

Social Influence and Student Choices: Exploring Online Word of Mouth, Brand Trust, and Purchase Intentions in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Digital communication and peer influence have become dominant forces shaping consumer behavior, especially among young online shoppers. In Malaysia's student market, where social media engagement is high, understanding how social factors and trust affect purchase decisions is crucial. This study aims to examine how social influence, electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), and brand trust affect students' purchase intention, focusing on the mediating role of brand trust. A quantitative research design was applied through an online survey of 152 Malaysian university students, and the data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The results indicate that purchase intention is positively predicted by perceived social influence ($\beta = 0.448$), e-WOM ($\beta = 0.310$), and brand trust ($\beta = 0.211$), confirming H1–H3. Brand trust is also positively influenced by social influence ($\beta = 0.320$) and e-WOM ($\beta = 0.519$), supporting H4–H5. These findings highlight a mediating pathway from e-WOM and social influence to purchase intention through brand trust, with explained variances of $R^2 = 0.019$ for purchase intention and $R^2 = 0.574$ for brand trust. The study concludes that e-WOM and social influence play crucial roles in shaping student purchase behavior, providing theoretical insight and practical implications for marketers to strengthen trust-based digital strategies.

Keywords: Brand Trust; e-WOM; Purchase Intention; Social Influence; Student Consumers

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, consumer behavior has evolved significantly and extensively, a change largely driven by the rapid advancement of digital technology (Verhoef et al., 2021) and the widespread use of social media platforms. This phenomenon can be observed to a large extent among students in Malaysia, whose purchasing behaviors are increasingly shaped by social and digital channels (Shien et al., 2023), such as word of mouth (WOM), online reviews, and how they assess brand reputation (Handoyo, 2024). These factors have become more important compared to traditional advertising, which had previously been the main source of consumerism (Dwivedi et al., 2021). The world in which students reside is more digitally inclined, and the internet has emerged as a key element of their decision-making process. More specifically, learners now increasingly depend on websites and social media to follow influencers, read in-depth online reviews, and seek advice from friends or peers before making any decisions concerning brands or products (Agrawal & Jacob, 2024). The rapid expansion of online communications and social media has revealed clearly that, for students, the internet is more than just a source of entertainment (Shahzad et al., 2024); it is an integral tool that drives consumer influence and guides purchases (Shah & Asghar, 2023).

The student market in Malaysia is a constituency that is not only highly saturated with digital technology but also highly networked through social media and online communities (Wang & Ibrahim, 2024). Social networking means that their purchasing patterns are influenced by an enormously wide range of offline and online sources, which together have significant control over how they determine what to purchase (Dwivedi et al., 2021). It has become common practice for students to follow the suggestions of liked peers (Guntha, 2024), social media personalities (Semwal et al., 2024), and even online anonymous reviews (Mallik et al., 2025) when choosing what to purchase or which brands to support. Against this backdrop, it is crucially important for businesses, marketers, and educators to gain a better understanding of the determinants influencing such decisions (Nordin & Ravald, 2023), for example, how students evaluate brand trustworthiness, the impact of online reviews on their buying behavior, and how social proof or the opinions of others matter to them. As the digital universe expands, it is more important than ever for anyone who wishes to engage with this group to understand how students interact with digital platforms and how this engagement drives their purchasing habits (Gupta et al., 2023).

Although there exists a broad database of empirical research focused on consumer behavior across various settings and populations, few have specifically targeted students in Malaysia or examined, in an interdependent manner, how the dual influences of social influence, online or electronic WOM (e-WOM), and brand trust interact to shape their buying intentions. The unique digital consumption patterns and extensive use of social media platforms by students in Malaysia must be investigated more thoroughly, as they are expected to be central to shaping their decision-making processes. Moreover, there is a need to comprehend how these variables, social influence, WOM, and brand trust, interact and impact students' choices when selecting products and brands. By studying these interactions, this research aims to close an essential knowledge gap in contemporary literature and offer reflective explanations of how students in Malaysia make purchasing decisions in a progressively digital society. This study seeks to enhance the understanding of student consumer behavior, which will be critical for businesses and marketers aiming to effectively target this crucial and growing consumer base.

This research focuses on students in Malaysia, a group that is highly active online and represents a significant segment of digital consumers. Previous studies have examined

how Malaysian students can be influenced by e-WOM and brand trust when making purchasing decisions. This research integrates three important elements, e-WOM, brand trust, and purchase intentions, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' purchasing behavior in a digital environment. In this post-pandemic digital age, online reviews and brand perception matter more than ever, especially among technologically literate students.

Companies can create more effective marketing campaigns for students by understanding how e-WOM, social influence, and brand trust influence purchase decisions. They can optimize their online presence through social media content, review management, and community building. This study also demonstrates that brand trust is a key mediator, suggesting that brands should invest in consistent communication, transparency, and credibility to increase students' likelihood of making a purchase. The study adds to the literature by expanding research on digital behavior and contributes to the growing body of knowledge on digital consumer behavior, especially among youth in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, its theoretical contribution can be strengthened by applying Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to provide more accurate, evidence-based relationships between variables.

This study aims to examine the impact of social influence and WOM on purchase intention among Malaysian students. It seeks to observe how trust in a brand serves as a mediating factor between these effects and students' intentions to purchase a product or service. The independent variables are social influence and e-WOM; the mediator is brand trust; and the dependent variable is purchase intention. The hypotheses propose that social influence can directly impact purchase intentions, e-WOM can directly impact purchase intentions, and brand trust can serve as a mediator between social influence, e-WOM, and purchase intentions. Practically, this research provides insights for marketers, companies, and brands aiming to engage student consumers and, academically, contributes to the growing body of scholarly literature on digital consumer behavior.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Influence

Social influence is one of the key determinants of consumer action, particularly through e-WOM and electronic communication. Social influence operates through processes such as social proof, where individuals use the behavior of others to determine their own actions, something that is evidently reflected in the way online reviews and testimonials shape consumer purchasing decisions (Ngo et al., 2024). Studies have shown that user-generated content (UGC), such as customer reviews and social media posts, can increase conversion rates by up to 161% (Mandal, 2021), demonstrating the power of peer recommendation. Social influence is also exacerbated by network effects, with people more likely to take up ideas or products that have been approved by their social networks (Niu, 2025). Instagram and TikTok, for example, exploit this with their emphasis on viral trends, in which influencers and regular users drive perceptions and demand (Barta et al., 2023). However, there is danger in negative social influence, such as the spread of misinformation or harmful trends, for which brands need to be actively engaged and present in online discourse (Shahbazi & Bunker, 2024). Lastly, an understanding of social influence allows marketers to create strategies founded on harnessing peer recommendations, influencer partnerships, and group activities to promote brand success.

Student Choice

Student autonomy in purchasing refers to the practice of allowing consumers, including students, to choose what, where, and when they purchase, from selecting product categories to choosing brands or even customizing features. It has been observed through research that it is possible to enhance satisfaction, engagement, and brand loyalty by empowering consumers to have more control over purchasing decisions (Zaim & Yucel, 2022). For instance, learners will be more engaged and invest time in comparing options if they are able to choose products based on their individual tastes or needs. This is in line with the self-determination theory, which holds that autonomy is crucial in ensuring inherent motivation (Chiu, 2021). By considering the preferences of the student population, corporations will be able to deliver a personalized and significant shopping experience that appeals to young consumers.

Online Word of Mouth (e-WOM)

E-WOM refers to WOM communication on digital platforms, wherein customers write comments, reviews, suggestions, and experiences regarding a product, service, or company on digital websites (Prasetyo & Putra, 2024). E-WOM is highly trusted as customers place higher trust in peer suggestions rather than standard commercials (Dwivedi et al., 2021). E-WOM is shared through various channels, including social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram), review sites (Yelp, Google Reviews), forums (Reddit), and product descriptions on e-commerce websites (Amazon). Empirical studies reveal that positive WOM reinforces brand trust and sales, while negative WOM can deter potential customers and damage reputation (Sathyanarayana et al., 2024). Businesses proactively monitor e-WOM to manage their brand reputation, and most use influencer marketing and customer engagement practices to drive positive sentiment (Dwivedi et al., 2021). However, issues such as imitation reviews, disinformation, and the virality of negative comments endanger the system. Businesses must be proactive in their reputation management by addressing customer feedback and encouraging genuine reviews to maintain credibility (Mtengwa & Muchenje, 2023). Because it holds great influence, e-WOM remains a significant component of modern marketing and consumer decision-making (Diego & Wisker, 2024).

Brand Trust

Brand trust is a paramount motivator of consumer choice, and e-WOM has a substantial impact on it. Research has indicated that 88% of customers believe online reviews as much as they believe their friends' recommendations, which highlights the effect of UGC in creating credibility. Positive WOM fosters trust in a brand through social proof because customers view third-party comments from other customers as more believable than corporate promotion (Ngo et al., 2024). Negative comments or fake reviews, however, can result in loss of trust, with studies showing that one negative review is enough to deter up to 40% of potential customers (Pee, 2016). Brands that actively engage with customer feedback, respond to reviews, and encourage authentic discussions tend to foster stronger trust. According to a study by Rane et al. (2023), companies that respond to online reviews, both positive and negative, are perceived as more trustworthy and customer-centric. Additionally, influencer endorsements can amplify trust when the influencer is seen as credible and relatable (Coutinho et al., 2023). However, transparency is key, as consumers increasingly scrutinize sponsored content for authenticity. In summary, e-WOM directly impacts brand trust, making it essential for businesses to monitor, engage with, and ethically influence digital conversations to maintain a positive reputation and consumer confidence.

Purchase Intention

Purchase intention is a customer's likelihood or willingness to buy a given product or service in the future (Hakiki et al., 2024). Purchase intention is a key measure of actual

buying behavior and is influenced by several variables, such as brand image, product quality, price, marketing communication, and prior experience with the product. Purchase intention is often quantified by researchers and marketers for predicting sales performance and testing the effectiveness of an advertising campaign (Khan et al., 2022). Purchase intention is the buyer's conscious choice to go out of their way to purchase a specific brand or product (Mathea & Laksmidewi, 2024). Additionally, a study by Samudro et al. (2020) reveals that perceived value, price, and quality are important factors in consumer decision-making, which further emphasizes the importance of learning about purchase intention as part of marketing strategies. Understanding this concept through research allows companies to better align their products with consumer needs and enhance customer loyalty.

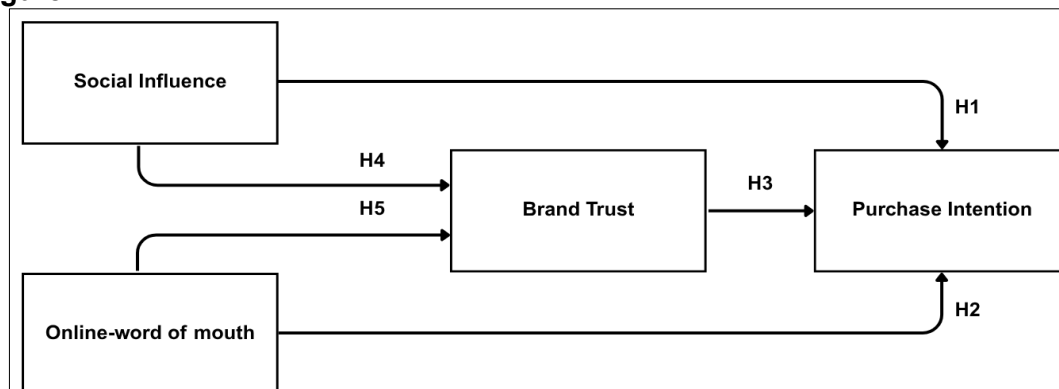
Hypotheses Development

Based on the reviewed literature, the relationships among social influence, e-WOM, brand trust, and purchase intention can be theoretically and empirically linked. Social influence plays a vital role in shaping consumer attitudes and decisions, particularly through user-generated content and peer recommendations that act as social proof in digital environments (Mandal, 2021; Ngo et al., 2024; Niu, 2025). Likewise, e-WOM has emerged as one of the most powerful determinants of consumer behavior, as customers tend to rely more on peer evaluations than on corporate advertising when forming perceptions of brands (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Prasetyo & Putra, 2024). Both factors contribute significantly to the development of brand trust, a key psychological mechanism that fosters consumer confidence and long-term loyalty (Coutinho et al., 2023; Rane et al., 2023). In turn, brand trust enhances consumers' purchase intention, influencing their willingness to engage with and purchase from a brand (Khan et al., 2022; Samudro et al., 2020). Considering these interconnections, this study proposes a conceptual framework that examines how social influence and e-WOM affect purchase intention directly and indirectly through brand trust. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are formulated:

- H1: Social influence positively affects purchase intention.
- H2: E-WOM positively affects purchase intention.
- H3: Brand trust positively affects purchase intention.
- H4: Social influence positively affects brand trust.
- H5: E-WOM positively affects brand trust.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1. Research Framework



Hypotheses in Figure 1 form the basis of the authors' research model and act as a tool for analysis of social influence, e-WOM, brand trust, and purchase intention in students' choice in decision-making on purchases.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a mixed-method research design that integrated both qualitative and quantitative approaches to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. In the initial qualitative phase, inductive reasoning was used through observation and documentary analysis to explore how e-WOM, purchase intention, and brand trust influence student decision-making. This exploratory stage helped in identifying the research gaps, formalizing the research problem, and formulating the study hypotheses based on the existing literature.

In the quantitative phase, data were collected using a systematic online survey distributed through social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Instagram. A stratified random sampling technique was applied to ensure diversity and representativeness across respondent groups. To maintain data quality, duplicate responses were screened out, resulting in 152 valid responses. All participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality was strictly upheld throughout the study.

The survey instrument included items measuring demographic variables, social influence, e-WOM, brand trust, and purchase intention. Responses were rated using a five-point Likert scale, capturing varying levels of agreement. A pretest was conducted to assess the clarity, reliability, and validity of the questionnaire items.

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27, focusing on reliability testing, statistical significance, and hypothesis validation. The results were presented in tabular form to facilitate interpretation and discussion.

However, several limitations should be acknowledged. As the data were self-reported, there is potential for response bias and unmeasured external influences on participants' opinions. Additionally, the online nature of the survey limited opportunities for in-depth probing or clarification of responses. Despite these constraints, the study minimized such issues through rigorous instrument design, pretesting, and transparent research procedures to enhance data validity and reliability.

RESULTS

Respondents' Demographic Profile

Table 1. Summary of Respondents' Demographic Information (N = 152)

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age		
18–21	69	45.4
22–25	72	47.4
26–30	7	4.6
31–35	1	0.7
36–40	0	0
Above 40	1	0.7
Below 18	1	0.7
Gender		
Female	89	58.6
Male	63	41.4
Education Level		
Bachelor's Degree	120	78.9
Diploma	19	12.5
Master Degree	8	5.3
PhD	4	2.6

STPM	1	0.7
Enrolment Status		
Full time student	146	96.1
Part time student	6	3.9
Monthly Income or Allowance		
Less than RM 300	36	23.7
RM 301–RM 500	14	9.2
RM 501–RM 700	32	21.1
RM 701–RM 1,000	28	18.4
More than RM 1,000	42	27.6
Frequency of Online Shopping		
Never	4	2.6
Rarely (once every few months)	33	21.7
Occasionally (once a month)	57	37.5
Frequently (2–3 times a month)	42	27.6
Very frequently (weekly or more)	16	10.5

Table 1 outlines the demographic characteristics of the 152 participants involved in this study. Most respondents were young adults aged 22–25 years (47.4%) and 18–21 years (45.4%), indicating that the sample primarily consisted of university-age individuals. Only a small number were 26–30 years old (4.6%), while those over 30 accounted for less than 2%, confirming the youthful nature of the sample.

In terms of gender distribution, female participants (58.6%) were slightly more represented than male participants (41.4%). Regarding educational attainment, the majority were pursuing or had completed a Bachelor's degree (78.9%), followed by those with a Diploma (12.5%), a Master's degree (5.3%), and a few PhD candidates (2.6%). This pattern suggests that most respondents were undergraduate students, which aligns with the study's target group. Furthermore, 96.1% were enrolled full-time, while only 3.9% were part-time students.

In terms of financial background, respondents showed varied income levels: 27.6% reported receiving over RM1,000 monthly, while 23.7% earned less than RM300, illustrating a broad range of economic circumstances. Regarding online shopping frequency, the majority were occasional buyers (37.5%), followed by those who shopped frequently (27.6%) or very frequently (10.5%). Only 2.6% indicated never shopping online. These findings reveal that online purchasing is a widespread behavior among Malaysian students, aligning with current digital consumption trends.

Summary of Descriptive and Correlation Results

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics, Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha, and Zero-Order Correlations for All Study Variables

Variables		1	2	3	4
1	Perceived Social Influence	0.827			
2	Perceived e-WOM	0.612**	0.873		
3	Perceived Brand Trust	0.637**	0.714**	0.889	
4	Student Purchase Intention	0.772**	0.735**	0.718**	0.865
Number of Items		4	4	4	4
Mean		3.5855	4.1129	3.9770	4.0274
Standard Deviation		0.86634	0.80962	0.83720	0.78302

Note. N =152; *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001. The diagonal entries represent Cronbach's coefficient alpha.

Table 2 outlines the descriptive statistics, reliability scores, and intercorrelations among the primary constructs: social influence, e-WOM, brand trust, and purchase intention. The internal consistency for all scales is satisfactory, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the accepted benchmark of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2019). Specifically, reliability coefficients are recorded at 0.827 for social influence, 0.873 for e-WOM, 0.889 for brand trust, and 0.865 for purchase intention, demonstrating that the instruments used are statistically reliable.

The mean scores, which range between 3.58 and 4.11, indicate that respondents generally held favorable perceptions toward the measured constructs. The standard deviations, spanning 0.78 to 0.87, suggest moderate variation in responses across participants.

Correlation analysis further shows strong and positive relationships among all variables at the 0.01 significance level. Social influence correlates significantly with both purchase intention ($r = 0.772$) and e-WOM ($r = 0.612$), highlighting the importance of peer recommendations and social networks in influencing student consumer behavior. Likewise, e-WOM demonstrates substantial associations with brand trust ($r = 0.714$) and purchase intention ($r = 0.735$), implying that online discussions and reviews enhance consumer confidence and the likelihood of purchase. Additionally, brand trust maintains a high correlation with purchase intention ($r = 0.718$), underscoring that stronger trust in a brand translates into higher buying intentions.

In summary, the data confirm that the measurement items exhibit both strong reliability and construct validity. The significant correlations provide preliminary empirical support for the hypothesized relationships that were later examined through SEM.

Regression Analysis Results

Table 3. Summary of Regression Analysis

Variables		Student Purchase Intention (Beta)	Perceived Brand Trust (Beta)
1	Perceived Social Influence	0.448***	0.320***
2	Perceived e-WOM	0.310***	0.519***
3	Perceived Brand Trust	0.211**	—
R ² Change		0.019	0.574
F Value		10.166	100.519
Durbin–Watson Statistic		1.532	1.601

Note. N =152; *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

Table 3 presents the results of the regression analysis examining the relationships among perceived social influence, e-WOM, brand trust, and student purchase intention. The results show that perceived social influence has a significant positive effect on student purchase intention ($\beta = 0.448$, $p < 0.001$) and brand trust ($\beta = 0.320$, $p < 0.001$). Likewise, e-WOM positively influences purchase intention ($\beta = 0.310$, $p < 0.001$) and brand trust ($\beta = 0.519$, $p < 0.001$). In addition, brand trust also shows a significant positive relationship with purchase intention ($\beta = 0.211$, $p < 0.01$). These findings indicate that all proposed hypotheses (H1-H5) are supported by the data. Specifically, H1 (social influence → purchase intention), H2 (e-WOM → purchase intention), and H3 (brand trust → purchase intention) are accepted, as are H4 (social influence → brand trust) and H5 (e-WOM → brand trust).

The model explains 1.9% of the variance in student purchase intention ($R^2 = 0.019$) and 57.4% of the variance in brand trust ($R^2 = 0.574$), indicating that while social influence and e-WOM have a modest direct impact on purchase intention, they exert a strong effect

on brand trust formation. The F-values of 10.166 and 100.519 confirm that the models are statistically significant overall. Moreover, the Durbin–Watson statistics (1.532 and 1.601) suggest the absence of autocorrelation issues, indicating reliable regression results. Overall, these outcomes confirm that social influence and e-WOM are essential drivers of both brand trust and purchase intention among university students, with brand trust functioning as a key mediating variable linking social influence and e-WOM to purchase behavior.

Figure 2. Overview Result

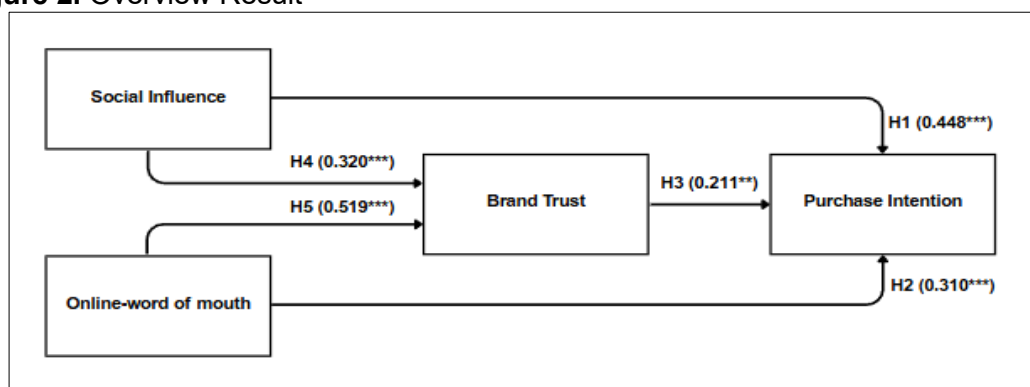


Figure 2 illustrates the structural model outlining the relationships among social influence, e-WOM, brand trust, and purchase intention. The figure visually represents the tested hypotheses and their corresponding standardized path coefficients derived from the regression analysis.

DISCUSSION

H1: The Influence of Social Influence on Purchase Intention

The study identifies e-WOM and social influence as having both direct and indirect impacts on purchasing behavior. Among these, social influence and WOM are shown to have particularly strong effects, surpassing the singular effect of brand trust. Furthermore, social influence is demonstrated to be a factor that not only drives purchase intentions but also contributes to the formation of brand trust. These findings support the effectiveness of the proposed model in explaining the complex interplay of social and digital forces in shaping consumer behavior, particularly among Malaysian students (Bhukya & Paul, 2023).

The strong positive correlation (0.211**) between brand trust and purchase intention indicates that trust remains a fundamental element in purchase decision-making. However, the higher influence of social influence suggests that Malaysian students may prioritize peer WOM over brand credibility. According to the findings, brand trust is affected by social influence more than purchase intention, with correlations of (0.448**) for brand trust and (0.211**) for purchase intention. This indicates that social influence enhances both trust and purchasing intention among students. In collectivistic cultures like Malaysia, peer opinion and social norms are extremely powerful (Azmi et al., 2023). The positive indicators show that students perceive socially accepted brands as more credible compared to Western markets, where there is higher skepticism toward influencer marketing (De Veirman et al., 2017).

There appears to be a two-step influence process in action, where social influence operates through early trust building and behavioral activation. Early trust building occurs when peer verification reduces perceived risk, while behavioral activation occurs when social proof generates purchase intention. This aligns with the dual process theory of

social influence (Wang et al., 2022), which explains both informational (belief in peers' expertise) and normative (peer pressure) effects.

H2: The Effect of e-WOM on Purchase Intention

The high correlation between purchase intention and e-WOM (0.310**) suggests a process of virality. Students are highly likely to rationalize purchases based on public feedback, supporting Festinger's (1957) dissonance theory. Sharing positive WOM may reinforce their own brand allegiance. The robustness of the coefficient (0.519***) likely results from Malaysia's high social media penetration, where platforms like TikTok Shop facilitate easy review sharing after purchase. Literature shows that WOM has a "multiplier effect," in which one purchase drives disproportionate e-WOM, accelerating trends such as bubble tea popularity among young consumers (Kumar et al., 2007).

E-WOM contributes more to purchase intention than to brand trust formation. This is largely because brand trust is an abstract concept that develops over time and through repeated confirmations, which extend beyond the initial purchase decision. Online reviews, such as Shopee ratings and TikTok testimonials, provide real-time verification from peers, giving immediate and tangible information that increases consumer confidence in their purchases (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). E-WOM has a higher correlation with purchase intention (0.310**) because it triggers urgency and Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). Brand trust alone does not create urgency; it is a gradual process (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). For example, a viral "must-have uni dorm gadgets" TikTok video (WOM) drives more impulse buying than a generic brand advertisement.

H3: The Effect of Brand Trust on Purchase Intention

Study findings suggest that many factors strongly impact the purchase intentions of consumers, with the primary factor being brand trust. When consumers highly trust a brand, their likelihood to purchase also increases at the same rate. In contrast, lower levels of trust, often caused by issues such as dubious certification or the perception of poor product quality, typically generate lower purchase intentions. Notably, brand trust not only has a direct impact on purchase intention but is also influenced by other extrinsic factors. This aligns with the commitment-trust theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), where trust reduces perceived risk and fosters loyalty.

H4: The Effect of Social Influence on Brand Trust

Social influence (0.448**) is not limited to peer reviews or testimonials but also includes trends, cultural norms, influencer endorsements, and community behavior, all of which exert a strong collective force beyond individual recommendations. In reality, social influence often works subconsciously, affecting consumer behavior mainly through conformity and the need to belong (Bagozzi, 2025). This can be seen when users buy popular products not necessarily because of one review but because "everyone is getting it," illustrating the bandwagon effect. While a Shopee review may convince an individual of a product's quality, seeing that it is used by a favorite TikToker or featured in multiple viral videos under a trending challenge further enhances its perceived value and urgency. Thus, while e-WOM is impactful, it operates within a broader social influence environment that ultimately exerts greater sway over consumer decisions.

H5: The Effect of e-WOM on Brand Trust

The robustness of e-WOM's relationship with brand trust (0.519***) underscores its power to establish credibility through peer-based communication. Online platforms enable instant sharing of user experiences, providing authentic and relatable feedback that reinforces perceived reliability. This digital endorsement acts as a social guarantee, bridging the trust gap between consumers and brands. However, while e-WOM strengthens trust over time, its primary influence remains behavioral, prompting

purchase intention more immediately than fostering enduring trust (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010).

Research Implications

The findings of this study offer several theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, they reinforce the commitment-trust framework (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) by demonstrating that trust operates both as a mediating and outcome variable influenced by social influence and e-WOM. The dual-path effect of social influence, through both trust and purchase intention, validates the relevance of social conformity and peer endorsement models (Wang et al., 2022). Practically, these insights suggest that brands targeting student consumers, particularly in collectivistic societies like Malaysia, should integrate peer-based marketing strategies emphasizing social validation and real-user storytelling. Encouraging authentic e-WOM through influencer collaborations, micro-reviews, and trend-based content can cultivate both immediate purchase responses and longer-term trust. Finally, the evidence underscores that digital consumer behavior among Malaysian students is largely socially driven, indicating that marketing efforts should shift from persuasion-based messaging to community-based engagement to foster sustainable brand trust and loyalty.

Overall, e-WOM, social influence, brand trust, and purchase intention are interconnected. Student consumers who trust a brand are more likely to develop positive purchase intentions, which ultimately influence their buying behavior. These findings confirm all hypotheses (H1–H5) and validate the integrated model explaining how social and digital communication collectively shape brand-related decision-making among Malaysian university students.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine how perceived social influence, e-WOM, and brand trust affect students' purchase intention, with a particular focus on the mediating role of brand trust. The research sought to understand how digital communication and peer dynamics influence purchasing behavior among Malaysian university students.

The results provide strong empirical support for the positive effects of perceived social influence, e-WOM, and brand trust on purchase intention. Both social influence and e-WOM were also found to significantly enhance brand trust, confirming their dual direct and indirect impacts. The findings reveal that respondents tend to shop occasionally, about once a month, indicating that greater social and trust-related engagement may increase purchasing frequency. Social influence emerged as the strongest predictor, showing that Malaysian students rely heavily on peer validation and community norms when making purchasing decisions. These results align with the commitment-trust theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) and dual-process theory of social influence (Wang et al., 2022), emphasizing that trust and social proof jointly drive consumer intention.

Marketers and companies should focus on strengthening brand trust and enhancing online engagement strategies to stimulate purchase intentions among student consumers. Efforts such as developing credible e-WOM campaigns, leveraging student influencers, and encouraging authentic user-generated content can help establish trust and social connections. Companies should also optimize digital platforms like TikTok and Shopee to facilitate community-based interactions, peer recommendations, and transparent review systems that reinforce positive perceptions and credibility.

Theoretically, this study enriches the literature on digital consumer behavior by validating the mediating role of brand trust between e-WOM, social influence, and purchase

intention in a collectivistic cultural context. Practically, the findings highlight the strategic importance of trust-building and peer-driven marketing in influencing young consumers' buying behavior. By leveraging e-WOM and social influence, brands can create stronger emotional and social bonds with students, leading to higher purchase intention and long-term loyalty. Future research should expand this framework to other cultural and demographic settings and employ longitudinal designs to better capture changes in trust and behavioral patterns over time.

LIMITATION

Some limitations are present in this study. Self-reported online survey data may be subject to bias. Because this study focused solely on students, broader conclusions cannot be drawn. The sample consisted of 158 university students from Malaysia who were recruited through social media channels. Although diversity was encouraged by posting the survey form across multiple platforms, the sample does not fully represent the entire Malaysian student population.

Based on these findings, future research should involve a more varied and larger sample. Further studies should also explore how e-WOM impacts purchase intention and the relationship between e-WOM, brand trust, and purchase intention in greater depth.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors have declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning the study, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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