

e-WOM Homophily, Valence, Information Usefulness, and Intention to Enrol by Gen Z International Students

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia is an education hub, and the number of international students enrolling here is increasing. Several studies have shown that electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) affects the behaviour of Gen Z across various sectors and industries. However, there is a dearth of studies on the effect of the specific characteristics of e-WOM on Gen Z international students' enrolment intention in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). There is also a paucity of studies on the role of Information Usefulness as a mediator in the relationship between valence and homophily towards intention to enrol. This study investigated the influence of valence and homophily on information usefulness and subsequently on students' enrolment intention in Malaysian HEIs. Information usefulness was a mediator. Relevance was a moderator in this moderated mediation model. In this quantitative study, the target population was Gen Z international students in Malaysian HEIs. The sample size was 431 students. The results revealed that homophily and valence were significant predictors of information usefulness. Information Usefulness was a significant predictor of enrolment intention. Relevance not only moderated the direct relationship but also influenced the overall mediation process. Results showed that the indirect effect of Homophily on Enrolment Intention via Information Usefulness is stronger when Relevance is high. The information's usefulness had a complementary mediation effect. HEIs need to further

invest in information usefulness to attract more Gen Y international students. The study is unique because it examined the moderated mediation caused by relevance. Influence on consumer behaviour and purchase intention.

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INTRODUCTION

Malaysia plan to enrol 250,000 international students by 2025 (Malay Mail, 2024). The enrolment in private universities is dominant, with an enrolment of between 58 and 60 percent of the international students and a 34.7 percent increase in applications, compared to the 13.2 percent increase in the public institutions (MOHE, 2023). This trend suggests that private universities actively leverage peer influence and digital marketing to attract students, making them a more pertinent context for studying eWOM dynamics.

The largest percentage of international applicants is Generation Z, who prefer digital information corridors in making university choices. Students of Generation Z are digital natives who are pressing for change. Being the children of digital technology, they regularly evaluate the online reviews, peer testimonials, and social media debates in their comparison of study destinations (Hernandez-de-Menendez et al., 2020). The competitive and internationally orientated nature of the Malaysian environment subjects them to a large amount of cross-border information that makes peer-generated content an instrumental tool in measuring cultural fit, academic quality, and institutional credibility.

A study indicated that Generation Z dedicates significant time to social media platforms. About 96% have accessed YouTube, while 80% have used Facebook (Moghavvemi et al., 2017). This highlights the vital importance of information available

on social media platforms. Hence, electronic word of mouth (eWOM) based on peer influence has become one of the most important factors influencing Gen Z in terms of evaluations, trust development, and enrolment intentions. Therefore, HEIs need to rethink and strategise how electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) can be leveraged to increase the number of enrolments. Unlike other generations, Gen Z students are prone to processing and analysing information from several platforms simultaneously. They dig deeper into credibility checks and expect everything to be authentic and relevant (Martinez et al., 2023). The higher level of sophistication shows that older and traditional sequential models of eWOM evaluation may not be effective.

In today's world, e-WOM is one of the key determinants of consumer behaviour across several sectors and industries. Therefore, HEIs are encouraged to use marketing strategies to attract and increase loyalty (Wahab et al., 2024). In contrast to the traditional word-of-mouth, eWOM does not have geographical or temporal barriers. Furthermore, it can be assessed almost instantly and from anywhere by using digital channels and platforms by international students.

Some of the key dimensions or characteristics that influence its behaviour or persuasiveness encompass valence, homophily, and relevance (Daowd et al., 2021). The study highlighted that eWOM is today one of the key determinants of decision-making by customers. Past studies have identified the positive impact

of information usefulness on intention adoption. This provides marketers with a better perception of eWOM information (Ngo et al., 2024).

However, despite the importance of eWOM in promotion and marketing by HEIs, there is still a gap in both empirical and theoretical knowledge. Most past studies undertake Western contexts, such as Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), thus not considering unique market dynamics in Southeast Asian markets, such as cultural norms, technological adoption, and information-seeking behaviours. These cultural differences can result in different outcomes. Moreover, prior research has also tended to investigate eWOM factors independently, such as valence or credibility, without considering the effects of their interactions on decision-making processes. For instance, Daowd et al. (2021) focused on e-WOM credibility. The inclusion of relevance in this moderated mediation model makes this study more unique.

There has also been limited research on how relevance moderates these effects, especially among multicultural, digitally savvy Generation Z students who evaluate information across various platforms with advanced skills (Martinez et al., 2023). Additionally, earlier research has looked at the direct effects of eWOM characteristics on enrolment intentions; little has been done to examine the moderated mediation mechanism, or more precisely, how relevance uses information usefulness to moderate the indirect effects of homophily on enrolment intention.

These gaps point to the need for a more integrated approach to understanding how eWOM affects enrolment decisions in international education. This study seeks to investigate the role of eWOM attributes including homophily and valence in information usefulness and enrolment intention of Gen Z international students in higher education institutions in Malaysia. Moreover, the moderating role of relevance in direct and indirect relationships is examined in relation to such constructs. Based on Information Adoption Model, Elaboration Likelihood Model, and Social Identity Theory, this paper combines cognitive, motivational, and social identity perspectives to account for how students can evaluate and to act on eWOM information. The results provide universities with meaningful advice for enhancing the recruitment of international students with more relevant, credible, and centred around real student experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Support

The Information Adoption Model (IAM) that originated from Sussman and Siegel (2003) was used to describe the process of information evaluation and adoption by individuals in online environments. In this study, perceived usefulness was a mediator between the predictors and behaviour intention. Recent studies suggest that perceptions of usefulness have a profound effect on swaying the use of online reviews (Wang et al. 2023) and shaping students' decision-making in higher education institutions (Kumar et al., 2021).

In this study, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) by Petty and Cacioppo (1986) complemented the IAM. The ELM is a model that describes how persuasion occurs either through a central pathway, a peripheral pathway, or a combination of both. Based on this model, people are apt to involve themselves in cognitive processing, evaluate e-WOM in terms of argument quality and personal relevance, in which constructs like valence and relevance acquire significance for use in predictions of their intention to enrol in HEIs (Thompson et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023).

Both IAM and ELM are cognitive models. In this study, a sociocultural perspective was incorporated using Social Identity Theory (SIT). The SIT model states that a person's feelings of closeness to other group members in their own group promote credibility and acceptance. This has a direct bearing on the role of homophily in swaying perceived information value. This will lead to the generation of trust in peer-generated reviews. This is the user-generated content among Gen Z consumers (Garcia et al., 2022).

The integration of IAM, ELM, and SIT is therefore appropriate because these frameworks collectively explain how information usefulness, message valence, perceived relevance, and homophily shape cognitive processing and behavioural intentions, central variables in understanding Gen Z's enrolment decisions. Empirical studies support this integration: Kumar and Patel (2022) demonstrated that information usefulness mediated the link between eWOM

characteristics and behavioural intentions, while cultural similarity moderated these effects among international students. Since this research is aimed at investigating how eWOM valence, homophily, and relevance influence the perceptions of Gen Z students in terms of information usefulness and their intentions to enrol, the integrated IAM, ELM, and SIT framework has a better conceptual fit and a stronger theoretical foundation than either TAM or UGT.

Relationship Between Valence and Information Usefulness

In the e-WOM context, valence refers to the negative or positive information or tone that can influence decision-making or behaviour. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) referred to eWOM as any positive or negative information made available to people via the internet. In the context of the IAM model, valence influences how the predictors in the IAM model, like information usefulness, are interpreted (Sussman & Siegel, 2003). Positive eWOM information can provide the decision makers with more useful information to enhance their capacity to judge multiple alternatives and make decisions. This will enhance their perceptions of information usefulness (Sussman & Siegel, 2003).

Past studies have shown a positive relationship between valence and the usefulness of information. The study by Jia and Liu (2018) indicated that consumers are influenced by the valence and usefulness of online reviews. The exposure of positive reviews to customers can reflect a greater

intention to purchase by consumers. The study by Coursaris et al. (2018) added that when reviews are perceived as useful, the purchase intention is higher. Ismagilova et al. (2020) revealed valence as one of the best predictors of intention. The following hypothesis was proposed:

H1: Valence positively influences information usefulness.

Relationship Between Homophily and Information Usefulness

The Social Identity Theory and the similarity attraction theory can be used to explain how customers' perceived similarity can increase information credibility and usefulness. According to theories, when customers perceive information sources to be similar, they are likely to be influenced by that information in their decision-making processes (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Past studies have generally shown a positive relationship between homophily and the likelihood of engaging in e-WOM information and Behaviour (Ismagilova et al. 2021). A meta-analysis by Ismagilova et al. (2021) revealed that source homophily enhances perceived e-WOM usefulness and customers' behaviour. The findings suggest that similarity-based credibility improvements are a key mechanism in digital communication contexts, irrespective of channels or technological affordances. The following hypothesis was examined:

H2: Homophily positively influences information usefulness.

Relationship Between Information Usefulness and Enrolment Intention

Information usefulness can be associated with perceived usefulness, and its explanation can be based on the Information Adoption Model and Technology Acceptance Model. In instances where customers perceive information as useful, they are more likely to use the information to make decisions (Sussman & Siegel, 2003).

Previous studies have generally shown a positive relationship between information usefulness in decision-making, such as intention to enroll in HEIs (Leong et al., 2021). The study by Leong et al. (2021) explained that information usefulness influenced adoption, which subsequently influenced intention. Kumar et al. (2021) study further revealed that information usefulness was significantly associated with students' enrolment intentions. This understanding was further supported by Huang and Liu (2025), who showed that awareness of algorithm-based content personalisation positively influences perceived usefulness, which subsequently strengthens behavioural intentions among Generation Z users. The following hypothesis was developed:

H3: Information usefulness positively influences enrolment intention.

Relevance Moderates the Relationship Between Homophily and Information Usefulness

In accordance with the IAM Model, relevance refers to how well information aligns with a customer's needs or decision-making.

However, there is a lack of studies where the relevance of information moderated the relationship between homophily and information usefulness. However, some studies examined the relevance that moderated the relationship via a related source. A study by Van Esch et al. (2018) revealed that country-of-origin (COO) information moderated the relationship between homophily and product satisfaction. The results mean that the relationship between homophily was higher in instances where customers seek COO information vigorously. This refers to a situation in which the relevance or alignment between information and decision-making need is high. In this situation, relevance via COO moderated the relationship between homophily and information usefulness.

The study by Nguyen and Vo (2021) further revealed that homophily was strongly associated with eWOM acceptance, which is a sign of perceived utility. Based on the results of the study, homophily has a higher impact when it is relevant. . On moderated mediation, a study by Nechoud et al. (2021) presented a model of moderated mediation. The following hypotheses were tested:

H4: Relevance moderates the relationship between homophily and information usefulness.

H5: Relevance moderates the indirect relationship between homophily and enrolment intention through information

usefulness, such that the mediating effect of information usefulness is stronger when relevance is high.

Relationship Between Homophily and Enrolment Intention

Past studies have shown that homophily influences customers' behaviour (Machado Carvalho, 2024; Mainolfi & Vergura, 2022). The study by Mainolfi and Vergura (2022) revealed that homophily had a significant influence on engagement with a blog. In addition, the perceived similarity with the bloggers of other blogs, that is, homophily, and a greater engagement level led to higher buying intention of the promoted products. Campigotto et al. (2022) added that in educational contexts, school friendship networks showed high homophily effects. This facilitated information exchange and influenced decision-making. Homophily is multidimensional, and the study by Machado Carvalho (2024) revealed that only the attitudinal dimension of homophily influences behaviour. The value dimension of homophily had a positive impact on content perception. However, the content perception dimension had a counterproductive effect.

H6: Homophily has a direct and significant positive effect on enrolment intention

Mediating Effect of Information Usefulness in the Relationship Between Homophily and Enrolment Intention

There is a lack of studies on the mediation effect of information usefulness in the relationship between homophily and

intention to enrol. Past studies have shown that students often establish networks with peers of similar backgrounds, values, or interests. This will affect their decisions and outcomes (Weber et al., 2020). Information usefulness can be related to perceived usefulness. A study by Hashim et al. (2023) revealed that perceived system homophily among students positively influences perceived usefulness. This led to greater satisfaction, which can be a proxy for intention to enrol among students. Smirnov and Thurner (2017) further explained that homophily effects extend beyond network formation, influencing academic behaviours and performance through selective association. The following hypothesis was developed:

H7: Information usefulness mediates the relationship between homophily and enrolment intention.

Figure 1 shows the Research Framework.

METHODOLOGY

The data was gathered using a mono-method quantitative survey strategy that adhered to

the principles of positivist philosophy and employed a deductive approach. This was a cross-sectional study. With the availability of facts and measurements, positivism was an appropriate philosophy (Saunders et al., 2019). This study used a survey to collect primary data using a questionnaire in a cross-sectional design. The target population was international students of private higher education institutions in Malaysia, primarily in the Klang Valley region. In this research, data from international students studying in Malaysia were collected through quota sampling. This non-probability method has guaranteed the relevance and contextual fit of the study to its objectives (Saunders et al., 2019). There were 423 valid responses, and this number is more than what has been recommended as the sample size for PLS-SEM by Kline (2016). The sample included personal information of respondents, like age and gender.

To measure all the constructs, the measurements or questions were obtained from past studies where the reliability and validity were successfully tested. The constructs were measured using 5-point Likert scales. The questions on Valence and homophily were adapted from Nguyen

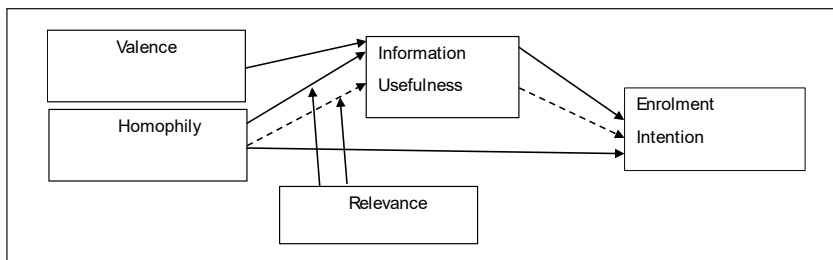


Figure 1. Research framework

Source: Developed by the researcher

and Vo (2021). Information usefulness was measured by adapting questions from Sirithanaphonchai (2017) and Filieri (2014). Enrolment Intention was measured with questions adapted from Filieri (2015) and Oday et al. (2021). The questions to measure relevance were adapted from Sirithanaphonchai (2017). Items were reviewed by experts and pre-tested with 50 respondents to test validity and reliability. The Measurement model assessment using SmartPLS was used to test indicator reliability, internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Pilot testing was done to further check the reliability and validity.

Questionnaires were electronically and manually distributed to the intended population. The data was edited and checked for missing values and outliers. The demographic profile of respondents was presented by SPSS statistical software. Smart Pls was used in testing reliability, validity, and multicollinearity. All items with low factor loading were dropped so that the data could be reliable and valid. As suggested by Hair et al. (2021), the indicator reliability should be greater than 0.70. Convergent validity was calculated by average variance extracted (AVE), which should be 0.5 or more. Discriminant validity through the HTMT value should be below 0.90 (Hair et al., 2021).

RESULTS

Demographic Profile

A total of 423 respondents participated in the questionnaire. All the participants were Gen Z international students from Malaysian

private universities. Based on gender, there were more males ($n = 253$, 59.80%). There were 170 females (40.20%). The age distribution confirmed alignment with Generation Z demographics, with 63.40% aged 18-22 years ($n = 268$), 29.30% aged 23-26 years ($n = 124$), and 7.30% aged 27+ years ($n = 31$). Educational level diversity was evident across academic programs, with undergraduate students (bachelor's degree) representing the largest group ($n = 220$, 52.00%), followed by pre-university (foundation and diploma) ($n = 128$, 30.3%) and postgraduate students (Master's and Phd) ($n = 75$, 17.70%).

Factor Loadings

In SmartPLS, factor loadings indicate the strength of the relationship between each observed indicator or item and its underlying latent construct. As stated by Hair et al. (2021), factor loadings above 0.7 are ideal. In this study, the factor loadings were above 0.7. The high loadings reflect that all the items are strong indicators of the constructs.

Reliability Testing

To determine how much each of the components correlates with the other and is related to the same fundamental concept, the reliability testing was executed (Hair et al., 2021). As suggested by Hair et al. (2021), the reliability values and composite reliability ρ_a should have values between 0.7 and 0.95 (Hair et al., 2021). The Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (ρ_a) coefficients for all the constructs were above 0.7. and thus reliability was not violated (Table 1).

Table 1
Reliability and convergent validity

	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (rho_a)	Composite Reliability (rho_c)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Enrolment Intention	0.809	0.816	0.875	0.637
Homophily	0.891	0.894	0.924	0.754
Information Usefulness	0.920	0.925	0.938	0.719
Relevance	0.864	0.864	0.908	0.712
Valence	0.844	0.861	0.906	0.762

Convergent Validity

The convergent validity can be determined by evaluating the degree to which a construct converges to explain the variation in its items. As specified by Hair et al. (2021), an acceptable Average Variance Extracted (AVE) should be above 0.50. In this study, all the AVE values were above 0.5. This threshold signifies that all the constructs explain at least 50% of the observed variation in their items (Hair et al., 2021). Therefore, convergent validity was confirmed (Table 1).

Discriminant Validity

As stated by Hair et al. (2021), the discriminant validity refers to the distinctiveness of a construct compared to other constructs in a structural model (Hair

et al., 2021). HTMT was selected in this study to check the discriminant validity. As stated by Henseler et al. (2015), the HTMT is a different and more accurate assessment of discriminant validity. Henseler et al. (2015) stated that an HTMT value above 0.90 shows that discriminant validity is violated. A threshold value of below 0.85 is recommended (Henseler et al., 2015). As shown in Table 2, all the HTMT values are below 0.85, and this shows that discriminant validity is confirmed.

Multicollinearity

Multicollinearity is a situation where two or more independent variables in the model are highly correlated (Hair et al., 2021). The threshold for outer model multicollinearity is less than 5.

Table 2
Discriminant validity HTMT

	Enrolment Intention	Homophily	Information Usefulness	Relevance	Valence
Enrolment Intention					
Homophily	0.701				
Information Usefulness	0.728	0.720			
Relevance	0.684	0.688	0.782		
Valence	0.637	0.672	0.718	0.703	
Relevance × Homophily	0.642	0.657	0.743	0.625	0.618

In this study, all the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were below, and thus the estimation of path coefficients is not distorted. For the Inner Model, A VIF value below 3.3 is indicative of no collinearity issue. The VIF values below 3.3 indicate that the model does not have a common method bias problem (Kock, 2017).

Coefficient of Determination R-Square

As stated by Hair et al. (2021), the R-squared value or the coefficient of determination reflects the degree of variance in the dependent variable that is explained by its independent variables. In this study, the R² of 0.460 indicates that 46% the variance in Enrolment Intention is explained by independent variables. Similarly, the R² of 0.661 indicates that 66% the variance

in Information Usefulness is explained by independent variables (Table 3).

Structural Model Path Coefficients and Significance Levels

The results in Table 4 and Figure 2 can be utilised for hypothesis testing, including the path coefficients and related data. In the assessment, both the T-value and P-value are taken into account. The t-value above 1.96 indicates a significance level to reject the null hypothesis. A P-value below 0.05 also signifies significance to reject the null hypothesis (Hair et al., 2021). According to Table 4, all the relationships have a p-value of < 0.05 and a t-statistic above 1.96. Based on the p-value and the t-statistic, hypotheses H1, H2, H3, and H6 are supported. The moderation and mediation testing are further explained.

Table 3
R-square

	R-square	R-square Adjusted
Enrolment Intention	0.460	0.458
Information Usefulness	0.661	0.658

Table 4
Path coefficients

	Original Sample	Sample Mean	Standard Deviation	T Statistics	P Values
Valence -> Information Usefulness	0.166	0.165	0.046	3.599	0.000
Homophily -> Enrolment Intention	0.324	0.325	0.046	7.063	0.000
Information Usefulness -> Enrolment Intention	0.420	0.419	0.043	9.828	0.000
Homophily -> Information Usefulness	0.160	0.159	0.047	3.403	0.001
Relevance -> Information Usefulness	0.304	0.303	0.051	6.016	0.000
Relevance x Homophily -> Information Usefulness	0.255	0.259	0.045	5.699	0.000

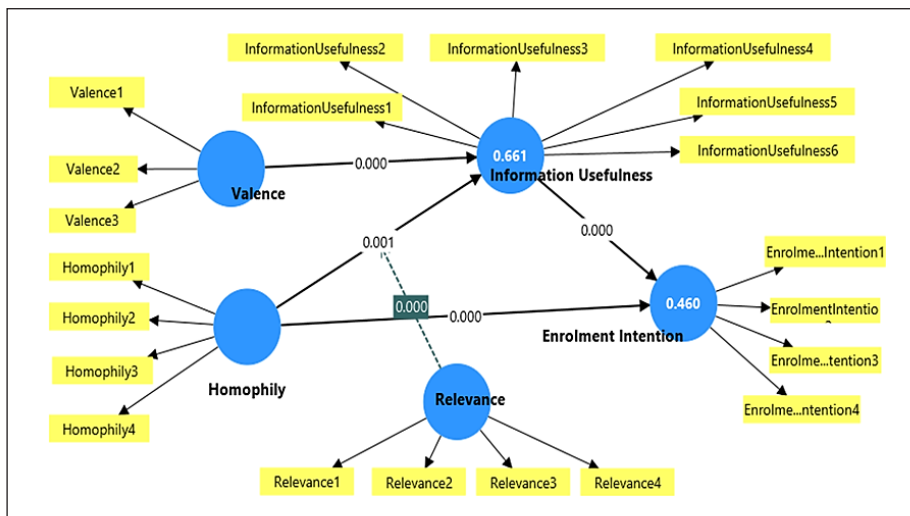


Figure 2. Structural model path coefficients

Moderation Testing

Based on the p-value in Table 4, the moderating role of relevance was significant ($\beta = 0.255$, $p = 0.000$) in Table 4. This shows that relevance affects the strength and direction of the relationship between homophily and information usefulness. When Relevance is high, Homophily's influence on Information Usefulness increases. The findings demonstrate that the hypothesis is validated, and that Relevance moderates the association between Information Usefulness and Homophily.

Moderated Mediation Testing

When the level of a moderator variable determines the significance of a mediation effect, this is known as moderated mediation. Table 4 demonstrates that information usefulness is significantly impacted by homophily ($\beta = 0.160$, $p = 0.001$). Enrollment intention has a

significant relationship with information usefulness ($\beta = 0.420$, $p = 0.000$). The findings in the Relevance $\times$ Homophily $\rightarrow$ Information Usefulness path are also significant and noteworthy ($\beta = 0.255$, $p = 0.000$). Relevance $\times$ Homophily $\rightarrow$ Information Usefulness $\rightarrow$ Enrollment Intention also exhibits a significant relationship ($\beta = 0.107$, $p = 0.000$) when using specific indirect effects. When Relevance is high, it is more powerful. As a result, the findings are consistent with a moderated mediation model, according to which the relationship between homophily and enrollment intention is mediated by information usefulness. Relevance also acts as a moderator for this mediation.

Mediation Testing

The mediation effect of information usefulness between homophily and enrolment intention was tested using the

Zhao et al. (2010) model. The impact of homophily on enrollment intention in this study is partially explained by information usefulness. Both directly ($\beta = 0.324$, $p = 0.000$) and indirectly (Homophily $\rightarrow$ Information Usefulness: $\beta = 0.160$, $p = 0.001$; Information Usefulness $\rightarrow$ Enrollment Intention: $\beta = 0.420$, $p = 0.000$), homophily has a significant impact on enrollment intention. Both relationships are important and moving in the same direction. Consequently, this suggests complementary mediation (Zhao et al., 2010). It implies that homophily not only has a direct impact on enrollment choices but also enhances the value of information, which raises enrollment intention.

DISCUSSION

Discussion of Findings

The first hypothesis tested the impact of valence on information usefulness by Gen Z International students. The results based on p-value and correlation coefficients showed a positive and significant effect of valence on information usefulness by the Gen Z students ($\beta = 0.166$, $p < 0.001$). The results mean that valence shows international students whether the information delivers a positive or otherwise evaluation. A positive valence will increase the perceived information usefulness among students. The findings are consistent with Jia and Liu (2018), who demonstrated that review valence significantly influences perceived usefulness in online environments and align with Ismagilova et al. (2020), who identified valence as a key predictor of behavioural

intention through evaluative processing. However, the standardized path coefficient ($\beta = 0.166$) in this study is positive but low in size or impact.

The second hypothesis investigated the relationship between homophily and information usefulness by Gen Z students in Malaysia. The findings rejected the null hypothesis and indicated a positive and significant impact of homophily on information usefulness ($\beta = 0.160$, $p = 0.001$). However, the path coefficient is positive, but the impact is considered small. This finding is consistent with Ismagilova et al. (2021), whose meta-analysis demonstrated that source homophily enhances perceived eWOM usefulness and influences consumer behaviour.

The third hypothesis in this study was concerned with examining the relationship between information usefulness and the intention to enrol. The findings illustrated a highly significant effect ($\beta = 0.420$, $p < 0.001$). A correlation coefficient value of 0.420 showed a strong and positive impact of information usefulness on intention to enrol. indicates a moderately strong positive effect—as perceived usefulness increases, intention to enrol also increases. In addition, the significant magnitude ($f^2 = 0.667$) showed that information usefulness is pivotal for Generation Z when making decisions to enrol in HEIs. The results also support the core tenet of the Information Adoption Model (IAM), which states that usefulness is a pivotal element in the adoption of information, together with behavioural intentions (Sussman & Siegel, 2003).

The findings are consistent with Kumar et al. (2021). The study by Kumar et al. (2021) illustrated that university consideration on social media platforms is predicted by information usefulness.

The results of the next hypothesis showed the presence of a significant interaction effect of relevance on the relationship between homophily and usefulness ($\beta = 0.255$, $p < 0.001$). This means that relevance affects the strength and direction of the relationship between Homophily and Information Usefulness. The positive correlation coefficient ($\beta = 0.255$) shows that as relevance rises, the effect of homophily on information usefulness becomes much greater. The results are consistent with Social Identity Theory, which states that people are most susceptible to messages that are directed at them from similar people (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). A similar result is offered by Garcia et al. (2022), who reflect that the similarity effect on perceptions of credibility is high when relevance is high and vice versa.

The findings concerning the fifth hypothesis also suggest a positive and significant moderated mediation effect (Relevance $\times$ Homophily $\rightarrow$ Information Usefulness $\rightarrow$ Enrolment Intention: $\beta = 0.255$, $p < 0.001$). The results mean that homophily is positively and significantly associated with students' intention to enrol in HEIs indirectly through Information Usefulness. In addition, homophily makes information seem stronger. Subsequently, usefulness leads to intention to enrol. In other words, when relevance is high,

homophily will have a higher effect on information usefulness and vice versa. This result suggests that high relevance not only strengthens the direct association from Homophily to Information Usefulness but also enhances the Indirect Effects of Homophily on Enrolment Intentions.

The next hypothesis examined whether there is a statistically significant positive impact of homophily on the intention to enrol ($\beta = 0.324$, $p < 0.001$). This means that homophily has a moderate effect on intention to enrol as international students. In other words, the homophily level was associated with the intention to enrol by students. The results are consistent with the Social Identity Theory. According to this theory, students will tend to be more interested in getting information from people they regard as similar (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This is supported by previous research, which has confirmed that similarity in terms of values, backgrounds, or experiences is linked to trust, which has a significant effect on behaviour (Weber et al., 2020). The implications of the findings, from a university enrolment perspective, are that Gen Z students are more likely to make a decision to enrol when they are influenced by information and reviews from people, they consider similar to themselves.

The last hypothesis tested the mediating role of information usefulness on the relationship between homophily and enrolment intention. The findings showed that the variable of homophily played a direct role in influencing enrolment intention ($\beta = 0.324$, $p < 0.001$) as well as an indirect

role via the variable of information usefulness (Homophily $\rightarrow$ Information Usefulness, $\beta = 0.160$, $p = 0.001$; Information Usefulness $\rightarrow$ Enrolment Intention, $\beta = 0.420$, $p < 0.001$). Since findings with similar directions were obtained for the two routes, the findings support complementary mediation in accordance with Zhao et al.'s (2010) model. The findings indicate that similarity not only affects direct influencers but also increases the use of information from similar people. This further increases behavioural intentions. The findings are consistent with previous research, which supported that similarity increases trust, credibility, and utility judgments of peer information in educational environments (Smirnov & Thurner, 2017; Weber et al., 2020).

IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY

There are three important contributions that result from this study. First, it combines IAM, ELM and SIT into an integrated framework that accounts for how Gen Z international students process eWOM in higher education decisions. The empirical results support the main suggestion of IAM, which states that information usefulness is one of the main factors of behavioural intentions, and ELM helps to understand how the relevance and valence of the information influence more complex cognitive processes of digitally literate students. Also, the findings add to SIT by showing that homophily is a socially grounded credibility cue whose effect is amplified when the content is personally relevant.

Secondly, it adds to previous literature by exploring a moderated mediation mechanism, where relevance strengthens the indirect impact of homophily on enrolment intention through information usefulness. These findings directly support the study objective by demonstrating that relevance strengthens both the direct and indirect pathways linking eWOM characteristics to enrolment intention, thereby offering a more comprehensive explanation of Gen Z decision-making.

Thirdly, it adds empirical evidence from a Southeast Asian context, tackling the dominance of Western-centric findings in prior eWOM research.

From the practical implications' viewpoint, the information in this study will be useful for university recruiters and marketers. Informational usefulness had a direct and indirect effect on students' intention to enrol. Based on the results, the highest focus should be placed on the usefulness of information. Higher levels of information usefulness perceived as highly useful by Gen Z students will lead to higher levels of intention to enrol in Malaysian HEIs. The University recruiters should improve the information quality and credibility. The information should also be kept up to date to increase perceived usefulness. Notably, the moderating role of relevance implies that information should be made relevant to the needs of students. Information can be made more relevant by personalisation that includes financing, entry requirements, and career goals.

The results also showed that homophily mattered both directly and indirectly. Pairing the content with similar or homophilous sources can increase usefulness and intention to enrol. The University recruiters and marketers should set up a student/alumni ambassador programme. Through these programmes, the ambassadors with source similarity and useful content can affect the intention to enrol.

LIMITATION AND RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The first limitation was the inability to make causal inferences because the cross-sectional design measures perceptions in only a one-point location in time. A longitudinal design would provide stronger evidence. This study did not include prior experience of respondents with Malaysia or the chosen institutions. For future studies, the respondents should be asked screening questions about their prior experience or prior visit. This study was focused mostly on positive eWOM and did not consider negative and neutral valence messages. It is suggested that comparative analysis involving several types of valences should be conducted to provide a wider range of emotions. This study did not account for more detailed types of similarity, such as shared values, academic goals, or identity-based congruence. This would be further improved by the incorporation of argument quality or source expertise to amplify explanatory capacity, particularly in pathways effective in the Elaboration

Likelihood Model (ELM). Demographic factors and cultural differences, such as nationality groups and gender, were not considered as possible moderators. Further multi-group research can yield the subgroup disparities in eWOM processing under contrasting cultural and disciplinary backgrounds. Lastly, other mediators like trust should be explored since they can be an alternative and/or even a supplement to the usefulness in elucidating enrollment intention.

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