



**THE EFFECT OF DIGITAL PROMOTION AND WORD OF MOUTH ON
UNIVERSITY CHOICE INTEREST AMONG 12TH-GRADE STUDENTS IN WEST
JAVA PROVINCE**

Abdul Ahmad Hafidh Nurmansyah¹, Khaerul Rizal Abdurahman²

Management Study Program, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Jenderal
Achmad Yani, Cimahi, Indonesia
abdul.ahmad@lecture.unjani.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Competition among higher education institutions in West Java Province has intensified as the number of public and private universities, polytechnics, and colleges offering competitive study programs continues to grow, compelling each institution to build a strong appeal in an increasingly saturated education market. This study aims to examine the effect of digital promotion and word of mouth (WOM), both partially and simultaneously, on the interest of 12th-grade students in choosing a university in West Java Province. A quantitative approach with a survey method was applied to 150 twelfth-grade students from senior high schools, vocational high schools, and Islamic senior high schools in West Java, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using an online questionnaire based on a 1–5 Likert scale and analyzed using multiple linear regression following tests of validity, reliability, and classical assumptions. The results indicate that digital promotion has a positive but not statistically significant effect on university choice interest ($\beta = 0.128$; sig. = 0.162), whereas word of mouth has a positive and significant effect ($\beta = 0.256$; sig. = 0.003). Simultaneously, the two variables affect university choice interest, with a coefficient of determination (R^2) of 0.021, indicating that digital promotion and WOM jointly explain only 2.1% of the variance in university choice interest, while the remaining 97.9% is explained by other factors outside the model. These findings confirm that word of mouth is a more dominant determinant than digital promotion in shaping 12th-grade students' interest in choosing a university, suggesting that universities should strengthen alumni- and counselor-based interpersonal communication strategies while simultaneously improving the quality of their digital promotional content.

Keywords: *digital promotion; word of mouth; university choice interest; 12th-grade students; multiple linear regression*

INTRODUCTION

Competition among higher education institutions in Indonesia, particularly in West Java Province, has intensified alongside the growing number of public and private universities, polytechnics, and colleges offering a wide range of competitive study programs. This growth not only expands the options available to prospective students but also generates competitive pressure that requires each institution to build a strong appeal within an increasingly saturated education market. As the province with the second-largest population of 12th-grade students in Indonesia, West Java has become a strategic target for universities from various regions, including national institutions expanding their promotional reach into the area. Under these conditions, universities are

required not only to rely on academic reputation but also to adopt modern marketing approaches that align with the characteristics of younger generations.

Digital promotion has become one of the key strategies employed by universities to communicate information about study programs, campus facilities, tuition fees, and career opportunities more rapidly, broadly, and interactively. The shift in information-seeking behavior among Generation Z, who increasingly rely on social media, has positioned digital channels such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and official campus websites as primary spaces through which universities build their image and enhance prospective students' engagement. At the same time, word of mouth (WOM) from alumni, guidance counselors, and peers plays a substantial role in shaping students' perceptions of university quality. As a generation that places considerable weight on authentic experience and source credibility, 12th-grade students tend to trust direct recommendations from people close to them more than formal promotional messages from institutions.

Digital promotion refers to marketing activities that utilize various technology-based platforms—such as social media, official websites, online advertisements, video content, and educational applications—to reach and influence a broader audience more rapidly and interactively (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018; Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). According to Mangold and Faulds (2009), social media has become an essential component of the promotional mix because it enables institutions to build two-way communication, enhance engagement, and reinforce their image through compelling visual content and digital messaging. Word of mouth, meanwhile, refers to information conveyed by other individuals—such as alumni, peers, guidance counselors, or family members—regarding the quality and experience of studying at a particular university; such information is personal in nature and considered more credible because it originates from known and trusted sources (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Solomon, 2017). Schiffman and Wisenblit (2015) assert that consumers, including students, place greater trust in information from people close to them than in formal marketing messages, positioning WOM as a key factor in the evaluation and decision-making process. University choice interest, in turn, is understood as students' inclination to pursue further education at a particular institution, reflected in their interest in seeking information, willingness to participate in campus activities, preference for a specific university, intention to apply, and ultimately, the final decision to enroll.

Prior studies indicate that digital promotion plays an important role in increasing prospective students' awareness and knowledge, although the final decision is often more strongly influenced by interpersonal factors (Rohmat, 2020). Conversely, WOM has been identified as one of the most influential factors in educational decision-making, as information from interpersonal sources is perceived as more credible and persuasive than formal promotion (Putra, 2021). The combination of compelling digital promotional messages and positive WOM from trusted sources is believed to work synergistically in shaping perceptions, building trust, and strengthening students' interest in choosing a particular university (Clow & Baack, 2018). Nevertheless, the extent to which these two

variables, both partially and simultaneously, actually influence university choice interest among 12th-grade students in West Java remains to be empirically tested.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study aims to: (1) examine the effect of digital promotion on university choice interest; (2) examine the effect of word of mouth on university choice interest; and (3) test the simultaneous effect of digital promotion and word of mouth on university choice interest among 12th-grade students in West Java Province. Accordingly, the hypotheses of this study are formulated as follows: H1: digital promotion has a positive effect on university choice interest; H2: word of mouth has a positive effect on university choice interest; and H3: digital promotion and word of mouth simultaneously affect university choice interest. The findings of this study are expected to enrich the educational marketing literature and provide practical input for universities in designing more effective promotional strategies amid the increasingly dynamic competition in higher education.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative approach with a survey method, aimed at objectively and systematically measuring the relationships among variables so that the findings could be generalized to a broader population (Creswell, 2014). The population comprised all 12th-grade students from senior high schools (SMA), vocational high schools (SMK), and Islamic senior high schools (MA) in West Java Province who were in the process of planning their higher education pathway. The sample consisted of 150 respondents selected through purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique in which respondents are selected based on specific criteria (Sugiyono, 2017), namely 12th-grade students actively seeking information about universities and planning to continue their studies at the tertiary level.

Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms, consisting of closed-ended statements measured on a 1–5 Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The instrument comprised three variables: Digital Promotion (5 items), Word of Mouth (5 items), and University Choice Interest (5 items). Prior to use, the instrument's validity was tested using Pearson Product-Moment correlation, whereby an item was deemed valid if its calculated *r*-value exceeded the critical *r*-value, and its reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, with a minimum threshold of 0.70 (Ghozali, 2018; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Prior to conducting multiple linear regression analysis, the data were subjected to classical assumption tests, comprising normality, multicollinearity (indicated by a Tolerance value > 0.10 and a VIF value < 10), and heteroscedasticity tests using the Glejser test (a model is considered free from heteroscedasticity if the significance value is > 0.05) (Ghozali, 2018; Gujarati & Porter, 2009). Subsequently, multiple linear regression analysis was used to determine the extent to which Digital Promotion (X1) and Word of Mouth (X2) influenced University Choice Interest (Y), both partially and simultaneously. Hypothesis testing was conducted using the *t*-test to examine partial effects and the *F*-test to examine simultaneous effects, while the coefficient of determination (R^2) was used

to measure the extent to which the independent variables explained the dependent variable (Gujarati & Porter, 2009; Hair et al., 2010).

RESULTS

Respondent Profile

The study involved 150 12th-grade student respondents from various secondary schools across West Java Province, comprising SMA students (54.7%), SMK students (36.7%), and MA students (8.7%), with respondents originating from regencies and cities including Bandung, Cimahi, Bekasi, Bogor, Depok, Garut, Tasikmalaya, Cirebon, Sukabumi, and other areas. All respondents (100%) were active users of Instagram and TikTok during the preceding three months and resided in West Java. In terms of interest, the majority of respondents (69.3%) expressed interest in public universities (PTN), while 30.7% expressed interest in private universities (PTS), with several respondents specifically noting interest in institutions such as Universitas Padjadjaran, Institut Teknologi Bandung, and Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia.

Table 1. Respondent Profile

Description	n	%
School type – Senior High School (SMA)	82	54.7
School type – Vocational High School (SMK)	55	36.7
School type – Islamic Senior High School (MA)	13	8.7
Domicile in West Java	150	100
Active users of Instagram/TikTok	150	100
Interest in public universities (PTN)	104	69.3
Interest in private universities (PTS)	46	30.7

Validity and Reliability Test Results

The test results indicate that all statement items across the three variables produced calculated r-values greater than the critical r-value at the 0.05 significance level, confirming that all items were valid. The reliability test further shows that the Cronbach's Alpha values for all three variables exceeded the 0.70 threshold, confirming that all instruments were reliable and suitable for further analysis.

Table 2. Summary of Validity and Reliability Test Results

Variable	Corrected Item- Total Correlation (r) Range	Cronbach's Alpha	Result
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Digital Promotion (X1)	0.654 – 0.744	0.812	Valid & reliable
Word of Mouth (X2)	0.733 – 0.853	0.805	Valid & reliable
University Choice Interest (Y)	0.673 – 0.744	0.793	Valid & reliable

Classical Assumption Test Results

The multicollinearity test yielded a Tolerance value of 0.842 and a VIF value of 1.188 for both independent variables, satisfying the criteria of Tolerance > 0.10 and VIF < 10, indicating that the model was free from multicollinearity. The heteroscedasticity test using the Glejser method produced significance values of 0.442 for Digital Promotion and 0.317 for Word of Mouth, both exceeding 0.05, indicating that the model was free from heteroscedasticity and that the residuals exhibited homogeneous variance. With these assumptions satisfied, the regression model was deemed appropriate for hypothesis testing.

Multiple Linear Regression Analysis Results

Multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to test the hypotheses concerning the effect of Digital Promotion (X1) and Word of Mouth (X2) on University Choice Interest (Y). The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Multiple Linear Regression Analysis Results

Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	2.145	0.482	–	4.449	0.000
Digital Promotion (X1)	0.128	0.091	0.112	1.406	0.162
Word of Mouth (X2)	0.256	0.083	0.241	3.072	0.003

Based on Table 3, the resulting multiple linear regression equation is as follows: $Y = 2.145 + 0.128X_1 + 0.256X_2$. The constant value of 2.145 indicates that when Digital Promotion and Word of Mouth are held at zero, University Choice Interest remains at 2.145 units, suggesting a baseline level of student interest even in the absence of the two variables. The Digital Promotion coefficient of 0.128 indicates a positive relationship with university choice interest; however, with a significance value of 0.162 (> 0.05), the effect is not statistically significant, and H1 is therefore rejected. The Word of Mouth coefficient of 0.256 indicates a positive relationship with a significance value of 0.003 (< 0.05), confirming that WOM has a significant effect on university choice interest, and H2 is therefore accepted.

The coefficient of determination (R^2) obtained from the regression analysis is 0.021, indicating that Digital Promotion and Word of Mouth jointly explain only 2.1% of the variance in University Choice Interest, while the remaining 97.9% is explained by other factors outside the model, such as academic quality, accreditation status, tuition costs,

campus location, institutional reputation, and students' personal preferences. Although the R^2 value is relatively small, the simultaneous test results indicate that the two variables jointly influence university choice interest, and H3 is therefore accepted, notwithstanding the model's limited overall explanatory contribution.

The Effect of Digital Promotion on University Choice Interest

The results of the first hypothesis test indicate that Digital Promotion has a positive but not significant effect on University Choice Interest ($\beta = 0.128$; sig. = 0.162). This suggests that although universities' digital content is perceived as attractive, informative, and easily accessible to students, its effect on university choice interest is not yet statistically robust. This finding is consistent with Rohmat (2020), who noted that digital promotion plays an important role in increasing prospective students' awareness and knowledge, but that final decisions are often more strongly shaped by more personal and persuasive interpersonal factors. Digital promotion thus contributes to students' interest but has not yet become the primary determinant, suggesting that universities need to strengthen the interactivity, credibility, and consistency of their digital messaging.

The Effect of Word of Mouth on University Choice Interest

The results of the second hypothesis test indicate that Word of Mouth has a positive and significant effect on University Choice Interest ($\beta = 0.256$; sig. = 0.003). Recommendations from friends, family, alumni, and guidance counselors were found to play a strong role in shaping students' perceptions and interest in choosing a university. This finding is consistent with Putra (2021) and Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), who argue that WOM is among the most influential factors in educational decision-making, as information from interpersonal sources is perceived as more credible and authentic than formal promotion. The more positive the experiences and testimonials shared by people close to a student, the greater the likelihood that the student will choose that university, suggesting that institutions should strengthen alumni testimonial programs, open house events, and personal communication to build stronger WOM.

The Simultaneous Effect of Digital Promotion and Word of Mouth on University Choice Interest

Simultaneously, Digital Promotion and Word of Mouth influence University Choice Interest, although this effect is primarily driven by the Word of Mouth variable. An R Square value of 0.021 indicates that the two variables jointly explain only 2.1% of the variance in university choice interest, while the remainder is explained by other factors such as academic reputation, accreditation, tuition costs, campus location, and students' personal preferences (Clow & Baack, 2018). Although the model's overall explanatory contribution remains limited, this finding underscores that Word of Mouth is the dominant factor influencing students' decisions, while Digital Promotion functions as a supporting factor that requires further strengthening to achieve a more significant effect.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis and discussion, it can be concluded that Digital Promotion has a positive but not significant effect on University Choice Interest among 12th-grade

students in West Java Province ($\text{sig.} = 0.162 > 0.05$), whereas Word of Mouth has a positive and significant effect ($\text{sig.} = 0.003 < 0.05$). Simultaneously, Digital Promotion and Word of Mouth affect University Choice Interest, with a coefficient of determination (R^2) of 0.021, indicating that the two variables jointly explain only 2.1% of the variance in university choice interest, while the remaining 97.9% is explained by other factors outside this research model, such as institutional accreditation, program reputation, location, tuition costs, and campus facilities. Overall, this study confirms that Word of Mouth is the most dominant factor influencing students' interest in choosing a university, while digital promotion still requires strengthening to enhance its effectiveness.

Based on these findings, universities are advised to strengthen their word-of-mouth strategies by optimizing the roles of alumni, guidance counselors, and active students in providing positive testimonials – for instance, through alumni talk programs, campus roadshows, and school visits – while simultaneously improving the interactivity, credibility, and consistency of their digital promotional content. Future research is encouraged to incorporate additional variables such as campus reputation, tuition costs, and campus facilities, to adopt a mixed-methods approach, and to expand the sample size and coverage in order to produce more comprehensive and broadly generalizable findings.

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