

## ZMOT BRAND STORIES AS STIMULUS AND EFFECT ON PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS OF HEIs IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ERA

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### ABSTRACT

The current pandemic significantly prompts rising information gathering activities via the internet associated with a brand story. This phenomenon has considerable impacts in the decision-making process of high involvement services such as higher education. Since prospective students no longer have the opportunity to directly visiting the campus, their effort inclines more towards reading about life activities and experiences' stories from those who already encounter university life. This study utilizes a qualitative approach to gain deeper insights into this relatively prevailing Covid-19 pandemic situation by conducting a netnography and in-depth interviews with current and prospective students. This study discovers that diverse online learning experiences recounted by current students during the pandemic are brand story manifestations, shown as content in social media platforms. Furthermore, the finding emphasizes the importance of the upperclassmen role to the prospective students. They can associate with the prospective students while maintaining credibility as an influencer. Inspiring experiences told in university seniors positive narratives become successful zero moments of truth (ZMOT) and enhance the desire to interact with that remarkable university brand. Conversely, unpleasant encounters would be an adverse stimulus that would dissuade further interaction between prospective students and the particular university brand, revealed either through behavior or attitude. ZMOT brand

*story is uncontrollable content in social media, and if HE marketers neglect them, it will obstruct the development of the university's image. HE marketers need to be alert with diverse stories derived from personal experiences of online classes during the pandemic. Cooperation with the service provider, aka faculty members, has never been more profound to ensure that the delivery of the materials is enjoyable and memorable.*

## INTRODUCTION

Consumers' purchase journey for products or services which require high involvement, such as selecting higher education, is usually conducted with intense search behaviour. This behaviour is due to the increased risk of this type of service to the customer. The pandemic significantly influences search behaviour activity in high involvement services since face-to-face activities are not possible. On the contrary, the internet has become the most accessible and safest source of information for search behaviour activity. During the pandemic, search behaviour activity drastically increased (Hastuti, 2021; Prasetyani, 2021). In selecting higher education, prospective students are becoming more active in seeking information from official sources and stories about each university, namely from current students. The points told in these stories may be both positive and negative, which has the ability to influence the university's brand image in the long term.

Brand Image is an intangible aspect of an organisation or institution (Balmer & Podnar, 2021, Panda et al., 2019). In Higher Education Institutions (HEI), branding is an important activity, especially in the current times with tougher competition. Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) activities performed by HEI brand managers for brand building consist of delivering controlled communication messages mixed with uncontrolled communication messages. These uncontrolled messages are called word-of-mouth (WOM) communication. If delivered using an online platform, they are called e-WOM.

Word-of-mouth (WOM) has been acknowledged as one of the most influential and effective sources of information transmission because it is delivered by a third party, not directly by the university (Ponte, 2016). In the context of HEI, dozens of interactions occur every day between students and service providers, who are faculty members in the teaching and learning process. The students' experience, good or bad, can be expressed in written form or various other online content. Stories on the internet surrounding universities can influence HEI brand reputation (Shehzadi et al., 2020). Literature has found that a pleasant learning experience will cause university alumni to talk about the university's positive aspects to their community and the larger society (Hansen dan Lee, 2013).

The problem is that daily life in a pandemic faces difficulty in providing the optimal campus learning experience. Face-to-face learning activities must be replaced with online learning activities, which sometimes haven't gone through proper preparation, which provides a different overall experience for students (CNN Indonesia, 2020; Kim et al., 2012). Before the pandemic, stories about the campus learning experience shared either directly or indirectly were only told sporadically; however, during a pandemic where everyone, including students' interactions with their communities, are dominated by online media, the tendency to share stories about campus life increases.

In the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) framework, students' stories in online media about their campus life, is referred to as a stimulus. If a stimulus reaches the brand's target audience of prospective students, it will cause a response and action. EWOM Communication has been recognised to significantly impact the brand image of high involvement services (Krishnamurthy & Kumar, 2018). HEI brand experiences with increasing transparency where the messages can no longer be controlled is a stimulus for anyone

who reads the message, especially prospective students. This stimulus is e-WOM potential which can make or break the university's brand image. This impact is related to the success level of a Moment of Truth (MOT). At this moment, students interact with a brand and then have the opportunity to convey their impressions of the brand, which only previously existed in their minds (Normann, 2000). An MOT is successful when the brand's performance matches its expectations. This moment is crucial to see whether or not the interaction with the brand captivates, delights, or disinterests potential customers.

In the discussion of moments of truth, there is the term zero moment of truth (ZMOT), in which consumers seek information and reliable brand stories before deciding to interact and then engage. MOT stories told by current students are the base material of eWOM communication, creating a ZMOT for prospective students. Without having to come and experience campus life in person, prospective students can already imagine whether or not it will be interesting. A positive online learning experience will become a successful ZMOT. On the other hand, an unpleasant online learning experience will become a negative ZMOT.

Students' stories on social media about campus life have taken a more central role than in previous years. A success factor of influencing others is if the messenger possesses suitable characteristics. These characteristics are likability, credibility, a good personality, attractiveness, and expertise. These are usually the traits of an ideal celebrity endorsement (Kelman, 1961, El Hedhli et al., 2021, Zakari et al., 2019). In the context of HEI, one of the stakeholders who has these traits is a prospective student's high school senior. As current university students with many followers from their high school network, their social media brand experience becomes a strong ZMOT message for their followers.

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of zero-moment-of-truth (ZMOT) university brand stories, using the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model to develop a theoretical foundation for the research. The study adopts qualitative research methodology to develop the themes, including a combination of netnography and personal interviews. Furthermore, this study also wants to explore and find what impetus causes current students to share brand experiences online. Then, the extent to which ZMOT exposure affects the response and action of the receiver (prospective students) in the process of selecting university brands.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### *High involvement decision making process*

A high involvement product is a product where an extensive thought process is involved, and the consumer considers many variables before finally making a purchase decision (Shahin Sharifi, 2014; Nayeem & Casidy, 2013). University selection is not an easy task that is made every day. Hence, the decision-making process to choose the HEI brand for a prospective student is complex and takes a long time. The decision-making process in university selection is considered high involvement because it has an increased risk of making the wrong decision. There are several types of risks, namely financial risk (highly-priced items), social risk (products that are important to the peer group), or psychological risk (the wrong decision may cause the consumer some concern and anxiety).

To avoid making the wrong decision, prospective students seek as much information as possible, especially in looking for reliable information. In the university selection process, a prospective student will search for extensive information from multiple sources, evaluate many alternatives, and invest substantial effort in making the best decision. In addition to searching from internet sources, prospective students will also directly visit

the campus, come to exhibitions, and listen to presentations from university brand ambassadors who come to schools. The more trustworthy sources of information are those that do not come from the brand directly but are from e-WOM communication; third parties who are more neutral and have no direct affiliations with the brand.

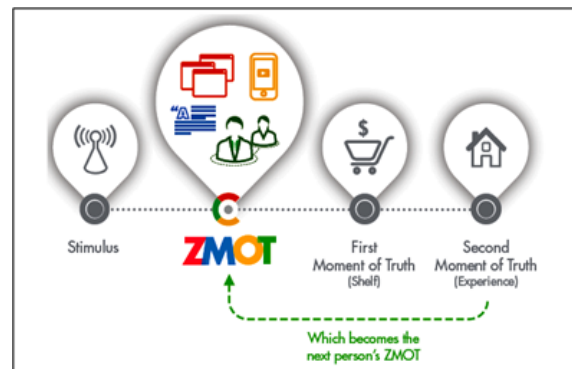
### *Zero Moment of Truth (ZMOT)*

Moment of Truth (MOT) is a critical moment of meeting between consumer interest and indifference (Normann, 2000; Moran et al., 2014). In other words, an MOT is a contact between a customer and a brand that allows consumers to form an impression about the brand. A successful MOT is when a brand's performance meets the customer's expectations. This moment is vital in assessing whether the brand's interaction captivates, delights, or disinterests potential customers.

Before the digital era developed, the decision-making process or consumer purchases were only based on a stimulus (a process where consumers get information about a product or service). Initially in the first meeting or First Moment of Truth, then in the Second Moment of Truth when consumers have purchased and experienced the product further.

In today's age, where digital technology is inevitable and information is amply available, consumers can learn about others' experiences through their smartphones and subsequently experience the products in the digital world ahead of purchasing them. Many consumers use the internet to collect information on products and brands before making purchases offline (Venkatesan et al., 2007; Teltzrow et al., 2007). Various stimuli, including brands' messages on social media, become the primary sources of information for consumers to make purchasing decisions. This phenomenon creates the new Zero Moment of Truth (ZMOT) when consumers have not met the brand but have created an impression of it based on other people's stories.

The Zero Moment of Truth (ZMOT) highlights searching information online that occurs before the buying decision. It includes using electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) to make more informed decisions. The First Moment of Truth is when the consumers meet the brand for the first time before purchasing it, whereas The Second moment of Truth is when the consumers finally decide to buy and then experience the brand values.



**Figure 1.** Zero-Moment-of-Truth (ZMOT) Framework (Adopted from Lecinski, 2011)

### *ZMOT stories as eWOM and its influence on Brand Image*

According to Lo (2012), WOM is a concept where individuals share their views or opinions with other individuals, whether negative or positive. WOM has a substantial psychological influence in determining how a person perceives a brand, service, product, or organization/institution. In line with existing developments, information is no longer shared directly by word of mouth but is transformed through indirect online platforms. This is referred to as electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM).

ZMOT works like a testimonial; therefore, it uses similar principles as electronic WOM. Users of the product or service will review their experience after using the product or service. Then, this review will be seen by potential users for consideration until they finally decide to buy the product. In the context of selecting universities for potential students, it is found

that prospective students rely on e-WOM more than information released directly by universities (Yang & Mutum, 2015). His findings show that e-WOM is more reliable because the information spread on social media is out of universities' control, hence more honest. Prospective students will continue to use e-WOM to inform their decisions.

Several other studies prior to Yang and Mutum discussed the correlation between e-WOM and brand image in various contexts. Previous research found that e-WOM influences consumers' perspective towards a brand's image, whether it is in the market of consumer goods or services (Torlak et al., 2014; Krishnamurthy & Kumar, 2018; Castellano & Dutot, 2017; Tariq et al., 2017; Sandes & Urdan, 2013).

In the context of higher education, Mahmoud and Grigoriou (2017) conducted a study that found individualized faculty attention, support staff helpfulness, and support staff empathy had a role in shaping WOM behavior. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the form of education has shifted into distance learning. In the study of Shehzadi et al. (2020), done during the pandemic, e-learning students greatly affect the formation of e-WOM. Influencing factors that affect e-WOM include learning technology, electronic service quality, and electronic information quality. The existence of university brand identification and university life satisfaction can also create positive e-WOM behavior (Lee et al. 2020).

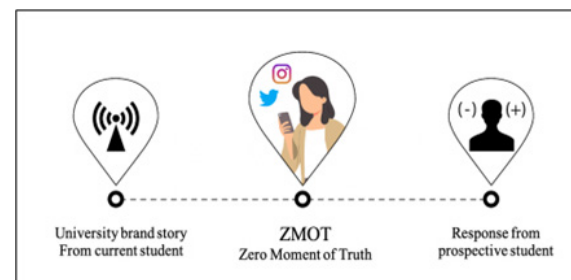
### Theoretical Framework

The S-O-R model (Stimulus, Organism, Response) is a theory based on psychology's science. Stimulus is the impulse that contains a statement (Gao & Bai, 2014), Organism means an individual, and Response is the effect or reaction induced. According to Gao and Bai (2014), sharing life stories and brand experiences (particularly through

social media) create various sentiments. For instance, a sense of security, wanting to be noticed, and wanting to be appreciated. These exposed stories then become stimuli to their readers and may influence their response and actions, such as the development of purchase intention.

Stimulus in the form of HEI brand experience stories operates as something that will influence prospective students' flow journey in selecting HEI brands. Written ZMOT stories of a HEI brand experience created by its current students are stimuli for prospective students reading the statements. User-generated content in social media has long been discussed, but discussion in the context of HEI and particularly in the S-O-R framework is scarce. A discussion needs to be started considering the current Covid-19 pandemic. As student life has become online-centered, experiences of students' interaction with an HEI brand are now more easily encountered in social media. Sharing experiences has become an outlet to grab attention and satisfy the wants to be noticed and appreciated in their community. Therefore, such stories are abundant online.

The O (Organism) in the framework of S-O-R involves two actors: (1) *creator*, current students who share their stories about the brand that will be the stimulus in ZMOT; (2) *receiver*, prospective students whose attitude and perception about the brand will be influenced. Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between the two and ZMOT.



**Figure 2.** Process of the stimulus to response within the S-O-R Framework



## METHODOLOGY

### Data Collection

This study utilizes a qualitative approach to gain deep insights into this relatively new phenomenon during the Covid-19 pandemic. A qualitative approach is believed to be able to dig into unseen motives and rationales as well as describe various matters invisible on the surface (Graue, 2015).

The data collection of this study consists of two steps. The first step is by doing a netnography. The purpose of data collection in this step is to observe actors of the phenomenon and themes in the ever-growing conversations within the digital space. Netnography is deemed the most suitable method because, according to Kozinets (2020), netnography is able to give clues for thorough observation towards online discussions, online forums, and various forms of computer-mediated recorded interactions. Netnography for this study is done by collecting posts created by current students on Instagram and Twitter within the three months prior to the registration of new students. This time frame is selected because it is a critical period for prospective students to decide on university choice (Brown et al., 2009).

The second step is by doing an in-depth interview with current and prospective students. The list of prospective students is acquired from snowballing respondents from the previous step. Snowballing technique is a qualitative sampling technique where previous respondents recommend their potential acquaintances to be the subsequent respondents (Guest et al., 2013). The snowballing technique is utilized because of the massive population of prospective students. Snowballing allows the researcher to find respondents more easily. Current students are asked whether they have any acquainted juniors who are also followers of their social media.

### Respondents' Characteristics

There are two groups of individuals that are important to be studied in this research, which are (1) Creators from Brand Story, which are current university students (2) Prospective students as individuals who receive brand story's message.

The first characteristic is current students who are still active in Indonesian Universities, own more than two social media accounts, are active users of social media, and have a minimum of 500 followers. This characteristic is chosen to obtain a description regarding what kind of experience is shared on social media. Public universities are chosen because they are a more popular choice for prospective students, and information regarding them is often sought after (Wahyudi, 2019).

The second respondent characteristic is prospective students who became followers and is the junior of the first characteristic respondents. This respondent characteristic is chosen because they are the group exposed to stories shared on social media. This is done to gain descriptions regarding their response to stories that their seniors on social media share. The respondents included in this research can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1. Respondents' Characteristics**

| Initial | M/F | Description   |
|---------|-----|---|
| DW      | F   | First-semester student. He has Instagram, Twitter, Line, Facebook, Snack Video, and TikTok accounts. However, it is most active on Instagram, Twitter, and Line. Using social media 5 hours a day. When seeing posts, DW's seniors actively responded in the comment's column on Twitter and line |
| FAR     | F   | First-semester student. He has Instagram, Twitter, Line, and Facebook accounts. Using social media 5 hours a day. Most active on Instagram and Twitter platforms. When viewing posts from FAR classmates, they are active in responding to the comments on Twitter and Instagram.                 |

## RESULTS

In accordance with previous studies such as Mahmoud and Grigoriou (2017) and Shehzadi et al. (2020), this study found that ZMOT experience in the context of higher education works as e-WOM, from the current students to the prospective students. The distinctive finding in this study, however, is the e-WOM is not consciously projected by the content creator, but actively pushed by the content receiver. The prospective students heavily search social media and stalk their seniors who are coming from the same high school.

Using an S-O-R framework, the findings of this research will explain how brand stories told by seniors become ZMOT for prospective students in choosing universities. First of all, actors who act in the S-O-R framework in this research will be explained. Furthermore, what kind of present stimuli will be described, and the last part discusses the response towards those stimuli.

### *Brand Story Creator and Receiver*

There are two important actors in this research, which are current university students as brand story creators and high school students as brand story receivers. The most important brand story creators are current students, who are the seniors of the high school students as the target audience for universities and have many followers. These students are experiencing online university classes in the pandemic. They could be affected by stimuli from their experience while online learning. For the second one, which are brand story receivers, prospective students as high school students seeking information regarding universities for universities' selection process.

|     |   |   |
|-----|---|---|
| BN  | F | First-semester student. He is an active user of Instagram, Twitter, and Line. Using social media 4 hours a day. BN often asks questions to seniors via Instagram direct messages about specific posts and participates in discussions in the Twitter comment column.  |
| DY  | F | First-semester student. He is an active user of Instagram, Twitter, and Line. Using social media 4 hours a day. When there is relevant information, DY also shares it on his personal account. However, he stalks his classmate's posts more than asking via direct message.  |
| JSM | F | First-semester student. He is an active user of Instagram, Twitter, and Line accounts. Using social media 3 hours a day. JSM prefers to stalk seniors' posts on Instagram or read through the discussions in the Twitter comments column.   |
| AFM | M | First-semester student. He is an active user of Instagram and Twitter accounts and uses social media 3 hours a day. When there is a post from an upperclassman, he will read when the post's content is relevant at that time. However, if he thinks he does not need the information, then do not stalk him further. |
| ASA | M | First-semester student. He is an active user of Instagram and Twitter accounts. Using social media 3 hours a day. ASA is active in sharing senior class posts that are relevant to him. However, when there are further questions, it is more convenient to ask via direct message.                                   |
| FAG | M | First-semester student. He is an active user of Instagram and Twitter accounts. Using social media 2.5 hours a day. FAG uses social media only for stalking seniors' posts.   |
| FFT | F | First-semester student. He is an active user of Instagram and Twitter accounts. Using social media 2.5 hours a day. FFT will thoroughly read the discussions on Twitter regarding specific information, and however, it does not actively follow up on the information.   |
| M   | F | First-semester student. He is an active user of Instagram and Twitter accounts. Using social media 2.5 hours a day. He only often looks at his classmate's posts on the veranda. Mostly he got the information from the upperclassmen's posts by accident.  |

Stories regarding the actors are described part by part, as follows.

#### *ZMOT Brand Story Creator: Current Students*

Current students, specifically those who actively post their university activities on social media, are seniors to the prospective students, their juniors in high school. These prospective students are at the stage of selecting their target university. In this study, we found there are three types of seniors who are followed by the prospective student respondents. The first type is seniors who were already popular in high school. The second type is seniors who are previously known well by prospective students. The third type is seniors who were previously not popular but are still students in the respondents' dream universities.

The popular seniors' social media have been followed by the respondents since they were in high school. Popular seniors often actively make posts of their daily life on social media, whether through Instagram or Twitter. Those posts usually incite a lot of reactions from the followers, whether likes or comments, because popular seniors often have more than 1000 followers. One example is a senior's account followed by a respondent is DEV's Instagram account with 1005 followers, with the number of likes on each post reaching 500. When still in high school, that senior was active in organizations, also active as a singer, radio host, and K-pop dancer. Therefore, their name is very popular among teenagers his age. In this type, respondents and seniors don't necessarily follow each other on social media. It could be only the respondents who follow them on Instagram without getting a follow back from the seniors.

The second senior type is seniors who are known well by the prospective respondents. This type is seniors who are close to the respondents due to certain backgrounds or reasons, such as living in the same region, have joined the same activity, and other similarities. In this type, respondents and seniors often

follow each other on social media. One of the seniors' accounts that are followed by the respondent because they are close is respondent RAD's Instagram account. The owner of that account is close to each other due to having taken the same extracurricular since junior high school.

The third senior type is seniors who are followed by the respondents due to them being a student at the respondents' university choice. These seniors are usually followed by respondents after the respondents have gained a perspective on which university to choose. There are a few stages for respondents until they follow seniors of this type. Firstly, respondents will ask the closest person who has information regarding the senior who has become a student at respondents' university choice. Second, the respondents start to search on social media and stalk the seniors' activity while in university. Third, if the seniors often post regarding university activities, respondents will start to follow that senior's social media account.

#### *ZMOT Brand Story Receiver: Prospective Students*

Prospective students are will-be new university students who follow the social media of their seniors. They are actively using social media every day, whether in giving responses/comments to another person's post or observing the available information in their social media feed. Most of the respondents in this research use social media on Twitter and Instagram. Most are from the top 10 public universities based on national ranking, while there are some who are not. This shows the tendency of the final choice of the prospective students that their motivation largely comes from their seniors who attend that university.

Based on their habits, prospective students are divided into two types, which are the passive type and the active type. Passive prospective students often only stalk their seniors. When they purposefully look up universities information or coincidentally



been given information from the seniors, passive prospective students often only collect the information provided from the seniors' post without any additional actions to ask in the comment section or through direct message that has been provided by the social media. They often only look through the information already provided. Most of the passive prospective students are in the social media content reservoir in the Instagram platform. According to the respondents, when they read the information on Instagram, it is more comfortable to just stalk the seniors' feed. Other information could also be gained through Instagram stories or highlights that might be provided from the seniors' accounts.

*"When I read Instagram, I like to see seniors' posts, only seeing them; what is the information for today. I am actually shy and hesitant to ask because I'm not very close to them, so I can only see them."*(Response from FAG, a prospective student)

*"Yes, I think it's comfortable to just read while scrolling on the seniors' posts because if I want to find out more, we can see them on their Instagram feed. Usually, the posts on their feed are important ones, so I can just learn from their stories."* (Response from FFT, a prospective student)

On the other side, the second character refers to the active type. Active prospective students prepare more than getting the university-related information they require. They enthusiastically seek and respond to the knowledge they learn from the associated university seniors' posts. The responses vary, from talking in the comment section to inquiring straight over a direct message for particular issues. They are excited when there is further insight regarding the university shared by the university upperclassmen. Most active and prospective students rise in the social media's content reservoirs, particularly Twitter. According to respondents, when browsing Twitter tweets, they are more engaging and fun to addressing everything openly.

*"(For) me (personally), if I do want to get information, I would direct message the person directly in Instagram. However, sometimes (people) do not want to read Direct message in Instagram, especially if (the sender) is not someone they know personally – so I just reply to posts on Twitter. It is (more) fun. Especially Twitter people (tends to be) less emotional, so it is easier to discuss (about things)."* (Response from DW, a prospective student)

Twitter tweets are more entertaining to engage because Twitter focuses on being an open discussion forum rather than flaunting pictures visually. Respondents favor actively express opinions or questions naturally from the comments section, primarily via Twitter threads.

### *S-O-R Process: The ZMOT Effect*

Here we will elaborate on the SOR process where all starts from online class experiences during the pandemic, which stimulates current students to devise a brand story in their own social media account. The stimulus invokes a response in the form of either a firm or fleeting desire to create a personal brand story. There are numerous brand stories, and this finding would describe it from each platform's perspective and content's perspective, associated with academic or non-academic life.

Most of the time, upper-level university students share their university life struggles on social media, from Instagram, Twitter, or even Facebook. The experiences are told in both positive and negative postings. During the netnography data acquisition, university seniors post their activities through Instagram and Twitter compared to Facebook. Moreover, upper-level university students also successfully create ZMOT messages, resulting in a significant number of followers. Posts of seniors' university life experiences can be categorized in the table 2 and 3.

Both teaching and learning activity is the core service of higher education. However, pandemic disrupts and transforms this activity significantly. Sudden transformation grows to be a challenge for higher education since teaching and learning become more intricate and complicated. The emphasis is no longer only about how the lecturer teaches or communicates with the class but also the significant rise of technological use in the teaching and learning life.

Various issues arise during the online learning method as gathered from netnography result: increased studying workload due to online learning, complex subject due to elaborating online, and limited interaction among lecturers and fellow students while online learning. Communications with faculty members outside of learning activity become a factor that has been reviewed by many students – since it is impossible to meet directly, students sincerely appreciate when faculty members can answer fast and succinctly.

Recent dynamics that emerge during this pandemic would influence students' satisfaction level towards assistance provided by higher education. A pleasant or terrible dynamic would become a stimulus for students to share their accounts about the things they experience positively or negatively.

#### *Stimulus ZMOT Brand Story in Instagram*

The study discovered variations in university seniors' narrative and message tones depending on utilized social media platforms. This phenomenon fits the research (Coelho et al., 2016 and Thies et al., 2016), affirming that features in a social media platform restrict what can and cannot be done. On Instagram, shared narratives should be in the form of photos or videos with a brief description. Their story highlights more visual emphasis compared to Twitter, which emphasizes text or script formatting. Thus, messages posted on Twitter are more straightforward and detailed. Furthermore, it is easier to share posts openly

on Twitter for public consumption – that is why stories on Twitter are free to be communicated with other people.

*"For Instagram, the thing is, if I post stuff like, for example, about committee activities, then the responses would be just from my friends around good luck, ooh fun, nice – only like that."*  
(Response from ARA, a current student)

This research further determines that features and social media platforms' perceptions influence messages' tone shared on different platforms. Respondents perceive Instagram as a one-way interaction platform to tell or share their experiences. The expected response from respondents is in the form of likes or comments from the story they are partaking in.

**Table 2. ZMOT Brand Story in Instagram**

| Account (initial) | Number of followers | Posts' Content   |
|-------------------|---------------------|--|
| IZ                | 1.813               | Gratefulness of succeeding to go to the desired university<br>Gratefulness of gaining incredible friends in an organization<br>Organization's activities that inadvertently have to be held online<br>Announcement of Charity event with society   |
| DE                | 1.005               | Sharing to their followers that it is not easy to do vocational study  |
| RA                | 741                 | Sharing about activities held by scholarship sponsor for their study in Faculty of Medicine<br>Sharing about themselves being a candidate of secretary-general in the organization that they join in campus<br>Sharing a video of learning activity that they get in the medical school and how they wish to be a doctor in the future |

|     |       |  |
|-----|-------|--|
| HAN | 1.055 | Sharing of their participation in joining a particular campus's activity   |
| ARA | 1.093 | Posts of invitation of a Ramadhan activity on campus<br>Sharing the experience of Lebaran overseas<br>Sharing Faculty video competition<br>Announcement of getting a scholarship |
| FAU | 710   | Sharing of campus organization's activities<br>Sharing on how to pay for college fees through application<br>Sharing their experience about campus webinar activities            |
| AI  | 1.084 | Sharing about their campus organizations' activities<br>Sharing the event of particular Students Association   |
| DHE | 1.409 | News about marketing competition's activities and expose the engagement<br>Announcement of joining a campus organization   |

#### 4.2.2 Responses to ZMOT Brand Story in Instagram

As illustrated in the stimulus phase above, Instagram stories of upper-level university students usually revolve around learning activities, campus organizations, committees experience, and scholarship information. These posts are usually positive and constructive, narrating intriguing experiences and how to develop oneself continuously. These positive Instagram posts draw respondents to follow every activity shared by their seniors.

*"If (you ask) me, I prefer to research first before going to that university by seeing this seniors' Instagram (posts). For me, the posts are interesting to be followed and also adding information and knowledge, because I can see (beforehand) activities the students do in the campus."* (Response from FAR, a prospective student)

#### Stimulus ZMOT Brand Story in Twitter

Conversely, Twitter is perceived as a platform to discuss a novel topic or trigger conversations correlated to the respondents' experience. In this platform, respondents expect two-way communication and interactions.

*"The point is, Twitter can trigger discussion because of the thread (features). Like yesterday, I was complaining about my academic lecturer that cannot be contacted; there are replies from other people – it becomes a discussion with fellow Twitter users."* (Response from ANN, a current student)

*"For me, I prefer to share stories whether it is to vent or share happy things in Twitter, because (you) do not have to think which pictures to put. No need to concern (whether) the photo is ugly or not, because people (focus) on the reading to understand the point."* (Response from MIN, a current student)

**Table 3.** ZMOT Content Brand Story in Twitter

| Account (initial) | Number of followers | Posts' Content   |
|-------------------|---------------------|--|
| FAH               | 10.7k               | Intelligent and diligent students would lose due to the poor signal  |
| MIN               | 5.616               | Lecturers are not technologically fluent, resulting in lower marks for all student                         |
| BU                | 1.346               | Not happy with online learning until the end of the term since the assignment becomes a lot                |
| PA                | 1.322               | As a new student does not yet have a friend, and online learning makes it more challenging to gain friends |
| JIE               | 1.003               | Online learning gives too many assignments   |
| CE                | 966                 | Complaining that campus administrations are slow and unfriendly towards students                           |
| ANN               | 805                 | The supervisor tends to be irritable and responds slow   |

|     |     |  |
|-----|-----|--|
| JU  | 738 | Disappointment of not using any facility from campus during online learning but still have to pay full college tuition |
| FRD | 722 | Expensive tuition fee since campus higher-ups actively campaigning about tuition fee                                   |
| AVE | 601 | The lecturer does not care about students' feelings  |

### *The Response to ZMOT Brand Story on Twitter*

It was explained in the stimulus stage that Twitter, as a media, prioritizes discussion spaces rather than mere likes from the followers. Though seniors who prospective students follow tend to use Twitter to share their good and bad experiences during school, respondents, in reality, were not significantly affected by existing posts. They only took them as notes, in preparation once they entered and thus must experience school life.

*"Yea, I have wanted (to enter) this university since a long time ago, so looking at those posts feel ordinary to me. I just keep them in mind; oh, one day when I enter that college, I will experience these things, which means I must do this and that in the future. It's just like that." (Response from BN, a prospective student)*

### *Looking at Effect of Stimulus on Responses*

In complementing the explanation regarding the S-O-R framework, this research would also investigate how prospective students respond to story stimuli told by current students. Prospective students were exposed to stimuli related by seniors because they had been included in their seniors' social media circle at social media. These stimuli were perceived by the prospective students, both actively and passively. The stimuli were perceived actively when prospective students intentionally sought social media posts made by their seniors. At the same time, the passive input occurred when they followed their

seniors on social media and happened to see their seniors' posts. Each prospective student responded variably depending on the type of stimulus given.

### *Stimulus of ZMOT Brand Story on Online Learning Experiences*

Experiences regarding the conducted lessons are told in both positive and negative lights. They are often shared through Instagram and Twitter, but there are tendencies to express stories highlighting complaints and dissatisfaction from online learning on Twitter compared to Instagram. It is simply because Twitter posts could be made with only a few words, making it convenient. It is agreed that to make posts sharing negative experiences of online learning on Instagram, one must follow up with photos as proof. Posting on Instagram is then considered to demand more effort than writing complaints on Twitter.

*"I did once complain on Twitter, but since I'm not a very visual person, I just said like, 'oh my god, sure I don't need to dress up well for online learning, but the assignments tho, why should all lectures give out assignments. I am going to be stressed.'" (Response from BU, a current student)*

Positive or negative posts are usually targeted for their lecturers, from the smooth learning process, given materials, given assignments, to interactions during class. Respondents are more inclined to express complaints on social media than sharing positive stories about online learning.

A few themes are related to the shared negative experiences, including assignments, social, administrative, and networks. The negative experiences pertaining to assignments are primarily complaints about the piling work given and the inability of lecturers to employ the technology, purging low the students' scores. The concern was also expressed by Twitter accounts BU and JIE, who admitted that there are too many assignments

in online learning. This eWOM is widespread across cyberspace due to the high-following number for each account, which is more than 1000 followers each. It means there is a significant influence from the number of followers reading these expressions.

The next dissatisfaction concerns the complaints about the social aspect: the challenges of gaining friends during online learning and the poor relationship between students and lecturers. The latter part is due to the lecturers' indignant expressions, the slow responses from lecturers, lecturers not being focused when teaching, and poor treatment of students by the lecturers.

Furthermore, the slow and apathetic responses done by campus admins also raise discontentment from the students. Indeed, the lacking relief for a financial fee or even the increase also brought intense displeasure against the campus. This unpleasant sentiment greatly influences an account with 966 followers and others below 500 followers, expressing their disappointment. Consequently, general expressions of dissatisfaction, such as disappointment, tiredness, exhaustion, stressed, and boredom, show up amongst students.

Other findings that may prove a hindrance for the students are internet signal and network problems. It is interesting that despite being intelligent, current students depend a lot on their internet signal. As said by the account @FS with 10k followers, though one lecturer is brilliant, if they have poor signal, then all is naught. From the distribution of news, this kind of expression has a significant effect on cyberspace. A majority of accounts using this expression has more than 500 followers, even reaching 10k followers.

### *Responses of ZMOT Brand Story on Online Learning Experiences*

There are two kinds of responses from prospective students regarding online learning: negative and positive responses. Prospective students tend to regard online learning experiences shared on social media as another concern, mainly because they often find complaints about online learning on Twitter, triggering a negative response. Further, two negative responses are reluctance to choose certain universities or turning the experience as a future reference and a challenge to endure.

*"Yes, sure, I also once thought of going to IPB University, but then I saw it was trending on Twitter, saying that the tuition fee increases despite being in the pandemic, and not receiving the full campus facility is just a waste, especially for people like me who cannot afford to pay high tuition fee. When I told my parents, they also disagreed, so I looked for other alternatives."* (Response from DY, a prospective student)

Aside from negative responses, prospective students also respond positively to stories posted by seniors about online learning. Most of the positive reactions expressed admiration and newfound motivations from positive posts shared by their seniors. For instance, stories about accommodating campus facilities, achievements, educational tools with sophisticated technology, and many others have stimulated these prospective students' admiration for the university. Further, the respect is complemented with hopes of prospective students to enter the same university as their seniors. Besides, the image of the university is indirectly drawn from the seniors' posts. Positive posts create a positive university image which implicates to inspiring prospective students to enter that university. Most of the prospective students directly express their fascination and hopes in the comment sections of the posts, pushing for other people to respond likewise.



*"I once saw this senior's post, and it's interesting. It makes me wanna go to this university. It seems like it's great being able to learn online using a system implemented there. They said this uni had had the e-learning system since a long time ago, so when there's a situation like this pandemic, they are ready. That's why I see that people like this senior do not have any worries of system errors or confusions when operating it." (Response from ASA, a prospective student)*

The diversity of the posts' content by the upperclassmen carries implied meaning, both thrilling and embarrassing moments. This would shape the perspective of their prospective students towards the university. Regardless of institutions' fame or private-public status, positive ZMOT would trigger a positive attitude for prospective students, while negative ZMOT alters students' attitudes in negative ways. In this case, students' attitude covers their judgment and expectation towards the university. Hence, the alteration of attitude may affect students' decisions for their higher education. However, based on our study, change of attitude does not affect prospective students' consideration, especially for those who aim for established institutions. Here is a testimony of one prospective student as our respondent,

*"Back then, I saw social media posts from my upperclassmen in Universitas Indonesia (UI). They moaned about UI's protracted bureaucracy that complicated their proposal submission for a certain student organization. However, it did not affect my decision for higher education. In National Admission Test, I still chose UI due to their established resume." (Response from JSM, a prospective student)*

ZMOT that is shaped by eWOM, incidentally, would affect the university's brand image. The collection of ZMOTs may be reduced into unruly message chains. These would carry implications for prospective students through their upperclassmen's social

media posts. Positive ZMOT builds a positive brand image and vice versa.

### *Stimulus of ZMOT Brand Story in Non-Academic Activities*

Social media posts that discuss non-academic activities are one of the most frequent contents. These are predominantly written by current students who are heavily involved in non-academic activities, like student organizations and self-development programs. They express their stories through photos and descriptions on Instagram, especially on special occasions. New members' inauguration, one of these occasions, allows prospective students to interact with established members. There, these prospective students may share their stories based on the aforementioned interactions, as well as upcoming activities in the organization.

*"Like on my Instagram page, I usually post organizational or committee activities since they require an audience. Instagram post is our way to attract them." (Response from FAU, a current student)*

*"New members are usually asked to post recent and upcoming organization's activities on Instagram. Usually, we choose Twitter with caption as the medium, as it may raise my connections' awareness of my recent extracurricular activities. Besides, this may increase my organization's reach on social media." (Response from JIE, a current student)*

### *Response Towards ZMOT from Non-Academic Activities*

Prospective students tend to possess positive perceptions about non-academic stories. As first-hand exposure to university life, these stories provide students with brand-new perspectives that may differ from prospective students' expectations. The existence of various non-academic activities in university triggers prospective students' excitement to

experience life as a university student. The more prospective students are exposed to non-academic experiences, the more interest they would pile up in facing university life.

*"Back then, I saw my upperclassman's Instagram post about organization activity. I felt it was a thrilling experience to gather pieces of knowledge and broad relationships. In the organization, I encountered students from various majors, also peers and upperclassmen from different faculties." (Response from MO, a prospective student)*

*"Besides organization activities, I also saw an Instagram post from my upperclassmen about their dance art activities in a student organization. I like dance art, so I aspire to be him/her as a university student. In university, we do not only acquire knowledge from lectures and classes, but also various extracurricular activities." (Response from AFM, a prospective student)*

## CONCLUSION

This study identifies new insights about the significance of managing ZMOT brand stories from current university students undergoing online classes during the pandemic. We discover that brand stories' creation is not always credible due to deliberate efforts to influence, but instead when there is no advertising-to-look feel-like situation. The e-WOM process, it turns out, is conceived in the form of day-to-day tales of university seniors towards prospective students rather than a 'bound' advertising message. For example, the daily life stories of current university students provide an accurate picture of what a prospective student can expect and whether they can resonate with the brand.

Prospective students who know and follow their seniors' stories on social media may perceive the account as the ZMOT experience. High school students learn what to expect and learn more about the brand without directly observing the

university upperclassmen's stories on social media. Furthermore, the study ascertains the importance of the upperclassmen role towards prospective students. We highlight those current students' roles since they can associate with more prospective students, especially their credentials as reputable influencers. Thus, it becomes imperative to engage with current students who have substantial followers on social media and talk about the university brand stories' content. On one side, inspiring experiences in university seniors' positive narratives become successful ZMOT and enhance the desire to interact with that remarkable university brand.

Conversely, unpleasant encounters would be an adverse stimulus that would dissuade further interaction between prospective students and the particular university brand, revealed either through behaviour or attitude. Therefore, ZMOT stories will be the ultimate factor that significantly influences the university's brand image, especially students with a high number of high school followers. To stand out from other competing university brands, HE marketers should invest extra effort into managing the brand story creation.

Brand stories that develop informally will elevate the university's brand recognition process, advantageous for university marketing. Dissemination of stories through social media is effective because they are not perceived as an advertisement. However, on the other hand, the risk is exceptionally high because the message expressed in the brand story can no longer be constrained solely by the HE marketing. ZMOT brand story is uncontrollable content in social media, and if HE marketers neglect them, it will obstruct the university's image development. HE marketers need to be observant of diverse stories derived from personal experiences of online classes during the pandemic. Cooperation with the service provider, such as faculty members, has never been more

profound to ensure that the delivery of the materials is enjoyable and memorable experiences of online classes during the pandemic. Cooperation with the service provider, such as faculty members, has never been more profound to ensure that the delivery of the materials is enjoyable and memorable.

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