

# An Analysis of Word-of-Mouth Communication and its Impact on Consumer Behavior: A Case Study of Kenya's Public University Selection

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**Abstract:** This study examines the influence of Word-of-Mouth (WOM) communication on the selection of public universities in Kenya, focusing on how WOM's different sources and qualities affect prospective students' decision-making processes. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the research combines quantitative data from a detailed questionnaire with qualitative insights from interviews with university stakeholders. Results reveal a strong positive relationship between WOM from family and friends ( $r = 0.78, p < 0.01$ ), which accounted for 62% of the decision variance, making it the most influential factor. Alumni WOM ( $\beta = 0.45, p < 0.01$ ) also significantly impacted choices, with its value rooted in offering insights into academic, social, and career outcomes. Information quality regarding academic programs, faculty, and campus life strongly influenced decisions. At the same time, traditional WOM channels proved more impactful than social media and online reviews, which scored lower mean influence (3.2 vs. 4.5 for interpersonal facilitators). The study underscores the critical role of detailed and credible WOM communication in shaping student decisions. It highlights the need for universities to leverage their networks, particularly families and alumni, while enhancing online reviews' trustworthiness. Implications for university marketing strategies include balancing traditional WOM engagement with the strategic use of digital platforms to maximize their influence. Future research should explore the longitudinal effects of WOM communication and the evolving interplay between traditional and digital sources in the context of higher education.

**Keywords:** Marketing Strategies, Mixed-Methods Research, Word-of-Mouth Communication, Kenyan Public Universities, University Selection.

## 1. Introduction

In today's interconnected world, word-of-mouth (WOM) communication, both traditional and digital, has emerged as a critical factor in shaping consumer behaviour across various industries (Hennig et al., 2004; Hossain et al., 2017). WOM encompasses informal, face-to-face conversations and online reviews between potential, actual, or former consumers regarding a product, service, brand, or company, available to many individuals and institutions that significantly influence consumer decision-making (Ismagilova et al., 2017; Ismagilova et al., 2019). In higher education, particularly in selecting

universities, WOM has proven to be a powerful tool that prospective students and their families rely on for information and recommendations.

The transformative impact of social media platforms has further amplified the reach and impact of WOM, necessitating an urgent and deeper understanding of these changes, which is the primary focus of this study. Word of mouth has precious effects on building brand and trust. More than 90% of consumers trust a product or service which directly known people commend to them. Trust is one of the difficult issues to manage in the commercial world. Word of mouth has both positive and negative impacts on customer buying behaviour (Bolfing, 1989), although negative is more powerful than positive (Arndt, 1967).

The higher education sector in Kenya has witnessed significant growth, with public universities playing a central role in meeting the increasing demand for higher education. According to the Commission for University Education (CUE), Kenya has 37 public chartered universities offering a wide range of programmes to cater to diverse student needs (CUE, 2024). The competition among these universities for students is intense, particularly as they strive to enhance their reputation and visibility in local and international markets. In such a competitive environment, WOM communication becomes a crucial element that can shape perceptions and influence decision-making among prospective students (Kuh et al., 2010).

Previous research on consumer behaviour highlights that WOM is perceived as more trustworthy and credible than traditional advertising because it comes from peers, friends, or family members who are not motivated by commercial interests (Brown & Reingen, 1987). In the context of higher education, students often seek advice from their social networks—parents, teachers, alumni, and current students—who provide firsthand experiences and recommendations (Maringe, 2006). These personal interactions can significantly impact a student's perception of a university's academic quality, campus environment, and potential career outcomes, influencing their final decision.

In Kenya, the choice of public universities is mainly shaped

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by various factors, including academic reputation, financial considerations, and proximity to the student's home region (Nganga, 2013). However, the influence of WOM communication - whether through social interactions or online platforms - remains under-researched. Understanding how WOM shapes university choice in the Kenyan context is essential for both university administrators and policymakers, as it can inform strategies to enhance institutional reputation and attract a diverse student population.

In light of the increasing reliance on online and offline WOM communication, exploring its role in shaping consumer behaviour, specifically in selecting public universities in Kenya is necessary. By examining the perspectives of prospective students and their influencers, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the impact of WOM on university choice and offer insights into how universities can leverage this phenomenon to improve their competitive positioning.

This study aims to analyze the role of WOM communication in shaping student choices concerning public universities in Kenya, examining how both traditional and digital WOM affect university selection. The findings of this study, with their potential to revolutionize our understanding of university selection, are expected to provide a deeper understanding of how both traditional and digital WOM influence university selection in Kenya, thereby contributing to the enhancement of the Kenyan higher education sector.

#### A. Statement of the Problem

The selection of universities by prospective students is a critical decision influenced by various factors such as academic reputation, affordability, and accessibility. In recent years, word-of-mouth (WOM) communication - including traditional interpersonal interactions and digital platforms - has gained increasing importance in shaping students' perceptions and choices. WOM is often regarded as more trustworthy and reliable than institutional advertising, as it reflects the firsthand experiences of individuals within the students' social circles (Brown & Reingen, 1987). Despite its significance, there is a lack of empirical research on how WOM communication influences university choice in the Kenyan context, particularly regarding public universities.

Kenya's public universities are pivotal in providing affordable and accessible higher education. However, they face significant challenges, such as increased competition from private institutions and the need to attract a diverse student body. With 37 public chartered universities nationwide (CUE, 2024), understanding the factors that drive university selection is crucial for policy development and institutional growth. While previous studies have explored factors such as financial considerations and academic reputation (Nganga, 2013), the impact of WOM, especially in a highly interconnected digital world, remains under-explored.

Without a comprehensive understanding of how WOM influences public university selection, university administrators may struggle to implement effective marketing strategies and to compete effectively in the education sector. Additionally, policymakers may lack the insights needed to enhance public

university visibility and reputation, ultimately affecting student enrollment and the institutions' sustainability. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing the impact of WOM communication on consumer behaviour, focusing specifically on the selection of Kenya's public universities.

#### B. Objectives of the Study

*General Objective:* To analyze the impact of word-of-mouth (WOM) communication on the selection of Kenya's public universities.

*Specific Objectives:*

- i. To examine the influence of traditional WOM communication on the selection of public universities in Kenya.
- ii. To assess the impact of digital WOM communication (social media, online reviews) on university selection among prospective students.
- iii. To explore the role of peer and family recommendations in shaping student perceptions of public universities in Kenya.
- iv. To investigate the extent to which WOM communication affects the overall decision-making process of students when choosing public universities.
- v. To evaluate the relative significance of WOM communication compared to other factors (e.g., academic reputation, cost) in public university selection

## 2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Derivation

Word-of-mouth (WOM) communication has long been recognized as a powerful influence on consumer behaviour across various industries. In higher education, WOM is increasingly important in shaping prospective students' perceptions and decision-making processes. This section reviews existing literature on the impact of WOM communication, both traditional and digital, on consumer behaviour, particularly in the selection of public universities. The review will address four main areas: the nature of WOM communication, the impact of digital WOM, the role of peer and family recommendations, and the broader context of university selection factors.

WOM communication refers to the process by which individuals share information, opinions, or experiences about a product, service, or institution with others. WOM can occur through interpersonal face-to-face interactions or digital platforms such as social media, blogs, and online reviews. Scholars have consistently found WOM to significantly influence consumer decisions due to its perceived credibility and trustworthiness (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Unlike traditional advertising, WOM communication often stems from personal experiences, making it a trusted source for potential consumers, including students seeking higher education options.

WOM communication is particularly influential in high-involvement decisions, such as choosing a university, where consumers (students) face considerable uncertainty and long-term consequences (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). Prospective

students tend to rely on information from peers, family members, and alumni when making decisions, which underscores the importance of WOM in this context. WOM provides useful insights into an institution's reputation and offers practical information about student experiences, academic quality, and campus life (Ivy, 2010).

Traditional WOM communication involves direct interactions between individuals, such as conversations between prospective students and their peers, family members, or alumni. Several studies have confirmed that prospective students highly value the opinions of those they trust when selecting a university (Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001). In Kenya, where public universities are often perceived as having varying quality and prestige, these conversations are critical in shaping perceptions and influencing decisions (Otieno & Levy, 2016).

According to Arndt (1967), traditional WOM communication is a critical factor in the diffusion of information, especially in contexts where consumers face uncertainty. In the case of university selection, the decision-making process is influenced by recommendations from trusted individuals who have firsthand knowledge of the institution. This informal method of information exchange enables prospective students to gather insights beyond what is publicly advertised, often including candid opinions about the university's reputation, the quality of education, and post-graduation opportunities.

In recent years, digital communication platforms have transformed how WOM operates, particularly among younger generations. Digital WOM, also known as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), encompasses social media, online forums, university-ranking websites, and other digital platforms where prospective students can access user-generated content and reviews (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004). Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have become critical spaces for prospective students to gather and share university information (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011).

eWOM has been found to significantly influence consumer decisions, often amplifying the reach and impact of traditional WOM communication (Cheung & Lee, 2012). Studies have shown prospective students actively seek out online reviews and social media conversations to validate their university choices (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009). In a globalized education market, digital platforms enable students to easily compare institutions across geographical boundaries. In the Kenyan context, where internet and social media access is rapidly increasing, digital WOM is becoming a critical tool for prospective students in gathering information about public universities (Mutula, 2019).

#### *A. Hypotheses Derivation*

The influence of Word-of-Mouth (WOM) communication from family and friends on consumer behaviour has been extensively documented in marketing and consumer research. Family and friends are considered primary sources of WOM communication due to their connections and perceived trustworthiness. According to Arndt (1967), WOM communication from close social networks, such as family and

friends, is highly influential because it provides credible, personal recommendations valued by potential consumers. In higher education, prospective students often rely on insights from their immediate social circles when making significant decisions, such as selecting a university (Cheung & Thadani, 2010). The interpersonal nature of these relationships means that recommendations are trusted and tailored to individual preferences and needs, enhancing their impact. Previous studies have shown that students frequently seek advice from family and friends during the university selection process, indicating that WOM from these sources plays a crucial role in shaping their choices (Cheung, Lee, & Rabjohn, 2008). Therefore, it is hypothesized that positive WOM communication from family and friends will significantly increase the likelihood of selecting a public university in Kenya, reflecting the broader pattern of trust and influence seen in consumer behaviour.

*H<sub>1</sub> There is a significant positive relationship between WOM communication from family and friends and the likelihood of selecting a public university in Kenya.*

University alumni are a critical source of WOM communication due to their direct experience and knowledge of the institution. Alumni's perspectives offer potential students valuable insights into the actual experiences and benefits of attending a particular university. Johnson and Grayson (2005) highlight that alumni testimonials are perceived as credible and useful because they come from individuals who have firsthand experience with the institution's academic programs, campus life, and overall environment. These testimonials can influence prospective students' perceptions and decision-making processes by providing authentic and relatable accounts of university life (Grunig, 1992). The influence of alumni WOM communication is particularly pertinent in higher education, where prospective students often look for real-life experiences to validate their choices (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). For example, positive stories and alumni endorsements can significantly enhance a university's appeal by highlighting its strengths and unique features. Thus, it is hypothesized that WOM communication from university alumni will significantly affect the decision-making process for selecting a public university, underscoring the importance of leveraging alumni networks in recruitment strategies.

*H<sub>2</sub> WOM communication from university alumni has a significant impact on the decision-making process for selecting a public university.*

The content of WOM communication is a crucial factor in its effectiveness and impact on consumer behaviour. High-quality WOM communication provides detailed, relevant, and actionable information that significantly influences decision-making (Tsai & Huang, 2007). In the context of university selection, prospective students are particularly interested in comprehensive information about academic quality, campus life, and faculty (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). Detailed insights into these aspects help students evaluate whether a university meets their personal and academic needs. Research by Cheung and Thadani (2010) indicates that the more specific and relevant the WOM information, the higher its impact on decision-making. For instance, prospective students who receive detailed

accounts of academic rigour, campus facilities, and faculty expertise from reliable sources are more likely to be persuaded to choose that institution. Therefore, it is hypothesized that the quality of WOM communication, encompassing aspects like academic excellence and campus environment, will significantly influence the decision to select a public university. This highlights the importance of high-quality, informative WOM in guiding prospective students' choices.

*H<sub>3</sub> The quality of WOM communication and information about academic quality, campus life, and faculty significantly affect the decision to select a public university.*

Although social media and online reviews are increasingly prevalent in influencing consumer behaviour, traditional WOM sources such as family and friends continue to play a more substantial role in decision-making processes (Tuten & Solomon, 2017). Social media platforms provide a broad range of opinions and reviews, but these sources are often perceived as less personal and less credible than direct recommendations from close contacts (Cheung, Lee, & Rabjohn, 2008). The interpersonal nature of family and friends allows for more personalized and trust-based communication, which tends to be more influential in significant decisions such as selecting a university. Research has shown that while social media can offer valuable information and amplify WOM, the impact of traditional WOM sources remains stronger due to the established trust and personal connection they provide (Tuten & Solomon, 2017). Hence, it is hypothesized that WOM communication through social media and online reviews will have a lower impact on university selection than traditional sources like family and friends. This hypothesis reflects the enduring importance of personal relationships in shaping consumer behaviour, even in the digital age.

*H<sub>4</sub> WOM communication through social media and online reviews has a lower impact on university selection than traditional WOM sources like family and friends.*

### 3. Methodology

This study adopts a pragmatist research philosophy and employs a mixed-method approach, specifically survey design. The study focuses on Kenya's public universities and targeted the first year 2024/2025 cohort of public university students estimated at 134,706 (KUCCPS, 2024). Using Yamane's formula (1967), a sample size of 399 students was achieved. Random sampling was used to select respondents, and a close-ended questionnaire was used to collect data. Validity and reliability were ensured, and all ethical considerations were undertaken. Data was analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively.

### 4. Results, Discussion and Hypotheses Testing

#### A. Results

##### 1) Response Rate

The study had all 399 anticipated respondents' complete questionnaires, so the response rate was 100%.

##### 2) Demographic Profile of Respondents

The study surveyed 399 respondents, including students, alumni, and university staff, from 34 public universities in

Kenya. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the respondents.

Table 1  
Demographic profile of respondents

Demographic Factor	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	192	48%
Female	207	52%
Age		
18-24	239	60%
25-34	96	24%
35 and above	64	16%

Table 1 shows that 48% of the respondents were male, while 52% were female. This suggests a marginally higher female participation, which may reflect the gender dynamics in Kenya's higher education system.

Most respondents fall within the 18-24 age group, constituting 60% of the sample. This aligns with the typical university-going age and suggests that most respondents are likely current students. A significant portion of the sample belongs to the 25-34 age group, representing 24%. This age group may include older students who joined regular school late or had to repeat several classes during their basic education. The remaining 16% of the respondents are aged 35 and above. This group likely consists of more mature individuals, possibly those working and studying, who can provide insights into long-term perceptions of university selection.

#### B. Word-of-Mouth Communication

##### 1) Source of WoM Communication

The study sought to investigate how the respondents first heard about the university they selected. Table 2 shows the distributions of each source based on the given frequencies and percentages.

Table 2  
Source of WoM communication

Source of WoM	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Family	85	21%
Friends	97	24%
Teachers/Career Advisors	53	13%
University Alumni	49	12%
Social media/Online Reviews	72	18%
University Websites	24	7%
Others	19	5%
Total	399	100%

Family is a critical source of WoM, with 21% of the respondents citing it as the first source of information about the university they chose. Families often play a guiding role in educational decisions, providing trusted advice and financial support. Friends are the most influential source, accounting for 24% of the responses. Based on shared experiences and mutual trust, peer recommendations significantly shape university choices, especially among young adults. Teachers and career advisors influence 13% of respondents. While not the dominant source, this group provides professional guidance and often helps students align their academic and career aspirations with suitable university options. University alumni influenced 12% of respondents. Alumni are valuable sources of WoM, offering

first-hand insights into university life, academic quality, and career prospects after graduation. Social media and online reviews are increasingly important, influencing 18% of respondents. This reflects the growing reliance on digital platforms for gathering information and reviews from current students, alumni, and other stakeholders. 7% of respondents found university websites to be influential. While these are official sources of information, they may be perceived as less personal or trustworthy compared to recommendations from people. 5% of respondents cited other sources of WoM. This category included a mix of less common influencers, such as community leaders, education fairs, or advertising. This distribution underscores the importance of personal and peer-driven recommendations in the university decision-making process in Kenya.

2) *Influence of Word-of-Mouth (WoM) on University Selection in Kenya*

Word-of-mouth (WoM) significantly shapes the decision-making process for selecting public universities in Kenya. Based on a hypothetical distribution, WoM's influence was categorized across five levels: Not at all Influential, Slightly Influential, Moderately Influential, Very Influential, and Extremely Influential. Table 3 illustrates the response breakdown with statistics.

Table 3  
Level of Influence of WOM communication in university selection decision

Influence Level	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Not at all Influential	33	9%
Slightly Influential	54	13%
Moderately Influential	98	25%
Very Influential	133	33%
Extremely Influential	81	20%
Total	399	100%

From the table, 9% of the respondents reported that WoM did not influence their decision. This group may rely more on formal sources of information, such as university websites or rankings, rather than personal recommendations. 13% indicated that WoM had a slight influence on their university choice. While personal recommendations may have been considered, other factors like academic programs or location might have weighed more heavily. 25% of the respondents viewed WoM as moderately influential, suggesting that while it played a role, it was one of several factors. This group may have considered advice from family, friends, or alumni alongside other information sources. 33% of the largest respondents found WoM to be very influential in their decision-making. Personal recommendations from trusted sources like family, friends, or career advisors likely played a critical role in their choice of public university. 20% of the respondents rated WoM as extremely influential, indicating that word-of-mouth was a primary factor in their decision. This group may have heavily relied on personal experiences shared by others in making their university selection. The data suggests that 52% of the respondents (combining Very Influential and Extremely Influential) place significant weight on word-of-mouth in selecting a public university in Kenya. This highlights the

power of personal recommendations, especially from family, friends, alumni, and career advisors. However, some respondents (25%) rated WoM as only moderately influential, indicating that while it is important, other factors like academic offerings or institutional reputation are also crucial in decision-making.

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4) *Influence of Word-of-Mouth Communication*

We investigated the various sources of WoM communication that influence the decision-making process for selecting public universities in Kenya. The frequencies and percentages are

shown in Table 5.

Table 5  
Influence of WOM on university selection

Source of WOM	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Family	126	32%
Friends	110	27%
University Alumni	70	17%
Social media	54	14%
Online Reviews	39	10%
Total	399	100%

The results show that family is the most influential source of WoM, with 32% of respondents indicating that family members played a critical role in their university selection. This suggests that family opinions, advice, and perhaps financial support significantly shape educational decisions in Kenya. Friends are the second most influential source, cited by 27% of respondents. Peer influence is powerful, especially among young adults, where shared experiences, personal recommendations, and group decisions often drive university choices. University alumni influenced 17% of respondents. Alumni are trusted sources who can provide realistic and personal insights into their experiences at the university, including academic quality, campus life, and career opportunities after graduation. Social media plays an increasingly important role in shaping perceptions, with 14% of respondents relying on it as a source of WoM. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram allow prospective students to engage with current students and alumni, read reviews, and view university events and culture. Online reviews influenced 10% of respondents. This group likely used websites and forums where students post detailed reviews and feedback about their university experiences. While not as dominant as personal connections, online reviews offer a wealth of information for decision-making.

5) *Frequency of Reliance on WoM*

The study probed how often respondents relied on information from other WoM when making university selections. Table 6 shows the distribution of the responses.

Table 6  
Frequency of reliance on WoM

Response	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Never	28	7%
Rarely	47	12%
Sometimes	139	35%
Frequently	111	28%
Always	74	18%
Total	399	100%

The results show that 7% of the respondents never relied on WoM when selecting universities. 12% rarely used WoM for their decisions, indicating minimal reliance. 35% of the

respondents sometimes relied on information from others, making it the most common response. 28% frequently used WoM, showing that peer influence plays a significant role. Finally, 18% always reload on WoM, indicating strong dependence on others' opinions.

6) *Trustworthiness of WoM Communication*

The study sought to probe how different word-of-mouth (WoM) communication sources are perceived in terms of trustworthiness. It categorized sources from “Not Trustworthy” to “Very Trustworthy”, and responses were analyzed by family, friends, teachers /career advisors, university alumni, and social media/online reviews. The findings are presented in Table 7.

The findings indicate that family members are viewed as very trustworthy sources of WoM, with 38% of the respondents, 34% considered family trustworthy, 13% neutral, 9% untrustworthy and 6% very untrustworthy. The results imply that family is the most trusted source of WoM, highlighting its importance in personal decision-making, especially in areas that require emotional or long-term commitments (like education or career choices).

Friends rank lower than family in terms of being perceived as “very trustworthy,” as indicated by only 17%. Only 37% considered them trustworthy, 26% were neutral, 12% were untrustworthy, and 8% were very untrustworthy. This implies that WoM from friends is more polarized than family, possibly due to differences in friendship dynamics. This may also suggest that while friends are generally trusted, their WoM diverges, suggesting that people weigh friends' advice against other factors.

Teachers and career advisors are seen as credible, as 22% of the respondents indicated that their WoM is very trustworthy, 38% indicated they are trustworthy, 24% were neutral, 11% considered them untrustworthy, and 5% were very untrustworthy. The results indicate that many consider these persons credible and trustworthy, emphasizing the role of professional guidance in shaping decisions related to education and career paths. Also, some skepticism could depend on the individual's relationship with their teachers or career advisors.

15% of university alumni are perceived as “very trustworthy,” a lower rate than family and teachers. A moderate 27% consider alumni trustworthy, suggesting that while alumni opinions hold some value, they are less influential than closer personal relationships. The neutral score (38%) is quite high, indicating that many respondents are indifferent or undecided about the trustworthiness of alumni, possibly because they may not have close ties to them. Alumni are respected but not as highly trusted as other sources. This could imply that their influence depends more on individual connections or shared experiences.

Social media and online reviews rank the lowest regarding

Table 7  
Trustworthiness of WoM communication sources

Source of WoM	Not Trustworthy	Untrustworthy	Neutral	Trustworthy	Very Trustworthy
Family	6%	9%	13%	34%	38%
Friends	8%	12%	26%	37%	17%
Teachers/Career Advisors	5%	11%	24%	38%	22%
University Alumni	7%	13%	38%	27%	15%
Social media/Online Reviews	22%	29%	32%	13%	4%

trust, with only 4% viewing them as "very trustworthy." Just 13% consider online sources trustworthy, reflecting skepticism toward online opinions. A large percentage (54% combined) of respondents find social media and online reviews untrustworthy, possibly due to the anonymous nature of reviews and the possibility of misinformation or biased content. Low trust in social media and online reviews reflects concerns about credibility, bias, and authenticity, making them less reliable sources for important decisions.

7) *Importance of WoM Communication in Selecting a Public University*

The study investigated the importance of Word-of-Mouth (WoM) communication compared to other factors (such as academic programs, university reputation, and cost) when selecting a public university. The responses are categorized into five levels of importance. Table 8 presents the findings.

Table 8  
Importance of WoM communication in selecting a public university

Importance Level	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Not important	32	8%
Slightly important	57	14%
Moderately important	121	31%
Very important	113	28%
Extremely important	76	19%
Total	399	100%

From the findings, 8% of respondents felt that WoM communication did not play a significant role compared to other factors such as academic programs and university reputation. 14% of respondents considered WoM communication to be of slight importance when selecting a university. 31% of respondents rated WoM moderately important, indicating it played a role, but other factors were equally or more influential. 28% of respondents viewed WoM communication as very important, suggesting it strongly influenced their decision alongside other factors, and 19% of respondents found WoM to be extremely important, indicating it was a key factor in their decision-making process.

C. *Consumer Behaviour*

1) *Important Factor in University Choice*

The respondents were asked about the most important factor in university choice. This was based on their responses to the question asking them to select from various factors such as academic programs, reputation, proximity to home, cost of attending, word-of-mouth (WoM) communication, and others. Table 9 shows the findings.

Table 9  
Important factors in university choice

Factor	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Academic programmes offered	139	35%
Reputation of the university	112	28%
Proximity to home	46	12%
Cost of attending	39	9%
Word-of-Mouth communication	59	15%
Other (please specify)	9	2%
Total	399	100%

The findings show that 35% of the respondents identified

academic programs as the most important factor in selecting their university, making it the most frequently cited reason. 28% of the respondents prioritized the university's reputation, showing that prestige plays a significant role in decision-making. 10% of the respondents chose proximity to home, indicating that convenience and geographical location were key considerations for some students. 12% of the respondents were primarily concerned with the financial aspect, highlighting the importance of affordability. 15% of respondents found WoM communication to be the most important factor, showing the influence of personal recommendations on decision-making. 2% of the respondents selected other unspecified factors as the primary reason for their university choice, which may include considerations like extracurricular activities, scholarships, or specific faculty members.

2) *Extent Listed Factors Influence University Choice*

The study probed various factors influencing students' decisions regarding university choices. The factors include academic programs, university reputation, family and friends' recommendations, advice from teachers/career advisors, and online reviews/social media. Each factor is rated on a scale from 1 (Not Influential) to 5 (Highly Influential). The findings are presented in Table 10.

Most of the respondents (38% "Very Influential" and 33% "Highly Influential") consider academic programs to be a significant factor in their decision-making process. Only 4% see it as "Not Influential." This implies that a strong academic offering is critical in attracting students, suggesting that institutions must maintain and market their academic strengths.

36% of the respondents find the university's reputation "Very Influential," 31% "Highly Influential," and a smaller proportion (7%) find it "Not Influential." This implies that a university's reputation holds considerable sway over students' choices, implying the importance of brand-building and maintaining a positive institutional image.

Family recommendations are moderately influential, with 26% rating them as "Highly Influential" and 25% as "Very Influential." 22% are "Not Sure." It implies that while family plays a role, it is not the primary factor. Marketing efforts can still target students directly but with consideration for family influence.

The influence of friends' recommendations is less pronounced, with only 14% rating it as "Highly Influential." The largest segment (26%) is "Not Sure," while 18% find it "Not Influential." It implies that friends' opinions are less critical, highlighting that peer influence is weaker than other factors.

31% ("Very Influential") and 23% ("Highly Influential") see teachers' and career advisors' advice as important. However, 23% are "Not Sure" about their influence. This implies universities must engage teachers and career advisors, as their recommendations can significantly guide students.

Social media and online reviews are less influential, with only 15% rating them as "Highly Influential." In contrast, 24% see them as "Slightly Influential" or "Not Influential" (22%). This implies that while digital presence is important, it may not rival traditional sources like academic programs or institutional

Table 10  
Extent listed factors influence university choice

Factor	1 (Not Influential)	2 Slightly Influential	3 Not Sure	4 Very Influential	5 (Highly Influential)
University’s academic programs	4%	11%	14%	38%	33%
University Reputation	7%	10%	16%	36%	31%
Family recommendations	12%	15%	22%	25%	26%
Friends’ recommendations	18%	18%	26%	24%	14%
Teachers/Career Advisors’ advice	11%	12%	23%	31%	23%
Online reviews/social media	22%	24%	21%	18%	15%

reputation in influencing decisions.

3) Comparison of WoM Communication Across Multiple Sources

The study investigated whether the respondents compared WoM communication across multiple sources before deciding which university to join. The findings are presented in Table 11.

Table 11  
Comparison of WoM communication across multiple sources

Response	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Yes	261	65%
No	102	26%
Not sure	36	9%
Total	399	100%

The findings show that 65% of the respondents compared WoM communication across multiple sources before making their university decision, 26% indicated that they did not compare WoM communication from multiple sources, while 9% were uncertain about whether they made such comparisons. The fact that 65% of respondents compared WoM communication across multiple sources suggests that most students value getting diverse opinions and perspectives before making decisions about higher education. This underscores the importance of trusted referrals, peer reviews, and social circles in shaping prospective students' university choices. Also, the 26% of respondents who did not compare multiple WoM sources suggest that while word-of-mouth is important, a notable minority of students rely on a single source or make decisions based on other factors (such as personal research, reputation, or convenience). This highlights the need for universities to be visible in other informational channels like social media, official university rankings, or direct marketing.

4) Satisfaction Level on University Choice Based on WoM

The study examined the respondents' satisfaction with the university choice based on WoM. The findings are presented in Table 12.

Table 12  
Satisfaction level on university choice based on WoM

Satisfaction Level	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Very Dissatisfied	13	3%
Dissatisfied	39	10%
Neutral	76	19%
Satisfied	174	44%
Very satisfied	97	24%
Total	399	100%

The table shows that 68% of respondents (174 satisfied and 97 very satisfied) reported positive satisfaction levels with their university choice based on WoM communication. This suggests that WoM is mainly effective in guiding students toward

choices that meet or exceed their expectations. Universities with strong positive WoM communication can continue leveraging this as a valuable tool to attract students who will likely be satisfied with their choice.

Approximately 13% of respondents (dissatisfied and very dissatisfied) expressed dissatisfaction with their university choice. While not overwhelming, this percentage is significant enough to suggest that WoM is not infallible, and there may be gaps between the expectations set by recommendations and the experience. To avoid disappointment, universities may need to manage expectations or provide more detailed, realistic information alongside positive WoM.

The 19% of respondents who were neutral about their satisfaction indicate a group that may neither be strongly influenced by WoM nor disappointed by their university choice. This could suggest that the WoM was not a major deciding factor for these respondents or that their experiences have been mainly as expected without exceeding or falling short of their initial hopes. Universities should aim to convert this group into satisfied students by enhancing their university experience post-enrollment.

D. Hypothesis Testing

This part discusses the outcomes of the statistical tests made on the hypotheses on the influence of WOM communication on the choice of a public university in Kenya. These hypotheses look into various components of WOM – its sources (family, friends, alumni), the informativeness of the messages given, and the comparison of digital WOM to traditional WOM.

Hypothesis 1 (H<sub>1</sub>): *There is a significant positive relationship between WOM communication from family and friends and the likelihood of selecting a public university in Kenya.*

WOM communication types have also been analyzed in relation to public university selection. The analysis has revealed a positive relationship between WOM communication from family and friends to the selection of a public university, with a correlation coefficient of  $r = 0.78$  and a significance level of  $p < 0.01$ . This suggests that the greater the WOM personalization with close contact with social networks, the more the propensity of the respondents to choose a public university increases.

Regression analysis also established this finding. WOM family and friends accounted for 62% of the variance in university selection decisions. This means that relatives and close contacts are very strong decision-shaping factors, and their views or suggestions strongly influence the students' choices.

Hypothesis 2 (H<sub>2</sub>): *WOM communication from university alumni has a significant impact on the decision-making process for selecting a public university.*



A statistical evaluation was performed. The beta coefficient for alumni word-of-mouth is  $\beta = 0.45$  with  $p < 0.01$ . This deals with the effect on university choice from the perspective of alumni recommendations. Nevertheless, alumni have a somewhat lesser impact than other relatives and friends, though it is still a factor in making the choices.

Having gone through the same academic institution a few years or months back, these individuals offer information that goes beyond the books and touches on the educational, social and post-graduation employment aspects. Their strong feelings about a school cause either a desire or disillusionment of potential candidates to the particular school. Higher education institutions should consider alumni a deliberate asset in attracting prospective students. Institutions can activate this influence by maintaining robust alumni relations and engaging them in student recruitment activities. This corresponds with the literature indicating that alumni participation in such activities can be one of the tools of brand promotion (Mazzarol, 1997).

Hypothesis 3 (H<sub>3</sub>): *The quality of WOM communication and information about academic quality, campus life, and faculty significantly affect the decision to select a public university.*

A factor analysis was performed. This analysis revealed that information regarding academic quality, campus life, and faculty had factor loadings over 0.70, suggesting that these factors are highly connected with the decision-making process. The extreme quality of WOM communication, which entails providing informative content in a detailed, precise, and pertinent manner, considerably sways a university's selection process.

Elements of academic rigour, the composition of faculties, and campus settings significantly influence potential students' expectations and decisions. Non-specific or loose WOM communications might not exert the same amount of power. This means, all the more, that any such communication directed towards potential students has to ensure proper coverage of the key issues, including evidence of academic standards and quality and the campus life experience. It is more probable that a person will prefer a certain institution if its promotion is associated with descriptive terms rather than general ones. This aligns with the ELM model, whereby individuals tend to be more attuned and persuaded by complicated messages (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Hypothesis 4 (H<sub>4</sub>): *WOM communication through social media and online reviews has a lower impact on university selection compared to traditional WOM sources like family and friends.*

A statistical analysis of means-tested the differences between means. It is indicated that the interpersonal facilitators had more influence as friends and family scored 4.5 mean impact score ( $p < 0.01$ ) in contrast to mean scores of 3.2 for social media and online reviews.

Nowadays, social media, and more especially online reviews, greatly impact information provision. However, traditional sources of word-of-mouth effort remain more powerful. Finding trustworthy recommendations from the individual radius of up and down receives higher priority than looking to

strangers' reviews and social networking cold influencers.

This means the impact of social networks and online messages is rising. However, this study shows that universities should also pay attention to offline WOM channels. Building trust in user-generated content and storytelling through social media can potentially make it up to par with traditional WOM's power. Cheung and Thadani (2012) state in their work on the effect of WOM in cyberspace that online reviews are more believable when they appear personal and realistic rather than artificial and promotional.

## 5. Summary

The research studied the role of word-of-mouth communication in Kenya's public university selection process. Friends (24%) and family members (21%) emerged as the key initial referral sources, followed by social media/online reviews (18%), teachers'/career advisors (13%), and university graduates (12%). Family also emerged as the most trusted source of WoM, where 72% of the study participants evaluated it as either trustful or very trustful. In contrast, social media and online platforms were the least rated. On the factors concerning the impact of WoM, 52% of the respondents rated the factor very or extremely influential, while 25% rated it moderate. Nonetheless, other influences, such as academic programs (35%) and the university's image (28%), were rated higher on the importance scale.

The findings showed that WoM had different contribution levels towards the decision and its cognition. According to the survey, 18% always relied on WoM, while 28% relied on WoM frequently. However, the majority, 35%, did so occasionally, using other sources of information that compete with personal recommendations. A majority of the students, 65%, used several sources of WoM before making a decision, whereas 26% used a limited number of sources or other factors such as the institution's reputation. Teachers and career advisors were significant sources, as more than half of the surveyed participants acknowledged their presence in the student's decision-making process. WoM was also crucial, but it was mostly rated below academic programs and university reputation, which were the two key attributes rated during the selection of a university.

Most students were satisfied with their decision to attend a particular university in relation to WoM communication, with 68% citing satisfaction or high satisfaction levels. Nonetheless, 13% showed dissatisfaction, pointing out that there was a difference between their expectations and reality, while 19% were neutral. This illustrates the position of WoM Practice as being helpful but not perfect in helping make decisions on the university to attend. The research emphasizes the role of trust, the need for various views, and additional data to help the choices made by students in education.

Hypothesis testing revealed a strong positive correlation ( $r = 0.78$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) between WoM from family and friends and university selection, with this source accounting for 62% of decision variance, underscoring its powerful impact. Alumni WoM also played a significant role ( $\beta = 0.45$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), providing unique insights into campus life and career outcomes,

although it was less influential than family and friends. Information quality, particularly regarding academic programs, campus life, and faculty, strongly shaped decisions, with factor loadings above 0.70. Traditional WoM sources were more impactful than digital channels like social media, with higher mean scores for interpersonal facilitators (4.5 vs. 3.2). While online reviews are growing in influence, trust in traditional sources remains paramount, suggesting a need for balanced engagement across offline and online platforms.

### A. Conclusion

In conclusion, the research highlights the significant yet multifaceted role of word-of-mouth (WoM) communication in selecting public universities in Kenya. Friends and family were identified as the primary sources of WoM, with family also being the most trusted. However, despite its influence, WoM was often secondary to other factors, such as academic programs and institutional reputation, and was rated as more critical in the decision-making process. The study underscores that while personal recommendations are valuable, they must often be balanced with other sources of information to make well-rounded decisions.

The findings also reveal varied reliance on WoM among students, with some using it consistently while others incorporated it alongside formal information sources. Teachers and career advisors were recognized for their significant contributions, illustrating the need for diverse perspectives in university selection. Although most students consulted multiple WoM sources, a notable minority depended on a limited range, highlighting the potential risks of unbalanced decision-making.

Finally, the study indicates that WoM communication is generally effective, as evidenced by the high satisfaction levels among students. However, occasional mismatches between expectations and experiences highlight the importance of supplementing WoM with credible data and careful evaluation. Trust, diversity of opinion, and thorough research are crucial to ensuring informed and satisfactory choices in higher education.

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