Perceived eWOM and Students' University Enrolment Intentions: The Corporate Image as a Mediator

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out by the two authors. They designed the research methodology, managed and wrote the literature review, collected the primary data, performed the statistical analysis, wrote the findings and recommendations and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

The advancement of internet technologies and the emergence of social media platforms have made the influence of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) more pronounced than ever before on consumers' purchase decisions, especially young consumers who are more engaged with new technologies and social networks. Through social media platforms, young consumers nowadays are always connected to friends, families and organizations on smartphones, tablets or computers and actively look for eWOM before making purchase decisions. This study is aimed at examining the effect of perceived eWOM on the university enrolment intentions by the Saudi high school students mediated by the corporate image of the university. The sample comprised of 133 high school students studying in Saudi high secondary schools. The findings revealed that electronic word of mouth (eWOM) had a significant and positive association with the students' enrolment intentions, and the corporate image mediates this relationship. This research's findings and recommendations can largely help who are in charge of the private and public universities in Saudi Arabia to understand how eWOM shapes the university choices of students.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In a marketing context, the word of mouth (WOM) refers to talking about products, services and brands in a normal day to day conversation of consumers [1]. Marketing scholars since 1960's have agreed that word of mouth plays an important role in shaping purchases intentions [2]. Since the information about products, services and brands are obtained through friends and family members who have no commercial intent, consumers consider word of mouth more reliable than commercial advertisements [1,3]. The advancement of internet technologies and the emergence of social media platforms have made the influence of word of mouth more pronounced than ever before on purchase intentions of consumers [4]. EWOM, which stands for electronic word of mouth, refers to positive or negative statements made about products, brands, organizations and services which are propagated online electronically on the internet [4]. In contrast to traditional word of mouth (WOM), the electronic word of mouth (eWOM) does not perish with the conversation [5]. Posts, text messages, online reviews and comments on social networking websites, like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, remain there online and can be shared among users publicly [6,5]. eWOM unlike traditional WOM spreads quickly and widely on the internet to as many people as one can imagine at a click of a button [7]. Advancement in internet technologies have made it possible for consumers to be always connected to friends, families and organizations through smartphones, computers, tablets etc. making eWOM and its effect on purchase intentions a keen area of research for marketing professionals [4,5,8].

Studies have reported that eWOM indeed has both positive as well as negative consequences on purchase intention of consumers [9,10,11]. Findings have indicated that negative eWOM poses a greater influence than positive EWOM on purchase intentions and, if ignored, it proves detrimental to organizations in the form of lost sales and tarnished corporate image [12]. The effect of EWOM on purchase intentions has been studied greatly across various industries like travel, electronics, hospitality, automobiles, apparels and entertainment [13,14,9]. In education sector, although the effects of electronic word of mouth on students have been studied in evaluating performance of teachers, course evaluations and motives of students in using word of mouth on social media [15,16], there is a limited number of studies on what role does eWOM play in selection of universities for higher studies among higher secondary school students. Thus, this paper seeks to study the relationship of eWOM and university enrolment by high school students residing in Saudi Arabia.

More than 30% of the total population in Saudi Arabia were under 20 years of age in 2016 according to a latest demographic survey [17]. In a report published on Social Media usage in Middle East, Radcliffe & Bruni [18] found that Saudi youths are heavy users of social media like Snapchat, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube etc. Saudi Arabia enjoys the highest growth rate in the usage of social media than any other county in the world [18]. In general, Saudis value social relationships among families, relatives, and friends and like to remain always connected through social media platforms [19]. Steffes & Burgee [15] in a study conducted on USA college students about the factors considered in choosing professors and courses found that students perceive electronic word of mouth more reliable than traditional person to person word of mouth and seek primary information actively through eWOM to shape their service choice and enrolment decisions.

In making choices for universities to study, students go through a decision-making process [20]. Today's digital era has made it easily possible for students to access online recommendations, evaluations of professors, courses and general opinions about colleges by graduate and postgraduate students studying in a university [16]. Studies have demonstrated that the eWOM provided by graduate and postgraduate students is influential among high school students in the pre-purchase phase or search of information phase of the student decision making process in choosing which university to enroll in [21,22]. Since Saudi Arabia has a great young student population who are active in various types of social networking sites and value relationships as well, this lays a fertile ground for examining the relationship between perceived eWOM and selection of university for further studies. The finding of this study is expected to public and private universities. In this competitive market on university enrollment, this

study finding may help the competitive university to develop its marketing strategies to improve their corporate image on social media, taking into account that the researchers did not find any similar studies regarding the scope of this research. Thus, the main objective of this paper is to examine this relationship in depth by considering the association of perceived eWOM factors namely: eWOM credibility, eWOM quality, eWOM quantity with choice and university enrolment intentions from student's perspective. This study will also examine the mediating role played by corporate image of universities between perceived eWOM factors and choice and enrolment intentions among Saudi high school students who are active on social networking sites.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Enrolment (Purchase) Intention

As a whole, purchase intention refers to the consumer's willingness to buy a product or a service in future [23]. Purchase intention is a key variable in learning and understanding about the effectiveness of promotions undertaken by any marketing entity [24]. Most of the studies use purchase intention in order to measure effectiveness of advertisements [25]. However, in today's digital and "always connected with friends and families age", studies also use purchase intention to understand and measure the effectiveness of electronic word of mouth [25]. Purchase intention is an important variable in judging the outcome of EWOM [10]. In a study conducted by Dehghani & Tumer [26], electronic word of mouth was found to be of substantial influence in shaping purchasing decisions for products and services.

For secondary school students who intend to enroll in a university refers to bearing tuition, fees, books and general academic expenses of a university [27,21,22,28]. Previous researchers have found links between electronic word of mouth (eWOM) and enrolment intention for high school students who aspire for admission in universities for higher education [27,29,30]. In a study conducted by Bataineh [27] in Jordan, the eWOM was significantly found to shape intentions of high school students for choosing a university for higher education in Jordan. In Saudi Arabia the effect of eWOM on how secondary school students make a choice for a university remains largely unexplored. Secondary

school students of Saudi Arabia are mostly heavy users of social networking sites and remain always connected with friends and family [18]. As Saudi students use social media, the effect of electronic word of mouth is appropriate and relevant in this study context. The university enrolment intention, which means here the secondary school students' choices for universities for higher education, represents a key dependent variable in the study. The university enrolment intention will help in revealing effectiveness and influence of eWOM on students' decision-making process for seeking an admission to a university.

2.2 Perceived eWOM

In today's digital era, eWOM plays an influential role in shaping purchasing decisions [2]. Hennig-Thurau et al. [4] defined electronic word of mouth (eWOM) as any positive or negative statements made by users for prospective users of products and services on the internet. Previous studies in hospitality, automobile and electronics context reveal that positive statements lead to favorable purchase intentions and harness good corporate image [31,9,32]. Positive ewom is a boon for companies because it reduces advertising costs and increases sales [32]. In some studies, negative eWOM proves to be detrimental of the organization's sales and corporate image [12]. According to Nam et al. [11] consumers tend to remember negative eWOMs more than positive eWOMs. However, negative statements about a product or service doesn't necessarily always result in detrimental effects on purchase intentions [11]. Similarly, positive statements alone do not always necessarily lead to favorable purchase intentions because on the internet anybody is free to write reviews, posts, comments on products and services which can sometimes be biased and of incorrect evaluation [33]. Selecting a university for pursuing higher education requires high involvement in the decision making process by students as it involves paying for tuition, fees, books and general expenses for academic purposes [22]. Students look for information to be credible, of good quality and quantity in electronic word of mouth [27,22].

A study conducted on Taiwanese students through in-depth interviews by Yang & Mutum [21] suggests that students value quality and truthfulness of EWOM in shaping their decision of choosing a university. In a study conducted in Jordan by Bataineh [27], a university's corporate

image was found to mediate the relationships between eWOM and university enrolment intention of high school students. If a university has a good corporate image and information perceived through EWOM is credible, of good quality and quantity, it facilitates purchase decision making of students [27,22]. Previous studies [27] have investigated effects of eWOM from three angles of eWOM on university enrolment intentions of students namely: eWOM credibility, eWOM quality and eWOM quantity. When talking about eWOM, these three factors of perceived eWOM and their relationships with enrolment (purchase) intention are mostly studied by marketing researchers [27,22].

2.2.1 eWOM credibility and purchase intentions

Electronic word of mouth credibility simply refers to how much a consumer believes the information obtained through eWOM to be true and reliable [34]. The internet does not restrict anyone from posting reviews, comments about products and services on social networking sites [35]. Students also can post comments about their universities in public on social networking sites, but the question lies in how eWOM is perceived to be credible [21,22]. Too much positive or too much negative reviews posted online are not considered credible by consumers because too positive doesn't talk about the shortcomings and too negative may come from prejudice or hidden personal interests [36,11]. EWOM credibility is of paramount importance only when it is perceived to be credible and leads to favorable purchase intention [29]. Regarding the factors that affect choosing professors and courses in USA college students, Steffes & Burgee [15] found that students perceive electronic word of mouth more reliable than traditional person to person word of mouth and seek primary information actively through eWOM to shape their service choice and enrolment decisions.

Since, Saudi youth value social ties [19], they will consider the information from the nears and dears more credible on social media rather than open public reviews and opinions. A study among college students in USA by Valenzuela et al. [37] revealed that social trust increases with time on Facebook when users add contacts who are friends of friends. Therefore, posts, reviews, and messages from friends and a friend of friends on social networking sites of high school students studying in Saudi universities will be

presumed to be credible electronic word of mouth in Saudi Arabian context. Thus, the first hypothesis is proposed as:

H1: There is a statistically positive association of eWOM credibility with students' university enrolment intentions

2.2.2 eWOM quality and purchase intentions

The quality of electronic word of mouth can be understood as how appealing the information that is provided to consumers [30]. In a study on consumer products, Park et al. [30] reported a positive association of eWOM quality with purchase intention. Another study conducted on Taiwanese students through in-depth interviews by Yang & Mutum [21] suggests that students value quality and truthfulness of EWOM in shaping their decision of choosing a university. When consumers are in the pre-purchase stage, they seek certain type of information or set criteria in their minds [38]. Consumers expect the information provided through eWOM to be relevant, helpful, clear and simple to comprehend [38]. If the eWOM is irrelevant and complex to understand, it would hardly make any difference in consumer's decision making process [28]. As high school students make choices of prospective universities by communicating with students studying in universities, the quality of information matters [28]. Hence, for Saudi high school students to make decisions about higher education, the information provided through eWOM should be perceived as relevant, clear and easily understood so that it can aid students in the selection of the prospective university. Thus, the second hypothesis is proposed as:

H2: There is a statistically positive association of eWOM quality with students' university enrolment intentions

2.2.3 eWOM quantity and purchase intentions

EWOM quantity simply refers to the scale of information available on the internet [39]. Park et al. [30] in a study on consumer products found that the number of reviews of a product positively correlates with purchase intention. In a study conducted on undergraduate students, Sher and Lee [40] found that students when exposed to a product review website, they looked only at the number of product reviews to shape their purchase intention. Park et al. [30] also found that consumers who are less involved in the decision making process refer to the number of

positive or negative reviews of a product only. However, for high involvement decision making, consumers looked both for quality as well as quantity of eWOM. Students, during their decision-making process about higher education, also seek information on a greater scale through electronic word of mouth besides checking university websites [21,22,28]. As universities are primarily service organizations and their products being intangible [19], thus, Saudi students will ask for greater information from the ones who are consuming educational experience of studying in various universities. Thus, the third hypothesis is proposed as:

H3: There is a statistically positive association of eWOM quantity with students' university enrolment intentions

2.3 Corporate Image as a Mediator between eWOM and Purchase Intentions

Previous studies in hospitality, automobile and electronics context reveal that positive statements lead to favorable purchase intentions and harness good corporate image [31,9,32]. According to Gray [41], corporate image refers to the general perception of an organization in public. The level of knowledge held in the consumer's memory of the organization's image helps consumers in reducing risk associated with the purchase [41]. Torlak et al. [10] found that the corporate image mediated relationship between eWOM and purchase intention in Turkish students when considering purchase of cellphones. A university cares about good corporate image, so that it can attract students of great caliber [42]. In a study conducted in Romania by Avram [42], it was found that when students had good experience in their universities, their willingness to promote their university through word of mouth was high. Promotion of universities through word of mouth not only helps in enhancing corporate image but also helps in attracting future prospective students [42]. In another study conducted in Jordan by Bataineih [27], corporate image was found to significantly mediate the relationships between eWOM and intention to join a university among Jordanian high school students. Damayanti and Subriadi [43] revealed a positive relationship between eWOM and the university image. Since, there is a limited number of studies in Saudi Arabia that examine corporate image's mediating effect, this paper will examine corporate image of various universities as

mediating variable between eWOM and students' enrolment intention of universities. Thus, the fourth hypothesis is proposed as:

H4: The associations of eWOM credibility, eWOM quality and eWOM quantity with students' university enrolment intentions are mediated by the university's corporate image

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Population and Sample

The population for this study was all secondary school students studying in Riyadh city of Saudi Arabia. The sample for the study was convenience non-probability sampling method, represented by 133 secondary school students who responded to the study's data collection questionnaire. Secondary schools in Riyadh were selected to be the scope of this study because Riyadh city represents about 25% of the total population in Saudi Arabia, and the Secondary school students in Riyadh represent 23% of the total secondary school students in Saudi Arabia's administrative regions [17].

3.2 Measurement

The survey method was used to collect the primary data needed to test the study hypotheses. The questionnaire was distributed both manually and electronically. Only students who were active and used social media were selected. Specifically, students who had an active account on any one of these social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram were selected for this study. A filtering question was used to reveal if the respondent had an active account on the above-mentioned social networking sites. The independent variables eWOM credibility, eWOM quality and eWOM quantity were measured by adapting Bataineh [27] scales. Corporate image and university enrolment intention were measured using scales of Chen et al. [24]. All scales were adapted to suit the Saudi universities context and culture. The variables were measured using a 5-pointLikertscaleranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

3.3 Procedure

The survey responses were coded in the SPSS statistical software for data analysis. The analysis begins with descriptive analysis of the sample. Content and face validity was conducted by some marketing academicians and students

before distributing the questionnaire to check initially whether the scales are measuring the intended dimensions and in obvious articulation. A back translation from Arabic to English was also done to be sure that the meaning of each item is the same as the original scales. Exploratory Factor analysis was conducted first to test the sample adequacy, and second, with AVE and discriminant validity, on the data collected to test the scales construct validity. The reliability of the measures is checked by Cronbach Alpha and composite reliability after factor analysis. Lastly, after checking the reliability, the hypothesis of our study was tested using multiple regression analysis.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Sample Characteristics

From the initial analysis, as shown in Table 1, the sample exhibited highest users of Twitter 52.6%, followed by Instagram 23.3% and YouTube 21.1%. Facebook was the least used representing 3% of the study respondents. Most

of the respondents (72.9%) accessed their social media accounts more than 5 times per day. Only 3% of the respondents accessed their accounts once a day, so it can be clearly inferred that the young Saudi high school students are active on social media sites. The most preferred activities of the respondents were posting comments 44.4%, followed by searching for products and services 26.3% and chatting 23.3% on social networking sites. Making new friends was the least preferred activity 6% on the social media of the respondents. The table clearly shows that the students engage in reading online reviews and comments about products and services. It is also evident that 51.9% of the respondents had less than 5 friends who were studying in various universities in Riyadh. 25.6% of the respondents had more than 11 friends followed by 22.6% which had more than 6 but less than 10 friends. It can be inferred that the respondents of the secondary school students have friends online elder to them who are studying in various universities in Riyadh. Lastly, the sample consisted mostly of male secondary school students 97.7%.

Table1. Sample characteristics

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
What is the most activity you usually do on social networking sites?				
Facebook	4	3.0	3.0	3.0
Twitter	70	52.6	52.6	55.6
YouTube	28	21.1	21.1	76.7
Instagram	31	23.3	23.3	100.0
How often do you visit this social networking site per day?				
1.00	4	3.0	3.0	3.0
2.00	6	4.5	4.5	7.5
3.00	12	9.0	9.0	16.5
4.00	14	10.5	10.5	27.1
5.00	97	72.9	72.9	100.0
What is the most activity you usually do on social networking sites?				
Chatting	31	23.3	23.3	23.3
Posting Comments	59	44.4	44.4	67.7
Making New Friends	8	6.0	6.0	73.7
Searching products and Services	35	26.3	26.3	100.0
Roughly, how many university students do you know from your contacts on your social networking site?				
1 - 5	69	51.9	51.9	51.9
6 -10	30	22.6	22.6	74.4
11-15	34	25.6	25.6	100.0
Gender				
Male	130	97.7	97.7	97.7
Female	3	2.3	2.3	100.0

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation
eWOM credibility	133	1.20	5.00	3.1263	.78334
eWOM quality	133	1.00	5.00	3.3233	.64534
eWOM quantity	133	1.00	5.00	3.4787	.79281
Corporate image	133	1.13	5.00	3.6053	.66445
University enrolment intention	133	1.00	5.00	3.3064	.88046

Table 3. KMO and Bartlett's test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.768
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1411.264
	df	276
	Sig.	.000

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

The responses of the variables of our study were coded as "1" for "Strongly Disagree", "2" for "Disagree", "3" as "Neutral", "4" for "Agree" and "5" for "Strongly agree". Table 2 shows the mean values of the respective variables of this study. All the variables for electronic word of mouth have Mean values above 3, which indicates that the electronic word of mouth is perceived to be credible, of good quality and quantity. Most of the respondents agree that there is an overwhelming quantity of electronic word of mouth about universities available in the form of reviews, comments and recommendations in the social media as the Mean is 3.47. Also, presence of perceived corporate images of universities is evident from the Table 6 below as it has a mean value of "3.6" which indicates most of the respondents agree that they have some kind of overall perception built of universities. Lastly, secondary school students do keep an intention of getting admission to prospective universities which are talked about on the social media as their mean is reported "3.30" leaning towards agreement.

4.3 Validity and Reliability

Since the scales are adapted from prior studies, exploratory factor analysis was employed using principle component analysis to confirm whether the scales are measuring the same dimensions which are intended to be measured. The overall Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) is seen to ".768" from Table 3 which is greater than the acceptable range of .7 suggested by Kaiser [44]. The individual measures for all the five variables reported KMO above .7. The p value of Bartlett's test of sphericity is less than .05 (.000<.05) and thus indicates that the data can be factorized.

Table 4 shows the factor loadings of each of the study five constructs. According to Fornell and Larcker [45], the average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability(CR) should be above than .5 and .6. For all of the constructs the AVE can be seen above .5 except for corporate image ".49" and CR well above .6 for all the constructs. Fornell & Larcker [45] also suggest if an AVE value is less than .5 it can be accepted but with CR higher than .6, in our case the CR for corporate image is ".88" far above .6 and hence can be accepted. DeVellis [46] and Kline [47] suggest the higher the number of Cronbach alpha greater the internal consistency, however both are of the opinion .6 can be used as an acceptable threshold. All the variables reported higher Cronbach alpha greater than .6 which can be seen in the Table 4.

To be further sure that construct validity is not violated, check for any possible violation of discriminant validity is needed. John and Benet-Martinez [48] suggest the criteria for checking discriminant validity is that the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) should be greater than the correlations with the other constructs of a particular construct. Employing John & Benet-Martinez method [48], Table 5 shows the respective squared AVE values of each construct and their correlations with each other. The square roots of all the AVE values are clearly seen well above the individual correlations of constructs presented in rows and columns. Thus, it could be concluded that the measures are indeed distinct and well discriminant. According, the scales can thus be considered as valid and reliable. It is now possible to proceed to test hypotheses of the study using regression analysis.

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Table 4. Standardized factor loadings, Cronbach alpha, AVE & CR

Constructs	Items	Factor loadings	AVE	CR
eWOM credibility Alpha (.79)	Most contacts on my social networking site can be trusted	.704	.55	.85
	I feel confident about having discussions with the contacts on my social networking site	.696		
	The contacts on my social networking site will do everything within their capacity to help others	.732		
	My contacts on my social networking site always offer honest opinions	.787		
	I can believe in the contacts on my social networking site	.770		
eWOM quality Alpha (.78)	The online reviews/comments provided by university students on my social networking site are clear	.758	.62	.86
	The online reviews/comments provided by university students on my social networking site are helpful	.848		
	The online reviews/comments provided by university students on my social networking site have sufficient reasons supporting the opinions	.845		
	Overall, the quality of each online reviews/comments provided by university students on my social networking site is high	.683		
eWOM quantity Alpha (.62)	The number of online reviews/comments provided by university students is large, inferring that the university is popular	.630	.57	.79
	The quantity of online reviews/comments provided by university students is great, inferring that the university is trendy	.844		
	Highly ranking and recommendations, inferring that the university provides high quality services	.783		
Corporate image Alpha (.85)	The university discussed in the online reviews/comments is widely-known	.669	.49	.88
	The university discussed in the online reviews/comments has a good physical appearance	.716		
	The university discussed in the online reviews/comments always involve in social works	.714		
	The university discussed in the online reviews/comments is well liked by students	.681		
	The university discussed in the online reviews/comments has a distinguish image from others	.749		
	The university discussed in the online reviews/comments has a deep experience in the market	.672		
	The university discussed in the online reviews/comments is stable	.744		
	The university discussed in the online reviews/comments is trustworthy	.656		
University enrolment intentions Alpha (.77)	After reading online reviews/comments, provided by university students it makes me desire to join this university	.697	.58	.85
	I intend to seek more reviews/comments provided by university students on my social networking site	.782		
	I intend to visit the university discussed in the online reviews/comments	.780		
	In the future, I will consider the university discussed in the online reviews/comments as my first choice	.786		

Table 5. Discriminant validity

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5
1 eWOM Credibility	**.74**				
2 eWOM Quality	.292	**.78**			
3 eWOM Quantity	.084	.265	**.75**		
4 Corporate Image	.215	.429	.575	**.70**	
5 University enrolment Intention	.277	.330	.355	.467	**.76**

5. RESULTS

According to Baron and Kenny [49] the mediation effect is tested in 4 separate regressions. Employing Baron & Kenny's method [49], the 1st step begins with using regression analysis to test for significant a relationship between perceived eWOM and corporate image. According to Baron and Kenny [49], if the independent variable is significantly related to the mediator, then it is possible to proceed to the next step otherwise the mediation is said to fail if the relationship is insignificant. Table 6 shows a significant relationship between eWOM and corporate image ($R2 = .291$), F (1, 131) = 53.65, ($p < .05$). Now, it is possible to proceed to the 2nd step which includes testing the relationship between corporate image and purchase intention.

Table 7 shows that the 2nd regression analysis of the relationship between corporate image and purchase intention is significant ($R2 = .218$), F (1, 131) = 36.59, ($p < .05$). Now, it is possible to proceed to the 3rd step suggested by Baron & Kenney [49]; running the regression analysis between eWOM credibility, eWOM quality, eWOM quantity as independent variables predicting the students' university enrolment intention as a dependent variable to test the study hypotheses.

As evident from the regression model summary presented in Table 8, all the hypotheses H1, H2, and H3 are supported. The multiple regression model statistically significantly predicted the university's enrolment intention of students, F (3, 129) = 12.19, $p < .05$, $R2 = .221$. All the

Table 6. Regression model summary for eWOM and corporate image

Model	R	R square	Adjusted R square	Std. error of the estimate	F	Sig
1	.539	.291	.285	.56179	53.645	.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), Electronic word of mouth

Model		Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. error	Beta		
1	**(Constant)**	**1.338**	**.313**		**4.272**	**.000**
	Electronic word of mouth	.690	.094	.539	7.324	.000

a. Dependent variable: Corporate image

Table 7. Regression model for corporate image and university enrolment intention

Model	R	R square	Adjusted R square	Std. error of the estimate	F	Sig
1	.467	.218	.212	.78138	36.597	.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), Corporate image

Model		Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.074	.375		2.862	.005
	CORPORATE IMAGE	.619	.102	.467	6.050	**.000**

a. Dependent variable: University enrolment intentions

Table 8. Regression model summary for H1, H2 and H3

Model	R	R square	Adjusted R square	Std. error of the estimate	F	Sig
1	.470	.221	.203	.78608	12.199	.000

Predictors: (Constant), eWOM credibility, eWOM quality, eWOM quantity

Model		Unstandardized coefficients		Standardizedt coefficients		Sig.	Collinearity statistics	
		B	Std. error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	.619	.454		1.364	.175		
	eWOM CREDIBILITY	.219	.091	.195	2.403	.018	.915	1.093
	eWOM QUALITY	.269	.115	.197	2.348	.020	.857	1.168
	eWOM QUANTITY	.318	.090	.287	3.556	.001	.930	1.076

a. Dependent Variable: University enrolment intentions

Table 9. Regression model summary for H4

Model	R	R square	Adjusted R square	Std. error of the estimate	F	Sig
1	.524	.274	.252	.76160	12.10	.000

Predictors: (Constant), Corporate image, eWOM credibility, eWOM quality, eWOM quantity

Model		Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	T	Sig.	Collinearity statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	.222	.458		.485	.629		
	Corporate image	.403	.131	.304	3.070	.003	.579	1.728
	eWOM credibility	.187	.089	.167	2.101	.038	.902	1.108
	eWOM quality	.157	.117	.115	1.344	.181	.773	1.294
	eWOM quantity	.151	.102	.136	1.474	.143	.666	1.501

a. Dependent VARIABLE: University enrolment intentions

independent variables eWOM Credibility, eWOM Quality and eWOM Quantity significantly predict students' university enrolment Intention. The tolerance value is <1 and VIF value is <10 suggesting there is no evidence of multicollinearity. The sig value of all the three variables can be seen less than the level of significance .05 (.018<.05, .020 <.05, .001 <.05), hence all are significant. Finally, it is possible now to proceed the fourth and the last step suggested by Baron and Kenny [49], testing the mediation of corporate image on the relationship between eWOM Credibility, eWOM Quality and eWOM Quantity and the purchase intention to join the university.

Hypothesis H4 about the mediation effect of corporate image on the associations of eWOM credibility, eWOM quality and eWOM quantity with purchase intentions supported. Consistent with prior studies, the corporate image of the university clearly plays a mediating role between electronic word of mouth credibility, quality, quantity and purchase intention. Table 9 shows the tolerance value is <1 and VIF value is <10

again suggesting there is no evidence of multicollinearity. The corporate image is significant as its p value = .003 (.003<.05) which is less than the significance level. Full mediation can be seen for independent variables eWOM quality and eWOM quantity by corporate image with purchase intention because both of them -as suggested by Baron & Kenny [49]-have got insignificant from being statistically significant when corporate image is introduced in the model (eWOM quality p = .18 and eWOM quantity p =.143). Corporate image partially mediates the relationship between eWOM credibility and purchase intention as the Beta coefficient decreased from .219 to .187 and p value increased from .018 to .038 after introducing the corporate image in the model.

6. DISCUSSION

The results are mostly in agreement with prior studies conducted in different parts of the world, e.g. by Torlak et. al. [10]. The results clearly indicate that the effect of eWOM is more pronounced than thought of on university

enrolment intention of young Saudi high school students in the context of acquiring higher education. The study reported that electronic word of mouth (eWOM) has a significant and positive relationship with the intention of enrolling at a university for higher studies among Saudi high school students. This research can largely help persons in charge of private and public universities to understand how eWOM shapes choices of university among Saudi students. The information obtained through eWOM was found to be credible significantly by Saudi high school students and this can be because the Saudis overall value social ties and believe in helping each other by providing their opinions about their experience of studying in various universities. As previous studies have indicated [30,27], high involvement decision making demands for both eWOM quality and quantity, in this study Saudi students also look for eWOM quality and eWOM quantity, as it is a life changing event choosing a university for higher education.

Regarding the mediating role of brand image on the relationship between eWOM and Purchase intention, previous studies (e.g. Jalilvand) found that brand image is a mediator [9]. The current study found that corporate image of universities did mediate relationships fully between eWOM quality and eWOM quantity and partially for eWOM credibility with purchase intention. Corporate image along with eWOM quality and eWOM quantity aids in decision making among high school students. A good corporate image corresponded with positive eWOM quality and eWOM quantity will make decision making simple for high school students, validating a study by Damayanti and Subriadi [43] who found that eWOM is a path to build the image of the university. The reason why corporate image partially mediated eWOM credibility and enrolment intention in this study may be attributed to the student selectivity which makes them not in full agreement with is said about the universities because comments and reviews cannot be said to be always free from personal prejudice.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND MARKETING IMPLICATIONS

Social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter have become a source of information for developing marketing strategy. Consumer stake information of eWOM more credible than formal sources. This could be attributed to the consumer's belief that this information is more experiential and from non-beneficiaries. The

trend of the previous studies is a positive association between eWOM and the consumer choice, which is also demonstrated by this study. In this study, electronic word of mouth was found clearly influencing decisions of Saudi high school students in choosing universities for higher education. This means that the information exchanged in social media is of great benefit to marketers in enhancing the corporate image.

The genuine grievances of university students can be addressed by scanning and responding to their messages on social media platforms, so that the possible spread of negative eWOM is kept in check. Active presence of universities needs to be maintained on the social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, twitter, YouTube etc. which are used by students heavily. Moreover, universities can promote their achievements, satisfaction of students with quality education and much more on social media platforms, so that efforts are directed towards genuine positive eWOM of universities on the internet.

The universities in Saudi Arabia need to take the influence of eWOM into cognizance. The universities may need to devote an information technology section in university's marketing departments which scans the social media platforms for negative electronic word of mouth on a regular basis. It is necessary to scan and look for negative electronic word of mouth as numerous researches in the past have suggested negative electronic word mouth to be more dangerous and detrimental for university enrolment intentions of students. Social media provide platforms for grievances, genuine criticisms, and dissatisfaction for students. The comments on social media can also help universities develop their products and educational environment including: admission criteria and procedures, curricula, educational facilities, extracurricular activities, and any other dimension of the marketing strategies in universities as education service providers. Consumer behavior studies looking in social media sites could be useful for marketing strategy planning.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

One limitation of this study is the less inclusion of female secondary school students in the study sample, this is attributed to the non-probability sampling method that adopted in the study.

Future research should include females as part of the target market for university so as to check for any possible differences in effect of eWOM on their desire to choose and enroll in a specific university. Also, this study could not look in the differences between traditional word of mouth and electronic word of mouth on students' intentions to enroll in universities. therefore, future research could be conducted to examine these differences. Additionally, the study relied on a convenience (non-probability) sampling method, which limits the randomness of responses. A cluster sample suits such type of research to be representative to the target population.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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