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Research Paper

The Impact of Word-of-Mouth Communication on Consumer Choices and Satisfaction: An Empirical Study of Students' Perspective.

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ABSTRACT

With the number of existing studies and the contradiction of their conclusions about the word-of-mouth (WOM) phenomenon, there is a need to develop an all-embracing model capable of integrating prior findings and identifying future postulates. Therefore, this study explores the impact of WOM communication on students' choice of university and satisfaction. The following work discusses the effect of WOM on students' decision-making in the context of the likelihood elaboration model (ELM). Data was collected from the general population of 160000 students from different Georgia universities. We utilized deductive reasoning and quantitative and qualitative strategies such as focus groups followed by larger-scale surveys. We found that students are more inclined to choose the university when they are sure about WOM message source credibility and the quality of the message being transmitted. On the contrary, the mentioned WOM features do not persuade them to form a strong reputation for the university.

Keywords: Word-of-mouth communication, consumer behavior, university choice, satisfaction, ELM theory.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The academic world has seen many definitions of word-of-mouth communication (WOMc) by different authors. Those interpretations of the phenomenon primarily explain similar communication processes between a sender and a receiver. For example, Steffes and Burgee (2009) define word of mouth as informal communication about tangible or intangible products or producers channeled to other consumers. According to many empirical studies, word-of-mouth communication strongly influences consumers' decision-making process. Regardless of the form of WOM, whether it would be traditional (offline) or based on internet communication (online), their focus is on information and individuals' experiences sharing about goods and services, which is particularly important in the service industry (Steffes & Burgee, 2009).

Despite the interesting contributions in the literature regarding the impacts of WOM communication, the context of higher education is still insufficiently studied, namely the effect of WOM communication on consumers' brand choice and satisfaction. Therefore, this study aims to bridge the gap between these three phenomena. Analyzing existing studies, which indicate that WOM influences students' choice of university, this study further explores the topic by including satisfaction. Hence, this research will investigate WOM communication from the viewpoint of receivers.

Accordingly, we formulated the main research question:

- Does word-of-mouth communication generate high levels of consumer satisfaction?

Additionally, to explain better, which constituent of WOM communication has a more substantial effect on a university selection process, a sender's credibility, or the quality of message content, we designed complementing sub-research questions:

- Which are the most influential elements of WOM communication in university choice?
- Which are the most influential elements of WOM communication in strengthening a university's reputation?

To answer the research questions for this study, we will focus our attention on the following objectives:

- Review the existing literature to discover relevant elements of WOM communication, message source credibility, perceived quality of message, and how to measure them;
- To identify the most influential factor in the decision-making process for purchasing university services;
- To measure the mediation effect of WOM through university reputation, university choice to consumer satisfaction;
- To assess the indirect effect of word-of-mouth on consumer satisfaction through its impact on university reputation and choice;
- To examine the valid path to university choice and brand equity shaped by online and offline sources.

This study will investigate the effect of WOM communication on university choice from the receivers' point of view. Firstly, in this research, we will explore the relationship between WOM message source credibility and perceived quality of message and students' choice of university. Particularly, we are interested to know whether either of the listed factors is correlated with university choice and, if they are, which of them has a more substantial impact. Secondly, we will move to the next step and study whether the university's reputation for WOM communication mediates the effect on students' satisfaction. Furthermore, this study will examine the moderation effect of WOM on university choice and students' satisfaction.

The research provides theoretical and practical contributions to the field. The study utilizes the elaboration likelihood model and investigates the sender's credibility as an element of the peripheral route and message quality as the central route resulting in university choice and reputation. The research also extends the literature by testing the mediating and moderating role of WOM impacting the effect of university choice and reputation on satisfaction. Furthermore, the study adds to the literature by employing FSQCA to generate various valid configurations resulting in university choice and reputation extracted from two main subsamples.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Communication theory and higher education service characteristics

WOM has been studied since the '50s by many academics and marketing practitioners (Lang & Hyde, 2013). According to previous studies, consumers practice WOM when they want to purchase books, holiday destinations, choose medical services or make decisions about acquiring

education-related services (Chakravarty, Liu, & Mazumdar, 2010; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008; Dobele & Lindgreen, 2011; Greenacre, Freeman, Cong, & Chapman, 2014; Sipilä, Herold, Tarkiainen, & Sundqvist, 2017). It is common because people share their opinions in a non-commercial way about the products or services they consume (Arndt, 1967). According to Berger (2014), this communication practice has a more significant effect on consumer behavior because consumers trust each other more than they trust companies' marketing tools.

Throughout the existing literature, it is evident that most of the studies have focused on WOM from the sender's point of view. However, the receiver's side of the phenomenon has been studied less, mainly on how consumers utilize WOM in their purchase decision-making process (Martin & Lueg, 2013).

Before purchasing a product, customers seek out information about a product or the producer. They use several sources of information like non-commercial, personal contact, friends, family, etc. In addition, they search for information on the internet, social media, blogs, and company webpages forum groups and read other customer feedback (Komodromos, Abadir, Alserhan & Halkias, 2022). All the above-listed forms refer to word-of-mouth interaction rooted in the social communication paradigm.

Hovland (1948) identifies four elements of social communication: (a) A communication transmitter, (b) stimuli by the communicator, (c) communication responders, and (d) receivers' responses to the communication. The existing literature identifies three participants in the communication process: a sender, a message, and a receiver. Different variations of these three elements give out different communication models, whether interpersonal or mass communication, offline or online (Smith & Zook, 2011).

Out of many communication theories, this study focused on the elaboration likelihood model as a theoretical basis. The rationale for this choice is that many prominent scholars widely use it, observing the formation and the change in attitudes. Most importantly, we need to look into those two routes, which ELM theory possesses against recipients of that communication. Both those routes, central and peripheral, are aimed at changing the attitudes of information seekers. However, the approaches are not the same. In the case of the central route, the logical thought process takes over. It allows a bigger room for major changes and requires more attention. On the contrary, the message is assessed using surface features like the speaker's trustworthiness in the peripheral route. This approach results in more subtle attitudinal changes (Bordia, 2005; Cacioppo, 1984).

From the marketing point of view, communication is a constituent of one of the 4Ps in the marketing mix. Undoubtedly, communication has undergone significant changes throughout the years and social factors. However, unprecedented technological changes in our realm completely reshaped the nature of the marketing communication phenomenon (Waterschoot & Bulte, 1992). Nowadays, communication is a global proscenium for people to interact instantly. The underlying factors for such a dramatic change are the development of cellular and internet technologies followed by the development of platforms such as webpages, blogs, social media email, and mobile connectivity (Winer, 2009).

Undoubtedly, those changes touch the service industry and significantly higher education. Patti and Chia (2009) describe education services as credence-based, which is hard to evaluate for customers even after they purchased it. The authors also discuss the unique characteristics of educational services. Educational services have distinctive features from traditional service characteristics (heterogeneity, inseparability, intangibility, and perishability). In the mentioned scenario, High market entry barriers, information asymmetry between clients and service providers, challenges with service quality evaluation, increased perceived risk, and perceived pricing insensitivity are all highlighted (Patti & Chia, 2009).

Likewise, Patton (2000) and Veloutsou et al. (2004) state that higher education service is one branch of credence-based service with high personal involvement, complexity, high intangibility, and a professional and people orientation. (Patton, 2000) (Veloutsou, Lewis, & Paton, 2004).

Hartman and Lindgren (1993) and Richard et al. (1999) assert that HEIs require highly professional academic and administrative staff to deliver the service at maximum quality. Based on the observations, they identified that gathering information about higher education service providers is challenging, taking into account the fact that to measure satisfaction from such service consumption. According to them, it is connected to professional knowledge, skills, and finally to the future career of a consumer (Hartman & Lindgren, 1993) (Richard, Gabrielle, & Craig, 1999).

Before the education service consumption, potential students are not aware or do not have any experience in choosing a university, or in most cases, do not know which profession they want to acquire or what are the best possible approaches for them in delivering the services, or even what the quality teaching consists of (Richard, Gabrielle, & Craig, 1999).

According to Moogan et al. (2001), information gathering by students about higher education providers can be categorized into three stages. At the first stage of entry-level information

requirement, students intend to gather information about university core elements such as teaching and learning methods, knowledge assessments, study programs, entry barriers, and awarded qualifications (Moogan et al., 2001; Khoshtaria et al., 2020). In the second stage of deeper information search, students pay attention to factors such as the environment and lifestyle, confidence in the university, and reputation (Moogan et al., 2001). Finally, in the third stage, before making the final decision, students narrow down the university options they constructed throughout the first two stages of information gathering. According to Moogan et al. (2001), the life utility functions and environmental factors become significant concerns at this stage.

The existing literature suggests two communication models in studying a theoretical base on students' decision-making when choosing a university. The first is the transmission model based on one-way communication, and the transaction model involves two-way information exchange (Dwyer, 2009; Tynan et al., 2013). One-way communication is a linear model involving communication in a straight line from sender to receiver and does not generate any feedback. Therefore, the receiver can be easily misguided because of the noise, the message passes through or through the encoding process by the receiver, or the sender might make a mistake in decoding the message (Minh, D 2018). On the contrary, two-way information exchange is a circular model involving feedback from the receiver. In this model, roles as a sender and receiver are not strictly assigned because the sender might be an information receiver. Additionally, in this model, strong emphasis is placed on the environmental and contextual aspects (Minh, D 2018).

Our research will focus on the two-way communication model of ELM as a theoretical background in studying the perspective of student-receivers of word-of-mouth communication.

WOM message source credibility and university choice. The source and message are constantly mentioned as essential components in the frameworks that conceptualize the aspects impacting WOM efficacy and adoption from the receiver's perspective (e.g., Cheung & Thadani, 2012; (Kyriakou, Papaioannou, & Komodromos, 2022, Sweeney et al., 2008). The ELM argues that when processing information, receivers will analyze the content and source of a message. This assessment is seen as both peripheral and core information processing routes(Cheung et al., 2009; Petty et al., 1983), and ELM theory distinguishes between the two by taking into account the level of cognitive information processing that message evaluation experiences (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

When recipients have a strong motivation and capacity to comprehend information, the chance of elaboration is high, and they tend to analyze message content via the central channel. Conversely, when receivers have limited desire and processing skills, elaboration is unlikely, and they are more likely to examine peripheral cues or source-related aspects (Cite dissertation).

Individual and situational variables have been proposed as predictors of motivation and ability. Individual aspects include knowledge or relevance, whereas situational influences include distraction or repetition (Kang & Herr, 2006). When there is a low possibility of elaboration, the impression of a source has a more considerable effect on persuasion (Bordia et al., 2005). Positive source perception would alter the peripheral attitude and lead the information receiver back to the central cognitive processing pathway, which would then drive the attitude change of WOM receivers (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

As a result, when WOM recipients are preoccupied or lack understanding regarding the information received, WOM sources modify their perception of the message content. Furthermore, in practice, the central and peripheral pathways do not independently exist because the former, which requires fewer cognitive resources, might serve as a forerunner to the latter (Kang & Herr, 2006). As a result, information processing is complicated, and perceptions of the source and message influence each other. ELM theory establishes a theoretical basis for message and source factors' mediating effects and connections. The conceptual model and hypothesis formulation discuss these impacts in further depth.

In addition to the message quality and quantity, the sender's perceived traits can also affect decision-making. For example, the communicator's credibility can result from perceived proficiency in the field (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008). Additionally, the level of trustworthiness is another dimension of sender characteristics that can impact the purchasing decision (Roser, 1990; Martin & Lueg, 2013; Reichelt et al., 2014; Buttle & Groeger, 2017). Prior studies have indicated that the perceived expertise of the source can facilitate acceptance of unfamiliar brands more than familiar items (Lim & Chung, 2014). It is also determined that the influence of perceived expertise depends on the discrepancies between the receiver's proficiency and the sender (Sweeny et al., 2014). However, other researchers have concluded that if valence is positive, the impact of the sender's expertise and trustworthiness is reduced (Radighieri & Mulder, 2014).

Overall, the sender's characteristics have been defined in two primary constructs, the perceived communicator's expertise and trustworthiness (Asada & Ko, 2015; Tajuddin et al., 2020). The mentioned studies have tested the sender's traits in various fields such as sports, entertainment, dietary, and healthcare products. This study attempts to add to the literature by testing the reviewer's traits and their effects on the university's reputation and students` university choice.

As noted, the study divides the sender's characteristics into perceived trustworthiness and perceived expertise. Therefore, the following hypotheses are formulated:

- **H1a:** The sender's perceived trustworthiness positively impacts brand equity;
- **H1b:** The sender's perceived expertise positively impacts brand equity;
- **H1c:** sender's perceived trustworthiness positively impacts students` choice of university;
- **H1d:** The sender's perceived expertise positively impacts the student's choice of university.

2.2 WOM message quality and its impact on Decision-making outcomes

Cheung and Thadani (2012) and Sweeney et al. (2008) suggest that two main elements are crucial when discussing WOM effectiveness from a receiver's point of view. One is source characteristics tic, and the second is the quality of the message. Message quality can result from various dimensions, depending on how the message is delivered and the condition a message is received. These dimensions include vividness and valence (Godes et al., 2003; Mazzarol et al., 2007; Cheung, 2008; White, 2010; Yu & Tang, 2010; Sweeney et al., 2012; Williamsa & Buttleb, 2014; Chawdharya & Dall'Olmo Rileya, 2015) as well as the message's perceived usefulness (Casielles et al., 2013; Virvilaite et al., 2015).

Vividness, as a component of WOM, is a product of the communicator's compassion, the richness of the content, and the cohesiveness of the message sent (Yu & Tang, 2010; Wolny & Mueller, 2013; Virvilaite et al., 2015). Moreover, whether the message is positive or negative can also impact the receiver. As a result, valence is another dimension determining WOM's outcome. However, previous studies have found conflicting results regarding valence. While some researchers have concluded that valence can play a significant role in the receiver's behavior (Buttle, 1998; Anderson & Salisbury, 2003; Komodromos, 2017; Rezvani, 2012), others have indicated that WOM valence does not impact a firm's sales (Davis & Khazanchi, 2008). Furthermore, the perceived usefulness of the message depends on qualitative variables such as the

persuasive language used and quantitative factors such as the number of communicators (Casielles et al., 2013; Virvilaite et al., 2015).

Prior researchers have tested the impact of vividness, valence, and perceived usefulness on purchase intention and brand awareness and image in the entertainment industry, travel agencies, and fashion industry (Bowman & Narayandas, 2001; Liu, 2006; Alvarez et al., 2007; Sánchez-Fernández & Jiménez-Castillo, 2021). This study extends the literature by testing the dimensions such as volume of interactions and persuasiveness as components of usefulness and richness and cohesiveness of the message as dimensions of vividness on university reputation and choice. Moreover, the research examines WOM valence's effect on university reputation and students` choice in higher education institutions. Therefore, the study posits:

- **H2a:** Word-of-mouth message vividness positively impacts university's reputation;
- **H2b:** Word-of-mouth message valence positively impacts university reputation;
- **H2c:** Word-of-mouth message perceived usefulness positively impacts the university reputation.

As noted, this study also adds to the literature by examining the effects of message quality on students' choice of university. Hence, the following is put forward:

- **H3a:** Word-of-mouth message vividness positively impacts students` choice of university;
- **H3b:** Word-of-mouth message valence positively impacts students` choice of university;
- **H3c:** Word-of-mouth message perceived usefulness positively impacts students` choice of university.

Unlike previous literature, knowing whether university reputation mediates the word-of-mouth communication students' satisfaction is essential. Moreover, whether or not WOM moderates university choice and students' satisfaction. Hence, this research will investigate the ties mentioned above:

- **H4a:** Overall, Word-of-Mouth communication positively impacts a university's reputation;
- **H4b:** Word-of-mouth communication mediates university reputation toward students' satisfaction;
- **H5a:** Overall, Word-of-Mouth communication positively impacts a university choice;
- **H5b:** Word-of-mouth communication moderates university choice toward students' satisfaction;

- **H6:** The University's reputation leads toward purchase intention.

Additionally, we investigated three more direct relationships between overall WOM communication, university reputation, university choice, and university reputation and purchase intention.

We constructed a research model for our study (see Figure 1). As we can observe from the diagram, this study seeks to establish direct and indirect relationships. Investigating the direct connection was motivated by the existing literature. However, we took a logical step forward and attempted to examine indirect relationships.

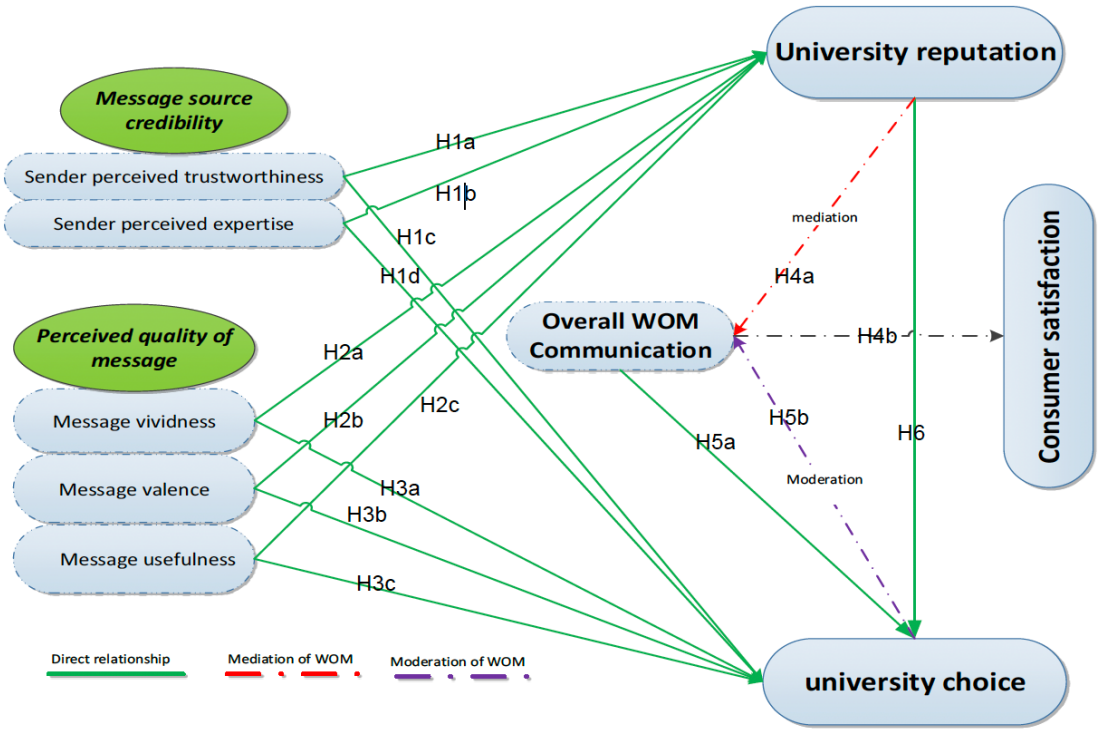

Figure 1 - Research model

We identify the following independent and dependent variables based on the systematic literature review. For endogenous variables, we identified university reputation, university choice, and consumer satisfaction. As for the exogenous, we estimated message source credibility, perceived quality of the message, and overall WOM communication. It must be noted that because of our new approach, the research model comprises two sub-models.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research strategy and measurement scales

We integrated qualitative and quantitative methods to fulfill our study's objectives, drawing on various research constructs from existing literature. Notably, we tailored our questionnaire to reflect the unique context of Georgian higher education. To achieve this customization, we conducted seven focus groups with students from Georgian universities, involving six to eight participants in each.

The insights gained from these focus group discussions were instrumental in identifying two critical variables: university reputation and university choice. Participants shared their perceptions of how a university's reputation influenced their satisfaction levels. Moreover, conversations revealed a division among students regarding their satisfaction with their chosen universities. These discussions provided rich qualitative insights and led us to hypothesize a moderating effect of university choice on the relationship between word-of-mouth (WOM) and satisfaction.

Additionally, the nuanced discussions about university reputation and its ambiguous impact on student satisfaction prompted us to explore its potential as a mediating factor in the WOM-to-satisfaction pathway. The focus groups' nuanced viewpoints drove this decision, which highlighted the complexity of the relationship between university reputation, choice, and student satisfaction.

Equipped with these insights, we designed a questionnaire that encapsulated the concerns and perspectives shared by the focus group participants. This tailored instrument was then piloted on a smaller sample, ensuring our research methodology was grounded in the specificities of the Georgian higher education landscape and the real-world experiences of students. Through this approach, we aimed to more accurately capture the mediator and moderator effects within the WOM communication, university choice, and satisfaction nexus, as informed by direct student input.

Additionally, we conducted a preliminary pilot test of the questionnaire with the group participants to ensure the survey instrument's comprehensiveness and alignment with the research phenomenon. This step was critical in refining the questionnaire to reflect the scope and objectives of the study accurately.

In the final stage, we distributed the questionnaire and gathered the data. The survey instrument is a Likert scale measuring from 1 to 5. We created the research strategy model using the following pattern: (see Figure 2).

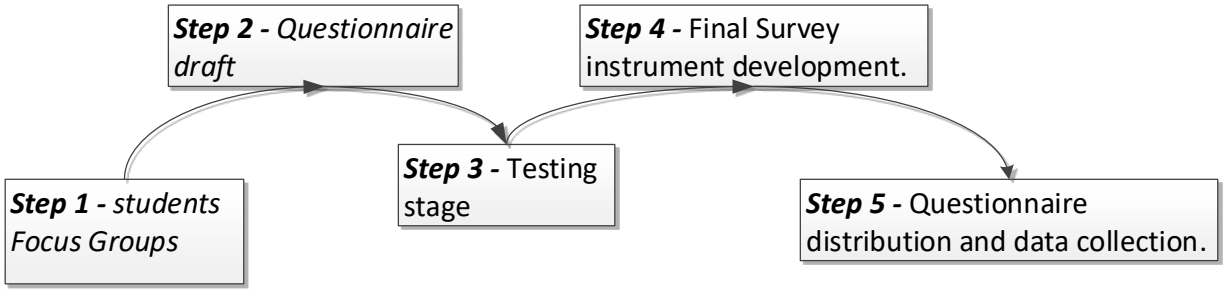

Figure 2 - Survey development process

3.2 Sampling techniques and analytical approach

This study looks at WOM communication, which considers university choice and satisfaction. We draw the sample size (628) from the general population of 160,000 students (geostat.ge, 2021). Salant and Dillman (1994) estimate minimal sample sizes at a 95% confidence level and +/- 10% sampling error in business research projects. As per collected responses, the error margin dropped to 4%, which is acceptable for business studies.

We used a random sampling approach for sample size, disseminated the questionnaire using an online survey service, and gathered data appropriately. For the analytical approach, we use SEM and FQSA. Firstly, we checked the model fit of the construct and sought direct and indirect relationships using SEM. In the second stage, we employed FQSA to determine which source credibility and message quality variables impacted university choice and reputation.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Validity and reliability using SEM

We used reliability alpha for the constructs comprising the questionnaire's internal reliability. As generally accepted higher the reliability coefficient, the better. We are looking at stepping over the threshold of 0.7 (Matin et al., 2023). According to the analysis, we have the following picture: Sender perceived trustworthiness (SeTrust) - .812, sender perceived expertise (SeExper) - .831, message vividness (MesVivid) - .862, message valence (Mes Valence) - .743, message usefulness (Mes Useful) - .896, overall WOM communication (WOMc) - .835, university CBBE/reputation (UniCBBE) - .846, purchase Intention/university choice (UniChoice) - .971 and consumer satisfaction (Satisfaction) - .826. Thus, the internal reliability of this study is maintained. Moving along with the testing, we utilized exploratory factor analysis to trim those factors that potentially reflected the number of latent variables.

Consequently, we checked the value of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin, which was – 0.824, well above the threshold of 0.5. Also, Barlett's test of sphericity was significant at $p < 0.00$.

Afterwards, we checked the Eigenvalues for each dimension. The test result identified nine dimensions. Each component under the mentioned dimensions is above 0.5, and the noted dimensions explain the cumulative variance at 0.62, topping over 0.5 thresholds. We concluded from the tests' results that this study achieved internal reliability and validity.

To validate our survey instrument, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis using IBM AMOS version 24. For the analysis, we concentrate our focus on absolute and comparative fit values (See Table 1).

Table 1 - Model fit statistics

Numb	Index	Statistics
1	TLI	. 892
2	CFI	.904
3	IFI	.905
4	X2/df	3.389
5	RMSEA	.062
6	GFI	.865

Additionally, we conducted discriminant and convergent validity tests, displayed in the Table below.

Table 2 - Convergent and discriminant validity

	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)	SeTrust	SeExper	UniChoice	UniCBBE	Mes Useful	Mes Vivid	Mes Valence	Satisfaction	Wom Commun
SeTrust	0,819	0,532	0,202	0,830	**0,729**								
SeExper	0,832	0,555	0,202	0,846	0,449***	**0,745**							
UniChoice	0,971	0,893	0,316	0,972	0,262***	0,308***	**0,945**						
UniReput	0,849	0,587	0,035	0,863	0,022	-0,062	0,119**	**0,766**					
MesUseful	0,899	0,692	0,316	0,912	0,301***	0,436***	0,563***	0,077†	**0,832**				
MesVivid	0,863	0,614	0,091	0,882	0,113*	0,302***	0,194***	-0,186***	0,205***	**0,784**			
MesValence	0,755	0,441	0,026	0,779	0,128*	0,037	0,106*	0,056	0,092†	-0,001	**0,664**		
Satisfaction	0,831	0,622	0,182	0,837	0,326***	0,427***	0,294***	0,141**	0,414***	0,108*	0,161**	**0,789**	
Wom Commun	0,836	0,562	0,065	0,845	0,090†	0,067	0,208***	0,166***	0,180***	-0,051	0,015	0,255***	**0,750**

As seen from the Table above convergent reliability of all variables is above 0.7, and the average variance extracted is between 0.505 and 0.635. Hence, Convergent and discriminant validity has been achieved.

4.2 Hypothesis testing

As mentioned, we tested direct and indirect relationships between the hypnotized relationships (see Table 3).

Table 3 - Test results

Hypothetical Relationships		**Est**	**S.E.**	**C.R**	**P**	**Status**
H1a	Sender trustworthiness ---> university reputation	,010	,021	,467	,641	Not supported
H1b	Sender expertise ---> university reputation	-,041	,031	-1,314	,189	Not supported
H1c	Sender trustworthiness ---> University choice	,112	,020	5,582	***	Supported
H1d	Sender expertise ---> University choice	,195	,030	6,534	***	Supported
H2a	Message vividness ---> university reputation	-,109	,028	-3,934	***	Supported
H2b	Message valence ---> university reputation	,030	,026	1,143	,253	Not supported
H2c	Message usefulness ---> university reputation	,040	,023	1,698	,090	Not supported
H3a	Message vividness ---> University choice	,109	,025	4,351	***	Supported
H3b	Message valence ---> University choice	,055	,024	2,280	,023	Supported
H3c	Message usefulness ---> University choice	,280	,027	10,556	***	Supported
H4a	WOM communication ---> university reputation	,106	,031	3,475	***	Supported
	Mediation	**Est**	**Low**	**upper**	**P**	
H4b	university reputation ---> WOM communication ---> satisfaction	,052	,023	,077	***	Supported
H5a	WOM communication ---> university choice	,129	,028	4,588	***	Supported
	Moderation					
H5b	university choice ---> WOM communication ---> satisfaction	-,056	,034	-1,679	,093	Not supported
H6	University reputation ---> university choice	,091	,034	2,695	,007	Supported

As we can see from the above Table, most hypotheses are supported, which are in line with some of the previous studies conducted around word-of-mouth communication and students' choice of university.

Fuzzy-Set Qualitative Comparative Analysis **-** This study also employs Fuzzy-Set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (FSQCA) to examine WOM's dimensions further. FSQCA is utilised to reveal various combinations of constructs that result in the outcome. The method generates these configurations and offers different paths to the outcome. Therefore, different valid models can be generated by applying FSQCA (Ragin, 2008; Rihoux & Ragin, 2009). This study applies the method to create valid solutions leading to students` university choice or increasing university reputation.

Initially, we divided the sample into two subsamples containing two manners of communication. The first group consists of students who received WOM messages through offline senders such as

family, friends or in-person presentations. The second group entails the students who received the message from online sources. A comparative analysis between the two groups reveals the different configurations for online and offline communication. The method has been tested previously in sports marketing and branding (Matin et al., 2023). This research adds to the literature by examining the paths in educations sector.

Once we identified two subsamples, we created truth tables and calibrated the 5-point Likert scale responses to the 0 to 1 range (Afonso *et al.,* 2018) for each subsample. Initially, the truth tables for both subsamples were constructed, considering university choice as the outcome (see annex tables 4 and 5).

Table 4 - Truth Table University Choice Subsample 1

File Edit

TRUST	EXP	VIV	VAL	USE	number	CHOICE	raw consist.	PRI consist.	SYM consist
1	1	0	1	1	104 (37%)		0.967504	0.947078	0.971517
1	0	0	1	1	82 (66%)		0.964662	0.94062	0.950256
1	1	1	1	1	31 (77%)		0.99207	0.983881	0.987702
1	0	0	1	0	13 (81%)		0.945354	0.843552	0.872767
1	1	1	0	1	9 (85%)		0.993962	0.983814	0.983814
1	0	1	1	1	9 (88%)		0.993036	0.983343	0.983343
1	0	0	0	1	9 (91%)		0.982487	0.95935	0.95935
1	1	0	0	1	5 (93%)		0.986239	0.968887	0.968887
0	0	0	1	1	4 (94%)		0.984816	0.951931	0.951931
0	0	0	0	1	3 (95%)		0.992853	0.973089	0.973089
1	0	0	0	0	3 (96%)		0.971682	0.900377	0.904762
0	1	1	1	1	2 (97%)		0.997638	0.989457	0.989457
0	0	1	1	0	2 (98%)		0.993662	0.959371	0.98255
0	0	0	1	0	2 (98%)		0.988222	0.947485	0.947485
0	1	0	1	1	1 (99%)		0.994288	0.980132	0.980133
1	1	0	1	0	1 (99%)		0.975552	0.919018	0.929776
1	1	0	0	0	1 (100%)		0.974299	0.90216	0.90216

Table 5 - Truth Table University choice subsample 2

File Edit

TRUST	EXP	VIV	VAL	USE	number	CHOICE	raw consist.	PRI consist.	SYM consist
1	1	0	1	1	57 (34%)		0.9606	0.936043	0.950052
1	0	0	1	1	46 (61%)		0.955245	0.925671	0.944157
1	1	1	1	1	19 (73%)		0.981502	0.963665	0.974752
1	0	1	1	1	12 (80%)		0.98598	0.969569	0.969569
1	0	0	1	0	8 (85%)		0.943811	0.840402	0.844644
1	1	0	0	1	8 (89%)		0.984535	0.966201	0.966201
1	0	0	0	1	5 (92%)		0.977094	0.94862	0.948619
1	1	1	0	1	5 (95%)		0.989845	0.973655	0.973655
1	0	0	0	0	2 (97%)		0.967935	0.883882	0.897887
1	1	0	1	0	2 (98%)		0.964571	0.880814	0.914027
1	1	0	0	0	1 (98%)		0.970806	0.892336	0.892336
0	0	0	0	1	1 (99%)		0.990463	0.960655	0.960655
0	1	0	1	1	1 (100%)		0.993811	0.9791	0.9791

Consequently, we created truth tables for both subsamples considering university brand equity as the outcome (see annex Tables 6 and 7).

Table 6 - Truth Table CBBE subsample 1

File Edit

TRUST	EXP	VIV	VAL	USE	number	BRANDE	raw consist.	PRI consist.	SYM consist
1	1	0	1	1	104 (37%)		0.931419	0.861936	0.893168
1	0	0	1	1	82 (66%)		0.938175	0.872016	0.887665
1	1	1	1	1	31 (77%)		0.928843	0.799104	0.805597
1	0	0	1	0	13 (81%)		0.972431	0.900666	0.909947
1	0	0	0	1	9 (85%)		0.958625	0.865575	0.871153
1	1	1	0	1	9 (88%)		0.962445	0.83559	0.83559
1	0	1	1	1	9 (91%)		0.972144	0.898576	0.902189
1	1	0	0	1	5 (93%)		0.960878	0.862013	0.862013
0	0	0	1	1	4 (94%)		0.986036	0.938981	0.938981
1	0	0	0	0	3 (95%)		0.968927	0.845275	0.845275
0	0	0	0	1	3 (96%)		0.991553	0.950571	0.963391
0	0	0	1	0	2 (97%)		0.991042	0.950093	0.950093
0	0	1	1	0	2 (98%)		0.99632	0.963636	0.963636
0	1	1	1	1	2 (98%)		0.973832	0.799722	0.799722
1	1	0	0	0	1 (99%)		0.986315	0.902728	0.902729
1	1	0	1	0	1 (99%)		0.983096	0.910766	0.921642
0	1	0	1	1	1 (100%)		0.981254	0.897601	0.8976

Table 7 - Truth Table CBBE Subsample 2

File Edit

TRUST	EXP	VIV	VAL	USE	number	BRANDE	raw consist.	PRI consist.	SYM consist
1	1	0	1	1	57 (34%)		0.914017	0.817038	0.838524
1	0	0	1	1	46 (61%)		0.94291	0.873335	0.889053
1	1	1	1	1	19 (73%)		0.912498	0.714885	0.735707
1	0	1	1	1	12 (80%)		0.962201	0.847749	0.858798
1	0	0	1	0	8 (85%)		0.966405	0.857143	0.891399
1	1	0	0	1	8 (89%)		0.946378	0.819672	0.819672
1	0	0	0	1	5 (92%)		0.956923	0.840607	0.840607
1	1	1	0	1	5 (95%)		0.941011	0.695991	0.695991
1	0	0	0	0	2 (97%)		0.977267	0.852942	0.852942
1	1	0	1	0	2 (98%)		0.968028	0.815691	0.849547
1	1	0	0	0	1 (98%)		0.978229	0.833648	0.833649
0	0	0	0	1	1 (99%)		0.98596	0.88651	0.88651
0	1	0	1	1	1 (100%)		0.98786	0.924445	0.924445

The study then proceeds to test the robustness and validity of the configurations. First, we tested the validity of the solutions by splitting each subsample into two random groups. The paths that exhibited high consistency and coverage for both subsamples were determined as valid configurations (Schneider & Wagemann, 2010; Pappas & Woodside, 2021; Wang *et al.,* 2021). Table 8 presents the valid configurations for subsamples of respondents receiving WOM from online sources with university choice assigned as the outcome.

Table 8 - Comparison of subsamples for online sources (Uni choice)

Uni choice	**Configurations**	**Raw coverage**	**Unique coverage**	**Consistency**
Group 1	TRUST*EXP*USE*	0.591548	0.0250967	0.9688299
	~TRUST*~EXP*VAL*~USE	0.746229	0.000580728	0.983798
	Solution coverage	0.861806		
	Solution consistency	0.9343007		
Group 2	TRUST*EXP*USE*	0.500037	0.0414701	0.960975
	~TRUST*~EXP*VAL*~USE	0.5007639	0.00445485	0.976575
	Solution coverage	0.850957		
	Solution consistency	0.919445		

Moreover, the same comparison was conducted for respondents receiving WOM from offline sources and assigning university choice as the outcome (Table 9).

Table 9 - Comparison of subsamples for offline sources (Uni choice)

Uni choice	**Configurations**	**Raw coverage**	**Unique coverage**	**Consistency**
Group 1	TRUST*EXP*USE*	0.577661	0.0494019	0.966610
	TRUST*VAL*USE	0.726486	0.0500205	0.94373
	Solution coverage	0.83400		
	Solution consistency	0.91273		
Group 2	TRUST*EXP*USE*	0.577661	0.0494019	0.956610
	TRUST*VAL*USE	0.726400	0.0500205	0.94573
	Solution coverage	0.88400		
	Solution consistency	0.91273		

We repeated the procedure to test the valid configurations for university reputation. Table 10 shows the valid solutions leading to university reputation for two subsamples of respondents receiving WOM from online sources.

Table 10 - Comparison of subsamples for online sources (Uni brand equity)

Uni choice	**Configurations**	**Raw coverage**	**Unique coverage**	**Consistency**
Group 1	~EXP*~VIV*USE*	0.66679	0.00646329	0.902952
	Solution coverage	0.896070		
	Solution consistency	0.863109		
Group 2	~EXP*~VIV*USE*	0.566675	0.0110116	0.91075
	Solution coverage	0.896268		
	Solution consistency	0.848279		

Once again, the procedure was repeated for respondents receiving WOM from offline sources and assigning university reputation as the outcome (Table 11).

Table 11 - Comparison of subsamples for offline sources (Uni Brand Equity)

Uni choice	**Configurations**	**Raw coverage**	**Unique coverage**	**Consistency**
Group 1	TRUST*EXP*USE	0.680912	0.0322089	0.902068
	TRUST*VAL*USE	0.33011	0.0887709	0.889299
	Solution coverage	0.892669		
	Solution consistency	0.862052		
Group 2	TRUST*EXP*USE	0.620673	0.0447378	0.846206
	TRUST*VAL*USE	0.772985	0.0426424	0.8409
	Solution coverage	0.897215		
	Solution consistency	0.920837		

Furthermore, we examined the robustness of the solutions. The robustness was tested by readjusting the thresholds for all constructs. Hence, the threshold for non-membership was readjusted to 1.25, for full-membership to 2.75, and the cross-over value to 3.75 for the final selection of configurations with acceptable validity and robustness, the solutions that were regenerated proceeding recalibration were selected (Fiss, 20011; Wang et al., 2021). Finally, we defined the cut-off values to determine the paths to include. The consistency threshold was set at 0.8 (Poorkavoos et al., 2016; Kraus et al., 2017).

The following Table contains the final paths generated by FSQCA that impact university choice as the outcome :

Table 12 - FSQCA analysis of university choice configurations

Outcome	***University Choice***			
Models	Online sources		Offline sources	
Paths	1	2	3	4
TRUST	●	○	●	●
EXP	●	○	●	
VIV				
VAL		●		●
USE	●	○	●	●
Raw coverage	0.5990202	0.553243	0.591923	0.744777
Unique coverage	0.020121	0.0050059	0.0199710 9	0.0476393
Consistency	0.964926	0.98219	0.957349	0.94843
Solution coverage	0.855865		Solution coverage	0.873086
Solution consistency	0.953136		Solution consistency	0.915109

Legends: Trust= Sender's perceived Trustworthiness, EXP= Sender's perceived expertise VIV= Message Vividness, VAL= Message Valence, USE= Message usefulness

FSQCA analysis generated four valid configurations. The first two solutions reveal a path for respondents receiving WOM from online sources. Solution 1 suggests that students can potentially make their university choice to enroll from online sources if they perceive the sender of the message as trustworthy with sufficient expertise in the field and the content of the message is perceived as useful. Solution 2 proposes that online senders perceive trustworthiness, expertise, and useful content can impact university choice with partial membership if message valence at full membership is added to the configuration. The following two solutions were generated to reveal the paths from offline sources. Solution 3, similar to the first solution, exposes a path from the sender's perceived trustworthiness, expertise and message usefulness to university choice as the outcome. Finally, solution 4 suggests that influencing university choice can be achieved by the sender's perceived trustworthiness, message valence and usefulness.

The final solutions generated for respondents receiving WOM from online and offline sources leading to university brand equity as the outcome are as follows:

Table 13 - FSQCA analysis of university reputation configurations

Outcome	***University Reputation***		
Models	Online sources	Offline sources	
Paths	1	2	3
TRUST		●	●
EXP	○	●	
VIV	○		
VAL			●
USE	●	●	●
Raw coverage	0.556685	0.650312	0.811011
Unique coverage	0.0120095	0.0122339	0.0337709
Consistency	0.921574	0.902068	0.889199
Solution coverage	0.917671	Solution coverage	0.891551
Solution consistency	0.840434	Solution consistency	0.862852

Legends: Trust= Sender's perceived Trustworthiness, EXP= Sender's perceived expertise VIV= Message Vividness, VAL= Message Valence, USE= Message usefulness

Solution 1 contains the path that influences university reputation from online sources. The solution proposed that the sender's perceived expertise, message vividness and message usefulness can impact the outcome. The following two solutions discuss the configurations leading to university reputation from offline WOM sources. Solution 2 indicates that the sender's perceived trustworthiness, expertise and message usefulness can affect the university's reputation. Moreover, solution 3 reveals that the sender's trustworthiness, message valence, and usefulness can also lead to the university's reputation as the outcome.

It can be observed that configurations generated from FSQCA emphasise some constructs as more central to affecting university choice and reputation among students. In both outcomes, message usefulness is present in every solution generated. In addition, the sender's perceived trustworthiness and expertise are also present in most configurations. Therefore, elements of both message quality and the sender's credibility can affect both outcomes.

5. DISCUSSIONS

The study aimed to conduct empirical research on word-of-mouth communication and its effects on students' satisfaction. We utilized a deductive approach, reviewing the existing studies,

scrutinizing the research constructs in them, and integrating the focus group method enabled us to deliver a country-specific adopted research instrument. We estimated our research model in the framework of SEM and FSQCA.

Likewise, previous studies tested the direct relationship between WOM communication and consumers' behavioral intention. However, we took a different twist and attempted to investigate moderating and mediating effects by adding three additional variables, university choice, reputation, and student satisfaction. Firstly, we tested ELM variables (message source credibility and content quality) towards university reputation and choice.

The results of the analyses showed that both direct connections of central and peripheral paths support university choice. However, the university's reputation lacks a positive experience. The only variable that supports the hypothetical relationship is the message vividness construct. However, perceived message quality cannot be supported as a unified construct.

For the next step, we performed SEM for overall WOM communication toward university reputation and choice. We also wanted to see if there were any links between the university reputation and choice as a direct relationship. It became evident that the results supported predictions. Additionally, we investigated the mediating effect of WOM between university reputation and student satisfaction and the mediating impact of WOM communication between university choice and student satisfaction. In the first case, WOM had a mediating effect; however, in the second case, it did not show a moderating effect.

The research results provide interesting insights into how the ELM model could be designed regarding university choice and satisfaction. We assessed central and peripheral routes of WOM communication toward after-purchase satisfaction. According to the result (see Table 3), H1c, H1d, H2a, H3a, H3c, H3d, H4a, H4b, H5a and H6 were supported. On the other hand, the H1a, H1b, H2b, H2c, and H5b were not supported. In other words, from the viewpoint of students, both central and peripheral routes have a positive impact when choosing a university. However, there is neither a positive nor negative attachment to the university's reputation. Overall, WOM has a positive impact on university's reputation as well as university choice. This contradicts the fact that the sender's credibility and message quality were not positively correlated with the university's reputation (Kyriakou, Papaioannou, & Komodromos, 2022). This process needs further investigation. Also, university reputation and university choice are positively correlated. As to the mediating relationship, it is supported, meaning that the university's reputation spawns

positive word-of-mouth that leads to satisfaction amongst students. On the contrary moderation effect of WOM was not supported.

As depicted in the analytical part, FSQCA was utilized to compare the two main groups of subsample and test for any non-linear relationship between exogenous and endogenous constructs. The analysis generated four configurations leading to university choice and three paths that result in university brand reputation. The investigation of subsamples revealed sender's perceived trustworthiness and message usefulness are the most regenerated constructs in configurations leading to university choice and brand reputation as outcomes. Overall, elements of both the sender's credibility and message quality appeared to impact the configurations for the noted outcomes.

6. CONCLUSION

This study extends the literature by applying the FSQCA method to generate valid configurations for university choice and brand reputation. FSQCA assists the researcher in adding to the previous literature by producing solutions for two types of WOM receivers. This study generates various combination paths leading to university brand reputation and choice using the FSQCA dynamic approach. Hence, the study is not bound by the limitation of previously static models.

The study has various significant implications for the field of higher education marketing. First, the findings indicate that universities that seek to elevate their brand reputation can adopt both central and peripheral routes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The research categorized the sender's credibility under the peripheral route and collated the sender's perceived trustworthiness and expertise (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008; Reichelt et al., 2014) under the path. The SEM analysis revealed that the constructs used in this context could impact students` university choices, but the effect on university satisfaction was insignificant. However, FSQCA analysis determined that for the subsample of students receiving word of mouth from offline sources, both the sender's perceived expertise and trustworthiness contribute to the configurations leading to university's reputation as the outcome.

Moreover, the research collated constructs to create a central route for the elaboration likelihood model that the study is based on (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The elements identified include message vividness, valence, and perceived usefulness (Godes et al., 2003; Mazzarol et al., 2007; Cheung, 2008; Virvilaite et al., 2015). The results confirm the previous literature except for the

impacts of message valence and usefulness on university's reputation. Further analysis employing FSQCA indicated that message perceived usefulness is a more prominent component of configurations leading to university choice and reputation among students among both subsamples.

The configurations generated by the FSQCA method, utilized in this study, can assist marketers and managers in developing more dynamic paths for higher institutions. The technique generated solutions for receivers of WOM from online or offline sources. Hence, higher education institutions can utilize the study to adopt the paths generated based on how the message is disseminated. Hence, marketers can adjust the factors they should use by adopting one or multiple paths for each group of WOM receivers.

The results indicate that higher education institutions can prioritize the sender's perceived expertise and trustworthiness to influence university choice among students. The senders can include opinion leaders online or offline. However, the analysis of subsamples revealed that message usefulness should also be included in the marketing campaigns to result in a valid path to university choice. Therefore, marketing communication techniques such as content marketing can be utilized efficiently by higher education institutions to impact university choice among students. The findings also emphasize the positive effect of message valence and vividness. Hence, the intensity of the campaign can also affect university choice. The outcome can enable higher education institutions to design a suitable campaign using sender traits and reinforcing them through content marketing and volume to create a halo effect among receivers. Another noteworthy contribution of the study is that, through FSQCA analysis, university reputation, among the subsample containing online WOM receivers, is more impacted by message vividness, while message valence is more prominent in the second subsample incorporating offline WOM receivers.

The first limitation of this study is that concerning the generalization of the results, the FSQCA does not necessarily suggest the generalization of the research outcomes. The second limiting factor might be associated with the territorial boundary. We conducted the research within Georgian universities, and the mentioned might not particularly coincide with international trends. Third, likelihood elaboration model constructs are frequently measured using scales developed by Fishbein and Ajzen (1981) or other well-established measures. In some cases, researchers utilized alternative scales, and some created new ones expressly for their investigations. Using different

scales may provide slightly different results. In the future, researchers are suggested to utilize various constructs of ELM when studying WOM communication. Additionally, there is a need to conduct a longitudinal study to identify if there are any shifts in WOM communication students' behavioral change and satisfaction over time.

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