

The Role of Brand Image Mediation on Motivation and Word-of-Mouth on Study Decisions: A Study of Indonesian Diaspora Students in South Korea

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Abstract

The growing interest in international education and bold learning, particularly among the diaspora community, raises questions about the factors influencing learning decisions. This study examines the role of brand image as a mediator between motivation, word of mouth, and study decisions in Indonesian diaspora students enrolled in the Online Korean language program. The quantitative approach was used through an online survey involving 59 Indonesian students at Cyber Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (CUFS), South Korea. The data were analyzed using the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) method. The study results show that motivation positively affects brand image and indirectly influences learning decisions through brand image. In contrast, word of mouth has a significant but negative direct influence on learning decisions and does not significantly affect brand image. These findings confirm that brand image plays an important role as a mediator and needs to be managed strategically to optimize motivation into registration decisions, especially in the face of negative word-of-mouth narratives. This research provides practical implications for universities in designing more effective branding and communication strategies to attract diaspora learners in the context of bold education.

Keywords

Brand Image; By word of mouth; Diaspora; Motivation; Study Results

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1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education is crucial in encouraging human resource development, improving employability, and promoting economic mobility in today's globalized world (Pham T & Jackson D, 2020). Among the many competencies sought in a competitive labor market, foreign language proficiency has emerged as a strategic asset, especially for individuals aiming to integrate into a cross-cultural environment (Knutsen, T., Wiborg, V. S., & Wiers-Jenssen, 2024). The global popularity of Korean popular culture—widely known as *Hallyu*—has significantly increased interest in learning Korean and, in turn, South Korea's capacity to attract international students through its soft power and educational diplomacy (Matosian, A. E., Fedorova, E., & Fedorov, 2021).

In recent years, the Indonesian diaspora in South Korea has grown rapidly, driven by economic opportunities, educational aspirations, and intercultural marriages. According to (ASEAN-Korea



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Centre, 2024) This population increased from 37,161 in 2020 to over 63,000 in 2023. Most of these diasporas view Korean language education as a gateway to mobility and upward integration into Korean society (Liuhuizi & Yasin, 2024)(Kotarumalos, 2024). Population growth has been accompanied by a shift in visa distribution, with E-9 (non-professional occupation) and F-6 (marital migrants) visas representing a significant proportion (see Figure 1). However, conventional higher education institutions in South Korea often present structural barriers for diaspora students—especially working migrants—due to rigid schedules, physical attendance requirements, and inflexible curricula (Ortiga, 2017).

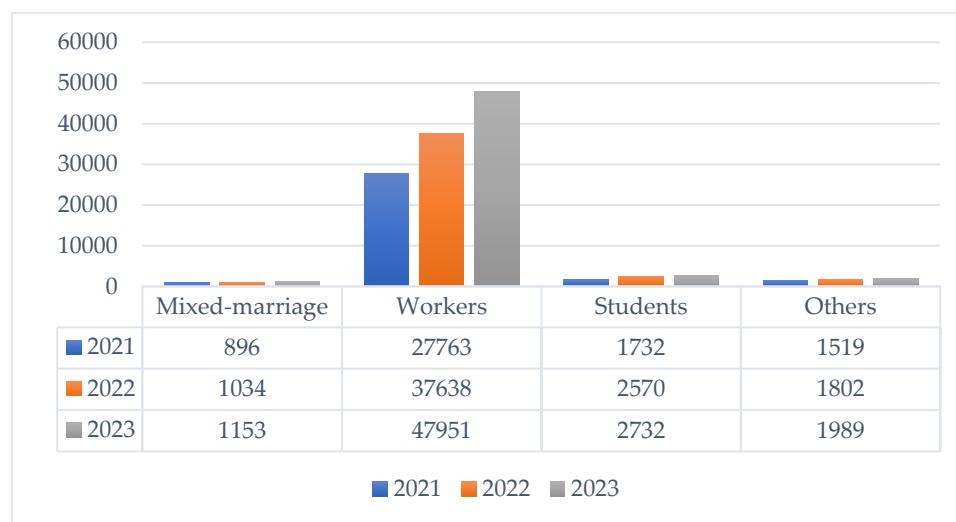


Figure 1. Number of Indonesian Diaspora in South Korea by Visa Type (2021–2023),

Source: ASEAN-Korea Centre, 2024.

Answer: Online education has emerged as a viable alternative, offering greater flexibility, accessibility, and adaptability for diaspora learners (Bell et al., 2022). One institution that meets this need is Cyber Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (CUFS), which provides an online Korean language bachelor's program tailored to the circumstances of working diaspora students (Schulze, M., & Scholz, 2018). Although the registration of the Indonesian diaspora in CUFS is increasing, the number is still relatively small compared to the total diaspora population. These differences point to potential gaps in understanding what drives or hinders study decisions in this context.

Previous research has identified motivation and word-of-mouth (WOM) as key antecedents for educational decision-making. Motivation refers to internal drivers—such as personal growth or career advancement—that influence students' choices (Pickle, 2024). WOM refers to interpersonal communication and recommendations that shape the perception of educational institutions (Le et al., 2020) (Nguyen et al., 2021). However, research findings on WOM have been mixed, with some studies reporting positive effects (Wijaya et al., 2023) (Sinta S, Teguh Widodo, 2025). While others highlight negative or negligible effects due to misinformation or mistrust (Wu & Chiang, 2023) (Al-Dmour et al., 2024).

Another construct that appears in the educational marketing literature is brand image—defined as students' perception of the university's reputation, quality, and credibility (Kango et al., 2021)(Snadrou & Haoucha, 2024). Brand image can act as a mediating factor, bridging internal motivation and external WOM with the final decision of the study. Although few studies have examined these variables separately, few have explored how they interact in the context of online education for diaspora learners—audiences with unique constraints, aspirations, and support needs (Boulden, 2022) (Huang & Mittelmeier, 2025). However, some evidence suggests that brand image does not always significantly influence students' choices (Alamsyah et al., 2023), highlighting the need to reassess its role in diverse educational contexts.

This study examines the role of brand image mediation in the relationship between motivation, word of mouth, and study decisions among Indonesian diaspora students enrolled in online Korean language programs. These findings are expected to contribute theoretically by integrating these three constructs into a single explanatory framework and clarifying the inconsistent effects of WOM. From a practical perspective, the study provides actionable insights for higher education institutions looking to improve the recruitment and engagement of diaspora students in international online programs.

2. METHODS

This study uses a quantitative explanatory approach to examine the relationship between motivation, word-of-mouth (WOM), brand image, and study decisions among Indonesian student diaspora. The unit of analysis is an individual student enrolled in a Korean language undergraduate program at Cyber Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (CUFS). The purposive sampling technique was used to target Indonesian students with the following criteria: (1) active enrollment in CUFS, (2) participation in Korean undergraduate programs, and (3) willingness to participate voluntarily in research. The final sample consisted of 59 respondents. Primary data was collected using an online structured questionnaire via Google Forms in May 2024. The questionnaire measures four constructs: Motivation, Word of Mouth, Brand Image, and Study Decisions. Each variable was assessed using several items adapted from established scales and previous research (Acar, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2021; Kango et al., 2021), with responses recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The instrument was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) to ensure validity and reliability. All values meet acceptable thresholds: CR > 0.7 and AVE > 0.5 (Hair, J. F., Risher, J. J., Sarstedt, M., & Ringle, 2019). Convergent and discriminant validity were evaluated as part of the measurement model in SmartPLS 4.

Furthermore, the data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to test the direct and mediating effects. This includes evaluation of measurement models (external loads, CR, AVE), structural models (path coefficients), and hypothesis testing via bootstrapping (t-statistic and p-value). The study adheres to ethical research standards. Participation is voluntary, and respondents are guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity in the use and reporting of data. The proposed relationships between the variables are presented visually in Figure 2, which outlines the conceptual framework used in this study. This model illustrates the direct and indirect pathways that connect Motivation, Word of Mouth, Brand Image, and Study Decisions. In particular, it highlights the mediating role of Brand Image in transmitting the effects of Motivation and Word of Mouth on Study Decisions. This framework serves as the basis for further PLS-SEM analysis and reflects the theoretical assumptions guiding this research.

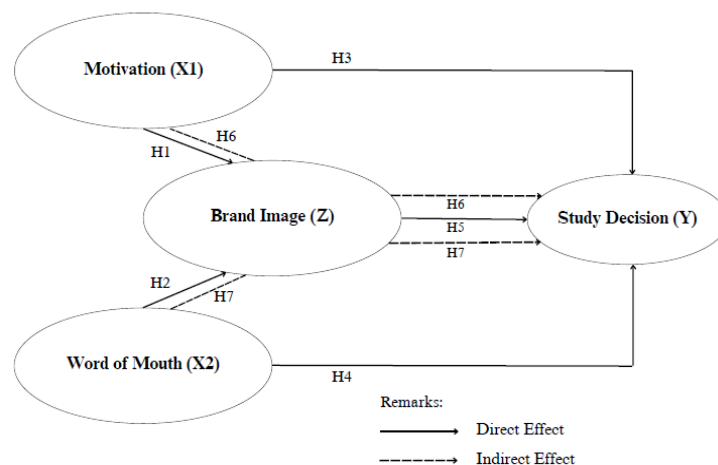


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework and Research Hypotheses

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Sufficient data support the results obtained from this study and directly discuss the hypotheses mentioned earlier in the introduction. Each subsection below presents the main findings, validation of measurements, and implications of these findings in relation to the theoretical framework and previous studies.

Findings

Respondent Demographic Profile

The demographic characteristics of the 59 respondents provided meaningful context for interpreting their academic choices. The majority are male (59.3%), and the largest group of students is admitted in 2024 (28.8%), followed by the 2023 and 2025 cohorts. Visa status shows that most respondents are categorized as workers (78.0%), followed by those holding F-3 family or mixed marriage visas. These characteristics highlight that most students are working adults or married migrants, reinforcing the relevance of flexible online study options such as CUFS's Korean language undergraduate program.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Thing	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Man	35	59.3
	Woman	24	40.7
Year of Registration	2020	7	11.9
	2021	5	8.5
	2022	4	6.8
	2023	13	22.0
	2024	17	28.8
	2025	13	22.0
Visa Status	Worker	46	78.0
	Mixed marriages	4	6.8
	Spouse/Family (F-3)	9	15.2

Indicator Measurement and Reduction Model

An initial set of 31 indicators in four constructs was assessed to refine the measurement model. Twelve items with low factor load (< 0.60) were removed sequentially to improve the validity and reliability of the model. The final model maintains 19 indicators, each indicating acceptable load, internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.80$), Composite Reliability (CR > 0.87), and AVE (> 0.63), thus confirming the validity of the convergence. The Fornell-Larcker criterion validates the validity of the discriminator. These measures ensure psychometric robustness while maintaining the theoretical integrity of each construct. In addition, all Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values are below the threshold of 5, indicating the absence of multicollinearity between indicators.

Table 2. Measurement Model Results

Build	α Cronbach	CR	AVE
Motivation	0.847	0.891	0.673
Word of mouth	0.813	0.873	0.631
Brand Image	0.866	0.908	0.711
Study Results	0.879	0.914	0.724

Structural Models and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis testing through bootstrapping revealed that Motivation significantly affected Brand Image ($\beta = 0.584$, $t = 4.847$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1. However, Motivation did not have a significant direct effect on the Research Decision (H3 was rejected), although the indirect effect through Brand Image was significant ($\beta = 0.387$, $t = 3.501$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H6. Word of Mouth did not have a significant impact on Brand Image (H2 was rejected), but had a significant negative effect on Research Decisions ($\beta = -0.352$, $t = 2.122$, $p < 0.05$), in favor of H4. Brand Image emerged as the strongest predictor of the Study Results ($\beta = 0.662$, $t = 4.130$, $p < 0.001$), validating H5. The role of Brand Image mediation is confirmed in the case of Motivation, but not for WOM (H7 rejected).

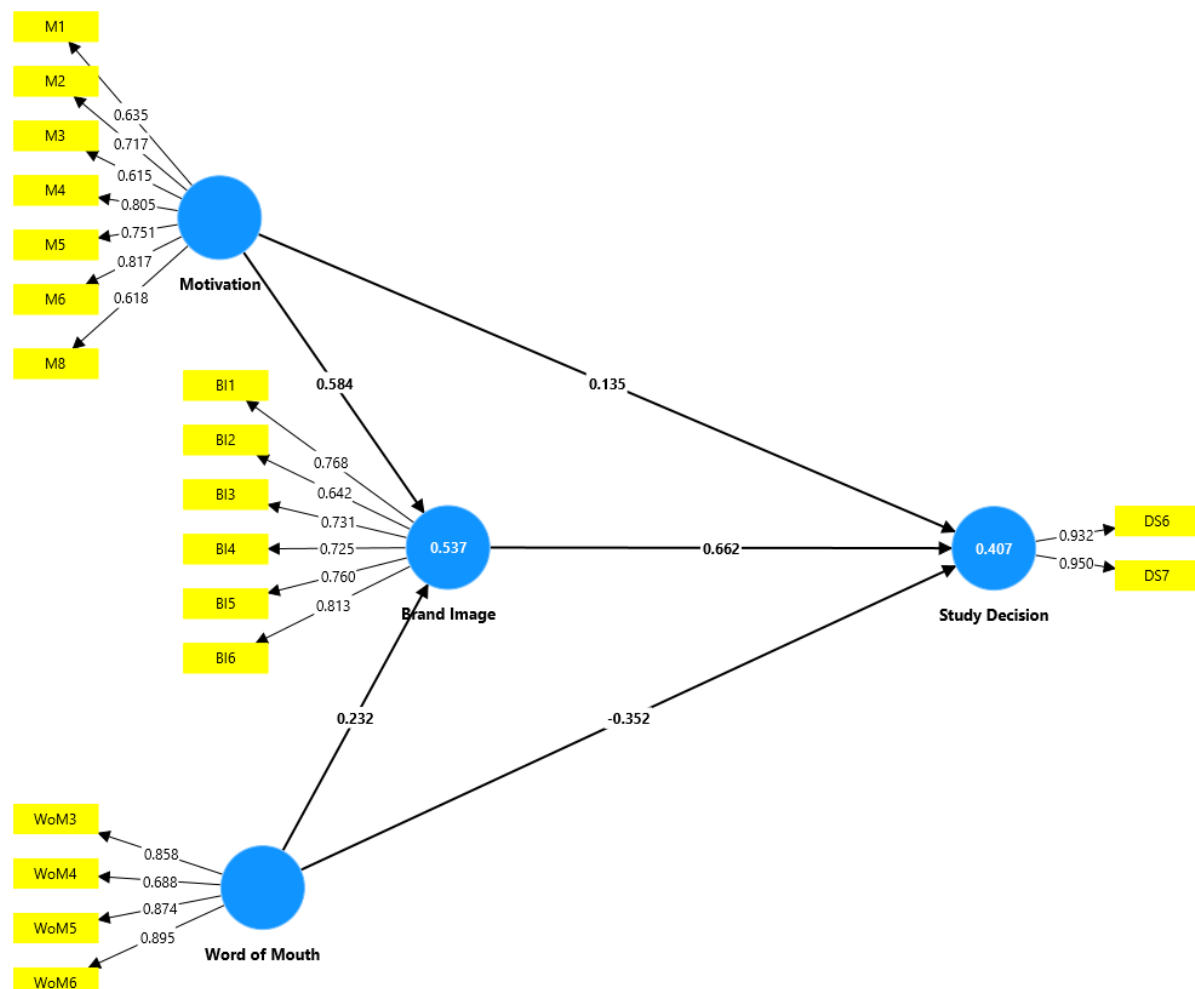


Figure 3. Results of Structural Models with Line Coefficients and External LoadsSource: Author's SmartPLS Output (2025)

Table 3. Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	Motivation → Brand Image	0.584	4.847	0.000	Supported
H2	→ Brand Image From Word of Mouth	0.232	1.614	0.107	Not Supported
H3	Motivation → Study Decisions	0.135	0.658	0.511	Not Supported
H4	Word of mouth → study decision	-0.352	2.122	0.034	Supported
H5	Brand Image → Study Decision	0.662	4.130	0.000	Supported
H6	Motivation → Study Decisions (Indirect)	0.387	3.501	0.000	Supported
H7	WOM Study Results → (Indirect)	0.154	1.442	0.149	Not Supported

The Predictive Power of the Model

Table 4. R² and Q² for Endogenous Variables

Build	R ²	Question ²
Brand Image	0.537	0.267
Study Results	0.407	0.286

The value of R² indicates a moderate explanation. Motivation and Word of Mouth accounted for 53.7% of the variance in Brand Imagery, while Brand Image and other predictors accounted for 40.7% in Research Results. A Q² value above 0.25 confirms the predictive relevance of the model (Hair et al., 2019).

Discussion

The Influence of Motivation on Brand Image and Study Decisions

The results of the study confirmed that motivation had a strong positive effect on brand image ($\beta = 0.584$, $t = 4.847$, $p < 0.001$), in line with previous research showing that individual motivation significantly shapes perceptions of institutional credibility (Janke, 2019). Highly motivated students—driven by academic goals or career advancement—tend to view the university better, recognizing it as aligned with their aspirations (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2023). This reflects the influence of internal drive in forming positive brand associations, especially in competitive international education settings. Learners who perceive that an institution can facilitate their goals are more likely to internalize and evaluate its brand positively. In the context of the diaspora, motivation can also intersect with cultural adaptation and the pursuit of upward mobility, intensifying the importance of institutional imagery (D'Uggento et al., 2022).

However, the direct relationship between motivation and study decisions was not significant ($\beta = 0.135$, $t = 0.658$, $p > 0.05$), underscoring the critical mediating role of brand image (Sujchaphong et al., 2020). While motivation can inspire a desire to study abroad, the brand image turns this intention into action. Significant indirect effects ($\beta = 0.387$, $t = 3.501$, $p < 0.001$) confirm that intrinsic motivation must be supported by positive institutional perceptions to influence enrollment decisions meaningfully (Manzoor et al., 2021). These findings suggest that even well-motivated students may hesitate to apply if the university's image lacks credibility or emotional appeal. Therefore, institutions must identify motivational triggers and align their branding strategies with those values to turn intent into behavior (Bhatt et al., 2022).

The Role of Word of Mouth in Shaping Study Decisions

Word of mouth (WOM) did not significantly affect brand image ($\beta = 0.232$, $t = 1.614$, $p > 0.05$), and had a significant but negative direct effect on the study decision ($\beta = -0.352$, $t = 2.122$, $p < 0.05$). These counterintuitive outcomes can be attributed to inconsistent narratives or negative feedback circulating in the diaspora student community (Herhausen et al., 2019) Wu & Chiang, 2023). Such information—often shared informally through messaging apps, forums, or social media—can erode institutional trust, especially if it is not balanced by direct experience or credible university communication. In a tightly connected diaspora network, emotionally charged stories or individual dissatisfaction can carry a disproportionate influence, shaping group perceptions despite limited representation (Tosun, P., Çağlıyor, S., & Yanar Gürce, 2024).

In this context, WOM serves as a double-edged sword. While positive recommendations can increase institutional appeal, negative or contradictory messages deter prospective students from applying. The viral nature of informal communication can reinforce dissatisfaction and distort objective evaluations of institutional quality. In addition, the indirect effects of WOM through brand image were insignificant ($\beta = 0.154$, $t = 1.442$, $p > 0.05$), suggesting that even a strong institutional image may not fully mitigate the damage caused by negative WOM (Mawadah & Mada, 2022). Ini underscores universities' importance in proactively engaging with diaspora narratives, building bridges through alum ambassadors, authentic digital storytelling, and transparent communication to strengthen trust and reduce uncertainty in decision-making.

The Strategic Role of Citra Mere K

Brand imagery showed the most substantial direct effect on research decisions ($\beta = 0.662$, $t = 4.130$, $p < 0.001$), reaffirming its mediator role between motivation and final enrollment choice (Rizard et al., 2023)(Nofrizal, Juju, U., 2024). The brand image of an educational institution is a general image inherent in the public's minds regarding the institution's quality, reputation, and credibility. In higher education, brand image is not only an identity, but also a student's main consideration when deciding where to study. This is especially felt in the digital era, when online education programs are growing rapidly and have become the choice of many students, including diaspora students living abroad (Aprianti & Krismawati, 2020).

For diaspora students, choosing an educational institution is not simple. They must weigh many things, ranging from the program's quality, the university's reputation, the recognition of the diploma, to the suitability of personal needs. However, among many factors, brand image is among the most dominant in influencing their choices. The research data showed that brand image strongly influenced learning decisions with significant coefficient values ($\beta = 0.662$, $t = 4.130$, $p < 0.001$). These results state that the more positive the image of a university, the more likely students are to commit to applying.

A good brand image illustrates that the educational institution has guaranteed academic quality, professional teaching staff, and adequate student services (Amilia, 2017; Aprianti & Krismawati, 2020, 2020; Guspul, 2018). Prospective students will feel more confident when choosing an institution that is widely known and has a good track record. Conversely, if an institution's brand image is less convincing, then the motivation of potential students is often not strong enough to make them decide.

The institution's brand image also provides a sense of security for diaspora students. The distance from the campus makes it impossible for them to check the facilities and learning process directly. Therefore, the reputation of the university is a substitute for real experience. For example, a university with international cooperation, recognized academic publications, and prospective students will trust many successful alums more easily.

Diaspora students usually have a strong motivation to continue their studies. This motivation can be a desire to improve your skills, expand your horizons, or achieve a specific career goal. However, this motivation requires support in the form of a belief that the chosen educational institution is worthy

of being followed. In it, brand image plays a role.

Brand image helps bridge motivation with real decisions. For example, a student who wants to learn Korean may find many course providers brave. However, if a university has a strong international reputation, the student will be more confident to apply, as they believe the institution can provide quality education. Thus, motivation only in the form of intention can be a concrete decision thanks to a positive brand image.

In online education, the limitations of physical interaction make prospective students more dependent on the institution's brand image. They cannot directly see the campus atmosphere, meet lecturers, or witness student activities in person (Khasanah et al., 2021; Mardikaningsih & Sinambela, 2016; Zebuah, 2018)a. Instead, they can only rely on information available through official websites, social media, or experiences shared by alums.

Therefore, educational institutions that want to develop online programs must carefully consider brand image management. Clear, consistent, and convincing information is essential. If prospective students feel that the institution has a strong and trusted reputation, they will be more likely to apply even without direct interaction.

In fact, the student diaspora often gets various information about educational institutions from friends, communities, or online forums. Not all of this information is positive. There are times when they hear criticism or unpleasant experiences from others. However, such negative information has little effect when the institution's brand image is strong.

For example, some prospective students hear that online programs are less effective than face-to-face ones. However, these doubts can be dismissed if the institution offering the program has a good reputation, international collaboration, and many successful alums. In other words, a strong brand image serves as a buffer that protects institutions from the impact of negative information.

A combination of personal motivation and institutional image ultimately determines the decision to apply. However, brand image is often the deciding factor. Diaspora students who were initially skeptical can change their confidence after seeing that the university has a good reputation, is responsive to the needs of students, and is in line with their values.

In this context, a brand image is not just a logo or a big name, but encompasses the entire experience and perception formed in the minds of prospective students. Academic reputation, quality of teaching, student service, and the values held by the university all shape the brand's image. When the image is positive, the decision to commit will be easier to make.

Diaspora students have their own challenges. Living far from their home country makes them have to be more selective in choosing educational institutions. They also face limited access to information directly. Therefore, they rely more on brand image as the basis for decisions. For them, universities with an international reputation not only promise quality education but also provide social recognition. A certificate or diploma from a reputable institution will be more appreciated, both in the country of origin and in the country where they live. This adds important value to the brand image in the context of the diaspora.

For institutions that target international students—especially from diaspora communities—building a brand that resonates and can be trusted is essential. These include transparent communication, cultural alignment, provable academic quality, and responsiveness to community concerns (Lim, W. M., Jee, T. W., & De Run, 2020). University, it must be realized that brand perception is formed through official materials and lived experiences, and word-of-mouth exchanges in the diaspora ecosystem. Since informal social channels comprise most of diaspora discourse, branding efforts should go beyond formal platforms and be strengthened through active engagement with community dialogue. This may involve strategic use of alums influencers, participation in diaspora

events, and providing a multilingual support system to bridge institutional goals with student realities.

In short, brand image is an important intermediary that translates motivation and WOM into actual study decisions. To optimize recruitment, universities must increase institutional credibility and visibility and actively shape the informal narratives circulating within the diaspora community.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined the influence of motivation and word-of-mouth (WOM) on study decisions, with brand image as a mediating variable, among Indonesian diaspora students enrolled in the online Korean language undergraduate program at Cyber Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (CUFS). These findings reveal that motivation significantly improves brand image but does not directly influence research decisions. In contrast, WOMs do not significantly affect brand image and negatively affect research decisions. Brand image, however, emerges as the strongest predictor of study decisions and serves as an important mediator in the relationship between motivation and study decisions.

This research has several limitations. First, a relatively small sample size ($n = 59$) may limit the generalization of results. Second, the cross-sectional design limits causal inferences. Third, the scope of research is limited to Indonesian diaspora students at one online university. In addition, WOM measurements may require refinement to better distinguish between positive and negative WOM effects.

Future research should consider expanding the sample to include a broader diaspora or international student population. Longitudinal studies are encouraged to explore how study decisions develop over time. Integrating qualitative methods can also help uncover deeper insights into informal narratives and emotional drivers. Finally, future models can examine alternative mediators such as perceived value, trust, or digital engagement.

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