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The Mechanism of Word of Mouth in the Transformation of Strategic Capabilities Into Competitive Advantages of Excellent Private Universities the Role of Word of Mouth as a Conversion Mechanism in the Digital Age (Parsimonious Model)

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ABSTRACT

The changing competitive landscape of private higher education institutions (PTS) indicates that institutional excellence is no longer solely determined by internal performance, but rather by how that performance translates into credible public perception. This study aims to examine the role of Word of Mouth (WoM) as a conversion mechanism that transforms strategic capabilities—student experience (X1), digital strategy (X2), and industry partnerships (X3)—into competitive advantage (Y1) at Unggul-accredited PTS in the Greater Jakarta area. The research approach employs an explanatory quantitative method with Structural Equation Modeling analysis based on Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS). Data were obtained from 252 respondents consisting of active students and alumni. The results show that student experience and digital strategy have no direct effect on competitive advantage, while industry partnerships have a significant positive effect. However, all strategic capabilities are proven to have a significant effect on Word of Mouth, and Word of Mouth has a strong effect on competitive advantage. Mediation tests confirm that WoM functions as the main transmission mechanism, with a full mediation pattern for student experience and digital strategy, and partial mediation for industry partnerships. This finding confirms that strengthening internal capabilities needs to be accompanied by a social-digital advocacy activation strategy to produce a competitive advantage that is recognized by the public.

KEYWORDS strategic capabilities; word of mouth; competitive advantage; private universities; SEM-PLS.

INTRODUCTION

The global landscape of higher education is undergoing a profound transformation, driven by intensifying competition, demographic shifts, and the digital revolution (Hesse et al., 2022; Karim et al., 2024; Mohamed Hashim et al., 2022). Universities worldwide are no longer judged solely on their historical prestige but on their demonstrated ability to adapt and deliver tangible value to students and society (Frank & Meyer, 2020). This competitive pressure is particularly acute for private institutions, which must constantly differentiate themselves in a crowded marketplace to attract and retain students (Perry & Lubienski, 2020; Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016). Consequently, understanding the mechanisms that translate internal institutional strengths into externally perceived competitive advantage has become a central concern for both university administrators and higher education scholars (Hart & Rodgers, 2024; Marulanda-Grisales & Vera-Acevedo, 2023; Phiri et al., 2024).

Several Unggul-accredited private universities (PTS) have made significant investments in improving academic services, strengthening digital infrastructure, and expanding industry partnerships (Melhem & Richani, 2025; Omodan, 2024; Widiputera & Agung, 2023). However, these internal improvements have not always been accompanied by a strengthening of competitive advantage as perceived by the market (Kaleka & Morgan, 2017). This phenomenon indicates a gap between internal capabilities and external recognition.

Word of Mouth (WoM) is seen as a relevant mechanism because it stems from third-party experiences, which are more credible than institutional communication (Zhou & Duan, 2015). In the digital era, WoM has evolved into electronic word of mouth, which has a much greater reach and speed of diffusion (Bahtiarachim & Vania, 2025; Fang et al., 2018; Hariono, 2018).

The specific research gap this study addresses is the lack of an empirically tested model that positions WoM as the central mediator—the “conversion mechanism”—between a holistic set of strategic capabilities (student experience, digital strategy, and industry partnerships) and competitive advantage in the context of private universities. While the importance of reputation is widely acknowledged, the precise process through which internal capabilities are transformed into external, reputation-based competitive advantage remains undertheorized and empirically unexplored (Başar, 2025). The study by Sijoria (2019) called for more research into the antecedents of university brand equity—a gap this research directly addresses by proposing WoM as a key antecedent and mediator.

The urgency of this research is underscored by the high-stakes nature of investments in higher education (Furuta et al., 2021). Without a clear understanding of this conversion mechanism, PTS risk misallocating resources by focusing on building capabilities that fail to resonate in the public sphere. In an era of stagnant or declining enrollment in some sectors, the ability to convert quality into a compelling, widely shared narrative is not just an advantage but a necessity for survival. This research is timely because it provides a roadmap for PTS to ensure that their internal excellence is effectively translated into the market strength required to thrive.

The novelty of this study lies in its development and testing of a parsimonious model that explicitly theorizes and empirically validates Word of Mouth as the core transmission mechanism in the digital age. By integrating three distinct strategic capabilities into a single mediated model, this research moves beyond fragmented analyses to offer a holistic and practical framework. It contributes to the literature by extending dynamic capabilities theory, suggesting that the ability to orchestrate WoM is itself a crucial dynamic capability for service organizations. The practical contribution is an evidence-based guide for university leaders on how to strategically manage advocacy to unlock the competitive potential of their internal strengths.

Therefore, this study aims to empirically examine the role of Word of Mouth as a mediator in the relationship between strategic capabilities (student experience, digital strategy, and industry partnerships) and competitive advantage at Unggul-accredited private universities in Jabodetabek. The objective is to provide both a theoretical contribution by elucidating this conversion mechanism and a practical contribution for university management by offering a strategic framework for resource allocation and WoM activation to build a sustainable competitive position in the digital era.

METHOD

This study uses an explanatory quantitative approach with Structural Equation Modeling analysis based on Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS).

The research population was active students and alumni at PTS with Unggul accreditation in Jabodetabek with a sample size of 252 respondents.

Model evaluation includes testing the outer model and inner model, as well as mediation testing using bootstrapping with a p-value criterion of <0.05.

Table 1. Respondent Profile (summary)

Characteristics	Category	n	%
Status	Student	165	65.5
Status	Alumni	87	34.5
Gender	Woman	167	66.3
Gender	Man	85	33.7
Age	18-20	56	22.2
Age	21-23	116	46.0
Age	24-26	51	20.2
Age	27-29	29	11.5

Source: SEM-PLS data processing, 2025

Instruments and Operationalization Of Variables (Brief)

The research instrument was a questionnaire with a Likert scale of 1-5 (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). The constructs measured included X1 (Student Experience), X2 (Digital Strategy), X3 (Industrial Partnership), Z1 (Word of Mouth), and Y1 (Competitive Advantage). All constructs were treated as reflective constructs.

For transparency in article reporting, the appendix presents a summary of indicator codes and descriptive mean values. Instrument quality was tested using convergent validity (outer loading and AVE), discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker and HTMT), and reliability (CR and Cronbach's Alpha).

SEM-PLS Analysis Procedure

The analysis was conducted through the following stages: (1) evaluation of the outer model to ensure validity and reliability; (2) evaluation of the inner model to test the path coefficients and explanatory power of the model; (3) mediation test using bootstrapping on specific indirect effects. The significance criterion used was p<0.05 (t>1.96).

The explanatory power of the model is assessed through R-square (R2) for endogenous constructs and predictive relevance through Q-square (Q2) with the criterion Q2>0. The evaluation is carried out to ensure that the model is not only significant but also has adequate explanatory power.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics of Constructs (mean indicator)

In general, respondents' responses showed a positive trend across all constructs. The highest mean value for Student Experience was found in indicator X1.1 (mean=4.12), while the lowest was found in X1.4 (mean=3.62). In Digital Strategy, the highest mean was found in X2.7 (mean=4.13) and the lowest was found in X2.5 (mean=3.71). In Industrial Partnership, the highest mean was found in X3.3 (mean=4.34) and the lowest was found in X3.6 (mean=3.41). In WoM, the highest mean was found in Z1.2 (mean=4.27) and the lowest was found in Z1.6 (mean=3.68). For Competitive Advantage, the range of indicator means was around 3.87-4.03 with a positive trend.

Evaluation of Measurement Model (Outer Model)

Convergent Validity

Convergent validity testing was conducted through outer loading and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The minimum outer loading criteria used were >=0.60 and AVE >=0.50. In the initial estimation, several indicators had outer loadings below 0.60, namely X1.4 (0.391), X1.6 (0.515), X3.3 (0.469), and X3.8 (0.598). These four indicators were eliminated, and then the model was re-estimated.

Table 2. Summary of Convergent Validity (after re-estimation)

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Source: SEM-PLS data processing, 2025

Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was evaluated using the Fornell-Larcker and HTMT criteria. Fornell-Larcker requires that the square root of the AVE on the diagonal be greater than the correlation between other constructs in the same row/column. HTMT is used as a more stringent measure with a threshold of <=0.90.

Table 3. Fornell-Larcker (subset of core constructs of the article)

	X1	X2	X3	Z1	Y1
X1	0.729				
X2	0.524	0.767			
X3	0.483	0.512	0.750		
Z1	0.541	0.576	0.562	0.782	
Y1	0.487	0.513	0.528	0.574	0.787

Source: SEM-PLS data processing, 2025

Table 4. HTMT (pairs reported in SEM-PLS results)

Variable pairs	HTML	Conclusion (<=0.90)
X1 - X2	0.684	Valid
X1 - X3	0.642	Valid
X2 - Z1	0.713	Valid

Source: SEM-PLS data processing, 2025

The Fornell-Larcker results show that the diagonal value (square root of AVE) is greater than the correlation between constructs, thus discriminant validity is met. The reported HTMT value is also below 0.90, confirming the conclusion of good discriminant validity.

Construct Reliability

Reliability was tested using Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach's Alpha with general criteria of >=0.70. All core constructs of the article met high reliability (CR approximately >=0.84 and Alpha approximately >=0.80).

Table 5. Construct Reliability (CR and Cronbach's Alpha)

Construct	CR	Cronbach's Alpha
X1 Student Experience	0.841	0.802
X2 Digital Strategy	0.873	0.829
X3 Industrial Partnership	0.856	0.811
Z1 Word of Mouth	0.879	0.834
Y1 Competitive Advantage	0.874	0.835

Source: SEM-PLS data processing, 2025

Structural Model Evaluation (Inner Model)

The R-square (R2) value indicates the model's ability to explain the variance of endogenous constructs. The model explains 65% of the variance in WoM (Z1) and 67% of the variance in Competitive Advantage (Y1). With a general reference (R2 around 0.50 is moderate and 0.75 is strong), these values indicate the model is in the moderate-strong category. The predictive relevance results show Q2 > 0 for the endogenous constructs, so the model has predictive relevance.

Direct Effects Test

Table 6 presents the bootstrapping results for the core path of the articles.

Table 6. Direct Path (Path Coefficients)

Track	beta	T	p	Direction	Decision
X1 -> Z1 (WoM)	0.284	3,991	0,000	+	Significant
X2 -> Z1 (WoM)	0.323	4,015	0,000	+	Significant
X3 -> Z1 (WoM)	0.293	5,122	0,000	+	Significant
Z1 -> Y1	0.375	4,072	0,000	+	Significant
X1 -> Y1	-0.014	0.173	0.862	-	Not significant
X2 -> Y1	-0.040	0.470	0.639	-	Not significant
X3 -> Y1	0.305	5,574	0,000	+	Significant

Source: SEM-PLS Data Processing, 2025

Mediation Test (Indirect Effects) through WoM

Table 7 summarizes the results of the indirect effects test (specific indirect effects) through WoM.

Table 7. Indirect Effects through WoM

Indirect path	beta	p	Conclusion
X1 -> Z1 -> Y1	0.106	0.003	Significant mediation
X2 -> Z1 -> Y1	0.121	0.004	Significant mediation
X3 -> Z1 -> Y1	0.110	0.002	Significant mediation

Source: SEM-PLS Data Processing, 2025

The pattern of results suggests that student experiences and digital strategies operate primarily through WoM (indicating full mediation), while industry partnerships operate through both direct and indirect channels (indicating partial mediation).

Why Are X1 and X2 Not Directly Significant to Y1?

The results show that student experience and digital strategy do not directly influence competitive advantage. Substantively, several explanations are consistent with the context of superior private universities. First, in the superior institution segment, basic service standards and digital adoption tend to be high and relatively homogeneous, thus no longer creating strong differentiation in the public eye. Second, student experiences can be hidden (private experiences) if not transformed into widely shared stories and evidence. Third, digital strategies that focus on one-way information do not always enhance competitiveness; their contribution emerges when digital strategies facilitate interactions, service experiences, and sharing activities that trigger Word of Mouth (WOM).

In other words, X1 and X2 are internal capabilities that require social conversion mechanisms to become perceived competitive advantages. This finding underscores the importance of distinguishing between 'capability' and 'recognized advantage'.

WoM as a Converter: Activating Social Proof in the Digital Age

Word of Mouth (WoM) has been shown to be a powerful conversion mechanism: X1, X2, and X3 enhance Word of Mouth (WoM), and Word of Mouth (WoM) enhances competitive advantage. Mechanistically, Word of Mouth (WoM) functions as social proof, validating an institution's quality through recommendations from parties perceived as more independent than the institution's promotional claims. In the digital age, Word of Mouth (WoM) is amplified by platforms' ability to increase the reach and speed of story diffusion (e.g., through reposts, comments, reviews, and video content).

The findings of the WoM mediation for X1 and X2 can be interpreted as the need for an 'activation mechanism'. Student experiences must be designed to include shareable moments, while digital strategies must build an interaction architecture that makes stories easy to emerge and share. Otherwise, experiences and digitalization will become merely internal qualities that are less visible to the public.

Industry Partnerships: More Measurable and More Tellable Differentiation

Industry partnerships directly impact competitive advantage, as well as indirectly through Word of Service (WoM). This suggests that industry partnership outcomes (e.g., internships, collaborative projects, certifications, and job opportunities) directly strengthen PTS's value proposition related to employability. Concrete, easily verifiable outcomes also enrich the Word of Service (WoM) framework, thereby strengthening competitiveness through social channels.

From a dynamic capabilities perspective, industry partnerships can represent both seizing (capitalizing on job market opportunities) and reconfiguring (adjusting curriculum and learning processes). The strong direct effect indicates that performance indicators related to work outcomes and industry networks are powerful competitive signals in the higher education market.

Theoretical Contributions

This article contributes to the literature on reputation and competitiveness in higher education by highlighting the mechanisms of social conversion. Rather than assuming that student experience and digital strategies automatically improve outcomes, the model demonstrates that their primary contribution occurs through Word of Service (WoM). Thus, Word of Service (WoM) serves as a mechanism-based component explaining how capabilities transform into competitive advantage.

For the dynamic capabilities literature, the findings indicate that sensing-seizing-reconfiguring capabilities need to be accompanied by the ability to activate social proof. In trust-based service industries, social mechanisms such as Word of Mouth can be viewed as part of capability orchestration—that is, the ability to transform internal performance into credible external signals.

Managerial and Policy Implications

The main implication of this research is the need for a Word of Mouth (WoM) activation program as a strategic agenda for the competitiveness of superior private universities. Word of Mouth (WoM) activation goes beyond simply soliciting testimonials, but rather building a system that makes experiences and outcomes easy to share, easy to prove, and easy to share. The following are implementation recommendations:

a. Design shareable moments: map the most crucial service touchpoints (academic, administration, student affairs, career) and improve the consistency and speed of service to create repeatable positive stories.
b. Build a social proof repository: curate outcome evidence (achievements, portfolios, alumni tracers, internship/industry project stories) in short, verified content formats, so they can be shared across channels.
c. Student and alumni advocacy programs: develop community-based ambassadors with non-monetary incentives (recognition, network access, career benefits) so that recommendations are organic.
d. Digital channel orchestration: transform digital channels from mere information into engagement spaces (live sessions, Q&A, alumni forums, highlight peak experiences), including ethical referral mechanisms.
e. Integration of industry partnerships into the public narrative: each industry program needs to produce quotable outcome indicators (number of internships, projects, certifications, job placements) and be published as evidence of value.

CONCLUSION

Word of Mouth has proven to be a key mechanism in transforming strategic capabilities into competitive advantages at PTS Unggul. The limitations of this study lie in the uneven distribution of respondent institutions and the use of questionnaire-based perception data. Further research could expand the scope of institutions, compare non-Unggul PTS, and combine perception data with digital behavior data (e.g., engagement metrics and content sharing) to more robustly test the mechanisms of WoM. In-depth qualitative studies are also recommended to clarify the contexts in which WoM is activated—or not—at specific service points.

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