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# The Influence of Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM), Scholarship Programs and Content Marketing on the Decision to Study at Darul 'Ulum Islamic University, Lamongan Through Brand Image as an Intervening Variable


## ABSTRACT

Darul 'Ulum Islamic University (UNISDA) stands as the first private higher education institution in Lamongan Regency and ranks among the oldest universities in East Java. Situated at Jalan Airlangga 03 Sukodadi, UNISDA was initially established in 1985 as a study group and has continued to develop amid globalization and rapid technological progress. To enhance the interest of prospective students, UNISDA has adopted strategies that emphasize electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), scholarship initiatives, and content marketing. This research investigates how these three factors affect students' decisions to enroll at UNISDA Lamongan. Data were collected via questionnaires from 90 respondents who were recipients of the KIP Kuliah scholarship and active users of social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. The data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 26. The findings indicate that e-WOM, scholarship programs, and content marketing all significantly influence students' decisions to pursue higher education. However, brand image only served as a mediating variable in the relationship between content marketing and the decision to study; it did not mediate the effects of e-WOM or scholarship programs. There was a notably strong indirect effect of scholarship programs and content marketing on decision-making through brand image. Based on these results, it is recommended that UNISDA further optimize its e-WOM strategies, enhance scholarship offerings, and improve the quality of content marketing to better attract new prospective students.


Keywords: e-WOM, scholarship program, content marketing, brand image, and college decision-making

## INTRODUCTION

Competition among universities to attract new students is increasingly fierce, especially in the digital era. Darul 'Ulum Islamic University Lamongan (UNISDA), an Islamic-based

university officially established in 1987, continues to innovate to increase its annual enrollment. According to PDDIKTI data, UNISDA's active student population in the even semester of the 2024/2025 academic year reached 3,736 students across 18 study programs.

Advances in digital technology have encouraged universities to shift from conventional promotional methods to adopt digital marketing strategies. Digital marketing is a common promotional strategy used to market goods and services to consumers through various distribution channels (Muhajir & Bilgies, 2022). In this context, UNISDA actively utilizes platforms like Instagram and TikTok to expand its promotional reach. Social media plays a crucial role for organizations operating in the digital world, particularly in answering customer questions, building and strengthening customer relationships, and exploring innovative ideas (Shoimah et al., 2024). Interestingly, even though TikTok has only been in use since 2022, the platform has already gained over 12,500 followers, indicating strong potential for engaging prospective students through content marketing.

Furthermore, electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) in the form of alumni testimonials, social media reviews, and live broadcasts plays a crucial role in shaping prospective students' perceptions. Electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) encompasses positive and negative statements shared through online social media platforms with the aim of recommending a product or service to potential customers or consumers (Sari & Pangestuti, 2018, as cited in Syarifudin et al., 2025). Their study also found that e-WOM is perceived as more trustworthy than formal information released by institutions.

The KIP Kuliah scholarship program is also a crucial factor influencing study decisions, especially for students from lower-middle-income backgrounds. In addition to financial support, this scholarship serves as a powerful academic motivator.

However, the success of a promotional strategy is greatly influenced by the strength of brand image. Brand image refers to the perceptions that arise in consumers' minds when considering a brand or product (Wulandari et al., 2025). A positive brand image helps shape perceptions and trust, serving as a bridge between promotional activities and students' final decision-making process.

Unfortunately, research integrating the influence of e-WOM, scholarship programs, and content marketing as an integrated model with brand image as an intervening variable is still limited, especially in the context of private universities in regional areas. Therefore, this study

offers a new contribution by combining these three variables in a single research framework, adding brand image as an intervening variable.

## METHOD

This study employs a quantitative approach using correlational and explanatory methods. The correlational approach aims to examine the relationship between variables, while the explanatory approach seeks to analyze causal effects between independent and dependent variables. This method is structured and objective, utilizing standardized instruments to collect data that are then statistically analyzed to test hypotheses and identify relationships among variables (Husda et al., 2023). The research targets active KIP-K scholarship recipients at Universitas Islam Darul 'Ulum Lamongan who are users of TikTok and Instagram. The number of respondents was determined using Slovin's formula, resulting in a total of 90 participants. The study is scheduled to be conducted over approximately seven months, beginning with data collection in February and concluding with the final examination of the research in August 2025. A Likert scale was used to measure the independent variables. This scale is categorized as an ordinal scale and is commonly employed in quantitative research to assess respondents' attitudes or opinions toward specific statements (Husda et al., 2023).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Validity testing aims to ensure that the research instrument actually measures the intended variable. An instrument is considered valid if it accurately represents the concept being studied, so that the resulting data is relevant and accountable.(Fitri et al., 2023). Statistically, validity is indicated when the calculated r value is > than the table r; conversely, if the calculated r < than the table r, then the instrument is considered invalid. From the results of the Pearson correlation test, it was found that all questions were declared valid, as indicated by the calculated r value of each statement submitted to respondents being greater than the table r value of 0.205. Reliability tests are used to assess the consistency of measurement results. An instrument is considered reliable if it produces consistent data even when used at different times or under different conditions.(Fitri et al., 2023) The methods used include repeated measures and one-shot. In the one-shot method, reliability is assessed through the similarity between question items. Analysis was performed using Cronbach's Alpha, and the instrument is considered reliable if the value is >0.6.

Based on the test results Reliability shows that the Cronbach's Alpha value of all variables studied obtained a value > 0.6, meaning that all research variables are said to be reliable and can be continued to further testing.

## Classical Assumption Test

### Normality Test

According to (Fitri et al., 2023) A normality test is required in regression to ensure that the residual data is normally distributed. This is essential for the resulting regression model to be valid and reliable.

**Table 1. Classical Assumption Test**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Normality Test** | Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) | .097c |
| **Multicollinearity Test** | Tolerance | VIF |
| EWOM | .466 | 2.145 |
| SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM | .505 | 1,979 |
| CONTENTMARKETING | .271 | 3,690 |
| BRANDIMAGE | .361 | 2,768 |
| **Heteroscedasticity Test** | T | Sig |
| EWOM | -1,902 | .061 |
| SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM | 1,513 | .134 |
| CONTENTMARKETING | -1,738 | .086 |
| BRANDIMAGE | -.229 | .820 |

Source: SPSS 26 Data Processing Results

Based on Table 1 shows that the probability value or Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) in the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test is 0.097. Because this value is greater than 0.05, it can be concluded that the data is normally distributed, so the model used in this study is considered consistent and efficient. According to (Fitri et al., 2023) The multicollinearity test aims to ensure there is no high correlation between independent variables in multiple regression. Multicollinearity can cause unstable regression results. Indicators used are a tolerance value > 0.10 and a VIF value <10, indicating freedom from multicollinearity. This test is important to maintain estimation accuracy and avoid bias.

Based on Table 2, it can be concluded that there is no indication of multicollinearity in all independent variables. This can be seen from the Tolerance and VIF values of each variable which are still within a reasonable range. The e-WOM variable (X1) has a Tolerance of 0.466 and a VIF of 2.145, the Scholarship Program (X2) shows a Tolerance of 0.505 and a VIF of 1.979, Content Marketing (X3) has a Tolerance of 0.271 and a VIF of 3.690, while Brand Image (Z) shows a Tolerance of 0.361 and a VIF of 2.768. All of these values are still

below the maximum VIF limit of 10 and above the minimum Tolerance limit of 0.10, so this regression model is free from multicollinearity problems.

According to (Fitri et al., 2023) The heteroscedasticity test is used to ensure that the residuals have the same variance (homoscedasticity). If this is not met, the regression results can be inefficient. Detection is usually done through a scatterplot between the residuals and the predicted Y values. If the dot pattern forms a funnel, there is an indication of heteroscedasticity. However, if the dots are randomly distributed without a pattern, the homoscedasticity assumption is met. In addition, a significance value from the Absolute Residual (ABS) test that shows a number greater than 0.05 can be assumed that the homoscedasticity assumption has been met. Besides based on the Glejser test results table above, it shows that the significance value of the Electronic Word of Mouth (X1) variable = 0.061, Scholarship Program (X2) = 0.134, Content Marketing (X3) = 0.086, and Brand Image (Z) = 0.820. Since all variables have a significance value above 0.05, it can be concluded that there are no symptoms of heteroscedasticity, so this regression model is declared free from heteroscedasticity problems.

Analysis Path analysis is a development of multiple regression used to determine the direct and indirect influences between variables in a theoretical model. According to (Fitri et al., 2023), multiple regression can be applied when there is more than one independent variable influencing the dependent variable, and this relationship can be depicted in a path diagram.

Wrong One type of variable analyzed using this model is the intervening variable, a variable that bridges the influence of the independent variable on the dependent variable. This variable serves to strengthen or weaken the relationship between variables, although it is often difficult to measure directly.

In This study used two models:

1. Model 1: The Influence of e-WOM (X1), Scholarship Program (X2), and Content Marketing (X3) on Brand Image (Z):

$$Z = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + e$$

2. Model 2: The Influence of X1, X2, X3, and Z on College Decisions (Y):

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 Z + e$$

Model This is used to test whether Brand Image acts as a mediator between the independent variables (e-WOM, Scholarships, and Content Marketing) on College Decisions.

Model 1: The Influence of e-WOM (X1), Scholarship Program (X2), and Content Marketing (X3) on Brand Image (Z).

**Table 2. Path Analysis**

| **Path Analysis Model 1** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Variable** | **Coefficients** | **t** | **Sig.** |
| EWOM | .139 | 1,430 | .156 |
| SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM | .119 | 1,131 | .261 |
| CONTENT MARKETING | .590 | 5,941 | .000 |
| | **R** | **R Square** | **Adjusted R Square** |
| **BRAND IMAGE** | .799 | .639 | |
| **Path Analysis Model 2** | | | |
| EWOM | .218 | 2,980 | .004 |
| SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM | .006 | .078 | .938 |
| CONTENTMARKETING | .215 | 2,458 | .016 |
| BRANDIMAGE | .548 | 6,843 | .000 |
| | **R** | **R Square** | **Adjusted R Square** |
| **COLLEGE DECISION** | .897 | .805 | .796 |

Table 2 of the Coefficients section shows the results of the path analysis of model 1, where the e-WOM variable (X1) has a b value = 0.139, Scholarship Program (X2) = 0.119, and Content Marketing (X3) = 0.590 on the Brand Image variable (Z). In the Model Summary table, the R Square value of 0.639 indicates that X1, X2, and X3 contribute 63.9% to Z, while the remaining 36.1% is influenced by other variables outside the study. The error value (e1) is calculated using the formula e1 = $\sqrt{(1 - 0.639)} = 0.601$ and is illustrated in the path diagram of model 1.

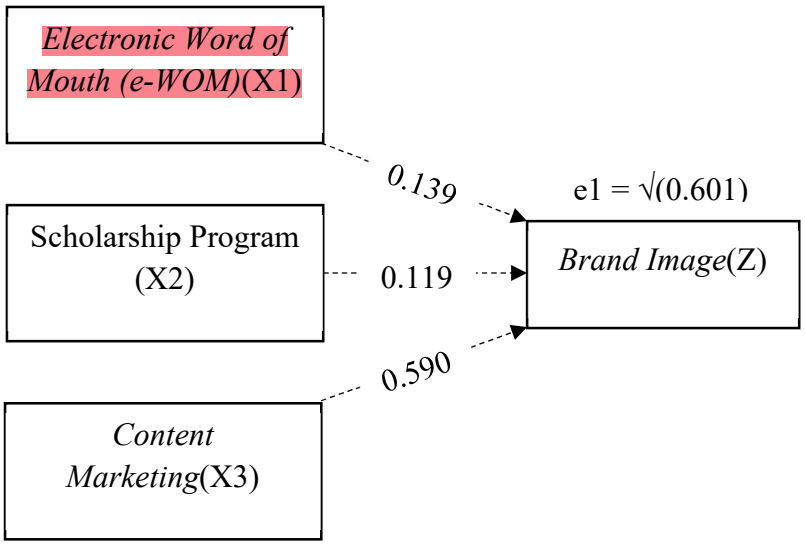



**Figure 1. Model Path Diagram 1**

Model 2: The Influence of Variables X1, X2, X3, and Variable Z on the College Decision Variable (Y). Based on the output of Table 2, the results of the path analysis of Model 2 in the Coefficients section show the influence of variables X and Z on Y, with a b value for e-WOM (X1) = 0.218, Scholarship Program (X2) = 0.006, Content Marketing (X3) = 0.215, and Brand Image (Z) = 0.548. Meanwhile, the R Square value in the Model Summary of 0.805 indicates that the combination of variables X1, X2, X3, and Z explains 80.5% of the variation in variable Y. The remaining 19.5% is influenced by other variables outside the model. The error value (e2) is calculated using the formula e2 = √(1 - 0.805) = 0.442. This value is used to describe the path of Model 2 in the path diagram.

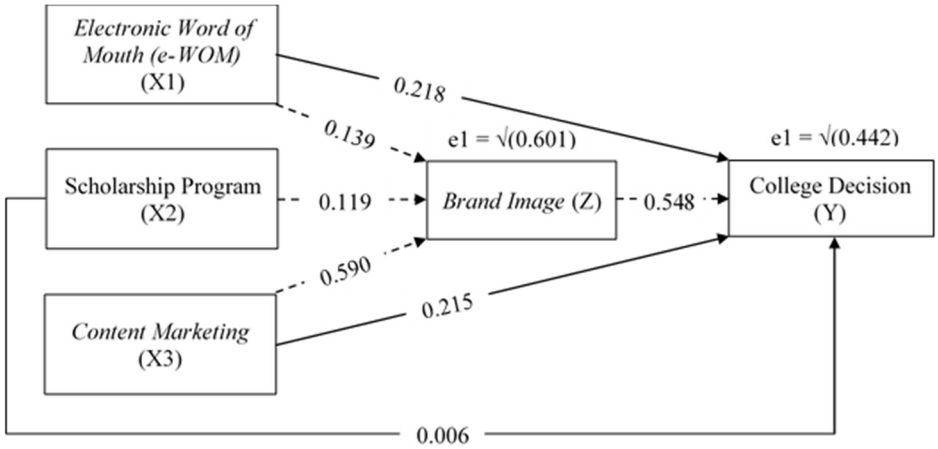



**Figure 2. Path Diagram Model 2**

**Table 3. Path Analysis Test Results**

| No | Influence of Variables | Causal Influence | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Direct | Indirect | |
| 1. | X1 against Z | 0.139 | | 0.139 |
| 2. | X2 against Z | 0.119 | | 0.119 |
| 3. | X3 against Z | 0.590 | | 0.590 |
| 4. | X1 against Y | 0.218 | | 0.218 |
| 5. | X2 against Y | 0.006 | | 0.006 |
| 6. | X3 against Y | 0.215 | | 0.215 |
| 7. | Z against Y | 0.548 | | 0.548 |
| 8. | X1 against Y through Z | | (0.139) × (0.548) | 0.076 |
| 9. | X2 against Y through Z | | (0.119) × (0.548) | 0.065 |
| 10. | X3 against Y through Z | | (0.590) × (0.548) | 0.323 |

From the results of the Path Analysis test above, it is known that there is a dominant value of the indirect influence of Variables X2 and X3 on Y through Z with a value of X2 > 0.006 and a value of X3 > 0.215, there is also a dominant direct influence of Variable X1 on Y.

After obtaining the results of the path analysis, the next step is to manually calculate the Sobel test to test the existence of the mediating role of the intervening variable, namely Brand Image, in bridging the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable as follows:

1. Indirect Effect of X1 on Y Through Z

$$Z = \frac{a \times b}{\sqrt{(b^2.Sa^2) + (a^2.Sb^2)}}$$

$$Z = \frac{0.139 \times 0.548}{\sqrt{(0.548^2 \times 0.097^2) + (0.139^2 \times 0.080^2)}}$$

$$Z = \frac{0.0762}{0.0543} \; Z = \mathbf{1.403}$$

From the results of manual Sobel calculations, it can be seen that the Brand Image variable is not able to mediate the influence of variable X1 on Y with a value of 1.403 <1.96.

2. Indirect effect of X2 on Y through Z

$$Z = \frac{a \times b}{\sqrt{(b^2.Sa^2) + (a^2.Sb^2)}}$$

$$Z = \frac{0.119 \times 0.548}{\sqrt{(0.548^2 \times 0.105^2) + (0.119^2 \times 0.080^2)}}$$

$$Z = \frac{0.0652}{0.0583} \; Z = \mathbf{1.118}$$

From the results above, it can be seen that the Sobel test on the Intervening Variable Brand Image was not able to mediate the influence of variable X2 on Y with a value of 1.118 <1.96.

3. Indirect effect of X3 on Y through Z

$$Z = \frac{a \times b}{\sqrt{(b^2.Sa^2) + (a^2.Sb^2)}}$$

$$Z = \frac{0.590 \times 0.548}{\sqrt{(0.548^2 \times 0.099^2) + (0.590^2 \times 0.080^2)}}$$

$$Z = \frac{0.3233}{0.0719} \; Z = \mathbf{4.496}$$

From the results of the manual Sobel calculations above, it can be seen that the Brand Image variable is able to mediate the influence of variable X3 on Y with a value of 4.496 >1.96.

Based on the results in the table 2, the three independent variables show a partial significant influence on the College Decision (Y). The e-WOM variable (X1) has a calculated t value of 9.736 > t table 3.232 and a significance of 0.000 < 0.05, indicating a significant influence. The Scholarship Program (X2) also shows similar results with a calculated t value of 7.271 > t table 2.232 and a significance of 0.000, which means it has a significant influence on the College Decision. Likewise, Content Marketing (X3) has a calculated t value of 12.876 > t table 3.561 and a significance value of 0.000, indicating a partial significant influence on the College Decision.

The results in Table 2 show that the variables Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM), Scholarship Program, and Content Marketing contributed 0.698 or 69.8% to the Decision to Study at Darul 'Ulum Islamic University Lamongan. Meanwhile, the remaining 0.302 or 30.2% was influenced by other factors outside the variables examined in this study.

**The direct influence of Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) on the decision to study at UNISDA Lamongan.**

Based on the results of the data analysis in Table 9, it is known that the Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) variable has a direct influence on the decision to study, so that the hypothesis Ha-1 is declared accepted. These results indicate that digital information, reviews, and testimonials circulating through social media forums and other digital platforms are able to shape perceptions and encourage prospective students' decisions in choosing Darul 'Ulum Islamic University (UNISDA) as a place to pursue higher education. In the world of digital marketing, e-WOM strategies are very important because social media provides an interactive space between business actors and consumers directly. (Syaputra et al., 2025) This interaction not only serves as a communication channel but also serves to strengthen public trust in an institution.

Furthermore, (Utomo et al., 2024) In his book, he emphasized that companies must understand the dynamics of social media and develop appropriate marketing strategies to capitalize on its potential. This approach is highly relevant for UNISDA to manage positive public perception of the campus's image. This approach includes utilizing student and alumni testimonials through various forms of content, such as videos, blogs, and short reviews on social media. This effort not only enhances the institution's credibility but also builds emotional connections with prospective students. However, the uncontrolled spread of negative opinions can also negatively impact the institution's image. Therefore, it is crucial for UNISDA to implement a digital communication strategy that is not merely reactive to criticism but also proactive in shaping a positive narrative. This strategy includes content management, social media monitoring, and engaging the campus community in voluntarily and systematically sharing their experiences. Therefore, it can be concluded that e-WOM is a crucial part of a modern digital marketing strategy. Support from students and alumni as digital communication agents needs to be strengthened, and the university's communication strategy should be directed at facilitating positive interactions and sustainably managing public perception.

**The direct influence of the Scholarship Program on the decision to study at UNISDA Lamongan.**

Based on the results of the data analysis in Table 10, it is known that the Scholarship Program variable has a direct influence on the Decision to Study, so that hypothesis Ha-2 is

accepted. This finding strengthens the view that the existence of scholarships is a strategic factor in attracting prospective students. Scholarship programs not only provide financial assistance but also provide access to equal education. In the context of Darul 'Ulum Islamic University (UNISDA), the provision of scholarships is an added value that can increase the institution's competitiveness in recruiting new students, considering that UNISDA is one of the Islamic universities located in the region. This statement is supported by quantitative data, where the indicator "The existence of a scholarship program encourages me to continue my education to college" obtained the highest average score on this variable. In this view, (Syaputra et al., 2025) An effective digital marketing strategy should be built on an approach that emphasizes empathy and trust, as these play a role in shaping positive public perception of the institution. Scholarships, when communicated openly and addressing social values, are a highly effective form of empathetic engagement. This demonstrates that UNISDA offers more than just education, but also provides real solutions to the economic challenges often faced by prospective students.

Furthermore, narratives of scholarship recipients' success stories can be packaged as digital campaign material to increase the university's appeal. Campuses that are able to present real, inspiring stories from scholarship recipients will more easily build emotional engagement among prospective students and parents. The same book states that communication strategies based on real experiences and social engagement are more credible to audiences than traditional commercial advertising. Therefore, a strategically designed and transparently managed scholarship program can serve a dual purpose as a digital promotional tool with wide reach, while simultaneously positioning the institution as a welcoming and inclusive campus. Therefore, UNISDA needs to maintain and expand the scope of its scholarships, and make this program a key part of the institution's marketing strategy.

**The direct influence of Content Marketing on the decision to study at UNISDA Lamongan.**

1 Based on the data processing results in Table 11, it is known that the Content Marketing variable has a direct influence on the College Decision variable, so that the Ha-3 hypothesis is declared accepted. This indicates that content-based marketing strategies implemented by educational institutions, including the Darul 'Ulum Islamic University (UNISDA), can influence the perceptions, interests, and decisions of prospective students in determining their choice of college. The presentation of interesting, relevant, and valuable information through

digital media has proven to be a significant attraction in the academic consideration process (Indrawan et al., 2025).

*Content marketing* is one of the most powerful approaches in digital marketing because it can create emotional engagement and build audience trust by presenting authentic and valuable information. Similarly, (Erwin et al., 2024) stated that content marketing serves not only as a medium for conveying information, but also as a means of building emotional connections with consumers and increasing brand loyalty through meaningful interactions. They emphasized that information such as study program profiles, faculty and alumni achievements, campus facilities, and academic and non-academic activities are important aspects considered by prospective students. This content strategy becomes even more effective when distributed through digital platforms that align with the characteristics of the younger generation, such as Instagram and TikTok.

In this context, (Suwarno et al., 2023) explained that digital marketing strategies need to focus on meeting the emotional needs of modern consumers, who are heavily influenced by consistent digital perceptions and experiences. They stated that digital marketing is not just about promoting products, but also about creating value-based and relevant consumer experiences. This demonstrates that consistent, engaging, and accessible content has the power to positively shape an institution's brand image and differentiate UNISDA from other universities. Furthermore, (Safrin et al., 2024) emphasize that marketing success in the digital age is largely determined by an institution's ability to deliver personalized and contextual messages to build a psychological connection with its target audience. They state that today's marketing requires more than just identifying consumer needs; it also requires a deep understanding and building lasting relationships as the foundation of loyalty.

Thus, structured, emotional, and needs-oriented content marketing management has a significant direct impact on their college decisions. Content serves not only as a promotional medium but also as a communication tool that builds trust, strengthens the institution's brand image, and fosters emotional connections that drive concrete actions such as enrolling or selecting a college.

**The indirect influence of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) on the decision to study at UNISDA Lamongan through Brand Image as an Intervening Variable.**

The results of the study indicate that Brand Image does not act as a mediator in the relationship between Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) and College Decisions, so that

hypothesis Ha-4 is rejected. Although e-WOM is proven to have a direct influence on student decisions, this influence is not bridged through perceptions of the institution's Brand Image. This means that Brand Image fails to play a role as an intervening variable because the campus Brand Image formed from digital interactions is not strong enough in its relationship to direct prospective student decisions.

This phenomenon can be explained from the perspective that, in the context of higher education, student decision-making is driven more by rational considerations such as academic quality, study program accreditation, job prospects, and actual testimonials from alumni or current students. This is in line with the opinion of (Sawlani, 2021) which states that brand image will only have a significant impact if it is built on real consumer experiences, not just digital images that are visual or informative. Furthermore, according to (Sitorus et al., 2022) A strong brand image requires a link between public perception and the actual value of the brand, including personal experiences, institutional reputation, and the quality of service received directly by consumers. Without this experiential dimension, brand image is merely a symbol without any real influence on consumer behavior. Similarly, (Suwarno et al., 2023) explain that digital engagement such as e-WOM will only have a strong impact on decisions if the brand image formed is supported by satisfying service experiences and tangible evidence from the institution.

Thus, the ineffectiveness of Brand Image as a mediator in this model indicates the need for a stronger and more holistic brand management strategy. Educational institutions cannot simply rely on digital exposure through e-WOM, they must develop narratives based on actual experiences: such as academic excellence, active alumni engagement, student experiences, and institutional achievements. This is crucial so that Brand Image becomes not merely a perception, but a tangible representation of the institution's excellence, capable of significantly influencing prospective students' decisions.

**The indirect influence of the Scholarship Program on the decision to study at UNISDA Lamongan through Brand Image as an Intervening Variable.**

Based on the research results, although the Sobel test does not support a significant role of Brand Image as a mediator in the relationship between Scholarship Programs and College Decisions (thus rejecting Ha-5), structurally, it was found that the indirect effect was actually greater than the direct effect. This condition reflects the possibility of weak partial mediation, which indicates that the influence of scholarship programs on college decisions can be

maximized if accompanied by strengthening the institution's Brand Image. When scholarship programs are strategically designed and socialized, they have the potential to create a positive perception of the university, which then increases the level of trust and interest of prospective students to continue their studies at the institution. However, in reality, scholarships still tend to be positioned only as financial support, rather than as an element of a comprehensive and planned strategy for building the institution's Brand Image. As a result, Brand Image is not yet strong enough to play an effective mediating role in bridging the influence of scholarship programs on college decisions. This is in line with the view (Erislan, 2024) which states that the strength of a brand image is not only formed through visual appearance or formal messaging, but also comes from the consistency of experience and values truly felt by consumers. If scholarships are viewed solely from the perspective of economic benefits without being linked to a strategic narrative that strengthens the institution's reputation, then the institution's brand image efforts will be weakened and unable to function optimally as an intermediary. Similarly, (Sitorus et al., 2022) emphasizes that the strength of an institution's image depends greatly on the extent to which its brand values are integrated into all forms of service, including scholarship programs, which should not only be seen as financial assistance, but also as a symbol of the institution's commitment to social and educational missions, in addition to within the framework of communication strategies, (Suwarno et al., 2023) suggests that successful digital marketing requires the complete integration of all institutional activities, including scholarship programs, into a unified and consistent brand narrative, in order to build sustainable public trust and loyalty.

Therefore, it is crucial for universities to develop communication stories and messages that not only highlight the types and amounts of scholarships offered but also link them to the social mission, institutional commitment, and the actual success of scholarship recipients. This way, even though Brand Image has not been statistically proven to be a significant mediator, the perceptual pathway still demonstrates a relevant contribution and needs to be strengthened as part of a long-term communication strategy. UNISDA can develop this approach by making the scholarship program an integral part of a larger institutional narrative that is inclusive, visionary, and emphasizes academic excellence and social responsibility.

**The indirect influence of content marketing on the decision to study at UNISDA Lamongan through brand image as an intervening variable.**

This study reveals that Brand Image plays a significant mediator in the relationship between Content Marketing and College Decisions, as evidenced by the results of the Sobel test which shows the Z value exceeds the significance threshold. In other words, the Ha-6 hypothesis is accepted. This finding indicates that the content-based marketing strategy implemented by Darul 'Ulum Islamic University (UNISDA) has a strong indirect influence on students' decisions in choosing a campus, through the formation of a positive institutional Brand Image in the minds of prospective students. In this case, the delivery of content that is carried out regularly, informative, and relevant through digital media such as websites, social media, and student testimonial videos, plays an important role in creating perceptions of the quality and reputation of the university. (Syaputra et al., 2025) explains that a content marketing strategy that is implemented consistently and tailored to the audience's needs can strengthen the brand's position in the minds of consumers, because this kind of content not only increases memorability but also builds a stronger emotional closeness.

Beyond simply increasing brand awareness, digital content also plays a strategic role in building a strong brand image, especially when disseminated through platforms popular with younger generations, such as TikTok or Instagram. This approach allows educational institutions to build an emotional connection with prospective students, ultimately increasing trust and interest in the campus. In line with this, (Sitorus et al., 2022) states that the strength of a brand image rests on consistency in delivering messages and conformity to consumer experiences and expectations. This is also supported by the opinion of (Suwarno et al., 2023) , which states that the success of digital marketing cannot be separated from the integration of a strong content strategy as the main instrument in building brand value and forming public loyalty, through a communication approach that is relevant, valuable, and touches the emotional side of the target audience.

Therefore, while content marketing has been shown to directly influence student decisions, the indirect pathway mediated by brand image is even more powerful because it targets the emotional and psychological aspects of prospective students. Therefore, strengthening content strategies that are closely integrated with the institution's brand image is necessary as part of a strategic approach to higher education marketing in today's digital age.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis and discussion, it can be concluded that e-WOM, scholarship programs, and content marketing have a direct, positive, and significant influence on students' college decision-making. Brand image does not mediate the effects of e-WOM and scholarship programs on college decisions, but it does mediate the effect of content marketing. The indirect effects of scholarship programs and content marketing through brand image show a dominant influence on students' decision-making.

In light of these conclusions, it is recommended that Universitas Islam Darul 'Ulum Lamongan optimize its content marketing strategy as a primary attraction particularly through social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, which are widely used by Generation Z. Content should highlight campus life, student testimonials, academic excellence, and Islamic values to strengthen the university's brand image. The use of scholarship programs should also be enhanced, through broader dissemination of the KIP-K program, storytelling of scholarship recipients' success, and integrating scholarship information into emotionally engaging and inspiring promotional materials. e-WOM strategies can be strengthened by encouraging active student and alumni participation in sharing their experiences—for example, through initiatives like "Student Ambassador" or "Campus Influencer" programs. Moreover, UNISDA should improve its brand image reinforcement efforts by consistently communicating its campus identity, emphasizing the quality and affordability of education, and ensuring alignment between digital promotion and on-campus reality.

For future researchers, the findings of this study may serve as a valuable reference for developing similar research by including additional variables that were not explored in this study. For prospective students, it is advised not to rely solely on social media or peer recommendations, but also to seek official information directly from the university. Scholarship programs such as KIP-K should be viewed as valuable opportunities, and critical consideration should be given to the institution's brand image, academic reputation, and core values in order to make more objective and personally aligned educational decisions.

## REFERENCES