

Antecedents and Outcomes of Social Commerce Information Sharing in China: From Multi-medium Marketing to Consumer Behaviour

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ABSTRACT

An increase in people's use of social media networking sites has changed their perceptions of communications and marketing. This study investigates the effects of social media and broadcast marketing (BM) of higher education institutions (HEIs) in China on intention to buy (IB) and word-of-mouth (WOM). Given that social media marketing (SMM) has become an emerging topic for study, HEIs are currently shifting towards digital marketing approaches to create intentions amongst people. Furthermore, the concept of social commerce information sharing (SCIS), which is an enhanced version of e-commerce, had been studied to determine how it creates intention among parents and students to opt the particular institution that use SMM and BM for admission. The current study follows the quantitative research method to test the relationship between variables. Data were collected in China using structural equation modelling. Results showed that SMM and BM significantly affects IB and WOM, whereas SCIS significantly mediates the relationship.

Keywords: social media marketing; broadcast marketing; word-of-mouth; behavioural intentions; higher education institutions

INTRODUCTION

Technological advancements and the customer-oriented use of computing technologies have led the shift of higher education institutions (HEIs) towards market-oriented approaches, in which students are considered potential customers and target audience (Pires, 2006). HEIs use social media, instead of traditional marketing methods, as a tool to promote their products and services. The reason is that interactive technology-based communication through social media affects the decision-making process of customers or people (Vela, 2016). In China, social media sites are multifunctional, and their purpose is more enhanced than those of Western countries (Achim, 2021). HEIs face dynamic changes because they are now treating students'

enrolment as consumers availing of their services. Thus, institutions follow large-scale marketing trends (Tomlinson, 2015). Students obtain sophisticated information on HEIs' services through traditional marketing strategies, in which the latter explains they provide better services than their competitors (Gai, 2016). However, the changing higher education environment and HEIs' implementation of marketing strategies to attract and create awareness amongst students have prompted these institutions to find alternative ways to differentiate themselves (Molesworth, 2016). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of social media sites (e.g., Facebook) has led businesses to strengthen their customized services (Liu, 2019). In the lockdown situations that ensued, the use of the Internet and social websites has also increased, thereby leading consumers to obtain information on the services they want (Nowland, 2017). Social media marketing (SMM) is related to the technical aspects of the social commerce process because it enhances people interactions and collaborations through social networking sites (Wang, 2012). Social media plays an important role in HEIs because it helps create psychological engagement and influences impressions by providing two-way communication with consumers compared with traditional marketing approaches, in which information is merely shared. Tools in traditional broadcast marketing (BM), such as radio, television and poster banners, have been used to convey information to consumers but they do not participate actively in the communication (Ashley, 2015). Word-of-mouth (WOM) or information shared on social media sites also affects people's intentions to avail of services. China's demographics does not like traditional marketing approaches, thereby prompting businesses and institutions to develop alternative ways to create consumer engagement (Achim, 2021). Extensive studies have been conducted to determine the impact of social media on student learning and teaching practices (Ngai, 2015; Neier, 2015). However only a few studies have been conducted to determine the effects of HEI social media sites, such as their search engines websites and portals, on students' decision-making explaining that these factors positively affect the behaviour intentions of students. Moreover, how HEIs lead people to engage in the social media sites and create intention amongst them is not evident. Thus, the current study aims to examine the effects of SMM and broadcast marketing (BM) on the intention of people to gain admission to HEIs. Considering this a study was conducted in China on how online content published on Chinese social media platforms help students choose HEIs in other countries (Gai, 2016). The present study fills in the gap related to the effects of Chinese HEIs' SMM on people's intention to gain admission into particular institutions. Moreover, this research intends to present how these marketing forms help create positive word-of-mouth (WOM). Studies have suggested that the social features of applications, such as social media sites, positively affect purchase intention because referrals, recommendations and information of products are shared on social media sites that promote information sharing (Leong, 2017). The current research aims to analyse the effects of SMM and BM on the intention to gain admission and WOM. Furthermore, this study intends to assess how information sharing helps create intention and positive WOM.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

The higher education sector is the most rapidly growing service sector in the world. Currently, revolution in the service sectors have made the related institutions focus substantially on market-driven strategies to remain competitive and ahead of their competitors (Alwi, 2014). The use of marketing strategies is highly common in private businesses owing to their potential benefits. However, these strategies are currently used by HEIs as well to sustain their positions (Vela, 2016). Studies have suggested that HEIs must focus on proactively capitalising on

opportunities in SMM social media marketing. The current study uses the preceding research as basis to examine the effects of SMM and BM on people's intentions. Moreover, the mediating role of information sharing is introduced to determine how it helps create intentions and positive WOM. Theories of reasoned action and planned behaviour are related to understanding human behaviour because they are related to cognition (Ajzen, 1991). Moreover, (Kaplan, 2016) explained that social media is a platform that provides information to users or customers that create intentions amongst them, specifically by encouraging two-way communication.

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

SMM AND INTENTION TO OPT FOR HEIS

Social media consists of integrated parts because it includes communication, interaction and content. The information-sharing revolution of social media had enabled communication because firms can now target numerous customers through the availability of information on social media sites (Smith, 2011). SMM through social applications enables organisations to be substantially connected to customers because ease of communication is created. Social sites' contents on particular institutions or organisations help create customers' intentions. Furthermore, intentions are possibilities that lead customers to purchase products and services in the near future (Kim, 2012). However, studies on HEIs have been conducted to determine how SMM plans of institutions can help in continuing programs or making the decision to join new ones (Melchiorre, 2017). The current study explains that SMM impacts the target audience intentions because they obtain information on HEIs through social media sites. SMM is used by numerous business entities because social media sites have become an integral part of the people's life. Marketing through social media plays an important part in creating awareness amongst the people on products and services they want. (Laksamana, 2018) studied the effect of SMM on the purchase intentions of customers in the Indonesian banking sector and found that it positively affects customer intentions in opting for the services of particular banks. However, a study conducted on the tourism or hotel industry have also found that customer intentions are affected positively because of the SMM approaches used by hotels. Furthermore, students are now treated as customers in higher education, thereby resulting in the use of SMM to manage services and customer relationships (Wali, 2018). Therefore, the preceding studies are used as bases to propose that SMM of HEIs has a positive effect on the intentions of people to seek admission to these institutions. The following hypothesis is formulated:

H1: SMM has a significant influence on the intention to opt for HEI's

SMM AND WOM

SMM tools are particularly used by HEIs to attract potential students and to determine how marketing strategies affect students' decision-making in opting for particular institutions for admission (Boyd, 2008). Given that social media sites enable people to obtain pertinent information on the services or programs they want to choose, these sites affect the behaviour and intentions of users in terms of their applications. The young generation is considerably engaged in the use of social media, thereby making the engagement of HEIs with social media an effective decision (Constantinides, 2014). In SMM, brands use the tools of social media sites to advertise their services and products. Through social media platforms, WOM is also created electronically on the sites because customers share their reviews on products and services (Zhang, 2010). Studies have suggested that WOM generated electronically through SMM is likewise an effective advertising. The Internet has various platforms to share words

digitally through blogs, videos and discussions, amongst others (Cheung, 2012). Moreover, the Internet is taken as a reliable component of marketing to access the intentions of customers, ultimately affecting buying decisions (Daugherty, 2014). In HEIs, WOM involves the sharing of information by students who have previously studied in particular institutions, thereby affecting the intentions of other potential students who want to seek admission. Positive WOM helps to overcome the perceived risk of users because they receive a reliable source of information through social networking sites usage. Studies have also suggested that higher education marketing strategies have an impact on WOM because students' feedback and reviews impact people's decisions (Berger, 2012). According to the preceding literature, SMM of HEIs will create positive WOM because information may be provided to people through social media platforms. Additionally, students sharing their experiences or opinions on studying in particular institutions affect the intentions of potential students. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: SMM has a significant influence on WOM

BM AND INTENTION TO OPT FOR HEIS

BM is related to traditional marketing approaches previously used by marketers compared with social media marketing. Moreover, BM had replaced the traditional marketing campaigns of organizations. Before advancements in social media and technology, the only marketing approach was the traditional one, which was considered time consuming and difficult to adopt by businesses and institutions (Beauchamp, 2013). The reason is that the traditional approach involved only a one-way communication, in which people are informed through such channels as radio, television or print media (e.g., distributing brochures). BM is known as mass marketing because it covers broad audiences at the national and international levels. Moreover, BM is associated with perceived risks because brands or institutions use this mode to persuade customers by advertising the benefits (Cyprus, 2021). Traditional marketing or BM focuses on the four Ps of marketing: price, place, promotion and product. However, SMM introduced a fifth P, in which customer participation is encouraged by welcoming two-way communication through social media sites or marketing (Spiller, 2015). HEIs before the era of technological advancements and huge competition had been relying on broadcast marketing, in which they inform people through television and radio advertisements, which used to have minimal influence on people's intentions. At present, people extensively use social media sites to obtain information on the things they want. On the basis of the preceding literature, this research proposes that BM helps create intentions amongst potential students to seek admission to particular HEIs because the benefits are advertised in electronic medium. These benefits displayed through BM have a positive influence on intentions but have less impact than that of SMM because the former has more content, information and enhanced form of interactions for people (Kaplan, 2016). Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: BM has a significant effect on the intention to opt for HEIs.

BM AND WOM

In broadcast marketing, information is shared to people through the electronic media, in which they have no opportunities to communicate with communicators providing the services or products (Deng, 2018). Additionally, information exchange between recipients and communicators is related only to the delivery of products and services. WOM is important and the optional source of information for consumers. Marketing strategies adopted by organizations will help create good word, in which consumers will share information with other

consumers after having good experiences. In this type of marketing practice, consumers have their self-evaluated contents and experiences they share with other consumers. However, electronic WOM (e-WOM) in SMM is created, thereby providing two-way communication between consumers and organisations providing the services. Through social networking sites, consumers can interact and view the experiences of other consumers (Pookulangara, 2011). In HEIs, the marketing trend is shifting towards social media because of its increasing use amongst the people (Constantinides, 2014). On the basis of the extensive literature, it is proposed that HEIs' BM influences WOM because it involves the self-evaluated experiences of students who have previously studied in such institutions. Hence, the proposed hypothesis is as follows:

H4: BM has a significant effect on WOM.

MEDIATING ROLE OF SOCIAL COMMERCE INFORMATION SHARING SCIS BETWEEN SMM AND INTENTIONS, WOM

Social commerce is a virtual platform through which consumers can obtain information or buy products and services through the tools of social websites. Through social commerce, brands can create value and deliver sustained interactions as well (Stephen, 2010). Social commerce has the potential to create intentions amongst consumers on products and services offered through SMM (Gensler, 2012). Social commerce information sharing (SCIS) creates social support amongst consumers they love or care for because they can exchange information through social media sites. Studies have shown that SCIS generates social support thinking, ultimately affecting people's intentions. The use of social media applications creates a strong SCIS because consumers can obtain valuable information through referrals, ratings and reviews (Nick Hajli, 2017). Studies have explained that social media positively creates a strong SCIS amongst consumers, thereby ultimately affecting intentions. By sharing information through social networking sites, a positive (WOM) is created because consumers share information on social sites about their experiences with products and services, thereby affecting the intentions of other consumers (Tajvidi, 2020). The preceding studies are used as bases to propose SCIS through HEIs' SMM will significantly mediate the relationships between SMM and intentions to opt and WOM. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H5: SCIS significantly mediates the relationship between SMM and intention.

H6: SCIS significantly mediates the relationship between SMM and WOM.

MEDIATING ROLE OF SCIS BETWEEN BM AND INTENTIONS, WOM

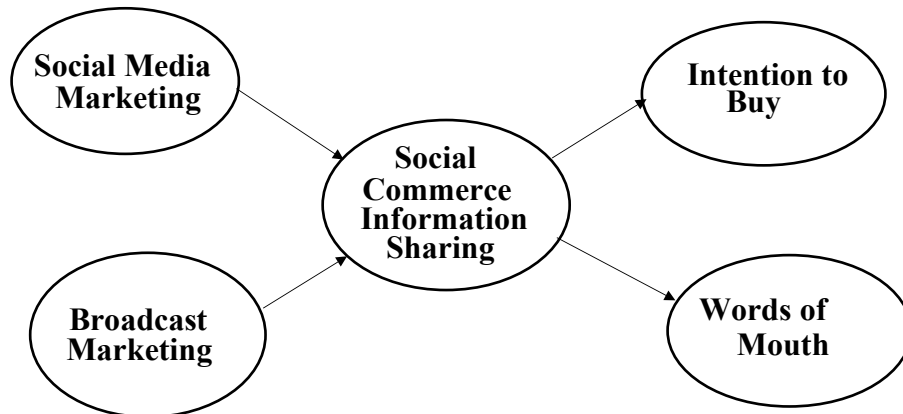
Marketing communication strategies have changed because of the shift in communication patterns. Social media had changed the way consumers obtain information on products and services they want by interacting through social media channels because these channels are considered more effective than the traditional marketing channels (Boateng, 2015). Traditional marketing channels are television and radio broadcasting, in which information is shared with people through these media but with technological advancement and use of the Internet and social media sites. Evidently, traditional media had been changed or revolutionized because it allows customers or consumers to the digital touchpoints through which they can share information and emotions. However, the past studies suggests that information published through traditional communication channels is not as effective as information sharing through social media channels (Kelty, 2012). However, BM is the same as SMM because the main purpose is to create awareness amongst the people. In broadcast marketing, consumers have no platform for interaction and information sharing. SCIS creates intentions and ultimately creates

WOM because it is the main factor in creating intentions amongst consumers (Morra, 2018). On the bases of the preceding studies, the current research proposes that SMM through HEIs' BM significantly mediates the relationships between BM and intentions to opt and WOM. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H7: SCIS significantly mediates the relationship between BM and intentions.

H8: SCIS significantly mediates the relationship between BM and WOM.

FIGURE 1. Conceptual Model



RESEARCH METHOD

To study the effects of SMM and BM on intentions and WOM in opting for HEIs in China, a model is proposed to empirically test the relationship between the variables. Figure 1 shows the conceptual model of this study. Marketing approaches have been used by brands in promoting and creating awareness amongst consumers. However, the current study introduces the role of SCIS in affecting intentions and WOM together with marketing approaches. The proposed model is presented because SMM is currently popular amongst HEIs owing to changes in dynamics (Wali, 2018).

POPULATION AND SAMPLING

The current study follows the explanatory research design with a cross-sectional time horizon to collect data from the respondents. The target population was selected to empirically test the relationship between the variables. By following the purposive sampling technique, respondents in China were selected to collect data on those who want to seek admission into HEIs. The minimum sample size selected was 300 following the method of Joseph F. Hair (2010), thereby enabling the application of structural equation modelling (SEM).

DATA COLLECTION AND INSTRUMENTATION

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of 22 items. The questionnaire was designed by adapting the scales of previous studies. Given that the questions were closed ended, the responses were measured using a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 Strongly agree to 5 Strongly disagree. This study includes the SCIS construct to measure using a scale consisting of four items adapted from (Nick Hajli, 2017; Liang, 2011). The SMM scale was measured based on (Hajli, 2014). For BM, a scale consisting of five items was adapted from (Morra,

2018; Yoo, 2000). WOM was measured by adopting the three-item scale of (Yia, 2013). Lastly, the intentions of consumers scale, which consists of three items, was adapted from (Bugshan, 2020).

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was conducted by applying statistical techniques via SPSS and AMOS. The following analysis was performed using SPSS to check the accuracy of the questionnaire. However descriptive analysis is performed in which descriptive statistics including mean, standard deviation is calculated. AMOS was used to conduct a model fitness test. Confirmatory factor analysis was performed, in which the convergent and discriminant validities are measured for hypotheses testing. Partial least square and SEM is used to check the relationship.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed to collect data from the respondents in China, specifically to determine how SMM and BM affect the intentions of people to seek admission into HEIs. Out of the 500 questionnaires, 464 valid responses were received. Table 1 contains the relevant information.

TABLE 1. Profile

		Frequencies	Percentages
Gender	Male	257	55.4
	Female	207	44.6
	Total	464	100.0
Age	Below 25 years	148	31.9
	25 to 35 years	199	42.9
	35 to 45 years	100	21.6
	Above 45 years	17	3.7
	Total	464	100.0
Qualification	High school diploma	78	16.8
	Bachelor's degree	205	44.2
	Master's degree	139	30.0
	Others	42	9.1
	Total	464	100.0
Income	Below 10000 CNY	36	7.8
	10001 to 20000 CNY	113	24.4
	20001 to 30000 CNY	128	27.6
	Above 30000 CNY	187	40.3
	Total	464	100.0

Table 1 is related to the results of the demographic profile of the respondents, in which 464 responses were received (55% males, 44% females). For the age profile, 31% of the respondents were <25 years, 42% from 25 to 35 years and 21% from 35 to 45 years. Table 1 also presents the qualification and income levels.

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Table 2 shows the results of the descriptive statistics of the variables. All minimum and maximum values against the variables depict no missing value or outlier because the values are within 1.00 and 5.00, respectively. Moreover, data are normally distributed because the mean values of SMM, BM, WOM, SCIS and IB are in the threshold range. However, data are skewed because the values are within +1 and -1.

TABLE 2. Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error
SocialMM	4641.00		5.00	3.1478	1.10179	-0.187	0.113
BroadcastMM	4641.00		5.00	3.2881	0.97194	-0.335	0.113
SocialCIS	4641.00		5.00	3.4213	1.16115	-0.384	0.113
IntenToBuy	4641.00		5.00	3.3103	1.17680	-0.347	0.113
PostWOM	4641.00		5.00	3.4461	1.18343	-0.322	0.113

LOADINGS AND CONVERGENT VALIDITY

Table 3 shows the results of the factor loadings and that there is no issue with the cross-loadings amongst the variable components of SMM, BM, WOM, SCIS and IB because they are strongly associated with one another. The components of the variable are highly correlated with the other variables because the values of the loading against each variable are above 0.7. Thus, the data are accurate and valid.

TABLE 3. Loading and Convergent Validities

Items	Loadings	CR	AVE	MSV
SMM1	0.890	0.933	0.735	0.311
SMM2	0.851			
SMM3	0.850			
SMM4	0.848			
SMM5	0.846			
BMM1	0.802	0.908	0.623	0.300
BMM2	0.670			
BMM3	0.746			
BMM4	0.833			
BMM5	0.840			
BMM6	0.832			
SCIS1	0.845	0.912	0.723	0.294
SCIS2	0.815			
SCIS3	0.826			
SCIS4	0.912			
ITB1	0.870	0.918	0.737	0.311
ITB2	0.883			
ITB3	0.846			
ITB4	0.833			
WOM1	0.798	0.876	0.702	0.300
WOM2	0.857			
WOM3	0.858			

Table 3 also presents the results of the convergent validity, in which the association between the constructs is measured as either correlated with one another or not because convergent validity is depicted through average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR). The results show that all values of AVE and CR are within the threshold range of >0.7 and below 0.5. Hence, there is no issue of convergent validity.

RELIABILITY AND DISCRIMINANT VALIDITY

To check the reliability and discriminant validity of the data against SMM, BMM, WOM, SCIS and IB, Table 4 presents that the data against each variable are reliable because Cronbach's alpha is above 0.7. However, there is no issue of discriminant validity against the variables because the values are $>$ or $=$ to 0.7.

TABLE 4. Reliability and Discriminant Validity

	Cronbac Alpha	ITB	SMM	BMM	SCIS	WOM
ITB	0.918	0.858				
SMM	0.933	0.558	0.857			
BMM	0.906	0.497	0.499	0.790		
SCIS	0.911	0.542	0.460	0.421	0.850	
WOM	0.875	0.444	0.534	0.548	0.478	0.838

MODEL FITNESS

The fitness of the current model contains SMM and BMM as independent variables and WOM and IB as dependent variables. SCIS as a mediator is checked through CFA and model fitness. Figure 2 illustrates the CFA. Meanwhile, table 5 shows that all five indicators of CFA for model fitness have acceptable values: $CMIN/DF < 3$, $GFI \geq 0.80$, $IFI \geq 0.90$, $CFI \geq 0.90$ and $RMSEA \leq 0.08$. Hence, the proposed model is a good fit.

TABLE 5. Model Fit Indices

CFA Indicators	CMIN/DF	GFI	IFI	CFI	RMSEA
Threshold Values	≤ 3	≥ 0.80	≥ 0.90	≥ 0.90	≤ 0.08
Observed Values	2.574	0.907	0.960	0.960	0.058

FIGURE 2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

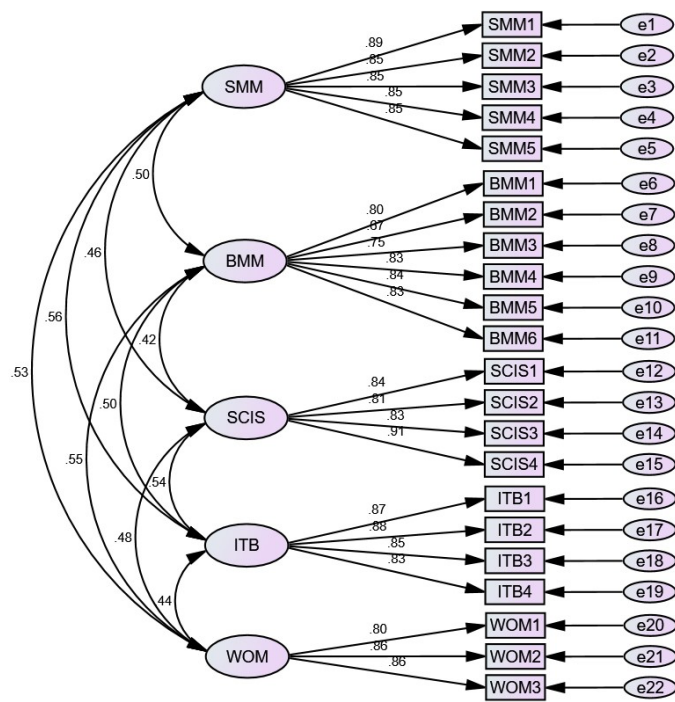


Table 6 shows the results of the hypothesis testing to check the hypotheses. The results showed that SMM has a positive influence on IB and significant influence on WOM because the p-values > 0.05 . In testing the relationship between BMM and IB and WOM, the results are significant because the p-values > 0.05 . However, the direct effects of SMM and BMM on SCIS is also significant.

TABLE 6. Structural Equation Modelling

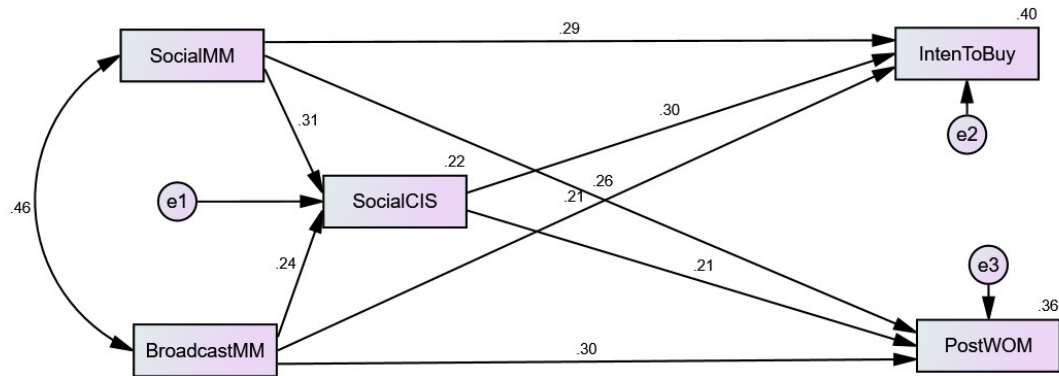
	Paths	Estimates	SE	CR	P
SocialCIS	<--- SocialMM	0.311	0.049	6.724	***
SocialCIS	<--- BroadcastMM	0.235	0.055	5.086	***
IntenToBuy	<--- SocialMM	0.290	0.045	6.830	***
PostWOM	<--- SocialMM	0.258	0.047	5.881	***
IntenToBuy	<--- BroadcastMM	0.214	0.050	5.133	***
PostWOM	<--- BroadcastMM	0.297	0.052	6.889	***
IntenToBuy	<--- SocialCIS	0.300	0.041	7.350	***
PostWOM	<--- SocialCIS	0.205	0.043	4.870	***

Table 7 shows the indirect effects of SCIS between the dependent and independent variables. For the indirect effect of SCIS for SMM→SCIS→ITB and SMM→SCIS→WOM, the results show that SCIS significantly mediates the relationship because the p-values are > 0.05 . For BMM→SCIS→ITB and BMM→SCIS→WOM, the results are significant, showing that SCIS significantly mediates the relationship between the respective variables. Figure 3 illustrates the SEM.

TABLE 7. Indirect Effects

Hypotheses	B-values	SE	P-values
SMM→SCIS→ITB	0.093	0.019	0.010
SMM→SCIS→WOM	0.064	0.015	0.010
BMM→SCIS→ITB	0.070	0.020	0.010
BMM→SCIS→WOM	0.048	0.014	0.010

FIGURE 3. Standard Error of the Measurement



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The current study examines the influence of SMM and BM on BI and WOM along with the mediation of SCIS. The hypotheses were tested by collecting data from respondents in China. In response to H1 and H2, Table 6 shows that SMM has a significant influence on people's intentions to opt for HEIs for seeking admissions. The reason is that marketing in social media sites enhances communication, thereby creating WOM and IB amongst the people. Thus, H1 and H2 are supported, and the results are consistent with (Kaplan, 2016; Wali, 2018; Kaplan, 2016). However, in response to H3 and H4, the results show that BM has a significant influence on BI and WOM. The reason is traditional marketing information is conveyed to consumers that create intentions and WOM; the results of the study are supported by (Beauchamp, 2013; Morra, 2018). Hence, H3 and H4 is supported. In response to H5 and H6 in terms of examining the mediating effects of SCIS between SMM → IB and SMM → WOM, the results suggest that it significantly mediates the relationship amongst the variables. Given that different studies have supported that SCIS positively affects BI and creates WOM (Gensler, 2012; Nick Hajli, 2017), H5 and H6 are supported. However, the indirect effects also revealed that SCIS significantly mediates the relationship between BM → IB and BM → WOM. Hence, H7 and H8 are supported. That is, information sharing through traditional marketing enhances BI and creates WOM.

IMPLICATION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study has theoretical and practical implication because it will help HEIs in China to work on SMM and BMM because students who gain admission in these institutions are treated as customers. Theoretically, the current study provides insights into the integration of the marketing approaches or communication channels, such as social media sites and their importance in the education sector. This study will help policymakers devise marketing

strategies for HEIs. The limitations in this study will help guide future researchers to conduct follow up studies in future. Firstly, this study used the cross-sectional time horizon, although longitudinal design can be chosen to know the before and after effects. Secondly, all HEIs in China were considered, although comparative studies can be conducted between public and private institutions. Lastly, this research was conducted in the education sector, though other sectors can be selected in future.

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