“The university-generated social media content and students’ eWOM behavior: the mediating role of student-university identification”

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THE UNIVERSITY-GENERATED SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT AND STUDENTS' EWOM BEHAVIOR: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF STUDENT-UNIVERSITY IDENTIFICATION

Abstract

This study investigates the influences of university-generated social media content on students' e-word-of-mouth behavior and student-university identification, and student-university identification on students' e-word-of-mouth behavior. Understanding these relationships is crucial for enhancing institutional engagement and communication strategies in higher education, particularly in the Philippine context. Using predictive-causal and quantitative research design, the direct and indirect links between the latent variables of the structural model were estimated using partial least squares of 487 students at Tarlac State University in Tarlac City, Philippines, administered in November 2024. Results revealed significant relationship of university-generated social media content and e-word-of-mouth ($\beta = 0.11$, $p < .001$), university-generated social media content and student-university identification ($\beta = 0.69$, $p < .001$), student-university identification and e-word-of-mouth ($\beta = 0.60$, $p < .001$), and mediation of student-university identification between university-generated social media content and e-word-of-mouth ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < .001$), thereby supporting all the hypotheses. This research provides significant statistical evidence that social media content being generated by the university has an influence on the student-university's identification and eWOM behavior. More importantly, the study reveals that student-university identification as mediator between university-generated social media content and e-word-of-mouth.

Keywords identification, social media, electronic word-of-mouth, higher education, SEM

JEL Classification M30, M31, M39

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INTRODUCTION

The relevance of branding has been underscored by the growing degree of competitiveness in academia. Complexity in higher education institutions (HEIs) highlights the importance of marketing in achieving its brand identities (Dean et al., 2016). Thus, HEIs have started using social media for purposes of marketing, like for student recruitment and building their own brands (Motta & Barbosa, 2018; Valos et al., 2017), to increase in student enrolment (Suomi, 2014), to select talents (Whisman, 2009), improve student loyalty and alumni connection (Ressler & Abratt, 2009; Helgesen & Nesset, 2007), to gain support from the private sector and to separate themselves from other HEIs (Scarborough, 2007). Utilizing social media for academic purposes gives HEIs the chance to interact with their stakeholders through news dissemination, publications, and programs, potentially expanding their online community and reach (Kumar & Nanda, 2019). Social media can help drive up the quality of their services when employed properly and strategically (Mosha et al., 2015).

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Prensky (2001) described college students as digital natives who heavily rely on social media platforms for information sharing and searching related to their studies (Westerman et al., 2014; Constantinides & Fountain, 2008), as well as to assess university offerings and look for post-admission recommendations in their preferred university (Le et al., 2019). Stronger sense of students towards their university's brand identity is strongly correlated with that of their institutions (Balmer & Liao, 2007). According to Balaji et al. (2016), students are more inclined to use word-of-mouth (WOM) to promote those institutions. Several studies utilizing presently enrolled university students have looked at the influence of people's association with their university as a potentially significant theory (Heffernan et al., 2018; Wilkins & Huisman, 2015). Therefore, in order to effectively influence prospective students' institution decision, HE marketers must encourage university brand identification (UBI) and good eWOM behavior among current students.

In higher education (HE) marketing, significant amount of study on marketing promotions (Foroudi et al., 2020) had been carried out but the effects of social media marketing on current students are less well understood (i.e. people who publish online reviews). Prior studies have largely concentrated on the impact of communications distributed by universities on student decision-making. Some scholars have established the role that WOM plays in assessing the marketing performance of HE institutions (Herold et al., 2016; Wilkins & Huisman, 2015). WOM is hardly ever examined in the field of HE marketing (Lee et al., 2020; Casidy & Wymer, 2015). Thus, further investigation into WOM processes in higher education is recommended by Lee et al. (2020) and Heffernan et al. (2018), as well as WOM as a significant outcome variable in addition to student choice. Additionally, the HE sector is not directly addressed by any empirical study on branding (Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013). The limited empirical research emphasizes brand identity and corporate administration (Balmer et al., 2010), brand personality (Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013), policies related to branding, and brand identification in corporations (Stephenson & Yerger, 2014; Balmer & Liao, 2007). To close these research gaps, this study explores the potential effect of a public university's social media content on students' eWOM behavior. Similarly, this study will explore student-university identification as a mediator variable by using the social identity and brand identity theories.

Structural equation model centered on student-university identification in HEIs constitute the study's originality where its aims are: (1) to test the influence of university-generated social media content on students' eWOM behavior; (2) to test the effect of university-generated social media content on student-university identification; (3) to test the influence of the student-university identification on students' eWOM behavior; and (4) to test the overall structural relationship of the study variables.

The results may have major repercussions in creating and putting into practice brand management plans that make students into university advocates.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

The brand identity theory (BIT) and social identity theory (SIT) are this paper's theoretical foundation. Customer brand identification, according to Kim et al. (2001), is the extent to which the brand expresses and strengthens the consumer brand identity. Strong brand identification increases the likelihood that consumers will support a brand's goods or services, be tolerant of negative publicity about the brand, back corporate objectives, and show brand loyalty (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). According to research by Casidy and Wymer (2015) and Balaji et al. (2016), students frequently resonate with their schools because they share ideals and identity. Students are frequently evaluated by their university choice in employment situations, in addition to the intense and extended direct engagement with the institution throughout studies (which forges a deep relationship in young developing minds). The student-university identifica-

tion is further strengthened by such societal expectations. Competition, status, and individuality were thought to be the antecedents of UBI by Mael and Ashforth in 1992. They believed that student rivalries at a university contributed to a lower level of UBI. Palmer et al. (2016) investigated how graduates perceived university brands. They claimed that two components' direct effects on loyalty (namely, recalled social experience and academic experience) decreased with time after graduation. The indirect influence on loyalty of these two criteria was mediated by brand identification.

The SIT contends that the act of selecting a university causes the university's image to become the student's identity. According to the notion, a person's perception of who they are depends on the organizations they belong to (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Tajfel, 1978). According to SIT, being a part of a group strengthens a person's sense of self-identification and social identity in a social environment. It suggests that being affiliated with a university has advantages for students that go beyond simply receiving an education. In studies addressing the concept of social identity in HE, researchers found that sadness, confidence and life satisfaction were all strongly correlated with subjective qualities of belongingness to a campus community (Cameron, 1999).

BIT conceptualizes brand identification as the alignment between consumer self-identity and brand image, fostering loyalty and advocacy behaviors (Kim et al., 2001; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Parallelly, SIT posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups – in this case, the university community – and this affiliation influences emotions, attitudes, and behaviors (Tajfel, 1978; Cameron, 1999). Prior studies confirm that strong student-university identification (SUI) correlates with increased loyalty and positive advocacy such as word-of-mouth promotion (Balaji et al., 2016; Heffernan et al., 2018).

Within the context of social media use, students engage in both passive consumption of university-related content and active eWOM behaviors – such as sharing, liking, or posting reviews—that influence peer perceptions and decisions (Verduyn et al., 2015; Deters & Mehl, 2013). Positive eWOM has been linked to psychological benefits, including self-affirmation and social connectedness (Alexandrov et al., 2013), making it a valuable outcome for universities aiming to enhance their digital reputation. While previous research has examined WOM's role in business and service contexts, its exploration in higher education marketing remains sparse (Lee et al., 2020; Casidy & Wymer, 2015). This study contends that university-generated social media content is a significant driver of students' eWOM behavior, hypothesizing a direct positive impact.

Furthermore, social media content generated by the university may strengthen students' psychological connection with their institution. Identification develops when students perceive shared values and attributes with their university, fostering a sense of belonging and commitment (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Arnett et al., 2003). Research confirms that stronger alumni and student ties correlate with supportive behaviors, including donations and advocacy (Abdelmaaboud et al., 2020). Applying SIT, customers seek affiliation with positively reputed brands that reinforce their self-identity and social distinctiveness (Keh & Xie, 2009). Accordingly, this study hypothesizes that university-generated social media content positively influences student-university identification.

The role of student-university identification as an antecedent of eWOM behavior is well-supported in consumer behavior and higher education research. Brand identification enhances consumers' willingness to engage in positive WOM behaviors and to function as brand ambassadors (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). In HE contexts, students with strong university identification actively promote their institutions through favorable eWOM (Balaji et al., 2016; Casidy & Wymer, 2015). However, the direct links between university brand identity and eWOM on social media remain underexplored, creating a basis for examining SUI's influence on student eWOM behavior.

Extending these paths, SUI is also proposed to mediate the relationship between university-generated social media content and eWOM behavior. Brand identification often serves as a mechanism through which marketing communications affect

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consumer advocacy (Dimitriadis & Papista, 2010). Students are more likely to support and promote institutions with which they strongly identify, engaging in behaviors such as defending the university and participating in its activities (Wilkins & Huisman, 2013; Yao et al., 2019). While previous studies have recognized organizational identification as a mediator in consumer-brand relationships (El-Kassar et al., 2017), less attention has focused on this mediating role within higher education's digital contexts. This research thus investigates SUI's mediating effect on the impact of university social media content on students' eWOM behavior.

In summary, this review reveals the critical roles played by university-generated social media content and student-university identification in shaping students' advocacy behaviors online. Yet, empirical evidence detailing these relationships within HEIs, especially in the Philippine context, is limited.

This study aims to fill that gap by examining the direct and indirect effects of university social media content on students' eWOM behavior through SUI. Based on the foregoing, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: University-generated social media content significantly influences students' eWOM behavior.

H2: University-generated social media content significantly influences student-university identification.

H3: Student-university identification significantly influences students' eWOM behavior.

H4: Student-university identification mediates the relationship between university-generated social media content and students' eWOM behavior.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study uses Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) as an overall methodology to verify the proposed model. SEM is a quantitative research technique used to show the causal relationships between variables. Particularly, the PLS-SEM method was used, which is a prediction-oriented approach to SEM that simplifies the requirements for data and relationship definition that a covariance-based SEM sets. Because of its statistical characteristics, PLS-SEM is especially helpful in exploratory research contexts. As articulated by Martínez-López et al. (2013), marketing and business scholars commonly use SEM to evaluate empirically novel theoretical suggestions expressed through intricate models.

Kline (2016) states that a median sample size based on study evaluations is N = 200, despite the fact that it is challenging to establish a minimum sample size in SEM studies. The research focused on 487 legal age students from Tarlac State University (TSU), Philippines officially enrolled from September to November 2024 data gathering, with personal social media account, and followers of any of the official social media accounts (FB, Twitter, YouTube) of TSU. This ensures the samples' relevant and meaningful exposure to UG social media content. Furthermore, ethical clearance and approval was secured by the researcher through the TSU Research Ethics Committee

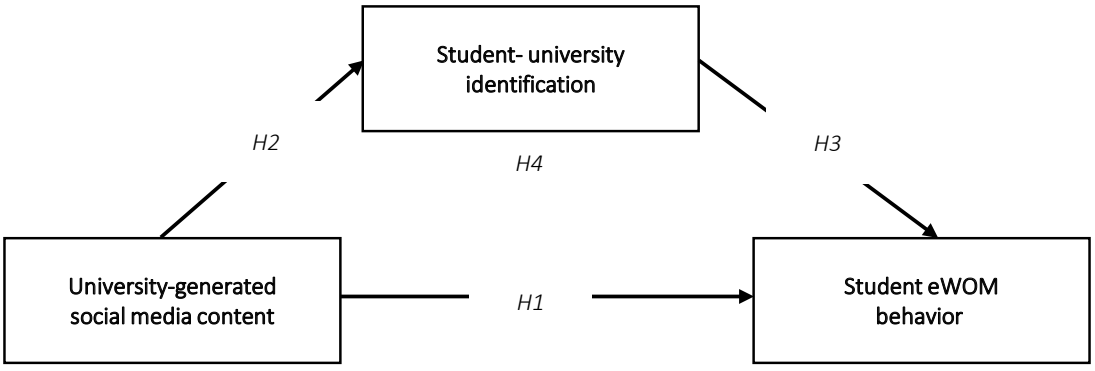

Figure 1. Proposed theoretical model

to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity throughout data collection and analysis.

Table 1. Demographic profile of the respondents

Category		Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Male	201	41.3
	Female	286	58.7
	Total	487	100
Year level	1st	139	28.5
	2nd	159	32.6
	3rd	122	25.1
	4th	67	13.8
	Total	487	100
College	CBA	368	75.6
	COE	92	18.9
	SOL	20	4.1
	CASS	6	1.2
	CCS	1	0.2
	Total	487	100

As shown in Table 1, respondents were mostly female (58.7%) while male population was 41.3 percent. Furthermore, most of the respondents are second year students (32.6%) followed by first year students (28.5%). Lastly, 75.6% of the students are under the College of Business and Accountancy followed by the College of Engineering (18.9%), School of Law (4.1%), College of Arts and Social Science (1.2%), and College of Computer Studies (0.2%).

Table 2. Social media accounts of the respondents

Social media	Frequency*	Percentage
Facebook	486	68.7
Instagram	94	13.3
YouTube	85	12.0
Twitter	42	6.0

Note: *Multiple Response.

Consistent with Balaji et al. 2016), students extensively use social media to connect with peers, academic institutions, and external communities. Table 2 shows that Facebook is the predominant platform among respondents (68.7%), followed by Instagram (13.3%), YouTube (12%), and Twitter (5.9%). This pattern justifies the focus on these platforms as key channels for university-generated content impacting student engagement and advocacy.

As opposed to the retrospective technique of calculating sample size after data have been collected and analyzed, it is generally recommended to estimate the minimal sample size before data collection and analysis, or prospective analysis. According to Cohen's (1992) power assessment guidelines, a reasonable effect size would be defined by the criterion $\beta^2/(1-\beta^2)>.02$ in a simple model that includes only one predictor and one criterion latent variable. Simpler models (involving two variables) must exceed the minimum acceptable effect size of .02 as established by Cohen (1992). However, more complex models tend to yield smaller effect sizes due to the inclusion of additional competing links.

In light of this, Kock and Lynn (2012) recommend targeting an effect size that is double Cohen's (1992) minimum acceptable threshold, suggesting an effect size of 0.04. This guideline is applicable to most models, including complex ones, provided they are devoid of vertical and lateral collinearity (Kock & Lynn, 2012). The corresponding inequality for this proposed rule of thumb can be expressed as $\beta^2/(1-\beta^2)>.04$, which leads to the solution $\beta \geq .197$. Thus, β value of 0.197 was chosen for the sample size computation.

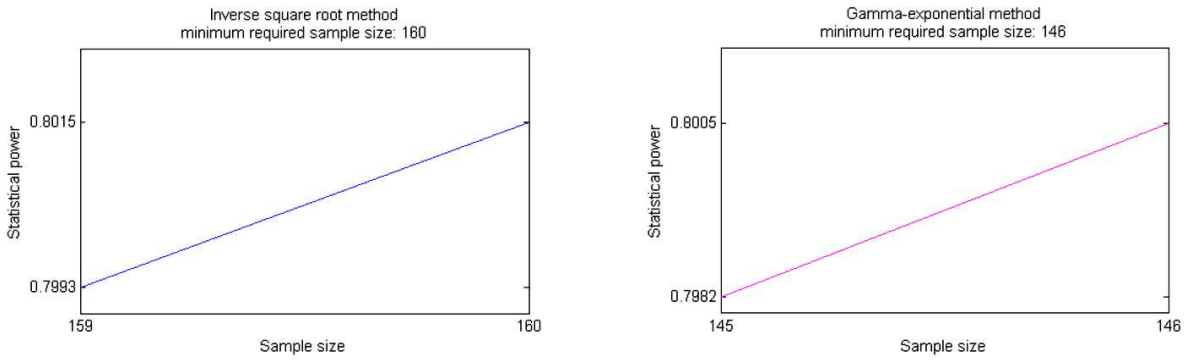

Figure 2. Minimum sample size required using inverse square root and gamma-exponential methods

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This study employed two sample size calculation methods for PLS-SEM analysis: the inverse root and gamma exponential method. The sample size was computed using the recommended path coefficient of 0.197 (suggested beta for prospective analysis), a significance level of 0.05, and a required power level of 0.80. The inverse square root method recommended a sample size of 160 at a minimum, while the gamma-exponential method suggested 146. This study utilized a sample size of 487, significantly exceeding the minimum sample size for both methods.

3. RESULTS

The measurement model and structural model analysis are displayed with focus on the association between UG, SUI, and student eWOM behavior.

All constructs and items in the instrument were adopted from extant literature: (1) university-generated social media content (Osei-Frimpong & Mclean, 2018); (2) SUI (Mael & Ashforth, 1992); and (3) student eWOM behavior (Casidy & Wymer, 2015). The instrument underwent pilot testing for factor analysis to check the reliability of its constructs and appropriateness for the context of Filipino consumers. To test the internal consistency reliability of the constructs, Composite Reliability and Cronbach's Alpha were utilized.

Based on the findings shown in Table 3, constructs have a CR result of 0.89 – 0.91, which exceeds the threshold of 0.70 recommendation. Likewise, the CA values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, respectively. Meanwhile, the CV, Factor Loadings and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) were performed. The findings on the initial test resulted to have one item (SUI5) with a negative value. Thus, the item was deleted, and another assessment for factor loadings was done. The final assessment for the remaining items surpasses the threshold of 0.60 (Hair et al. 2009). Furthermore, the AVE of the construct got a value of more than 0.50. The results of the factor loading and AVE indicates that the items are convergently valid.

Table 4. Assessment of the divergent validity of the constructs

Constructs	1	2	3
UG	(0.85)		
SUI	0.69	(0.79)	
EWOM	0.52	0.67	(0.85)

Note: Square roots of Average Variance Extracted (AVEs) shown on diagonal.

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, whereby the square root of each construct's AVE was compared against its correlations with other constructs. The results presented in Table 4 confirm that the AVE values were higher than the corresponding inter- con-

Table 3. Assessment of the convergent validity of the constructs

Construct	Factor Loadings		Composite Reliability	Cronbach's Alpha	AVE	Convergent Validity
	Initial	Final				
University-generated social media contents (UG)						
UG1	0.84	0.84	0.89	0.81	0.73	YES
UG2	0.83	0.83				
UG3	0.89	0.89				
Student-university identification (SUI)						
SUI1	0.79	0.81	0.89	0.84	0.62	YES
SUI2	0.70	0.74				
SUI3	0.81	0.84				
SUI4	0.84	0.85				
SUI5	–0.76	deleted				
SUI6	0.73	0.68				
Student eWOM behavior (EWOM)						
EWOM1	0.84	0.84	0.91	0.88	0.73	YES
EWOM2	0.89	0.89				
EWOM3	0.86	0.86				
EWOM4	0.82	0.82				

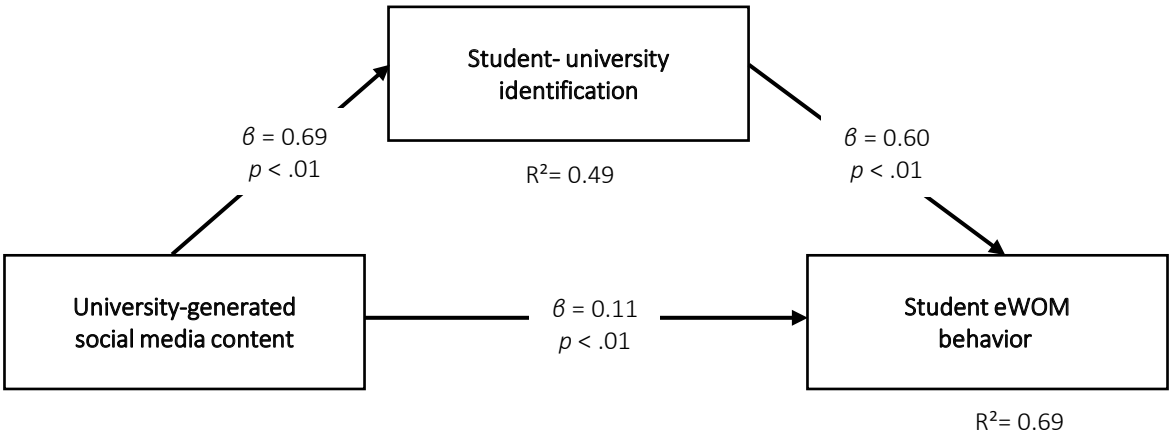

Figure 3. Path analysis

struct correlations, indicating sound discriminant validity and that the constructs measure distinct concepts (Hair et al., 2019).

Following validation of the measurement model, the structural model was analyzed to test the hypothesized relationships. The path coefficients and associated significance levels, obtained via bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples, are summarized in Table 5. University-generated social media content exhibited a significant positive effect on students' eWOM behavior (β = 0.42, $p < 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis 1 (*H1*). Similarly, university-generated content significantly influenced student- university identification (β = 0.53, $p < 0.001$), confirming Hypothesis 2 (*H2*). In turn, student-university identification positively impacted students' eWOM behavior (β = 0.31, $p < 0.01$), validating Hypothesis 3 (*H3*). Mediation analysis was conducted following the guidelines of Preacher and Hayes (2008) to test Hypothesis 4 (*H4*), which proposed that student-university identification mediates the relationship between university-generated social media content and students' eWOM behavior. The indirect effect of university-generated content on eWOM through student- university identification was statistically significant (β = 0.16, $p < 0.01$), indicating partial mediation. This suggests that while university-generated content directly promotes positive eWOM, its influence is also channeled through strengthening students' identification with their university. Additional model fit indices corroborate the robustness of the structural model, with the coefficient of determination (R^2) for eWOM behavior recorded at 0.49, indicating that nearly half of the variance in eWOM is explained by university-generated content and student- university identification collectively, consistent with benchmarks in social science research (Cohen, 1988).

Figure 3 displays that the final model provides support for all four hypotheses in this study. The result provides that university-generated social media content significantly affects students' eWOM behavior $(\beta = 0.11,\ p < .001)$. This supports the study of Sagynbekova et al. (2020) that both firm-generated social media content and user-generated social media content significantly affects eWOM. The same study also supports the findings of the present study that brand equity is influenced by contents generated by firms and in social media. Thus, *H4* of the present study is accepted with $\beta = 0.69,\ p < .01$.

Table 5. Path analysis and hypotheses testing

Path	H	Path coefficient	SE	p-value	Effect size	Decision
Direct effect						
UG → eWOM	H1	0.11	0.05	<.001	0.06	Supported
UG → SUI	H2	0.69	0.04	<.01	0.49	Supported
SUI → eWOM	H3	0.60	0.05	<.001	0.40	Supported
Mediating effect						
UG → SUI → eWOM	H4	0.42	0.03	<.001		Supported

Note: Effects size: small = 0.02, medium = 0.15, and large = 0.35.

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4. DISCUSSION

The significant positive relationship between student-university identification and eWOM behavior concurs with Casidy and Wymer's (2015) study, which demonstrated that students act as effective brand ambassadors for their universities through word-of-mouth. Schlesinger et al. (2021), who reported that university brand image strongly influences students' intentions to engage in positive eWOM, reinforce this. The findings complement these by highlighting that the degree of alignment between students' values and beliefs and those projected by the university plays an influential role in shaping eWOM. This supports Balaji et al.'s (2016) assertion that greater "oneness" or identification between students and their institutions correlates with stronger affiliative behaviors.

This study's identification of student-university identification as a partial mediator between university-generated social media content and eWOM behavior aligns with Fujita et al. (2020) who emphasized that social media platforms reveal users' interests and personal identities and serve as strategic arenas where brands, including universities, can align their messaging with these identities. Carvalho et al. (2020) similarly argued that positive eWOM stems from congruence between institutional messaging and individual beliefs or preferences. My findings therefore indicate that universities can enhance students' advocacy by creating social media content that resonates authentically with their community's values and interests, further empowering students to share and endorse university messages online (Casidy & Wymer, 2015).

The paper contributes substantively to the emergent body of literature on eWOM and branding within HEIs, an area hitherto underexplored. By integrating brand identity theory (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), it advances theoretical understanding of how digital branding efforts (via social media content) affect student identification and advocacy behaviors uniquely in a HEI setting. Unlike previous research that has largely focused on commercial brands or student recruitment intentions, this work illuminates the critical role of ongoing engagement with enrolled students and extends the conceptual application of these theories to students' eWOM practices in the digital age. Additionally, this study underscores the increasing speed and reach of digital word-of- mouth compared to traditional WOM, noting that online critiques, whether positive or negative, can rapidly influence institutional reputation among key stakeholders. This emphasizes why universities must exercise strategic care in curating their social media presence and consider the multifaceted impacts of their messaging on student identity and community dynamics.

The results provide significant statistical evidence that content in social media being generated by a university influences the student-university identification and eWOM behavior. Furthermore, the study also highlights that any activities generated by the university through its social media platforms reflects their values, beliefs, and other identifying factors which are being considered by the students. With this, Tarlac State University being the local of this study, through the Office of Public Affairs (OPA) may target the content of the posts or repost, comments, and any other activities made online. While OPA's work insofar as handling the social media account of the university has been commendable, it may still look into areas like strategies on how the university-generated contents could bolster student-university identification, and on how such contents prompt students to share contents of the university through eWOM. Thus, the university's marketing and communication effort can create strong university identification. This paper may further enhance the university's influence in fostering good relationship with its students.

CONCLUSION

The research gap this paper sought to address evidenced that student- university identification mediates the relationship between UG and eWOM. Moreover, this paper concludes to support the tested relationships between: (1) university-generated social media content and eWOM, (2) university-generated social media content and student-university identification, and student-university identification and eWOM.

Suffice it to state that while other variables may be included, the researcher only explored the stated variables as basis for this initial/exploratory research to test the structural relationship that exist among the variables. While this paper focused on university-generated social media content as the study's only independent variable, there may be other elements or determinants that may affect eWOM behavior (as the dependent variable). Meanwhile, the only dependent variable was eWOM behavior, as outcome variable. Notwithstanding, other potent outcome variable may be subject for further investigation.

The respondents composed of students coming from only one state university in the Philippines. Future studies may replicate or modify this study to compare university-generated social media content, student-university identification, and eWOM of private and private HEIs, and include other stakeholders like professors, university, alumni, among others. Future studies may use the initial findings of this paper to deepen the discussion on UG, SUI, eWOM in the context of HEIs, in other regions or countries. By doing so, the restriction of this paper on result generalization may be better addressed.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Conceptualization: Wilmark J. Ramos.
Data curation: Wilmark J. Ramos.
Formal analysis: Wilmark J. Ramos.
Methodology: Wilmark J. Ramos.
Supervision: Wilmark J. Ramos.
Validation: Wilmark J. Ramos.
Visualization: Wilmark J. Ramos.
Writing – original draft: Wilmark J. Ramos.
Writing – review & editing: Wilmark J. Ramos.

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