward higher values. The frequency of responses shows that 21 respondents rated events and fairs as 1, 20 rated it as 2, 53 rated it as 3, 99 respondents rated it as 4, and 80 rated it as 5.

Online advertisements had a mean of 3.425, a median of 4, and a standard deviation of 1.137, with excess kurtosis of -0.427 and skewness of -0.483, indicating a moderate spread of responses. The frequency analysis shows that 21 respondents rated online advertisements as 1, 32 rated them as 2, 78 rated them as 3, 94 respondents rated them as 4, and 48 rated them as 5.

Moreover, email had a mean of 3.011, a median of 3, and a standard deviation of 1.381, suggesting that its influence was relatively neutral. Its excess kurtosis of -1.219 and skewness of -0.07 indicate a relatively normal distribution. In terms of frequency, 55 respondents rated email as 1, 45 rated it as 2, 64 rated it as 3, 60 rated it as 4, and 49 rated it as 5.

Direct email showed moderate influence, with a mean of 3.099, a median of 3, and a standard deviation of 1.315. Its excess kurtosis of -1.062 and skewness of -0.174

suggest a relatively balanced distribution. The frequency distribution shows that 45 respondents rated direct email as 1, 43 rated it as 2, 71 rated it as 3, 68 rated it as 4, and 46 rated it as a 5.

Webinars or seminars had a mean of 2.978, a median of 3, and a standard deviation of 1.276, with an excess kurtosis of -1.016 and skewness of -0.075, indicating a normal distribution of responses. The frequency of responses shows that 46 respondents rated webinars or seminars as 1, 49 rated them as 2, 77 respondents rated webinars as 3, 65 rated them as 4, and 36 rated them as 5.

Print media was less influential, with a mean of 2.69, a median of 3, and a standard deviation of 1.227, along with an excess kurtosis of -0.983 and skewness of 0.110, suggesting a relatively flat distribution. The frequency distribution shows that 61 respondents rated print media as 1, 56 rated it as 2, 81 rated it as 3, 55 rated it as 4, and 20 rated it as 5.

Besides that, telemarketing had a mean of 2.631, a median of 3, and a standard deviation of 1.27, with an excess kurtosis of -1.062 and skewness of 0.225, indicating a slight right skew, meaning more respondents rated it as less influential. The frequency analysis shows that 67 individuals rated telemarketing as 1, 64 rated it as 2, 65 rated it as 3, 55 rated it as 4, and 22 rated it as 5.

SMS received the lowest influence rating, with a mean of 2.412, median of 2, and standard deviation of 1.296, along with an excess kurtosis of -1.023 and skewness of 0.432. The frequency of responses indicates that 93 respondents rated SMS as 1, 57 rated it as 2, 58 rated it as 3, 46 rated it as 4, and 19 rated it as 5.

Table 4.8 Likert Scale Analysis

How satisfied are you with the marketing communication from your university/ higher education institution (HEI)? (Rate on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = Very dissatisfied and 5 = Very satisfied)

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Name	Mean	Median	Standard deviation	Frequency	Excess kurtosis	Skewness
Email	3.462	4	1.21	1=21 2=37 3=76 4=73 5=66	-0.739	-0.383
SMS	2.582	3	1.287	1=80 2=45 3=79 4=47 5=22	-1.063	0.215
Social Media	3.875	4	0.979	1=4 2=20 3=66 4=99 5=84	-0.217	-0.595
University Website	3.872	4	1.042	1=8 2=20 3=60 4=96 5=89	0.03	-0.756
Online Advertisement	3.414	3	1.11	1=18 2=33 3=88 4=86 5=48	-0.427	-0.388
Print Media	2.927	3	1.205	1=45 2=48 3=88 4=66 5=26	-0.87	-0.098

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Events and Fair	3.747	4	1.054	1=11 2=18 3=75 4=94 5=75	-0.007	-0.648
Direct Email	3.293	3	1.19	1=28 2=37 3=79 4=85 5=44	-0.665	-0.373
Webinar/ Seminar	3.128	3	1.19	1=32 2=44 3=92 4=67 5=38	-0.738	-0.171
Telemarketing	2.74	3	1.238	1=61 2=49 3=85 4=56 5=22	-0.987	0.051

Source: Developed for the study

Table 4.8 shows the research results, indicating the level of satisfaction with university marketing communication varies across different marketing channels. Same with Table 4.6 and Table 4.7, social media has the highest satisfaction, with a mean of 3.875, a median of 4, and a standard deviation of 0.979, indicating a strong positive response. Its excess kurtosis of -0.217 and skewness of -0.595 suggest that responses were mostly concentrated on higher satisfaction levels. The frequency analysis shows that 66 respondents rated social media as 3, 99 rated it as 4, and 84 rated it as 5, while 4 rated it as 1 and 20 rated it as 2.

The university website was also highly satisfactory, with a mean of 3.872, median of 4, and standard deviation of 1.042, along with an excess kurtosis of 0.03 and skewness of -0.756, indicating a left-skewed distribution. The frequency distribution shows that 60 respondents rated the university website as 3, 96 rated it as 4, and 89 rated it as 5, while 8 rated it as 1 and 20 rated it as 2.

Events and fairs had a mean of 3.747, a median of 4, and a standard deviation of 1.054, while their excess kurtosis of -0.007 and skewness of -0.648 suggest responses were fairly distributed but leaned toward satisfaction. The frequency analysis reveals that 75 respondents rated the events and fairs as 3, 94 rated them as 4, and 75 rated them as 5, while 11 rated them as 1 and 18 rated them as 2.

Email had a mean of 3.462, a median of 4, and a standard deviation of 1.21, with an excess kurtosis of -0.739 and skewness of -0.383, indicating a moderate spread of responses toward higher satisfaction. The frequency distribution shows that 76 respondents rated email as 3, 73 rated it as 4, and 66 rated it as 5, while 21 rated it as 1 and 37 rated it as 2.

Online advertisements had a mean of 3.414, a median of 3, and a standard deviation of 1.11, with excess kurtosis of -0.427 and skewness of -0.388, suggesting a more neutral satisfaction. The frequency of responses shows that 88 respondents rated online advertisements as 3, 86 rated them as 4, and 48 rated them as 5, while 18 rated them as 1 and 33 rated them as 2.

Direct email showed moderate satisfaction levels, with a mean of 3.293, median of 3, and standard deviation of 1.19, while its excess kurtosis of -0.665 and skewness of -0.373 suggest a balanced distribution. The frequency analysis shows that 79 respondents rated direct email as 3, 85 rated it as 4, and 44 rated it as 5, while 28 rated it as 1 and 37 rated it as 2.

Webinars or seminars had a mean of 3.128, a median of 3, and a standard deviation of 1.19, with an excess kurtosis of -0.738 and skewness of -0.171, showing a

relatively even spread of responses. The frequency distribution reveals that 92 respondents rated webinars or seminars as 3, 67 rated them as 4, 38 rated them as 5, while 32 rated them as 1 and 44 rated them as 2.

Print media had a mean of 2.927, a median of 3, and a standard deviation of 1.205, along with an excess kurtosis of -0.87 and skewness of -0.098, indicating a broad distribution of opinions. The frequency analysis shows that 88 respondents rated print media as 3, 66 rated it as 4, and 26 rated it as 5, while 45 rated it as 1 and 48 rated it as 2.

Moreover, telemarketing had a mean of 2.74, a median of 3, and a standard deviation of 1.238, with an excess kurtosis of -0.987 and skewness of 0.051, indicating a slight right skew, meaning some respondents rated it as dissatisfactory. The frequency distribution reveals that 85 respondents rated telemarketing as 3, 56 rated it as 4, and 22 rated it as 5, while 61 rated it as 1 and 49 rated it as 2.

SMS has the lowest satisfaction rating, with a mean of 2.582, median of 3, and standard deviation of 1.287, along with an excess kurtosis of -1.063 and skewness of 0.215, indicating that more respondents rated it on the lower end of the scale. The frequency analysis shows that 80 respondents rated SMS as 1, 45 rated it as 2, 79 rated it as 3, 47 rated it as 4, and 22 rated it as 5.

4.4 Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modelling

The data in this study is analysed and interpreted using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM). There are two steps in this procedure. This study first evaluates the measurement model, followed by the structural model.

4.5 Measurement Model Assessment

4.5.1 Convergent Validity

Convergent and discriminant validity has been investigated using measurement models. Table 4.9 illustrates the findings of the measurement assessment of models.

Table 4.9 Measurement Model Assessment

Constructs		Factor Loadings	Alpha	rho_a	rho_c	AVE
Ads	Ads 1	0.771	0.857	0.861	0.893	0.583
	Ads 2	0.804				
	Ads 3	0.736				
	Ads 4	0.790				
	Ads 5	0.712				
	Ads 6	0.764				
CoU	CoU 1	0.844	0.885	0.889	0.920	0.743
	CoU 2	0.862				
	CoU 3	0.881				
	CoU 4	0.861				
DM	DM 1	0.655	0.734	0.738	0.834	0.559
	DM 2	0.758				
	DM 3	0.768				
	DM 4	0.800				
HEI BE	HEI BE 1	0.619	0.937	0.944	0.945	0.505
	HEI BE 2	0.474				
	HEI BE 3	0.558				
	HEI BE 4	0.649				
	HEI BE 5	0.757				
	HEI BE 6	0.802				

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	HEI BE 7	0.689				
	HEI BE 8	0.766				
	HEI BE 9	0.787				
	HEI BE 10	0.685				
	HEI BE 11	0.639				
	HEI BE 12	0.787				
	HEI BE 13	0.752				
	HEI BE 14	0.713				
	HEI BE 15	0.786				
	HEI BE 16	0.778				
	HEI BE 17	0.740				
PR	PR 1	0.792	0.816	0.826	0.878	0.643
	PR 2	0.787				
	PR 3	0.788				
	PR 4	0.840				
PS	PS 1	0.797	0.922	0.926	0.939	0.721
	PS 2	0.845				
	PS 3	0.887				
	PS 4	0.830				
	PS 5	0.853				
	PS 6	0.881				
SP	SP 1	0.799	0.816	0.826	0.878	0.644
	SP 2	0.850				
	SP 3	0.817				
	SP 4	0.741				
eWoM	eWoM 1	0.897	0.909	0.909	0.936	0.786
	eWoM 2	0.897				
	eWoM 3	0.864				
	eWoM 4	0.887				

Source: Developed for the study

Based on Table 4.9, the results indicate that most factor loadings are greater than 0.708. However, the factor loading for DM 1 is 0.655, which is below the threshold of 0.708. Additionally, the factor loadings for HEI BE 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 10, and 11 are also below 0.708. Hair and Alamer (2022) pointed out that lower factor loadings can be acceptable when other convergent validity requirements are met. Furthermore, the thresholds for Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (e.g., rhoA and rhoC) have been met. The AVE for all variables is greater than 0.5; therefore, even if a single item has a low factor loading, convergent validity still holds. Thus, convergent validity has been developed.

4.5.2 Discriminant Validity

Table 4.6 showed the result of HTMT analysis was conducted to verify the discriminant validity of the model.

Table 4.10 HTMT Criterion

Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Ads								
CoU	0.447							
DM	0.814	0.635						
HEI BE	0.685	0.703	0.738					
PR	0.637	0.256	0.540	0.476				
PS	0.708	0.483	0.786	0.684	0.554			
SP	0.740	0.248	0.703	0.557	0.736	0.702		
eWoM	0.497	0.855	0.629	0.776	0.284	0.512	0.319	

Source: Developed for the study

Table 4.10 showed most variables have reached the threshold, which is HTMT < 0.85. However, eWoM and CoU did not reach the threshold of 0.85, but Henseler et al. (2015) pointed out that between 0.85 and 0.90, discriminant validity is

acceptable. Therefore, it can be determined that discriminant validity has been formed.

4.6 Structural Model Assessment

After evaluating the measurement model, the structural model is assessed. Evaluating the structural model requires checking the VIF to detect multicollinearity between variables. Table 4.11 presented the result, the VIF values of all variables meet the threshold requirement (<3.3), so it can be concluded that there is no multicollinearity, allowing the structural model evaluation to proceed.

Table 4.11 Collinearity Statistics

Constructs	VIF
Ads -> HEI BE	2.316
DM -> HEI BE	2.096
HEI BE -> CoU	1.000
HEI BE -> eWoM	1.000
PR -> HEI BE	1.691
PS -> HEI BE	2.200
SP -> HEI BE	2.207

Source: Developed for the study

4.6.1 PLS Estimation

In this study, Table 4.12 shows the results of 10,000 bootstrap samples using a two-tailed setting.

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Table 4.12 Path Coefficient and Hypothesis Testing

Hypotheses	β	T value	P values	Confidence interval bias corrected	Decision
H1: HEI BE -> eWoM	0.736	22.428	0.000	(0.666, 0.796)	Supported
H2: HEI BE -> CoU	0.659	16.917	0.000	(0.580, 0.731)	Supported
H3: PR -> HEI BE	0.030	0.437	0.662	(-0.103, 0.156)	Not supported
H4: Ads -> HEI BE	0.250	3.013	0.003	(0.087, 0.415)	Supported
H5: SP -> HEI BE	-0.033	0.414	0.679	(-0.191, 0.121)	Not supported
H6: DM -> HEI BE	0.258	3.941	0.000	(0.128, 0.386)	Supported
H7: PS -> HEI BE	0.318	3.610	0.000	(0.152, 0.492)	Supported

Source: Developed for the study

Table 4.12 indicates that the major hypotheses are significant relationships, except for the relationship between PR and HEI BE and the relationship between SP and HEI BE; these relationships are not significant in the context of higher education institutions.

Firstly, H1 tests the significant relationship between HEI BE and eWoM intention. The result shows a β value is 0.736, the t-value is 22.428, and the p-value is less than 0.000, indicating a statistically significant relationship. The 95% confidence interval bias corrected is between 0.666 and 0.796. Therefore, H1 is supported, indicating that there is a significant relationship between higher education institution behaviour and electronic word-of-mouth intention.

Second, H2 examines the relationship between higher education institution behaviour and user satisfaction. The results show that the β value is 0.659, the t-value is 16.917, and the p-value is 0.000, indicating a statistically significant relationship. The 95% confidence interval bias-corrected is between 0.580 and 0.731, further supporting this hypothesis. Therefore, H2 is supported, concluding that there is a significant relationship between HEI BE and CoU.

Third, H3 examines the relationship between PR and HEI BE. The results show that β is 0.030, t is 0.437, and p is 0.662, indicating that the relationship is not

statistically significant. The 95% confidence interval bias-corrected is between -0.103 and 0.156. Therefore, H3 is rejected, showing that there is no connection between PR and HEI BE.

Fourthly, H4 explored the relationship between Ads and HEI BE. The results showed that $\beta = 0.250$, $t = 3.013$, and $p = 0.003$, indicating a statistically significant relationship. The 95% confidence interval bias-corrected is between 0.087 and 0.415. Therefore, H4 is supported, showing that there is a strong connection between advertising and higher education institution behaviour.

Fifth, H5 examined the relationship between SP and HEI BE. The results showed that the β value was -0.033, the t value was 0.414, and the p value was 0.679, indicating that there was no statistically significant relationship between the two. The 95% confidence interval bias corrected is between -0.191 and 0.121. Therefore, H5 is not supported, indicating that there is no relationship between SP and HEI BE.

Sixth, H6 investigated the relationship between DM and HEI BE. The results showed that the β value was 0.258, the t value was 3.941, and the p value was 0.000, indicating a significant correlation between the two variables. The 95% confidence interval bias corrected is between 0.128 and 0.386. Thus, H6 is supported, concluding that there is a significant correlation between DM and HEI BE.

Finally, H7 analysed the relationship between PS and HEI BE. The results showed that the β value was 0.318, the t value was 3.610, and the p value was 0.000, indicating a statistically significant relationship. The 95% confidence interval bias corrected is between 0.152 and 0.492. Thus, H7 is supported, indicating that there is a strong connection between PS and HEI BE.

4.7 Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

R^2 used to assess the explanatory power of a structural model. According to Hair et al. (2019), better R^2 denotes a better level of explanatory power. High power is typically indicated by a R^2 value of 0.75, moderate power by 0.50, and weak power by 0.25. Table 4.13 illustrates the findings of the R^2 analysis for this study.

Table 4.13 Coefficient of Determination

Construct	R^2	Explanatory Power
eWoM	0.539	Moderate
CoU	0.432	Moderate
HEI BE	0.510	Moderate

Source: Developed for the study

Table 4.13 shows the value of eWoM intention is 0.539, indicating that HEI BE explains 53.9% of the variance in eWoM intentions, suggesting moderate explanatory power. Subsequently, the value of CoU is 0.432, meaning that 43.2% of its variance can be explained by HEI BE, also indicating moderate explanatory power. Finally, the value of HEI BE is 0.510, meaning that exogenous variables (i.e., PR, Ads, SP, DM, PS) explain 51% of the variance in HEI BE, indicating moderate explanatory power.

4.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter summarizes the data analysis, including demographic characteristics of the respondents, multiple-choice analysis, and ordered data analysis. Furthermore, SMARTPLS was used to perform PLS-SEM inferential analysis. The research findings reveal that all proposed hypotheses are supported, except for H3 and H5, which were not supported. Further analysis reveals that IMC significantly

influences HEI BE, except for PR and SP, thereby HEI BE affecting eWoM intentions and CoU. Based on a comprehensive understanding of these research findings, subsequent chapters will conduct an in-depth discussion of these important discoveries.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

5.0 Introduction

Chapter 5 discusses the main findings of this research, followed by an exploration of theoretical and managerial implications in this study. Lastly, it outlines the study's limitations and offers recommendations for future research.

5.1 Discussion of Major Finding

Using the S-O-R model, this study aims to explore the relationship between IMC and HEI BE, as well as how this relationship affects eWoM intention and choice of university in HEIs. Table 5.1 summarizes the research results.

Table 5.1 Summary of Hypotheses Testing

Hypotheses	Decision
H1: HEI BE -> eWoM	Supported
H2: HEI BE -> CoU	Supported
H3: PR -> HEI BE	Not supported
H4: Ads -> HEI BE	Supported
H5: SP -> HEI BE	Not supported
H6: DM -> HEI BE	Supported
H7: PS -> HEI BE	Supported

Source: Developed for the study

5.1.1 HEI BE and eWoM Intention

Table 5.1 shows that hypothesis 1 is supported, which is consistent with prior studies conducted by Seo and Park (2018). Seo and Park (2018) justified that building positive brand equity can foster customers to spread eWoM voluntarily to others; this demonstrates that brand equity develops committed customers by affecting customer eWoM intention. As supported by Rambocas (2018), this indicates that positive HEI BE increases the eWoM intention. Rambocas (2018) highlights that customers are more likely to have positive behavior intent in regard to eWoM intention when brand equity is high, implying that customers with high equity toward specific brands are motivated to share information. This supports our finding that higher HEI BE can develop committed students who are more willing to share their positive experiences with others.

Perera et al.'s (2020) research states that when a university has a positive HEI BE, student interaction in eWoM activities fosters stronger and more frequent brand-related behaviours. Another possible reason is that students are satisfied with the academic performance and campus facilities of the university, so they will recommend it to family members or friends who are choosing a university to attend (Kairat et al., 2024).

5.1.2 HEI BE and CoU

According to Table 5.1, hypothesis 2 is supported, which is consistent with the results of earlier research such as Jalilvand et al. (2011). Jalilvand et al. (2011) justified that brand equity has a significant influence on purchase intention. This suggested that universities should concentrate their efforts primarily on brand equity, and it will increase students' intention to choose the university (Jalilvand et al., 2011). As Moreira et al. (2017) confirm, customers with a strong brand connection usually develop an emotional attachment to the brand and want to

experience it again, as they feel that the quality of the service is unique and they have received an overall unforgettable experience. Therefore, these results show that the higher the brand equity, the stronger the consumer motivation, preference, and choice of university for the relevant brand of the higher education institution.

One possible reason is that when choosing a university, students tend to prefer schools with higher HEI BE. According to Bashir et al. (2019), brand preference will create a potential brand ranking in the minds of consumers, so consumers tend to prefer to choose the brands at the top. This results in the fact that students are more likely to choose a university with strong brand equity since they feel that the institution can offer an ideal learning environment.

5.1.3 PR and HEI BE

According to Table 5.1, hypothesis 3 is not supported, showing that PR has no critical impact on HEI BE. Vercic et al. (2015) argue that PR discourse in the digital age remains elitist—created by the elite and for the elite—thus alienating a wider and more diverse audience, including digital immigrants and the digitally excluded. Edwards (2006) further criticizes PR as a mechanism that undermines trust and authenticity—key drivers of brand equity—by disguising organizations' true interests by cloaking arbitrary claims as legitimate ones. Likewise, L'Etang (2005) emphasizes that critical PR should go beyond utilitarian value, be reflexive and academic, and distance itself from applied brand outcomes. These studies therefore suggest that PR as traditionally defined and practiced may not resonate meaningfully with today's audiences and therefore does not contribute significantly to building brand equity.

Another possible explanation for this finding is that students place greater emphasis on a university's academic reputation and peer recommendations than on traditional PR efforts. Given the increasing demand for privacy and the preference for authentic, peer-generated content, students are less responsive to institution-led PR

campaigns. As Vercic et al. (2015) noted, evolving privacy norms have made it more challenging for PR activities to effectively engage younger audiences. Consequently, the impact of PR on HEI brand equity appears to be limited in the higher education context.

5.1.4 Ads and HEI BE

According to Table 5.1, hypothesis 4 is supported, which is consistent with previous research conducted by Buil et al. (2013). Buil et al. (2013) said that the higher a consumer perceived a brand's advertising spend, the more customer awareness of the brand. Nikabadi et al. (2015) justified that advertising plays a significant role in creating and reinforcing brand equity. These results showed that HEI can enhance customers' awareness of the brand and the brand association as well by using different creative advertising strategies (Nikabadi et al., 2015).

Similarly, Buil et al. (2013) found that businesses can improve consumers' favourable opinions of their brands by implementing innovative, creative, and distinctive advertising approaches. Another possible justification is that advertising can project a consistent message to the current and potential customers and persuade them of the strengths and identity of the university, which further leads to formulating a favourable reputation, which is built higher by HEI BE (Chan et al., 2025). Subsequently, as discussed above, HEI BE is significantly affected by advertising.

5.1.5 SP and HEI BE

According to the Table 5.1, hypothesis 5 is not supported, which is compatible with Yoo et al. (2000); there is a non-significant impact on the brand equity. Yoo et al. (2000) justified that frequent use of sales promotion leads consumers to think

primarily about deals and not about the utility provided by the brand (i.e., brand equity). Likewise, Buil et al. (2013) highlight that the frequent use of sales promotion dilutes some brand equity dimensions. Therefore, this result indicates that the use of sales promotional activities reduces brand equity in the context of HEIs.

Another possible reason is that students will pay little attention to promotions and will believe that promotions occur because the university is experiencing difficulties and there are fewer students, thus creating an unstable HEI BE. In addition to this, this perception is in line with the study of Yoo et al. (2000) that universities do not recommend the frequent use of promotions; promotions may cause consumer confusion and instability, which can negatively affect the creation of brand equity and create an image of inconsistent quality in the minds of consumers.

5.1.6 DM and HEI BE

According to the Table 5.1, hypothesis 6 is supported, showing that DM has a strong impact on HEI BE. This finding aligns with the prior research conducted by Theodora (2021). Theodora (2021) justified that direct marketing can affect the brand equity through the formation of a positive image in the minds of consumers and also the perception of good quality. The research conducted by Debling (2000) proposed that most still believe that branding has a role to play in DM to make the brand more recognizable, clearer, and consistent to lead to higher BE. The results show that direct marketing can enhance brand influence and thus brand equity through deeper analysis and dissemination of customer information (Debling, 2000).

As Nurkariani and Febriani's (2024) research confirms, direct marketing can build higher brand equity. A good direct marketing approach can promote good customer relationships and solicit direct feedback, which can significantly enhance a company's image (Nurkariani & Febriani, 2024). When students receive

information about universities from direct marketing communications, this can significantly affect their perception of the quality of the school. A plausible explanation in higher education institutions is that direct marketing strategies (such as direct emails, brochures, and social media) are implemented effectively to influence prospective students' perceptions of universities (Dameh & Ghadeer, 2019). These initiatives can improve brand awareness, clarity, and consistency, ultimately contributing to a positive HEI BE for universities.

5.1.7 PS and HEI BE

According to Table 5.1, Hypothesis 7 is supported, this indicates that PS has a significant impact on the HEI BE. This finding aligns with previous studies, such as those by Sadek et al. (2016) and Lubis et al. (2023). Sadek et al. (2016) noted that personal selling can directly influence high brand equity. Lubis et al. (2023) pointed out that personal selling capabilities can enhance brand equity, thereby increasing the likelihood of attracting new students. The research findings indicate that students are more willing to obtain information about universities from university staff, thereby creating greater brand awareness for specific universities.

As Theodora (2021) suggested, personal selling can form through introducing brand knowledge and then the positive quality perception from students. Similarly, Sadek et al. (2016) found that brand awareness can be enhanced by reflecting good quality and constructive characteristics, establishing trust with students through face-to-face communication, and creating an information-rich communication channel through interaction. These face-to-face engagements provide clarity, build trust, and enhance brand awareness, ultimately fostering positive HEI BE. As discussed above, HEI BE is significantly influenced by personal selling efforts.

5.2 Implications of the Study

As HEIs in Malaysia expand their sustainability initiatives in response to evolving societal expectations, they must also adopt strategic approaches to remain competitive within the education sector. This study aims to explore the potential role of integrated marketing communication as a driver of higher education institution brand equity, which may stimulate eWoM intentions and choice of university. The results of this study significantly enrich the existing literature on the theoretical understanding and practical application of this issue.

5.2.1 Theoretical Implication

By exploring how IMC supports HEI BE and subsequently influences students' eWoM intentions and university choice, this study adds a new perspective to the existing research in this field. This study creates a theoretical framework that investigates the influence of IMC on student answers via HEI BE by utilizing the S-O-R model.

This study adds to previous research in a number of ways from an academic perspective. Although the impact of IMC on brand equity has been widely studied in other research areas, there has been little discussion on whether IMC can influence the HEI BE to motivate student behaviour in the context of higher education. This study broadens the conversation by examining the interactions between IMC, HEI BE, and student responses—specifically, eWoM intention and choice of university—in contrast to earlier research that mostly focused on the direct relationship between HEI BE and student response. The results imply that student engagement increases as HEI BE is stronger.

The relationship between IMC and HEI BE: previous research has primarily used planned brand identity theory or IMC identity theory. By using the S-O-R model,

this research breaks new ground by providing a new perspective on how IMC, as an external stimulus, reinforces the brand of HEI BE, thereby shaping students' eWoM intention and choice of university. Through this approach, this study extends current theoretical understanding and confirms that the S-O-R model provides a robust explanatory framework for the IMC—HEI BE—eWoM intentions and choice of university.

An in-depth study revealed that despite the extensive research on HEI BE, its role in Malaysian higher education institutions remains under-explored. This study adds new depth to the existing literature by explaining clearly articulating the relationship between HEI BE, eWoM intention and CoU in the context of Malaysian HEIs. The study found that HEI BE was significantly associated with CoU and eWoM intention.

5.2.2 Practical Implication

This research reveals that building strong HEI BE is crucial to enhancing students' eWoM intention. Positive HEI BE encourages students to actively share positive experiences with others, thereby enhancing the university's visibility and credibility through authentic peer-to-peer communication, which in turn boosts the institution's brand equity. Therefore, HEI decision-makers should prioritise strategies such as encouraging students to create positive shareable content on social media to strengthen brand equity, as it drives students' eWoM intention and significantly amplifies the institution's reputation.

Similarly, HEI BE has a significant impact on students' CoU. Students tend to choose universities with stronger brand equity and associate them with higher academic quality, better facilities, and an overall better campus experience. A positive brand image forms a psychological hierarchy in students' minds, placing universities at the top of their preferred list. Therefore, HEIs should consistently

communicate their key differentiators to enhance their brand equity, which improves public perception and directly influences student enrolment decisions.

Besides that, IMC tools are important for HEIs to develop the strategies to build their brand equity, as HEI BE plays a crucial role in influencing student behaviours such as eWoM intention and choice of university. The most notable finding of this research is that personal selling (PS) has a significant influence on boosting HEI BE. This suggests that increasing PS activities will directly enhance HEI BE by fostering deeper emotional connections and trust. To leverage this, higher education institutions should invest in practical strategies such as expanding admissions teams, training brand ambassadors to conduct targeted outreach, and organizing more personalized events such as one-on-one consultations, small group information sessions, and tailored campus tours. In addition, engaging current students or alumni in personal selling activities can generate authentic peer influence, making the brand message more relatable and trustworthy. By increasing the quantity and quality of personal selling touchpoints, higher education institutions can significantly enhance their brand equity, such as brand credibility, brand loyalty, and overall brand value.

Subsequently, this study also found that direct marketing (DM) is the second most important factor in building positive HEI BE in higher education institutions. This highlights the importance of direct communication in influencing student decision-making. For example, customized email marketing, telemarketing, and social media private message interactions can help HEIs establish a direct connection with potential students. Marketing teams at colleges and universities should actively use these channels to send personalized messages, invite students to events, and encourage satisfied students to share their positive experiences. Through precisely targeted promotions and positive word-of-mouth, colleges and universities can effectively raise brand awareness and increase student recognition and loyalty to the brand.

Advertising (Ads) is an invaluable asset for increasing brand credibility and authenticity. Research has found that Ads also play an important role in building positive perceptions of the university among students. Students pay attention to the Ads and their content that have been posted at a university, and it sticks in their minds before they make a decision. Therefore, HEIs should allocate time, creativity, and resources appropriately to create insightful advertisements that attract students and cultivate their awareness of brand value, thereby continuously conveying brand concepts. Publishing effective advertisements that are consistent with the brand image and target audience through online or offline channels can have a significant positive impact on the construction of HEI BE.

In addition, HEIs should not invest too much effort in public relations (PR) as a major factor in building a positive HEI BE (p-value = 0.675). Despite the role of PR activities in shaping the image of HEIs, raising awareness, and managing media relations, students are more inclined to rely on personal experiences, social media interactions, and word-of-mouth rather than the image that HEIs project through PR activities. Therefore, the direct impact of PR on brand equity is more limited. The results of this study suggest that PR does not have a significant impact on HEI BE. Therefore, HEIs should prioritize more impactful marketing strategies when developing their branding strategies to ensure the effectiveness of branding.

Similarly, HEIs should not over-rely on sales promotion (SP) as the main strategy to enhance brand credibility and brand equity (p-value = 0.728). While promotions (e.g., scholarships, discounts, limited-time offers, etc.) may increase enrolment appeal in the short term, they tend to focus more on transactional incentives than on long-term brand building. Relying on promotional tactics may lead to a short-term brand image that focuses students more on financial gain than on the school's core values and quality of education. In addition, over-promotion may diminish the brand's uniqueness and sense of sophistication, making it seen as an organization that "relies on discounts to attract students" rather than as a brand that truly excels in educational quality. Therefore, higher education institutions should invest more resources in strategies that build long-term brand value.

5.3 Limitation of the Study

Although this study has provided contributions that are significant to various parties, it is important to acknowledge that it contains several limitations that could potentially influence the findings.

One of the main limitations of this study is the lack of ethnic diversity among respondents. The majority of participants are of Chinese ethnicity, with significantly fewer Malay and Indian respondents and even fewer foreign students. Specifically, out of 273 respondents, 254 respondents were Chinese, 11 respondents were Malay, and 8 respondents were Indian. This lack of diversity affects the findings' applicability to the broader Malaysian population. The overrepresentation of Chinese respondents could also skew the results, potentially overlooking the unique perspectives and behaviours of individuals from other ethnic backgrounds. As a result, this study may not fully capture the diversity of consumer preferences and behaviours in Malaysia.

Another limiting factor is the representativeness of respondents from different higher education institutions. Despite the fact that the participants in this study came from both public and private universities, the distribution between these institutions was not balanced. Specifically, 243 respondents came from private universities, while only 30 respondents came from public universities. This imbalance may limit the research findings' generalizability, as individuals with different educational backgrounds may have different perceptions of IMC. Additionally, the educational background of the respondents in this study is also unevenly distributed. 84.6% of the respondents hold a bachelor's degree, while only 15.4% belong to other educational levels. This imbalance may limit the applicability of the research results, as individuals with different educational backgrounds may have varying levels of understanding and involvement in student affairs.

Lastly, this study faced a gender imbalance, with females comprising 68.5% of the respondents, while males comprised only 31.5% of the respondents. Since gender differences affect eWoM intention and choice of university, an unbalanced sample may lead to biased conclusions. In future studies, a more balanced gender distribution would help to provide a more complete picture of the subject. Similarly, the age distribution of respondents was uneven, with a concentration in certain age groups. Specifically, 68.5% of individuals belong to the 20 to 22 age group, while only 31.5% belong to other age groups. This may affect the applicability of the findings of the study to a wider audience. as consumer preferences and behaviours tend to differ across age groups.

5.4 Recommendation for Future Study

Due to the limitations of this research, the following recommendations are proposed to improve the reliability, effectiveness, and generalizability of future studies.

First, to improve the generalizability and accuracy of the findings, future studies should adopt a stratified sampling approach to ensure a more balanced distribution of respondents in terms of race, educational institution, gender, and education level. This will not only help to gain more comprehensive insights into consumer behaviour, covering the experiences and perspectives of students in different academic settings, but also accurately reflect the impact of gender differences on eWoM intentions and university choices.

Furthermore, considering that educational level may affect students' participation in IMC and their perceptions of HEI BE, future research should delve deeper into how different academic backgrounds affect students' responses to IMC. With a more balanced sample distribution, future research will be able to reveal the impact of IMC in higher education more comprehensively.

Likewise, future research should be more representative because consumer behaviours and decision-making processes vary across age groups. Future research can use online surveys and in-person interviews to obtain more accurate results and ensure that the consumer behaviour of each age group can be studied. Therefore, future research should strive to include a wider range of age categories to better capture generational differences in responses to IMC strategies.

5.5 Chapter Summary

In summary, this study examines how IMC motivates students' eWoM intention and choice of university through HEI BE. Additionally, based on the S-O-R model, we analyse how various IMC components (public relations, advertising, sales promotion, direct marketing, and personal selling) serve as stimuli that influence HEI BE, ultimately driving students' eWoM intention and choice of university. The findings reveal that advertising, direct marketing, and personal selling have a significant positive relationship with HEI BE, further encouraging Malaysian students' eWoM intention and choice of university. However, public relations and sales promotion have an insignificant relationship with HEI BE and thus did not play a substantial role in driving students' eWoM intention and university choice. Moreover, this study acknowledges several key limitations and provides recommendations for future research to address these challenges. Overall, the findings provide important insights into the strategic application of IMC in HEIs and enhance our understanding of the factors impacting Malaysian students' eWoM intention and choice of university.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Online Survey Questionnaire

Dear Respondents,

I am Oo Kai Shi, a final year undergraduate student from Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) who enrolled in Bachelor of International Business (Hons). I am currently conducting research for my final year project entitled **“Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) motivates student's eWoM intention and choice of university through brand equity”**.

The main objective of this study is to collect the perceptions of respondents on the factors influencing job satisfaction from four perspectives. This survey consists of six (6) sections:

- Section A: Acknowledgement Notice
- Section B: Screening Question
- Section C: Demographic
- Section D: IMC Tools
- Section E: Perception
- Section F: Response

Your participation is voluntary, and your responses will remain CONFIDENTIAL. The data gathered will only be used for academic purposes. Completing this survey will take approximately 10 to 15 minutes, and your valuable input is greatly appreciated.

If you have any questions or require further clarification regarding this research, please feel free to contact me at kaishi427@utar.my.

Sincerely,
Oo Kai Shi

Section A: Personal Data Protection Notice

Please be informed that under Personal Data Protection Act 2010 ("PDPA") which came into force on 15 November 2013, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman ("UTAR") is hereby bound to take notice and require consent for collection, recording, storage, usage and retention of personal information.

Notice:

1. The purposes for which your personal data may be used are inclusive but not limited to:-

- For assessment of any application to UTAR
- For processing any benefits and services
- For communication purposes
- For advertorial and news
- For general administration and record purposes
- For enhancing the value of education
- For educational and related purposes consequential to UTAR
- For the purpose of our corporate governance
- For consideration as a guarantor for UTAR staff/Students applying for his/her scholarship/study loan

2. Your personal data may be transferred and/or disclosed to the third party and/or UTAR collaborative partners including but not limited to the respective and appropriate outsourcing agents for purpose of fulfilling our obligations to you in respect of the purposes and all such other purposes that are related to the purposes and also in integrated services, maintaining and storing records. Your data may be shared when required by laws and when disclosure is necessary to comply with applicable laws.

3. Any personal information retained by UTAR shall be destroyed and/or deleted in accordance with our retention policy applicable for us in the event such information is no longer required.

4. UTAR is committed in ensuring the confidentiality, protection, security and accuracy of your personal information made available to us and it has been our ongoing strict policy to ensure that your personal information is accurate, complete, not misleading and updated. UTAR would also ensure that your personal data shall not be used for political and commercial purposes.

Consent:

1. By submitting this form you hereby authorise and consent to us processing (including disclosing) your data and any updates of your information, for the purposes and/or for any other purposes related to the purpose.

2. If you do not consent or subsequently withdraw your consent to the processing and disclosure of your personal data, UTAR will not be able to fulfil our obligations or to contact you or to assist you in respect of the purposes and/or for any other purposes related to the purpose.

3. You may access and update your personal data by writing to us at kaishi427@lutar.my.

Acknowledgment of Notice

☐ I have been notified and that I hereby understood, consented and agreed per UTAR above notice.

☐ I disagree, my personal data will not be processed.

Section B: Screening

Please select an option for each of the following statements:

1. Where do you currently stay?
 - ☐ Kuala Lumpur
 - ☐ Selangor
 - ☐ Other (Thank you for your interest in participating in this survey! However, this survey is targeted at respondents from Kuala Lumpur and Selangor.)
2. Are you currently enrolled in a Higher Education Institution (HEI)/ College/ University?
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No (Thank you for your interest in participating in this survey. However, this survey is targeted at respondents who are currently enrolled in a university or higher education institution (HEI).)

Section C: Demographic

1. Age
 - ☐ 17 to 19 years old
 - ☐ 20 to 22 years old
 - ☐ 23 to 25 years old
 - ☐ 26 to 28 years old
 - ☐ Others: (Thank you for your interest in participating in this survey. However, this survey is targeted at respondents who are currently aged between 17 to 28 years old (Gen Z).)
2. Gender
 - ☐ Male
 - ☐ Female
3. Ethnicity
 - ☐ Malay
 - ☐ Chinese
 - ☐ Indian
 - ☐ Other

4. What type of university /higher education institution (HEI) are you enrolled in?
 - ☐ Public University/ Institution
 - ☐ Private University/ Institution
5. Education Level (Currently Pursuing)
 - ☐ Pre-University/ Foundation/ Diploma
 - ☐ Bachelor's Degree
 - ☐ Master's Degree
6. What is your field of study?
 - ☐ Arts and Humanities
 - ☐ Business and Management
 - ☐ Engineering and Technology
 - ☐ Health and Medicine
 - ☐ Science
 - ☐ Social Sciences
 - ☐ Other
7. Who primarily influenced your decision to choose this university/ higher education institution (HEI)?
 - ☐ Myself
 - ☐ Parents/Guardians
 - ☐ Other (please specify)
8. Who provided the most guidance during your university/ higher education institution (HEI) selection process?
 - ☐ Myself
 - ☐ Parents/Guardians
 - ☐ Teachers/Counselors
 - ☐ Friends/Peers
 - ☐ Other (please specify)
9. How much influence did your parents/guardians have on your choice of university/ higher education institution (HEI)?
 - ☐ None
 - ☐ Some
 - ☐ Significant
 - ☐ Complete
10. What was the primary reason you chose to study at this university/ higher education institution (HEI)? (Multiple choices)
 - ☐ Academic reputation
 - ☐ Specific programs or courses offered
 - ☐ Location
 - ☐ Campus facilities
 - ☐ Scholarships/Financial aid
 - ☐ Recommendations from others

11. How often do you use the internet?
- ☐ Daily
 - ☐ Several times a week
 - ☐ Once a week
 - ☐ Less than once a week
12. How often do you use social media?
- ☐ Daily
 - ☐ Several times a week
 - ☐ Once a week
 - ☐ Less than once a week
13. How did you first hear about your current higher education institutions (HEI)?
- ☐ Social media
 - ☐ University/ higher education institution (HEI) website
 - ☐ Online advertisements
 - ☐ Print media (newspapers, magazines)
 - ☐ Word of mouth
 - ☐ Events and fairs (e.g. education fair/ open day)
 - ☐ Other
14. Which communication channels do you prefer for receiving information from your university/ higher education institutions (HEI)? (Multiple choices)
- ☐ Email
 - ☐ SMS
 - ☐ Social media
 - ☐ University/ higher education institution (HEI) website
 - ☐ Online advertisements
 - ☐ Print media (newspapers, magazines)
 - ☐ Events and fairs (e.g. education fair/ open day)
 - ☐ Other
15. How effective do you find the following marketing channels in providing information about your higher education institutions (HEI)? (Rate on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = Not effective and 5 = Very effective)

No.	Questions					
1	Email	1	2	3	4	5
2	SMS	1	2	3	4	5
3	Social media	1	2	3	4	5
4	University/ higher education institution (HEI) website	1	2	3	4	5
5	Online advertisements	1	2	3	4	5
6	Print media (newspapers, magazines)	1	2	3	4	5
7	Events and fairs (e.g. education fair/ open day)	1	2	3	4	5
8	Direct email	1	2	3	4	5

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9	Webinar/ Seminar	1	2	3	4	5
10	Telemarketing	1	2	3	4	5

16. How often do you come across marketing messages from your university/ higher education institutions (HEI)?

- ☐ Daily
- ☐ Several times a week
- ☐ Once a week
- ☐ Less than once a week
- ☐ Rarely/ Never

17. How often do you engage with marketing content from your university/ higher education institutions (HEI)? (e.g., liking, sharing, commenting on social media posts)

- ☐ Always
- ☐ Often
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Never

18. To what extent did the following marketing channels influence your decision to enroll in your current university/ higher education institutions (HEI)? (Rate on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = Not influential and 5 = Very influential)

No.	Questions					
1	Email	1	2	3	4	5
2	SMS	1	2	3	4	5
3	Social media	1	2	3	4	5
4	University/ higher education institution (HEI) website	1	2	3	4	5
5	Online advertisements	1	2	3	4	5
6	Print media (newspapers, magazines)	1	2	3	4	5
7	Events and fairs (e.g. education fair/ open day)	1	2	3	4	5
8	Direct email	1	2	3	4	5
9	Webinar/ Seminar	1	2	3	4	5
10	Telemarketing	1	2	3	4	5

19. How satisfied are you with the marketing communication from your university/ higher education institutions (HEI)? (Rate on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = Very dissatisfied and 5 = Very satisfied)

No.	Questions					
1	Email	1	2	3	4	5
2	SMS	1	2	3	4	5
3	Social media	1	2	3	4	5

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4	University/ higher education institution (HEI) website	1	2	3	4	5
5	Online advertisements	1	2	3	4	5
6	Print media (newspapers, magazines)	1	2	3	4	5
7	Events and fairs (e.g. education fair/ open day)	1	2	3	4	5
8	Direct email	1	2	3	4	5
9	Webinar/ Seminar	1	2	3	4	5
10	Telemarketing	1	2	3	4	5

Section D: IMC Tools

Please select the most appropriate option that best indicates your agreement level about the following statements.

(1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

1. Public Relations (PR)

Public relations is a communication activity that communicates with the public and maintain the organization's image.

No.	Questions	SD	D	N	A	SA
1	University/ higher education institution is active in online and offline media (Internet, TV and radio, publications, books and newspaper and magazines)	1	2	3	4	5
2	University/ higher education institution actively update content across various platforms. (e.g., social media, university website, email newsletters)	1	2	3	4	5
3	Various events or conferences are held at the university/ higher education institution. (e.g. seminars, open day)	1	2	3	4	5
4	University/ higher education institution (HEI) is active in participating in many social events. (e.g. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR))	1	2	3	4	5

2. Advertising

Advertising is the process of creating and sharing messages to build brand awareness and image, with the aim of influencing student's behavior or attitudes.

No.	Questions	SD	D	N	A	SA
1	The advertisements by university/ higher education institution are appealing to me. (e.g. open day, scholarship offer, program offered)	1	2	3	4	5
2	The advertisement message by university/ higher education institution capture my attention. (e.g. open day, intake, scholarship)	1	2	3	4	5

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3	The advertisement by university/ higher education institution is important to me as a student. (e.g. open day, intake, scholarship)	1	2	3	4	5
4	The advertisement by university/ higher education institution provides me with useful information about its higher education services. (e.g. registration day, intake, scholarship, academic achievement)	1	2	3	4	5
5	My preference/choice toward the brand of university/ higher education institution is influenced by their repeated advertisement.	1	2	3	4	5
6	The advertisement by university/ higher education institution has an influence/impact on my impressions.	1	2	3	4	5

3. Sales Promotion Activities

Sales promotion activities are short-term strategies designed to attract and engage potential students.

No.	Questions	SD	D	N	A	SA
1	The university/ higher education institution is announce new services through various media channels (e.g. video marketing campaigns, social media posts) repeatedly.	1	2	3	4	5
2	University/ higher education institution engage in sales promotion activities (e.g., sponsorships, open days, education fairs, school seminars) frequently.	1	2	3	4	5
3	The university/ higher education institution hosts promotional events (e.g., university celebrations, competitions, open day)	1	2	3	4	5
4	University/ higher education institution (HEI) offers some incentive such scholarship, registration waver, etc for new students-	1	2	3	4	5

4. Direct Marketing

Direct marketing is an interactive marketing where university/ higher education institution (HEI) promote their services by communicating directly with potential students.

No.	Questions	SD	D	N	A	SA
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1	Social media marketing usually draws my attention. (e.g. open day, scholarship)	1	2	3	4	5
2	The telemarketing (cool call about the promotion, information about the university/ higher education institution, or programmes offer) from the university/ higher education institution capture my attention.	1	2	3	4	5
3	Webinars or education fairs hosted by the university/ higher education institution draw my interest.	1	2	3	4	5
4	Direct email (information about the university/ higher education institution, programme offer) from the university/ higher education institution capture my attention.	1	2	3	4	5

5. Personal Selling

Personal selling is a form of interpersonal communication in which a university/ higher education institution (HEI) staff attempts to assist or influence a prospect to choose a university.

No.	Questions	SD	D	N	A	SA
1	The staff from the university/ higher education institution generate excitement about the university.	1	2	3	4	5
2	The staff describe the advantage of the university/ higher education institution services (e.g. mode of teaching and learning, facilities) with enthusiasm.	1	2	3	4	5
3	The staff tailor their explanations or provide information to align with my preferences for programme to study.	1	2	3	4	5
4	The staff use information (e.g. quality of the program, mode of teaching, learning facilities) to convince me about the good of the university/ higher education institution.	1	2	3	4	5
5	The staff explain the different features of the university/ higher education institution services (e.g. program offered, mode of teaching and learning, learning environment).	1	2	3	4	5
6	The staff ensure that I understood all the relevant information about the university/ higher education institution.	1	2	3	4	5

Section E: Perception

Please select the most appropriate option that best indicates your agreement level about the following statements.

(1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

1. Higher Education Institutions Brand Equity (HEI BE)

HEI BE refers to the value and perception that stakeholders (e.g. students, faculty, alumni, and the general public) associate with a university/ higher education institutions brand.

No.	Questions	SD	D	N	A	SA
P1	I will expect high performance from this university/ higher education institution (HEI). (in term of academic achievement, university ranking, overall reputation)	1	2	3	4	5
P2	During my studies at this university/ higher education institution, I expect it to always provide accurate information. (e.g. announcement, events provided)	1	2	3	4	5
P3	I will expect this university/ higher education institution (HEI) to perform professionally. (e.g. handling problem well in all aspect)	1	2	3	4	5
P4	University/ higher education institution excels in its operations. (e.g. quality of program, mode of teaching, and learning facilities)	1	2	3	4	5
SI1	My university/ higher education institution matches my personal values and goals. (e.g. academic success, goods reputation)	1	2	3	4	5
SI2	I feel proud to study in this university/ higher education institution (HEI).	1	2	3	4	5
SI3	My friends think highly of my university/ higher education institution (e.g. for its academic excellence and high rankings)	1	2	3	4	5
SI4	My university/ higher education institution represents what I value most (e.g. academic excellence, good reputation)	1	2	3	4	5
V1	My university/ higher education institution offers great value for the programs and quality of teaching and learning it provides.	1	2	3	4	5
V2	Considering the tuition fees I paid, I get much more worth of value.	1	2	3	4	5

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V3	I will consider this university to be well-priced because of the certification, knowledges that I will receive.	1	2	3	4	5
T1	I trust my university/ higher education institution.	1	2	3	4	5
T2	My university/ higher education institution cares about its students' interests.	1	2	3	4	5
T3	I believe my university/ higher education institution treat students fairly.	1	2	3	4	5
A1	After seeing the social media marketing from my university/ higher education institution, I feel a positive connection to the university. (e.g. proud to be part of university community)	1	2	3	4	5
A2	Social media marketing from my university/ higher education institution gives me positive feelings about the university.	1	2	3	4	5
A3	Social media marketing from my university/ higher education institution makes me feel warmly towards the university.	1	2	3	4	5

Section F: Response

Please select the most appropriate option that best indicates your agreement level about the following statements.

(1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

1. Electronic Word of Mouth (eWoM) intention

eWOM refers to any online content, whether positive or negative, about a university/ higher education institution service posted by current or past students using the Internet or other information technology.

No.	Questions	SD	D	N	A	SA
1	I would recommend my university/ higher education institution (HEI) to others. (e.g. During discussion, I would recommend my university to my friends/ peers.)	1	2	3	4	5
2	I would encourage people to choose my university/ higher education institution (HEI). (e.g. During discussion, I would encourage my friends/ peers to choose my university.)	1	2	3	4	5
3	I would talk about the positive aspects of my university/ higher education institution (HEI) to others. (e.g. During discussion, I would say good things	1	2	3	4	5

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	about my university to my friends/ peers.)					
4	I would speak favourably of my university/ higher education institution (HEI) to others. (e.g. During discussion, I would tell my friends/ peers how much I like my university.)	1	2	3	4	5

2. Choice of University

The choice of university refers to selecting an institution for higher education based on factors like programs, reputation, location, and personal preferences.

No.	Questions	SD	D	N	A	SA
1	Even if other universities is similar, choosing my university/ higher education institution (HEI) feels like a smarter decision.	1	2	3	4	5
2	My university/ higher education institution (HEI) is a better choice compared to other universities.	1	2	3	4	5
3	It makes sense to choose my university/ higher education institution (HEI) over other similar universities.	1	2	3	4	5
4	I have a strong preference for my university/ higher education institution (HEI).	1	2	3	4	5