



The Influence of Word of Mouth and Social Media Marketing on Students' Decision to Choose a University With Brand Image as a Mediating Variable (Case Study at Darunnajah University)

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ABSTRACT

The increasing competition among higher education institutions requires universities to develop effective marketing strategies to attract prospective students. This study aims to examine the influence of Word of Mouth and Social Media Marketing on students' decisions to choose a university, with Brand Image serving as a mediating variable. A quantitative survey was conducted with 222 active students at Universitas Darunnajah, and the data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares (PLS) with SmartPLS software. The findings reveal that Word of Mouth significantly affects Brand Image (T-statistic = 2.671, $p < 0.05$) and student decision-making (T-statistic = 3.512, $p < 0.05$), while Social Media Marketing also significantly impacts Brand Image (T-statistic = 4.205, $p < 0.05$) and student decisions (T-statistic = 5.027, $p < 0.05$). Furthermore, Brand Image significantly mediates the relationship between both communication strategies and student decision-making. This study contributes strategic insights for universities by emphasizing the importance of enhancing brand image through digital engagement and positive interpersonal communication to improve student enrollment outcomes.

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education has increasingly become a fundamental necessity for individuals aspiring to enhance their quality of life and career advancement opportunities (Smith, 2024). Beyond acquiring knowledge, higher education provides avenues for professional growth, social mobility, and personal development (Gallagher, 2022). Consequently, the decision to pursue tertiary education involves a complex set of considerations, particularly in a highly competitive and information-rich environment.

Several factors influence students' university selection processes. Academic reputation, program quality, financial affordability, and career prospects consistently emerge as key determinants (Suryani, 2013; Pramudiyanto, Kurniawan and Jamal, 2024). Students often rely on institutional rankings, alumni testimonials, and the accreditation status of universities as indicators of educational excellence and future success (Kumar, Shukla and

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Passey, 2020; Fernandes and Singh, 2022). However, decision-making in higher education extends beyond institutional metrics. Social factors, including peer influence, family recommendations, and community perceptions, also significantly impact student choices (Bailey, 2021). Word of Mouth (WOM) communication plays a critical role in shaping students' perceptions and preferences. Positive WOM can strengthen trust in an institution, while negative WOM can deter prospective enrollments .

Alongside interpersonal communication, the rise of digital media has introduced Social Media Marketing (SMM) as an influential tool in modern university marketing strategies. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook offer universities a means to directly engage with students, convey institutional strengths, and foster brand loyalty (Van Dijck and Poell, 2013; Kotler, 2019). Social Media Marketing enables universities to project their brand images more dynamically and interactively than traditional advertising methods. By leveraging creative content, virtual campus tours, testimonials, and interactive campaigns, institutions can reach a broader, tech-savvy audience who value digital engagement as part of their decision-making processes.

For emerging universities such as Universitas Darunnajah, effectively utilizing WOM and SMM is critical. As a relatively new institution in Indonesia's competitive higher education landscape, it must build a credible and attractive brand image to compete with more established universities. Although it benefits from a strong reputation at the secondary education level, significant work remains to transition this reputation to higher education.

Through this research, it is expected to uncover how Word of Mouth and Social Media Marketing influence student decision-making, as well as how Brand Image functions as a mediating variable in the context of university selection. Based on preliminary observations, several challenges have been identified. First, competition in higher education has intensified with the growing number of universities and diverse program offerings. Second, Universitas Darunnajah faces the challenge of transitioning from its identity as an Islamic boarding school to a competitive university brand. Third, the institution must actively adapt to the evolving dynamics of student needs, technological advancements, and education market trends.

Enrollment data and open house participation statistics suggest that Universitas Darunnajah must enhance its marketing efforts and communication strategies. Without effectively managing the transition and adjusting to new market demands, the institution risks falling behind more agile competitors. Therefore, a strategic focus on strengthening brand image through the integration of WOM and SMM is crucial for improving enrollment performance and market positioning.

Brand Image emerges as a vital mediating factor between WOM, SMM, and student decision-making. A strong and positive brand image enhances credibility, fosters emotional connections, and solidifies enrollment decisions (Pramudiyanto, Kurniawan and Jamal, 2024). Conversely, a weak or inconsistent brand image may undermine even the most active WOM and SMM efforts, emphasizing the necessity for cohesive brand management.

The novelty of this research lies in three aspects. First, it integrates Word of Mouth, Social Media Marketing, and Brand Image—concepts that are often studied separately—into

a comprehensive model of university selection behavior. Second, it positions Brand Image as a moderating variable, providing new insights into how branding mediates the influence of communication strategies on student choices. Third, it applies these marketing concepts within the higher education sector, an area often overlooked compared to commercial industries.

Given these dynamics, this study aims to examine the influence of Word of Mouth and Social Media Marketing on students' decisions to choose a university, with Brand Image serving as a mediating variable. By employing a quantitative approach and utilizing Partial Least Squares (PLS) analysis, the study offers empirical evidence on the strength and direction of these relationships.

METHODS

In order to support the methodological framework of this study, several data tables were incorporated to provide a comprehensive context for the research process and object selection.

Table 1. Data Private Islamic Universities in Jakarta

No	Name of Islamic University	Rank	Accreditation
1	Univ. Muhammadiyah. Prof. Dr. Hamka	22	A
2	Univ. Al-Azhar Indonesia	127	A
3	Univ. Nahdlatul Ulama Indonesia	311	B
4	Univ. Ibnu Chaldun Jakarta	424	B
5	Univ. Islam Jakarta	435	B
6	Univ. Darunnajah	887	-

Source: Kampus Republika, 2024

Table 1 presents a comparative overview of private Islamic universities in Jakarta, highlighting their respective national rankings and accreditation statuses. This table establishes the competitive landscape in which Universitas Darunnajah operates. By demonstrating the position of Universitas Darunnajah relative to other institutions, it provides a rationale for selecting this university as the research object, especially in analyzing brand image development and the challenges associated with lower institutional rankings.

Table 2. New Student Admissions Data (PMB) at Universitas Darunnajah

Year	Target (Students)	Achievement (Students)	Note
2022	1.300	820	Not Achieved
2023	1.300	943	Achieved

Source: RPMB Universitas Darunnajah, 2024

Table 2 shows new student admissions data (PMB) at Universitas Darunnajah over two consecutive years. The data illustrate the university's enrollment targets versus actual achievements. This information is directly relevant to the research problem, highlighting the need to investigate factors influencing student decision-making, such as Word of Mouth

(WOM), Social Media Marketing (SMM), and Brand Image, which are hypothesized to affect enrollment success.

Table 3. Open House Event Data at Universitas Darunnajah

Year	Semester	School Attendance	Number of Participants
2022	1	11	183
2022	2	7	118
2023	1	8	133
2023	2	9	125

Source: PMB Universitas Darunnajah, 2024

Table 3 provides attendance data from open house events organized by Universitas Darunnajah. These events are one of the university's key promotional strategies, intended to attract new students. The fluctuation in participant numbers across semesters reflects variations in promotional effectiveness, further supporting the need to study how WOM and SMM contribute to forming brand image and influencing students' enrollment decisions.

These three tables collectively frame the research context by offering empirical evidence of the challenges faced by Universitas Darunnajah. They justify the choice of the university as the research site and reinforce the relevance of investigating WOM, SMM, and Brand Image in relation to student decision-making behavior. Furthermore, the data help in contextualizing the quantitative survey by aligning the background conditions of the university with the theoretical constructs being measured.

Following this contextual foundation, the research employed a quantitative survey method. Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to 222 active students at Universitas Darunnajah, representing a diverse demographic profile. The survey was designed to capture perceptions related to Word of Mouth, Social Media Marketing, Brand Image, and Student Decision, based on validated indicators drawn from previous literature. The data were subsequently analyzed using Partial Least Squares (PLS) modeling through SmartPLS software to test the proposed hypotheses and assess the mediating role of Brand Image (Ghozali, Iman, 2020).

The research method used in this study is a quantitative approach, aiming to examine the influence among predetermined variables, namely Word of Mouth and Social Media Marketing on students' decisions in choosing a university, with Brand Image as a mediating variable. This approach was selected because it is considered capable of providing an objective and measurable picture of the relationships between variables based on numerical data collected from respondents.

This study employed a survey method as the primary data collection technique. The survey was conducted using a questionnaire that was systematically developed and had undergone a validation process beforehand. The questionnaire was designed to measure students' perceptions of Word of Mouth, Social Media Marketing, Brand Image, and the decision to choose a university. Each variable was measured through a set of indicators determined based on existing theories and previous studies. The population in this study

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comprised all active students of Darunnajah University, totaling approximately 500 individuals. From this population, a sample of 222 respondents was selected using a random sampling technique. This method was chosen to ensure that each member of the population had an equal chance of being selected, thus minimizing sampling bias.

The object of this research is Darunnajah University students as consumers who make decisions regarding their choice of higher education institutions. The study focuses on how students perceive Word of Mouth and social media marketing activities, and how these perceptions influence their view of the university's brand image, which in turn affects their decision to enroll. The research model used in this study is a causal relationship model, comprising two independent variables (Word of Mouth and Social Media Marketing), one mediating variable (Brand Image), and one dependent variable (Student Decision). This model is illustrated in the form of a path diagram to clearly describe the relationship between the variables being studied.

Variable operationalization was carried out by breaking down each variable into measurable indicators. For example, the Word of Mouth variable was measured through indicators such as positive experiences, recommendations, and influence on decisions. Meanwhile, Social Media Marketing was assessed based on dimensions such as interaction, credibility, ease of access, and community engagement. Brand Image was measured through students' perceptions of the university's reputation, strengths, and appeal, while Student Decision was measured based on confidence and intention to choose a university. The data collected from the questionnaires was then analyzed using statistical software SPSS version 21 for descriptive data processing, and

SmartPLS for path analysis and structural model testing. Prior to inferential analysis, the data underwent validity and reliability testing to ensure that the research instrument met the criteria of a good measurement tool. Validity testing was conducted by measuring the loading factor value for each indicator, which is expected to exceed 0.7 to be categorized as valid (Ghozali Imam, 2015). Meanwhile, reliability testing involved measuring the composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha values, which indicate the internal consistency of each construct variable. Once the data was deemed valid and reliable, the next step was to conduct structural model testing (inner model) to examine the relationships among the variables under study. This test produced path coefficient values and significance levels used to test the proposed hypotheses. Additionally, R-square values were analyzed to determine how much the independent and mediating variables contributed to explaining the dependent variable.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Characteristics

This study involved a total of 222 respondents who are active students at Universitas Darunnajah. The demographic profile of the respondents was categorized based on several criteria, namely age, gender, academic year, and high school origin. These classifications were essential to gain a deeper understanding of the diversity among participants and to ensure the relevance of their responses in reflecting the broader student population.

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In terms of age distribution, the majority of respondents were between 18 and 20 years old, accounting for approximately 57.2% of the total sample. This age range represents students who are in the early stages of their undergraduate education. Meanwhile, those aged 21 to 23 made up 35.6%, indicating a significant portion of students in the middle stages of their academic journey. The remaining 7.2% were aged 24 and above, suggesting a smaller segment of mature students who may have different motivations and considerations in choosing a university. Regarding gender, female respondents slightly outnumbered their male counterparts. Female students represented 53.2% of the sample, while male students comprised 46.8%. This relatively balanced distribution provides a fair representation of gender perspectives in the decision-making process related to higher education choice.

From the perspective of academic cohort, the largest group of respondents came from the 2022 intake, representing 41.4% of the sample. Students from the 2021 cohort followed closely, accounting for 36.9%. Meanwhile, students from earlier cohorts (2020 and before) made up 21.7%. This distribution indicates that most respondents were still in their early to middle academic years, which aligns with the research focus on the decision-making phase when selecting a university. When classified by high school origin, the majority of respondents, 62.6%, graduated from Islamic high schools (Madrasah Aliyah or Islamic boarding school-based institutions), while 37.4% came from general senior high schools (SMA). This finding reflects the unique background of Universitas Darunnajah, which integrates Islamic educational values into its academic environment and thus naturally attracts students from religious schooling backgrounds.

The demographic profile of the respondents confirms a varied and representative sample in terms of age, gender, academic year, and educational background. These variations provide a robust foundation for analyzing how Word of Mouth and Social Media Marketing influence students' decisions, particularly when moderated by the brand image of the institution. The diversity within the sample also enhances the generalizability of the research findings within the context of Islamic private universities in Indonesia.

Description of Research Variables

The analysis in this study covers four primary variables: Word of Mouth, Social Media Marketing, Brand Image, and Student Decision in selecting a university. Each variable was measured through multiple indicators and assessed based on respondents' perceptions using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

The Word of Mouth variable reflects how interpersonal communication and student recommendations influence decision-making in higher education. The results revealed that a substantial proportion of respondents, approximately 76.5%, agreed or strongly agreed with statements related to the positive influence of Word of Mouth. This indicates that peer communication, recommendations, and shared experiences among students significantly contribute to shaping perceptions and decisions about university selection.

For the Social Media Marketing variable, findings demonstrated that 72.3% of respondents responded positively to items measuring engagement with the university's

social media content. This includes exposure to informative posts, interactive campaigns, and updates through platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube. The relatively high agreement level suggests that social media serves as an effective channel for student engagement and information dissemination, especially among prospective students from younger demographics.

In terms of Brand Image, which served as a mediating variable in the study, the majority of respondents (approximately 70.1%) perceived Universitas Darunnajah as having a positive brand image. This perception is rooted in values such as academic integrity, religious foundation, and institutional uniqueness stemming from its pesantren-based identity. The data imply that the university's efforts in projecting a strong and consistent brand identity have resonated with the student body, although there remains room for strengthening the brand's position in the broader competitive landscape. Lastly, regarding the Student Decision variable, around 74.8% of respondents affirmed that they were confident and satisfied with their choice to study at Universitas Darunnajah. This variable encapsulates the outcome of the decision-making process and reflects the extent to which students felt their expectations aligned with the university's offerings. Positive responses in this area reinforce the strategic importance of leveraging both interpersonal and digital marketing efforts to guide prospective students in their academic choices.

Taken together, the descriptive statistics suggest that all four variables—Word of Mouth, Social Media Marketing, Brand Image, and Student Decision—are perceived positively by the majority of respondents. These results not only support the relevance of the research model but also underscore the pivotal role of communication channels and brand positioning in influencing student behavior in the higher education context. Furthermore, the consistency in high perception rates across variables strengthens the argument that integrated marketing strategies, supported by a clear brand image, can effectively drive student enrollment in emerging universities like Universitas Darunnajah.

Smart PLS Analysis Results

The analysis results using Partial Least Squares (PLS) revealed two models: the Measurement Model (Outer Model) and the Structural Model (Inner Model). Evaluation criteria were applied to both of these models.

Table 4. Results of Convergent Validity Test Through Loading Factor

Variable	Item	Loading Factor	Cut Off	Remarks
<i>Word of Mouth</i>	WOM1	0,831	0,6	Valid
	WOM2	0,850	0,6	Valid
	WOM3	0,824	0,6	Valid
	WOM4	0,888	0,6	Valid
	WOM5	0,860	0,6	Valid
	WOM6	0,791	0,6	Valid
	WOM7	0,840	0,6	Valid
	WOM8	0,754	0,6	Valid

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Variable	Item	Loading Factor	Cut Off	Remarks
<i>Social Media Marketing</i>	WOM9	0,842	0,6	Valid
	SMM1	0,821	0,6	Valid
	SMM2	0,838	0,6	Valid
	SMM3	0,803	0,6	Valid
	SMM4	0,874	0,6	Valid
	SMM5	0,870	0,6	Valid
	SMM6	0,837	0,6	Valid
	SMM7	0,873	0,6	Valid
	SMM8	0,876	0,6	Valid
	SMM9	0,893	0,6	Valid
	SMM10	0,838	0,6	Valid
	SMM11	0,839	0,6	Valid
<i>Brand image</i>	SMM12	0,850	0,6	Valid
	BI1	0,897	0,6	Valid
	BI2	0,742	0,6	Valid
	BI3	0,736	0,6	Valid
	BI4	0,839	0,6	Valid
	BI5	0,927	0,6	Valid
	BI6	0,878	0,6	Valid
	BI7	0,865	0,6	Valid
	BI8	0,920	0,6	Valid
	BI9	0,881	0,6	Valid
	BI10	0,892	0,6	Valid
	BI11	0,806	0,6	Valid
	BI12	0,821	0,6	Valid
	BI13	0,883	0,6	Valid
	BI14	0,840	0,6	Valid
BI15	0,862	0,6	Valid	
Students' Decision in Choosing a University	KMMP1	0,891	0,6	Valid
	KMMP2	0,905	0,6	Valid
	KMMP3	0,913	0,6	Valid
	KMMP4	0,858	0,6	Valid
	KMMP5	0,899	0,6	Valid
	KMMP6	0,911	0,6	Valid
	KMMP7	0,870	0,6	Valid
	KMMP8	0,870	0,6	Valid
	KMMP9	0,894	0,6	Valid

Source: Processed primary data, 2025

Based on the results in Table 4, it can be seen that the items measuring the variables Word of Mouth, Social Media Marketing, Brand Image, and Students' Decision in Choosing a University have loading factor values above 0.6. Therefore, all of these instrument items can be considered valid in measuring their respective variables. However, there are certain items that have loading factor values below 0.6, indicating that those items are not valid in measuring their indicators. As a result, these items were removed or eliminated due to not meeting the criteria for convergent validity.

Table 5. Consistency Reliability Test Results

Variable	Cronbach Alpha	Composite Reliability	Cut Off	Remarks
Word of Mouth	0,944	0,946	0,6	Reliable
Social Media Marketing	0,965	0,966	0,6	Reliable
Brand image	0,973	0,974	0,6	Reliable
Students' Decision in Choosing a University	0,967	0,968	0,6	Reliable

In Table 5, it can be seen that the values of Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability are greater than 0.6 (Hair Jr et al., 2021). Therefore, it can be concluded that all instrument items are considered reliable in measuring the variables of Word of Mouth, Social Media Marketing, Brand Image, and Students' Decision in Choosing a University.

Table 6. Average Variance Extracted

Variable	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Cut Off	Remarks
Word of Mouth	0,692	> 0,5	Reliabel
Social Media Marketing	0,722	> 0,5	Reliabel
Brand image	0,730	> 0,5	Reliabel
Students' Decision in Choosing a University	0,793	> 0,5	Reliabel

In Table 6, the AVE (Average Variance Extracted) values for each construct—Word of Mouth, Social Media Marketing, Brand Image, and Students' Decision in Choosing a University—are all above 0.5, indicating strong convergent validity and meeting the required criteria.

Table 7. Discriminant Validity Test Results

	Brand image	Students' Decision	Social Media Marketing	Word of Mouth
Brand image	0,854			
Students' Decision	0,854	0,890		

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Social Media Mar- keting	0,885	0,812	0,850	
Word of Mouth	0,824	0,850	0,848	0.832

Table 7 shows that the loading values of each indicator item on its respective construct are greater than their cross-loading values. Therefore, it can be concluded that all constructs or latent variables have good discriminant validity, as the indicators within each construct block load higher on their own construct than on other construct blocks.

Table 8. R Square Test

	R Square	R Square Adjusted
Brand Image	0.803	0.801
Students' Decision	0.796	0.793

Based on Table 8, the analysis using Partial Least Square (PLS) shows that the R-Square value for the Brand Image variable is 0.803, meaning that 80.3% of its variability can be explained by the independent variables in the model. For the Student Decision variable, the R-Square is 0.796, indicating that 79.6% of its variability is explained by the model. Both variables also have high Adjusted R-Square values (above 0.75), confirming that the model has excellent predictive power and is reliable for explaining the relationships between variables in this study.

Table 9. Hypothesis Test

H	Relationship	T-Statistic	P Value Analisis	Description	Hypothesis
H1	Word of Mouth -> Brand image	2,671	0.008	Significant	Accepted
H2	Social Media Marketing -> Brand image	7,452	0.000	Significant	Accepted
H3	Word of Mouth -> Students' Decision	5,878	0.000	Significant	Accepted
H4	Social Media Marketing -> Students' Decision	3,607	0.000	Significant	Accepted
H5	Brand image -> Keputusan mahasiswa	4,890	0.000	Significant	Accepted
H6	Word of Mouth -> Brand image -> Students' Decision	2,189	0.029	Significant	Accepted
H7	Social Media Marketing -> Brand image-> Students' Decision	4,114	0.000	Significant	Accepted

Word of Mouth Influences Brand Image

The test results show that the T-statistic value is $2.671 > 1.96$, and the significance value (p-value) is 0.008. Since $0.008 < 0.05$, hypothesis H1 is accepted, indicating that Word of Mouth has a significant effect on Brand Image. Based on the findings of this study, it can

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be concluded that both Word of Mouth and Social Media Marketing significantly influence Brand Image and students' decisions at Universitas Darunnajah. Word of Mouth has proven to enhance Brand Image, as recommendations or testimonials from trusted individuals generate a positive perception of the institution. This shows that word-of-mouth information is a highly influential source in shaping brand perception, particularly among students at Universitas Darunnajah.

Social Media Marketing Influences Brand Image

The test results show that the T-statistic value is $7.452 > 1.96$, and the significance value (p-value) is 0.000. Since $0.000 < 0.05$, hypothesis H2 is accepted, indicating that Social Media Marketing has a significant effect on Brand Image. Social Media Marketing also plays an important role in building Brand Image. Marketing activities carried out through social media, such as distributing engaging content, implementing effective promotional strategies, and maintaining active audience interaction, have been proven to strengthen brand perception. In the context of students' decisions at Universitas Darunnajah, social media marketing becomes a highly influential factor, as social platforms provide easily accessible and attention-grabbing information.

Word of Mouth Influences Student Decision

The test results show that the T-statistic value is $5.878 > 1.96$, and the significance value (p-value) is 0.000. Since $0.000 < 0.05$, hypothesis H3 is accepted, indicating that Word of Mouth influences students' decisions at Universitas Darunnajah. Word of Mouth also has a direct influence on student decision-making. Students tend to trust information provided by friends, family, or alumni who have firsthand experience. Therefore, Word of Mouth becomes a crucial element in shaping their choices regarding institutions or services.

Social Media Marketing Influences Student Decision

The test results show that the T-statistic value is $3.607 > 1.96$, and the significance value (p-value) is 0.000. Since $0.000 < 0.05$, hypothesis H4 is accepted, indicating that Social Media Marketing has a significant effect on students' decisions. Social media marketing significantly influences students' choices. Social platforms provide accessible and appealing information that helps students make informed decisions about institutions or services.

Brand Image Influences Student Decision at Universitas Darunnajah

The test results show that the T-statistic value is $4.890 > 1.96$, and the significance value (p-value) is 0.000. Since $0.000 < 0.05$, hypothesis H5 is accepted, indicating that Brand Image influences students' decisions. A positive brand image provides students with trust and confidence in choosing a particular institution. In this study, Brand Image also acts as a mediator linking the influence of Word of Mouth and Social Media Marketing on student decisions. This suggests that to improve student decision-making, efforts must be made to build and strengthen brand image through effective marketing strategies.

Word of Mouth Influences Student Decision Through Brand Image

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The test results show that the T-statistic value is $2.189 > 1.96$, and the significance value (p-value) is 0.029. Since $0.029 < 0.05$, hypothesis H6 is accepted, indicating that Word of Mouth influences students' decisions through Brand Image. Word of Mouth was also found to have an indirect influence on student decisions through Brand Image. Positive Word of Mouth can enhance Brand Image, which in turn indirectly influences students' decision-making.

Social Media Marketing Influences Student Decision Through Brand Image

The test results show that the T-statistic value is $4.114 > 1.96$, and the significance value (p-value) is 0.000. Since $0.000 < 0.05$, hypothesis H7 is accepted, indicating that Social Media Marketing affects students' decisions through Brand Image. Social Media Marketing, through its impact on Brand Image, has a significant influence on student decision-making. An appropriate social media marketing strategy enhances Brand Image, which subsequently encourages students to make favorable educational choices.

Discussion

Word of Mouth Influences Brand Image

Based on the test results, the T-statistic value of 2.671 is greater than 1.96, with a p-value of 0.008, which is less than 0.05. This indicates that Word of Mouth has a significant influence on brand image. Information received through Word of Mouth, such as recommendations and testimonials, has been proven to enhance positive perceptions of the institution, particularly among students at Universitas Darunnajah. According to (Aditya Rahman, 2016), in his study at Telkom University, WOM was found to have a significant positive effect on brand image among students. Similarly, (Kalbuadi et al 2022) found that WOM and brand image significantly influence prospective students' decisions to pursue higher education. (Purwianti and Niawati (2022) also concluded that WOM has a significant positive influence on brand image. (Dam, 2020) demonstrated that electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) significantly affects brand image. (Pourkabirian, Habibian and Pourkabirian, 2021) revealed that eWOM significantly and positively impacts branding, brand image, and brand awareness. These findings confirm that the results of the current study are consistent with previous research, demonstrating a significant influence of Word of Mouth on brand image.

Social Media Marketing Influences Brand Image

The statistical test shows a T-value of 7.452, which is greater than 1.96, and a p-value of 0.000, which is less than 0.05. This means that social media marketing has a significant effect on brand image. Marketing activities conducted through social media, such as the dissemination of engaging content and active interaction, have successfully strengthened brand perception among students at Universitas Darunnajah. According to (Sijabat, Rantung and Mandagi, 2022), social media has a major impact on brand image, with consumers tending to have a more positive perception of brands endorsed by influencers they follow. (Arora, Kumar and Agarwal, 2020) found that social media marketing significantly affects brand image. (Samarah et al, 2022) stated that authentic and active engagement on social media platforms helps companies build stronger brand images. (Peng et al. 2024) noted that

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social media contributes significantly to brand image formation. These studies support the present research, affirming the significant effect of social media marketing on brand image.

Word of Mouth Influences Student Decision

The analysis shows a T-statistic value of 5.878, which exceeds 1.96, and a p-value of 0.000, indicating a significant effect of Word of Mouth on student decision-making. Information from friends, family, or alumni builds trust and helps students in choosing institutions or services. (Keller, 2016) highlighted that WOM significantly affects students' decisions in selecting universities and study programs, as advice from peers or experienced individuals provides students with greater confidence. (Huang & Benyoucef, 2023) noted that WOM spread through social media has an increasing influence on students' decisions, especially concerning the selection of technology products, books, and other services. Social media facilitates the dissemination of WOM, accelerating decision-making. (Brandes, Godes and Mayzlin, 2022) also emphasized that consumer-generated WOM, particularly from fellow students, strongly impacts purchase decisions, especially in choosing campus-related services or products. These findings align with the current study, confirming that Word of Mouth significantly influences student decision-making.

Social Media Marketing Influences Student Decision

With a T-statistic value of $3.607 > 1.96$ and a p-value of $0.000 < 0.05$, social media marketing is proven to significantly affect student decisions. Information presented through social media not only captures attention but also assists students in their decision-making process. According to (Hayes et al, 2021), personalized content and advertising campaigns on social media have a significant positive effect on students' purchasing decisions. Students exposed to relevant and engaging advertisements on social platforms are more likely to purchase products or choose services. (Perera, Nayak and Nguyen, 2023) found that students are strongly influenced by social media marketing campaigns, particularly those involving influencers or peer recommendations. (Galan, Lawley and Clements, 2015) confirmed that social media marketing affects student decision-making. Similarly, (Adebayo et al, 2024) revealed that students are more likely to make purchases after seeing advertisements or influencer recommendations on social media. Informative and educational content is also considered helpful in making better decisions. These results are consistent with the current study, demonstrating a significant influence of social media marketing on students' decision-making.

Brand Image Influences Student Decision

A T-statistic value of 4.890, which exceeds 1.96, and a p-value of 0.000, confirm that brand image significantly affects student decisions. A positive brand image is a crucial factor that encourages students to choose an institution, particularly at Universitas Darunnajah. (Wijanarko and Fachrodji, 2020) confirmed that brand image has a significant effect on students' purchasing decisions. (Hemsley-Brown et al, 2016) emphasized that university brand image strongly influences students in choosing educational institutions, with strong

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brands perceived as offering better education quality and career prospects. (Lubis *et al*, 2023) highlighted the importance of brand trust and brand affect in shaping student decisions. (Wilkins, Balakrishnan and Huisman, 2012) noted that a good brand image, whether for educational institutions or student-used products, directly impacts decision-making. (Saputro and Setyaningrum, 2023) added that brand image significantly influences purchasing decisions among students, particularly regarding technology or food products. These findings support the current study, reinforcing the significant effect of brand image on student decisions.

Word of Mouth Influences Student Decision Through Brand Image

The test results indicate a T-statistic value of $2.189 > 1.96$ and a p-value of $0.029 < 0.05$. This suggests that Word of Mouth indirectly influences student decisions through brand image as a mediating variable. (Hsu & Lin, 2022) found that WOM plays a major role in shaping brand image, which ultimately affects students' decisions in selecting products or services. Positive WOM enhances brand image, increasing the likelihood of purchase. (Snadrou and Haoucha, 2024) found that WOM strengthens a university's brand image and influences students' institutional choices. (Tafolli, Qema and Hameli, 2025) also emphasized the role of WOM in shaping brand image and influencing purchase decisions. (Nurhandayani, Syarief and Najib, 2019) highlighted that WOM is highly influential in building a strong brand image, which then impacts student decisions. Positive reviews from peers or influencers on social media enhance brand awareness and strengthen positive perceptions. These findings are in line with the current study, confirming that Word of Mouth significantly influences student decisions through brand image.

Social Media Marketing Influences Student Decision Through Brand Image

With a T-statistic value of $4.114 > 1.96$ and a p-value of $0.000 < 0.05$, social media marketing is shown to influence student decisions indirectly through brand image. Effective marketing strategies via social media enhance brand perception, which subsequently affects student decision-making. (Sugiartana, Somiartha and Prayitno, 2025) emphasized the role of social media marketing in shaping brand image and influencing student choices of products or services. (Fiaz *et al*, 2019) found that social media helps create a strong brand image among students. Effective use of social platforms fosters stronger emotional connections with students, ultimately influencing their purchasing decisions. (Thornton, 2017) revealed that social media marketing significantly contributes to brand image formation among students, which affects their choices. Successful social media campaigns help brands build a positive image that attracts student engagement. (Song *et al*, 2023) noted a strong connection between social media marketing, brand image, and student purchase intention. A positive brand image shaped through social media increases the likelihood of students choosing that brand. These findings align with the current study, confirming the significant influence of social media marketing on student decisions through brand image.

CONCLUSION

This study investigates the influence of Word of Mouth and Social Media Marketing on students' decisions in choosing a university, with Brand Image serving as a mediating variable, using Universitas Darunnajah as the research context. The findings demonstrate that both Word of Mouth and Social Media Marketing significantly enhance Brand Image and directly influence students' decision-making by providing persuasive and accessible information. Additionally, Brand Image plays a crucial mediating role, strengthening the impact of communication strategies on enrollment choices. From a managerial perspective, these results highlight the importance of leveraging alumni testimonials, implementing strategic and engaging social media campaigns, and maintaining a consistent brand image to attract prospective students. Despite its contributions, the study is limited by the scope of respondents, the exclusion of other potential influencing factors, and reliance solely on quantitative methods. Future research is recommended to broaden the sample population, incorporate variables such as academic reputation and service quality, and adopt a mixed-methods approach to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of student decision-making behaviors.

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