Word of Mouth as a Mediator between Ethnic Identification, Brand Image, and College Selection Decisions: An Empirical Investigation of Private Universities in Medan City, Indonesia

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Abstract. This study examines the mediating role of Word of Mouth (WOM) in the relationship between ethnic identification, brand image, and college selection decisions in the context of private universities in Medan City, Indonesia. Drawing on data collected from 313 students using a questionnaire, the authors employ structural equation modeling (SEM) with Smart PLS to test the hypothesized relationships. The findings reveal that ethnic identification and brand image have significant direct effects on WOM, which in turn has a strong influence on college selection decisions. Moreover, WOM mediates the relationships between ethnic identification, brand image, and college selection decisions. The study contributes to the literature by highlighting the importance of WOM in shaping college choice decisions and provides practical implications for private universities seeking to leverage ethnic identification and brand image to attract prospective students. The authors discuss the limitations of the study and suggest avenues for future research.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Image, WOM, Choice Decision

1. Introduction

In order to thrive in the competitive commercial landscape, higher education institutions must effectively showcase their whole capabilities. In the present day, the reputation and perception of a university brand are extremely important and serve as the main asset for entrepreneurs in the education industry (Martin & Nasib, 2021). The university's characteristics are accurately portrayed via a strong brand image (Haryani et al., 2023). Nevertheless, establishing a higher education institution poses significant challenges for universities, particularly in light of the growing rivalry from other academic institutions (Aditi et al., 2022). Higher education institutions are today experiencing heightened competition and rising expectations from the community for high-quality education that prioritizes the value for service users. As a result, there is significant pressure on these institutions to respond promptly and properly.According to reference (Munandar et al., 2022).

The service marketing approach of a higher education institution has an impact on students' choices to pursue higher education (Jabbar et al., 2022). The college selection process involves the decision-making process of selecting a higher education school to continue additional studies after finishing secondary education (Idris et al., 2020). This process include assessing several factors such as the reputation of the institution, the range of study programs offered, the financial implications, the geographical location, the facilities provided, the academic atmosphere, and personal preferences. Selecting a college is a crucial milestone in an individual's educational journey, since it will greatly influence their academic development, social connections, and future career opportunities (Pratama, 2022).

The decision of students to enroll in a university have significant implications for the future of these potential pupils (Harahap et al., 2021). Errors in selecting a college will undoubtedly have an adverse effect on the future of potential new students. If the prospective student lacks the requisite expertise and information to appropriately evaluate the benefits of each university, this condition might provide a substantial obstacle (Valks et al., 2020). The university recognizes the significance of the college selection process, as it feels that a higher number of potential new students who express interest in visiting will contribute to the university's long-term viability (DeWinter et al., 2023).

Currently, private colleges engage in marketing endeavors that encompass all members of their academic staff, ranging from lecturers to alumni. Furthermore, universities persist in enhancing their instructional facilities (Toledo & Martínez, 2020). We want to improve the marketing strategy's capacity to recruit new pupils. The participation of academic staff, lecturers, and alumni is believed to be capable of bolstering prospective students' confidence in selecting the right college (Eli & Hamou, 2022).

The strong demand from potential new students for private colleges is a lucrative commercial opportunity for those looking to build new private institutions (Effendi et al., 2023). However, new institutions continue to face challenges, including the difficulty of word-of-mouth advertising. The user's text is (Hapsoro & Hafidh, 2020) Word-of-mouth promotion is widely regarded as highly successful due to its reliance on interpersonal trust. Individuals are more inclined to place faith in recommendations from acquaintances rather than promotions conveyed through advertising or other forms of media. The efficacy of this process in shaping purchase decisions or other choices is considerable, as it relies on authentic experiences and individual viewpoints (Nurunnisha et al., 2021).

Empirical evidence demonstrates that word-of-mouth exerts a direct impact on the college selection process. Currently, many universities are exerting significant efforts to implement marketing strategies, particularly in the realm of education, with the aim of enhancing the quality of education and improving educational facilities. Universities believe the word-of-mouth technique to be the most suitable and cost-effective method for generating interest among potential new students.

According to the available statistics on the quantity of private institutions, particularly in Medan City, there are a minimum of 15 universities. The universities are listed as follows:

Table 1. List of Private Universities in Medan City

No	University Name	Number of students
1	Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara	24.170
2	Universitas Prima Indonesia	20.039
3	Universitas Pembangunan Panca Budi	23.486
4	Universitas Medan Area	12.396
5	Universitas HKBP Nommensen	12.666
6	Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara	9.924
7	Universitas Potensi Utama	8.232
8	Universitas Muslim Nusantara Al-Wasliyah	5.602
9	Universitas Methodist Indonesia	5.291
10	Universitas Harapan	5.031
11	Universitas Darma Agung	4.326
12	Universitas Dharmawangsa	3.694
13	Universitas Mikroskil	3.468
14	Universitas Battuta	1.524
15	Universitas Murni Teguh	879

Source: PTS, Data processed by researchers, 2023

Based on the above information, there are presently 15 private institutions vying for prospective students. The present circumstances in Medan City exhibit a significant degree of ethnic diversity, and the populace possesses a pronounced inclination towards pursuing higher education at a university. According to statistics obtained from the Central Bureau of Statistics of Medan City in 2023, the information is as follows:

Table 2: Number of Ethnicities in North Sumatra

No	Ethnicity	Percentage
1	Jawa	33,4%
2	Toba	22,3%
3	Mandailing	9,5%
4	Nias	7,1%
5	Melayu	6,0%
6	Karo	5,5%
7	Angkola	4,1%
8	Tionghoa	2,7%
9	Minang	2,6%
10	Simalungun	2,4%
11	Aceh	1,0%
12	Pakpak	0,8%
13	Suku lain	2,6%

Source: Kompas Daily, 2023

The chart above indicates that all 13 nationalities in Medan City, namely potential new students, have a strong desire to choose the most outstanding university for their future. One's ethnic identification plays a significant role in the decision-making process while selecting a university. Ethnic identity may shape an individual's perspectives on education and certain cultural norms, which may prioritize higher education or stress the significance of selecting certain majors that are deemed essential within that ethnic group.

Previous study findings indicate that ethnic identification exerts a substantial influence on the college selection process (S. M. Dam & Dam, 2021). Nevertheless, research (Arifin et al., 2020) indicates that brand image does not play a substantial role in the decision-making process while selecting a college. Certain ethnic groups may exhibit a predilection for colleges or study programs that

possess a specific level of status within their community. Individuals may engage in this behavior either to enhance their social standing or to preserve their cultural heritage.

Moreover, the university's brand image is often seen as a decisive component in choosing whether to pursue studies there. The reputation of a university significantly influences the decision-making process while selecting a college. Prospective students typically select institutions based on their perceived prestige and outstanding reputation in society or certain fields. Universities must proactively oversee and control their reputation in the perception of society, either by engaging in university rankings, establishing robust media connections, or implementing initiatives that showcase their beneficial impact on society.

Research findings (Siddiqui et al., 2021) indicate that brand image exerts a favorable influence on voting choices. However, research (Onsardi et al., 2021) suggests that brand image has little impact on decision-making. By organizing administrative, academic, and social events, colleges may actively enhance their brand reputation and appeal to potential students. This will aid them in preserving their status as a prominent educational institution and enhancing their impact on the advancement of society and the economy.

This study aims to investigate the influence of word of mouth on the relationship between ethnic identity and brand image in the decision-making process of selecting professors at private institutions in Medan City. Moreover, the importance of this research resides in its capacity to provide valuable insights for making strategic decisions about the formulation of marketing strategies at private colleges.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Campus Choice Decision

Selecting a university is a significant decision in an individual's life that can have enduring consequences (Harahap et al., 2021). The selection of a university will have a significant influence on the quality of education received by potential students (Valks et al., 2020). A good institution will provide exemplary instruction, sufficient amenities, and a congenial educational environment (Le, 2020). Certain corporations and industries hold some colleges in high esteem (Shoron, 2020). Opting for a renowned establishment might enhance career possibilities and provide access to top-tier job opportunities. Typically, universities possess a robust network of former students (Genta et al., 2022). Joining an educational institution with a wide-reaching network of former students can offer lasting benefits for obtaining jobs, establishing relationships, and progressing in a potential student's professional journey (Guo et al., 2020). Every institution demonstrates exceptional proficiency in specific academic programs (Kurniawan et al., 2020). Selecting a university that offers a program aligned with your interests and professional aspirations will facilitate the enhancement of your skills and academic accomplishments. Colleges are institutions where students devote their time to obtain information and cultivate personal growth (Ahmed et al., 2023). Various factors, including the social atmosphere, extracurricular activities, amenities, and school culture, will shape students' future life experiences. Every institution possesses its own distinct principles and culture (Versteijlen et al., 2021). The congruence of personal values, beliefs, and academic interests is crucial (Kim & Lee, 2023).

2.2 Word of Mouth

Word of Mouth (WoM) recommendations have a substantial influence on judgments about college selection (F. Wang et al., 2021). Referrals from acquaintances, family, educators, or university graduates are commonly seen as more reputable and credible than information from other sources (Rehman et al., 2022). Testimonies from acquaintances can offer valuable insights on campus life, educational benchmarks, and the overall academic atmosphere (Balan & Mathew, 2021). Word of

Mouth (WoM) frequently provides tailored and pertinent information based on individual requirements and choices (Amani, 2022). People who provide recommendations might discuss their own experiences with a certain course, the amenities of a school, the faculty members, or the potential employment opportunities. This helps potential students make an informed decision (Romadhoni et al., 2023).

Advice received from trusted individuals may significantly influence an individual's decision-making process, frequently evoking powerful emotional responses (Belhadi et al., 2023). The emotional impact may stem from the trust and rapport established with the recommender, as well as from the favorable brand reputation of the college upheld by these individuals (Lei et al., 2022). Word of mouth (WoM) can aid prospective students in comprehending the college's culture and traditions, which may not be apparent from official advertising materials (Yi et al., 2022). Prospective students might evaluate the compatibility of a college with their personalities and interests by considering information on the college community's social climate, extracurricular programs, campus events, and basic beliefs (Siddiqui et al., 2021). Word of Mouth (WoM) may offer guidance, information, and support to potential students, while also providing recommendations (Zhang et al., 2021). Those who make recommendations can aid in the research process, offer valuable insights into the application process, and offer an alternative perspective to enhance the confidence of prospective students in their decision-making (Chopra et al., 2022)(Zhai et al., 2022).

Prior study findings indicate that word of mouth (WOM) exerts a substantial influence on college choices (Byun et al., 2023)(X. Li et al., 2023). As stated by reference (Sun et al., 2021), word of mouth (WOM) can foster a sense of belonging to a broader community, which includes the alumni network. Positive comments from successful graduates can enhance the appeal of an educational institution as a viable choice for potential students.

H1: Word of Mouth (WOM) has a significant effect on college decisions

2.3 Ethnic Identification

College decisions can be significantly influenced by ethnic identity or diversity (Wibowo et al., 2022). The presence of ethnic identity can influence the level of ethnic diversity on campus and the extent to which students feel a feeling of social belonging (Salle-Finley et al., 2024). Prospective students are more inclined to enroll in an institution that has a similar ethnic mix to their own background (Z. Wang, 2022). Robust ethnic communities can provide valuable social assistance and promote the possibility of intimate connections (Nguyen et al., 2020). Students' satisfaction and well-being on campus may be influenced by their ethnic identification (DeLaney et al., 2022). Students who get acceptance and support from their ethnic group are likely to have a more pleasant and satisfying university experience overall (Stanton, 2023).

Children who have a strong sense of belonging to an ethnic community are more likely to be motivated and engaged in academic and social activities (Yao et al., 2022). Students' access to resources and assistance may be influenced by their ethnic identify, taking into account their specific requirements (Rudianto, 2021). Certain schools may offer specialized programs or resources designed to serve kids from specific ethnic backgrounds, including financial assistance and academic support programs (Carson et al., 2021).

Students' access to these services may be influenced by their ethnic identification. The influence of ethnic identity on campus culture and perceptions of diversity among potential students is a possibility (Barnes et al., 2021). Several students want colleges that stress inclusivity and acknowledge ethnic diversity as a crucial element of the educational setting. Having a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds among students improves the learning process and prepares them to actively participate in an increasingly linked global society (Licsandrua & Cui, 2019). Students' opportunities to engage in leadership and organizational activities related to ethnic or multicultural matters may be influenced by their ethnic identification (Pana et al., 2020). Participating in such

groups can assist students in cultivating leadership abilities, broadening their network of contacts, and advocating for the interests of their ethnic community (Reddya & Dam, 2020).

Prior study findings indicate that ethnic identification exerts a substantial impact on the college selection process (Freibott et al., 2022)(Middel et al., 2022). One's ethnic identity may serve as a powerful and empowering force in advocating for access to higher education. Certain ethnic communities possess community organizations or projects that facilitate access to higher education and promote social development. These factors might impact an individual's decision to pursue further education.

H2: Ethnic identity has a significant effect on word of mouth (WOM).
H3: Ethnic identity has a significant effect on college decisions.
H4: Ethnic identity has a significant impact on college decisions made through word of mouth (WOM).

2.4 Brand Image

The brand image of a college may greatly influence the decision-making process while selecting an institution (Yu et al., 2021). The brand image has the potential to impact the perception of prospective students about the value of their education in proportion to its cost (Demir et al., 2021). Prospective students frequently view universities with a robust brand image as more desirable and are more inclined to pay higher tuition costs (Felson & Adamczyk, 2021). A robust brand image can provide continuous professional assistance and acknowledgment for its alumni (Chen, 2021). Colleges that possess a robust brand image frequently have a favorable standing among employers and the industry, hence enhancing the job chances and professional progression opportunities for its graduates (Acton et al., 2022).

Improving a university's brand image can boost alumni involvement and loyalty, leading to lasting advantages for the school (Nasib et al., 2022). Alumni who possess a profound feeling of satisfaction and loyalty towards their alma mater are more inclined to offer help in the form of financial contributions, networking opportunities, and various other types of aid (Ali et al., 2022). This has the potential to enhance the university's standing and allure potential students. The establishment of a powerful brand image has the potential to boost university admissions and elevate their global reputation (Siddiqui et al., 2021).

Universitas dengan reputasi yang kuat sering kali menarik calon mahasiswa yang

Universities that have a great reputation tend to attract highly qualified and successful prospective students, which in turn improves the college's reputation and rating (Macdonald & Sharp, 2000). The brand image has the ability to evoke powerful emotional aspects and foster identification among students and alumni (Aghekyan Simonian et al., 2012). Schools that have well-established and recognizable brand images have the ability to attract potential students by effectively promoting their cultural identity or values, which might possibly have an impact on the students' decision in choosing a college (Haralayya, 2022). A university's ability to cultivate success and accomplishment may be significantly influenced by its brand image. Prospective students have the belief that by enrolling in an institution with a robust reputation, they would enhance their chances of attaining their academic, professional, and personal objectives (Alzate et al., 2022).

Prior studies have demonstrated that brand image exerts a substantial impact on college choices (Matli et al., 2021). Moreover, the college's brand image might also motivate a student to enthusiastically endorse the institution's exceptional qualities to others (Foroudi et al., 2020).

H5: Brand image has an important impact on word of mouth (WOM).
H6: Brand image has a significant effect on college decisions.
H7: Brand image has a significant impact on college decisions via word of mouth (WOM).

3. Research Methods

The approach in this study is to use the structural equation modeling (SEM) model. We will test the model to determine how word of mouth, both directly and indirectly, mediates ethnic identity and brand image in the decision to choose a campus in Medan City. Four (four) renowned universities in Medan City participated in this study.

Table 3. List of Private Universities in Medan City

No	University Name	Number of Students
1	Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara	24.170
2	Universitas Prima Indonesia	20.039
3	Universitas Pembangunan Panca Budi	23.486
4	Universitas Medan Area	12.396
	Amount	80.091

Additionally, the sampling technique employs strata random sampling, targeting 313 respondents for use as samples in this study. The proposal for selecting research sample targets is provided below.

Table 4. Proportional Sampling

No	University Name	Population	Proporsional	Sample
1	Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara	24.170	24.170/80.091 x 313	94
2	Universitas Prima Indonesia	20.039	20.039/80.091 x 313	78
3	Universitas Pembangunan Panca Budi	23.486	23.486/80.091 x 313	92
4	Universitas Medan Area	12.396	12.396/80.091 x 313	49
	Amount	80.091		313

The data collection technique relies on a questionnaire obtained through an online surThis study uses the following measurement scale for each variable:y is:

1. Indicators such as reputation, ranking, study program, financial factors, location, facilities, and infrastructure measure the decision to choose a campus.
2. Indicators such as personal trust, direct experience, personalized needs, social influence, and emotional connection measure word of mouth.
3. Indicators such as diversity and inclusivity, facilities and support resources, relevant academic programs, community connectivity, participation opportunities, experience, and testimonials measure ethnic identity.
4. Indicators such as academic reputation, alumni success, student experience, industry connections, commitment to innovation and research, leadership and brand identity, responsiveness to change, and challenges measure brand image.

4. Results and Discussion

Evaluation of Measurement Model

Table 5. Measurement of convergent validity and internal consistency reliability

Latent Variable	Indicators	Factor loadings
Ethnic Identity	IE1	0.835
	IE2	0.918
	IE3	0.943
	IE4	0.924
	IE5	0.797
	IE6	0.785

Brand Image	BE1	0.784
	BE2	0.833
	BE3	0.874
	BE4	0.914
	BE5	0.972
	BE6	0.859
	BE7	0.755
Word of Mouth	WM1	0.861
	WM2	0.893
	WM3	0.837
	WM4	0.874
	WM5	0.849
Decision to Choose a College	CD1	0.836
	CD2	0.827
	CD3	0.848
	CD4	0.878
	CD5	0.852
	CD6	0.877
	CD7	0.882

Table 5 describes how the ethnic identity variable, which includes 6 indicators, has a factor loading value greater than 0.7, the brand image variable, which includes 7 indicators, has a factor loading value greater than 0.7, and the word-of-mouth variable, which includes 5 indicators, has a factor loading value greater than 0.7. Finally, the decision to choose a college has seven indicators that also have a factor loading value greater than 0.7.

Construct Reliability dan Average Variance Extracted (AVE)

The results of data processing show that:

Table 6. Average Variance **Extracted** (AVE) Results

Variabel	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Ethnic Identity	0.853
Brand Image	0.825
Word of Mouth	0.866
Decision to Choose a College	0.847

According to Table 6, all AVE values are > 0.5, which means that they have met the validity requirements based on AVE. The table above indicates that the average value exceeds 0.5. It is known that all AVE values are > 0.5, which means that they have met the validity requirements based on AVE. Additionally, we conduct reliability testing using the composite reliability (CR) value.

Table 7. Composite Reliability (CR) Results

	Composite Reliability
Ethnic Identity	0,983
Brand Image	0,991
Word of Mouth	0,969
Decision to Choose a College	0,954

The composite reliability value exceeds 0.7, indicating that the indicators in this study are capable of accurate measurement. It is known that all CR values are > 0.7, which means that they have met the reliability requirements based on CR. Furthermore, the Cronbach's alpha (CA) value serves as the basis for reliability testing.

Table 8. Cronbach's Alpha (CA) Results

	Cronbach's Alpha
Ethnic Identity	0,979
Brand Image	0,987
Word of Mouth	0,960
Decision to Choose a College	0,941

Based on Table 8, it is known that the recommended CA value is above 0.7 (Mahfud and Ratmono, 2013:67). It is known that all CA values are > 0.7, which means that they have met the reliability requirements based on Cronbach's alpha. We also conduct discriminant validity testing using the Fornell-Larcker approach.

Inner Model

R Square

Tabel 9. R-Square

	R Square	**R Square Adjusted**
Word of Mouth	0,645	0,647
Decision to Choose a College	0,723	0,714

The table above reveals that the word-of-mouth variable has an R squared adjusted value of 0.647, or 64.7%, with other variables not included in this study influencing the remaining 35.3%. The Decision to Choose a College variable exhibits an R squared value of 0.714, or 71.4%, with other variables not included in this study influencing the remaining 28.6%.

Predictive Relevance (Q2)

The Q2 value has the same meaning as the coefficient of determination (R-square). A large Q-square value (Q2) of 0 indicates that the model has predictive relevance; conversely, if a value (Q2) is less than 0, this indicates that the model has less predictive relevance; or, in other words, where all Q2 values are higher, the model can be considered to be more suitable to the data. You can evaluate the Q2 value in the following ways:

$Q_2 = 1 - (1-R_1^2) (1-R_2^2) ... (1-R_n^2)$
$Q_2 = 1 - (1- 0.647) (1 - 0.714)$
$Q_2 = 1 - (0.419) (0.509)$
$Q_2 = 1-0.213$
$Q_2 = 0.786$

Based on these results, the Q2 value is 0.786, or 78.6%. Therefore, we can conclude that all the variables in this study—ethnic identity, brand image, word of mouth, and college choice decision—contribute to the authenticity data in the existing structural model of 78.6%. We need to develop the remaining 21.4% separately from the research variables.

Hypothesis test

Table 10. Hypothesis Test Results

	Coefficient	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	P Values	Information
H1: Ethnic Identity -> Word of Mouth	0.313	0.312	0.125	2.498	0.013	Alternative hypothesis is accepted
H2: Brand image -> Word of Mouth	0.301	0.299	0.12	2.514	0.012	Alternative hypothesis is accepted
H3: Ethnic Identity -> Decision to Choose a College	0.206	0.208	0.095	2.162	0.031	Alternative hypothesis is accepted
H4: Brand image -> Decision to Choose a College	0.198	0.199	0.093	2.141	0.032	Alternative hypothesis is accepted
H5: Word of Mouth -> Decision to Choose a College	0.658	0.656	0.111	5.899	0.000	Alternative hypothesis is accepted
H6: Ethnic Identity -> Word of Mouth -> Decision to Choose a College	0.206	0.208	0.095	2.162	0.031	Alternative hypothesis is accepted
H7: Brand image -> Word of Mouth -> Decision to Choose a College	0.198	0.199	0.093	2.141	0.032	Alternative hypothesis is accepted

Discussion

The Influence of Ethnic Identity on Word of Mouth

According to the study's findings, ethnic identity has a significant direct influence on word-of-mouth. This result can be seen from the significance value of 0.013 <0.05, which means it has a significant value smaller than alpha (5%). The implications of the findings in this study indicate that private universities in Medan City currently only emphasize ethnic identity based on cultural values. StudStudents believe that having friends with similar ethnic backgrounds can offer a sense of security, prevent discrimination, and establish a robust business network. hermore, the leaders of private universities in Medan City have realized that the importance of understanding the function of ethnic identity in word-of-mouth promotion in higher education lies in the recognition that student choices and experiences are not uniformly consistent.

The findings of this study align with the research conducted by (Leal & Ferreira, 2020)(Soriano et al., 2020), which asserts that ethnic identification has a notable impact on word of mouth. Moreover, as stated in reference (Zhang et al., 2021), ethnic identity is frequently linked to certain cultures, traditions, and principles. Then, (Leal & Ferreira, 2020) highlights that individuals who possess a robust Ethnic Identity are more inclined to exchange experiences or information regarding products or services within their social circles, hence influencing word of mouth marketing. Ethnic identity may cultivate a range of collective experiences among individuals within a certain group. According to reference (Soriano et al., 2020), it is also mentioned that individuals may be more receptive to word-of-mouth recommendations from those who share similar experiences and ethnic backgrounds.

The Influence of Brand Image on Word of Mouth

Brand image has a significant influence on word-of-mouth among students in Medan City. The results of the study can be shown by a significant value of 0.012 <0.05, which means that the significant value is smaller than the alpha level of 5% (0.05). The implications of this study are that the

management of private universities in Medan City can design marketing strategies that aim to stimulate and facilitate positive conversations about the institution. This can be doneThe management can achieve this by developing referral programs, implementing testimonial campaigns, or leveraging social media to broaden the reach of recommendations. agement can also optimize the role of alumni and staff, who have the potential to become a strong source of word-of-mouth marketing. As a result, universities have the ability to form collaborative initiatives with former students and staff members to improve the institution's reputation and advertise it to prospective students.

This study aligns with previous research conducted by authors (Aghekyan Simonian et al., 2012)(Macdonald & Sharp, 2000)(Yohana et al., 2021) which suggest that a positive word of mouth can effectively save marketing expenses and perhaps boost income by recruiting new students. Positive word-of-mouth may contribute to success by enhancing the company's brand image, whilst negative word-of-mouth can detrimentally impact the organization by damaging its brand image (Siddiqui et al., 2021). When students have a favorable opinion of a brand and have personally experienced its goods, they are inclined to engage in positive word-of-mouth communication or suggest it to others. This leads to the establishment of a positive brand image through messages sent to other students (Salsabila et al., 2023). Moreover, cultivating a favorable brand perception through student experiences has the potential to enhance brand communication (Budiman, 2021). In addition, brands have a beneficial impact on word-of-mouth communication. Students who possess a significant inclination towards a thing are very probable to endorse it to their friends or family members (Khoo, 2022).

The Influence of Ethnic Identity on the Decision to Choose a College
The test results prove that ethnic identity has a significant effect on the decision to choose a college. This result can be proven by the significant value of 0.031 <0.05, which means that the significant value of the ethnic identity variable is smaller than the alpha level of 5% (0.05). The implications of the findings in this study indicate the importance of understanding the influence of ethnic identity when making decisions to choose higher education institutions in heterogeneous environments such as Medan City. Private university managers must prioritize meeting the needs and desires of diverse ethnic groups while developing inclusive marketing tactics and academic programs to attract students from various ethnicities. In addition, it is essential to make a concerted effort to build a friendly campus environment that embraces all students.

This study aligns with the findings of previous studies (Maleki & Gholamian, 2020)(Finley et al., 2024)(Middel et al., 2022), which indicate that ethnic identification has a direct and substantial impact on college choice. Moreover, several individuals may opt for a private educational establishment due to the firsthand knowledge or esteemed reputation of their relatives who have previously attended college (Ting & Ting, 2020). According to research, ethnic identification can impact decision-making by being influenced by pleasant experiences or guidance from family members who have the same ethnicity (Z. Wang, 2022). One's ethnic identity might impact their university selections, particularly when considering institutions that stress or have a deep understanding of cultural or religious beliefs that have significance for people or their ethnic communities. Individuals may have a preference for private educational institutions that cultivate an atmosphere that is in accordance with these ideals (Nguyen et al., 2020).

The Influence of Brand Image on the Decision to Choose a College
According to the findings of the hypothesis test, it seems that the brand image has a direct impact on the decision-making process while selecting a college in the city of Medan. The findings of this study indicate a significance value of 0.032, which is less than the predetermined alpha level of 5% (0.05). This suggests that the brand image variable has a statistically significant impact. The findings of the study suggest that by establishing partnerships with neighboring industries and communities, PTS may enhance their network, enhance their reputation as institutions actively engaged in community development, and provide promising job opportunities for its graduates. Social media and technology

play a vital role in the development and enhancement of brand image. Higher education institutions may utilize social media platforms and technology to engage with potential students, offer pertinent information, and enhance their online brand image.

This study aligns with other research conducted by (Onsardi et al., 2021)(Foroudi et al., 2020)(Petrick, 2018), which shown that brand image had an impact on students' selection of a college. This conclusion aligns with the study conducted by (Demir et al., 2021), which shown a significant correlation between brand image variables and the selection of a private institution. Establishing a robust brand reputation among students enhances the probability of their brand purchase (S. M. D. T. C. Dam, 2021). Students maintain the conviction that a brand amplifies the worth of the product, addressing a range of student requirements (Pan et al., 2021).

The Influence of Word of Mouth on the Decision to Choose a College

The test findings suggest that word of mouth has a substantial impact on the college selection process in Medan City. The findings of this study demonstrate that the Word of Mouth variable has a statistically significant value of 0.000 <0.05. This indicates that the significance of Word of Mouth is lower than the predetermined alpha threshold of 5% (0.05). The findings of this study suggest that guidance from reliable individuals, such as acquaintances, family, or past students, significantly influences prospective students in making informed decisions. Private educational institutions in Medan City should recognize the significance of word of mouth (WOM) in the process of enrolling new students. Hence, it is important to exert endeavors in establishing and maintaining favorable connections with students, alumni, and the neighboring community. Effective communication and activities that improve these connections can promote word-of-mouth. Furthermore, private college administration possesses the capacity to design marketing tactics that especially target the enhancement of word of mouth (WOM). To do this, one might implement referral programs, testimonial campaigns, or utilize social media platforms to enhance the dissemination of recommendations. Recognizing the substantial influence of word of mouth (WOM), private colleges in Medan City can enhance their appeal in the higher education industry and successfully allure potential students.

The findings of this study are consistent with the findings of prior studies (Shukla et al., 2021)(Taufik et al., 2022)(Asnawatia et al., 2022), which indicated that word of mouth has a substantial impact on the college selection process. Moreover, as stated in reference (Zalukhu, 2022), word-of-mouth advertising not only influences individual decisions but also has the potential to initiate a cascade effect, where one positive recommendation can lead to successive recommendations. For instance, when an individual obtains substantial support from their friends regarding a university, they are inclined to disseminate this information to others, so enhancing the influence of word-of-mouth promotion. Furthermore, (Ismail et al., 2024) underscored the significance of parental or guardian testimonies, which may greatly impact kids' selection of an educational institution. Parents play a crucial role in providing information and support to potential students, and their opinions about a university may greatly impact their child's ultimate decision (Zhang et al., 2021).

The Influence of Ethnic Identity on the Decision to Choose a College through Word of Mouth

The data analysis results indicate that word of mouth has a major role in indirectly influencing the decision to pick a college in Medan City based on ethnic identification. The findings of this investigation demonstrate that the significant value is 0.031, which is less than the predetermined alpha threshold of 5% (0.05). The outcomes of this study suggest that higher education institutions should establish robust connections with certain ethnic groups or be acknowledged as the preferred option by community members. This can enhance the influence of verbal communication within the society. There is typically a correlation between ethnic identification and other political and social processes. The perceptions and recommendations of certain colleges might be swayed by political or social factors associated with a particular ethnic group. This encompasses the degree of endorsement from community leaders or organizations associated with the ethnic group.

The findings of this study are consistent with prior research, which indicated that ethnic identification has a notable impact on the choice to rely on word of mouth (An et al., 2019)(Leal & Ferreira, 2020)(F. Wang et al., 2021). Moreover, as stated in reference (Dowell et al., 2019), individuals are inclined to place greater faith in recommendations provided by others who share the same ethnic background due to shared cultural norms, beliefs, and life encounters. A robust feeling of ethnic identity can amplify the influence of word-of-mouth (WOM) in the process of making decisions. Moreover, (S. Li & Jaharuddin, 2021) highlighted that an individual's ethnic identity may also impact their perception of the caliber and standing of higher education institutions.

The Influence of Brand Image on the Decision to Choose a College through Word of Mouth

According to the data analysis results, it seems that word of mouth has a substantial influence on the relationship between brand image and the decision to select a college in Medan City. The study's findings demonstrate that the significant value is 0.032, which is less than the predetermined alpha threshold of 5% (0.05). The study's conclusions propose the implementation of a student ambassador program, wherein outstanding students with extraordinary backgrounds from private colleges are chosen to act as brand ambassadors. Prospective students can enhance the visibility of private institutions by delivering presentations at high schools, campus events, or through other social media channels. Private colleges can form partnerships with high schools and education departments in Medan City to establish deeper relationships. This might involve organizing campus tours, instructional sessions, or professional conferences to enhance the reputation and favorable image of private colleges among potential students.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous studies (Arif, 2019)(Aljuhmani, 2019)(Yohana et al., 2021), suggesting that word-of-mouth has a significant impact on shaping brand image and affecting decision-making. According to reference (Siddiqui et al., 2021), a robust brand image is likely to enhance the probability of buyers engaging in conversations about the business with others. Moreover, (Tajuddin et al., 2020) highlights that customers are more inclined to endorse a brand to others if they hold a positive perception of it, either based on their own experience or the marketing image projected by the firm. An individual's decisions are typically influenced by the experiences and viewpoints of their social group. A brand that possesses a robust and favorable brand image among a certain social group is likely to prompt its members to disseminate information about the firm within their social network. Word-of-mouth is frequently seen as more trustworthy than direct promotional contacts from the brand. A brand with a robust and good brand image is more likely to receive testimonials or recommendations from others that are seen favorably by potential consumers.

5. Conclusion

This study investigates the mediating role of word of mouth (WOM) in the relationship between ethnic identification, brand image, and college selection decisions in the context of private universities in Medan City, Indonesia. The findings provide empirical evidence that WOM plays a crucial role in transmitting the effects of ethnic identification and brand image on college choice decisions. Private universities in Medan City should recognize the power of WOM and develop marketing and branding strategies that leverage ethnic identification and brand image to generate positive WOM and attract prospective students.

However, the study is not without limitations. The cross-sectional nature of the data and the reliance on self- report measures from a single source (i.e., students) may limit the ability to draw causal inferences and raise concerns about common method bias. The focus on private universities in Medan City may also limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Future research could employ longitudinal designs, collect data from multiple sources (e.g., students, parents, university administrators), and examine the relationships in other cities or countries to address these limitations.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a valuable foundation for understanding the complex interplay between ethnic identification, brand image, WOM, and college selection decisions. The findings highlight the need for private universities to develop a deep understanding of their target audiences' ethnic identities and to craft brand images that resonate with these identities. By fostering positive WOM through targeted marketing and branding efforts, private universities can enhance their attractiveness to prospective students and gain a competitive edge in an increasingly crowded higher education market.

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