



Social Media Marketing and Brand Experience Effects on Streaming Subscription Intentions: The Moderating Role of Electronic Word-of-Mouth Among University Students

Alfina Tiurmida Sitanggang*, Darwin Lie, and Robert Tua Siregar

Faculty of Economics, Universitas Prima Indonesia, Medan, Indonesia

*alfinatiumidasitanggang@unprimdn.ac.id, darwinlie@unprimdn.ac.id,
roberttuasiregar@unprimdn.ac.id

Abstract. This study examined the influence of Social Media Marketing (SMM) and Brand Experience (BE) on Subscription Intention (SI) for streaming services, with Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) as a moderating variable. Grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) frameworks, the research employed a quantitative, cross-sectional design with a census sampling of 150 undergraduate students at Universitas Prima Indonesia (UNPRI) PSDKU Pekanbaru. Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS–SEM) via SmartPLS 4, following established reliability, validity, and model-fit assessments. The results indicated that SMM had a significant positive effect on SI ($\beta = 0.293, p < 0.001$), whereas BE showed a positive but non-significant effect ($\beta = 0.170, p = 0.065$). eWOM negatively moderated the SMM–SI relationship ($\beta = -0.167, p = 0.010$), suggesting that excessive or low-quality peer content reduced marketing effectiveness. In contrast, eWOM positively moderated the BE–SI relationship ($\beta = 0.128, p = 0.029$), demonstrating that credible peer endorsements strengthened the influence of brand experiences on subscription decisions. The model explained 77.9% of SI variance, reflecting substantial predictive power. This research contributed to digital marketing literature by identifying the dual moderating role of eWOM, highlighting how peer communication can both dampen and enhance marketing effects depending on content quality. Practically, the findings suggested that streaming service providers should integrate curated eWOM strategies with immersive brand experiences to increase subscription retention and growth.

Keywords: Social Media Marketing, Brand Experience, Electronic Word-of-Mouth, Subscription Intention, Digital Marketing Strategy

1 Introduction

In the era of pervasive digitalization, subscription-based streaming platforms such as Netflix, Spotify, and YouTube Premium have transitioned from niche entertainment services to indispensable lifestyle components for young consumers.

This shift has been accelerated by the growing sophistication of Social Media Marketing (SMM) and Brand Experience (BE) strategies, which shape how consumers discover, evaluate, and commit to subscription services. Globally, streaming platforms have leveraged digital campaigns, interactive content, and personalized brand touchpoints to enhance customer engagement, strengthen emotional attachment, and reduce churn rates [1–3].

SMM serves as a critical driver in this transformation by enabling brands to engage in two-way communication, deliver high-quality multimedia content, and mobilize peer influence through influencer collaborations. These strategies not only increase visibility but also improve perceived value and trust, which are essential precursors to behavioral intention [4,5]. The agility of SMM during crises—such as the COVID-19 pandemic—demonstrated its resilience in sustaining market presence despite rapid shifts in consumer behavior.

Complementing SMM, BE encompasses sensory, affective, behavioral, and intellectual dimensions that shape consumer attitudes, loyalty, and repurchase behaviors [6,7]. For subscription platforms, memorable and seamless user experiences are vital for maintaining brand salience in a competitive market. Recent evidence indicates that immersive experiences, such as exclusive content drops, personalized playlists, and gamified user interfaces, can significantly elevate engagement levels [8,9].

However, in the peer-dominated digital environment, Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) has emerged as a potent moderating mechanism that can amplify—or undermine—the effects of marketing activities. High-quality, credible eWOM has been shown to boost trust transfer, increase message relatability, and reinforce brand credibility [10,11]. Conversely, negative or excessive peer-generated content can dilute campaign effectiveness and erode consumer confidence [12]. For digital-native university students, who are simultaneously content creators and consumers, peer recommendations often carry greater persuasive power than official brand messaging.

Despite extensive research on SMM, BE, and eWOM as independent constructs, the moderating role of eWOM—particularly in the context of Indonesian higher education—remains underexplored. This gap is significant given the demographic's high social media penetration, pronounced susceptibility to peer influence, and distinct consumption patterns shaped by cultural and economic contexts. Furthermore, recent Indonesian studies have primarily examined direct relationships between marketing constructs and behavioral intentions, neglecting the nuanced role of moderation [13,25].

This study addresses the gap by examining the direct effects of SMM and BE on Subscription Intention (SI) and the moderating role of eWOM within the Indonesian university student market. It employs a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design with a census sampling approach targeting 150 active undergraduate students at Universitas Prima Indonesia (UNPRI) PSDKU Pekanbaru. Data were collected via a structured questionnaire and analyzed using Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4, chosen for its predictive capability and robustness in handling complex models with non-

normal data [15]. While this approach ensures strong explanatory power, it assumes measurement stability and does not capture longitudinal behavioral shifts—a methodological limitation acknowledged in this study.

The novelty of this research lies in integrating TPB and SOR frameworks to explain how eWOM exerts dual moderating effects, potentially strengthening BE's influence while weakening SMM's impact under certain conditions. This dual role offers a fresh theoretical contribution to digital marketing literature and provides practical guidance for subscription-based platforms in optimizing peer influence dynamics.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Social Media Marketing and Subscription Intention

Research on Social Media Marketing (SMM) has increasingly highlighted its role in shaping consumer decision-making for subscription-based digital services. Grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) [16], SMM shapes attitudes through positive brand perceptions, reinforces subjective norms via peer influence in online communities, and enhances perceived behavioral control through interactive, personalized features. This makes TPB a strong framework for examining SMM's influence on subscription intention.

The Relationship Marketing Theory (RMT) [17] adds a relational perspective, emphasizing trust, commitment, and customer satisfaction. SMM facilitates ongoing interaction, co-creation of value, and community-based loyalty, supporting both acquisition and retention strategies.

Empirical studies show that SMM activities—such as interactive content, influencer collaborations, and targeted campaigns—positively affect subscription intention, often indirectly via social identification and satisfaction [1, 18]. Content quality and interactivity strengthen brand affinity, while credible influencers enhance message resonance [3, 19]. Positive social influence on platforms can also increase tolerance toward advertising when paired with promotions [20].

SMM's adaptability during crises, including COVID-19, further underscores its strategic value. However, most prior studies focus on direct effects, overlooking moderators like Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM), and often neglect the Indonesian university context, where digital nativity and peer influence are highly relevant. In this study, SMM is viewed as operating through dual pathways: directly via content and influencer engagement, and indirectly through social identification and satisfaction. This aligns with TPB and RMT while extending prior work by testing eWOM as a moderator in an emerging market setting.

H1: Social Media Marketing has a positive effect on Subscription Intention.

2.2 Brand Experience and Subscription Intention

Brand Experience (BE) is a multidimensional construct that includes sensory, affective, behavioral, and intellectual dimensions that shape consumer attitudes,

preferences, and loyalty. According to Relationship Marketing Theory (RMT), BE acts as a direct driver and indirect mediator of subscription intention through the formation of trust, satisfaction, and loyalty.

A number of studies show that a positive brand experience drives brand preference and emotional attachment (brand love), which increases consumers' chances of re-subscribing [6, 8, 21]. In the digital ecosystem, community-based brand experiences strengthen commitment even though the direct influence on purchase intent varies [20]. In a subscription-based business model, unique experience design can shift consumer perceptions from utilitarian to hedonic value, thereby increasing subscription motivation [9].

The quality of the brand experience is also affected by the consistency of interactions across various touchpoints. Recent studies emphasize the importance of immersive experience design to differentiate services in competitive markets [8]. However, most of the research has focused on direct influence and has not tested the role of moderators such as eWOM, especially in the context of Indonesian students who have high digital exposure and strong peer-to-peer influence. Thus, this study expands the literature by testing BE not only as a direct driver of subscription intention, but also in the framework of eWOM moderation, which is theoretically relevant for RMT and TPB.

H2: Brand Experience has a positive effect on Subscription Intention.

2.3 The Moderating Role of Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) in the Relationship between Social Media Marketing and Subscription Intention

The Information Adoption Model (IAM) [22] posits that individuals adopt information when it is perceived as useful and credible. In the Social Media Marketing (SMM) context, Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) enhances these perceptions by providing peer-generated content that often carries more authenticity than brand-generated messages.

From the Trust Transfer Theory (TTT) perspective, trust established through a credible intermediary—such as peer reviews or influencers—can be transferred to the brand. Here, eWOM serves as a trust conduit, enabling peer credibility to reinforce brand trust and, in turn, increase subscription intention.

Empirical evidence indicates that eWOM can strengthen the SMM–subscription intention link by boosting message credibility, fostering emotional engagement, and facilitating information adoption. Studies show that high-quality, trustworthy eWOM significantly increases the persuasive impact of SMM [11, 23], while peer-sourced content often outperforms brand-originated communications in building trust [24].

Emotional mechanisms are equally important: positive brand experiences can lead to brand love, encouraging consumers to actively generate favorable eWOM [25, 26]. The interactive nature of social media further magnifies this effect by expanding eWOM's reach and engagement potential [12, 27]. In synthesis, from the IAM viewpoint, eWOM increases the perceived usefulness and credibility of SMM communications, while from the TTT perspective, it enables the transfer of

trust from peers to the brand. Together, these mechanisms underscore eWOM's moderating role in enhancing the effectiveness of SMM on subscription behavior.

H3: Electronic Word-of-Mouth strengthens the effect of Social Media Marketing on Subscription Intention.

2.4 Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) as a Moderator between Brand Experience and Subscription Intention

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) [16] posits that behavioral intention is determined by attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. A positive brand experience (BE)—through sensory, affective, behavioral, and intellectual interactions—shapes favorable attitudes toward a brand. In this framework, Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) reinforces subjective norms by offering social validation via consumer reviews and recommendations, while enhancing perceived control through credible, relevant information—thereby strengthening subscription intention.

From the Trust Transfer Theory (TTT) perspective [28], trust can be transferred from a credible source to a brand through strong association. Here, positive BE establishes initial brand trust, while credible eWOM amplifies and extends that trust. The synergy between an engaging BE and supportive eWOM enhances the likelihood of subscription.

Empirical studies consistently indicate that positive eWOM improves brand image, trust, and attitudinal favorability, magnifying the effects of BE on subscription and loyalty [25, 29, 30]. Research also shows that eWOM participation combined with satisfying BE fosters stronger digital loyalty [31, 32]. Moreover, eWOM can act as a mediator influencing brand image, which in turn impacts subscription decisions [30]. Trust has been identified as a critical pathway linking eWOM and BE to subscription intention [13, 33].

The emotional dimension is equally important. Positive BE can generate brand love, and eWOM can intensify this bond, driving loyalty and subscription intention [34, 35]. In the digital environment, social media amplifies this effect by expanding the reach and influence of eWOM [25, 26]. In summary, eWOM strengthens the BE–subscription intention relationship through three main mechanisms. The integration of positive BE with credible eWOM generates a synergistic effect that significantly boosts subscription likelihood.

H4: Electronic Word-of-Mouth moderates the effect of Brand Experience on Subscription Intention, such that the effect is stronger when positive eWOM is higher.

3 Methods

3.1 Research Design

We employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationships between the proposed constructs. Partial Least Squares structural

equation modeling (PLS-SEM) via SmartPLS 4 was selected because of its prediction orientation, ability to handle complex models, and robustness to non-normal data distributions [15].

3.2 Population, Sampling, and Participants

The study population consisted of 150 active undergraduate students enrolled in Universitas Prima Indonesia (UNPRI) PSDKU Pekanbaru in the 2024/2025 academic year. Using a census sampling approach, all population members were included in the sample, eliminating sampling errors and maximizing statistical power.

3.3 Instruments and Measurement

Data were collected via a structured, self-administered questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). The items were adapted from validated scales in prior studies and contextualized through expert reviews. The questionnaire consisted of the following questions:

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data were gathered online over two weeks via institutional email and official student group channels, ensuring anonymity and voluntary participation. Common Method Bias (CMB) was mitigated through procedural remedies—randomized item ordering, neutral wording, and construct section separation—and statistical checks, including full collinearity VIF (< 3.3) and Harman's single-factor test.

3.5 Data Analysis

Following [15], the analysis proceeded in two stages:

Measurement Model Assessment – indicator reliability (outer loadings ≥ 0.70), internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha, CR = 0.70–0.95), convergent validity (AVE ≥ 0.50), discriminant validity (HTMT < 0.85), and collinearity (VIF < 3.0).

Structural Model Assessment – collinearity diagnostics, path coefficients, bootstrapping (5,000 resamples, $\alpha = 0.05$), explanatory power (R^2), effect sizes (f^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), and model fit (SRMR < 0.08).

4 Results

4.1 Respondent Characteristics

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the 150 respondents, all of whom were active undergraduate students at Universitas Prima Indonesia (UNPRI)

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	57	38.0
	Female	93	62.0
Age	18–20 years	47	31.3
	21–23 years	78	52.0
	> 23 years	25	16.7
Subscription	Currently subscribed	102	68.0
Experience	Never subscribed	48	32.0

PSDKU Pekanbaru during the 2024/2025 academic year. The sample composition closely reflects the actual student population, ensuring representativeness and supporting the validity of inferences drawn from the analysis.

The majority of respondents were female (62.0%), a distribution consistent with institutional enrollment data, where business-related programs often attract higher female participation [36]. This is noteworthy, as prior studies suggest gender differences in digital platform engagement and social media responsiveness [37].

Most respondents (52.0%) were in the 21–23 years age group, representing a digitally active segment highly engaged with streaming services. Importantly, 68.0% of respondents reported active subscriptions, providing a robust base for analyzing behavioral intention drivers. This demographic composition not only ensures adequate variation for hypothesis testing but also offers insights into how age, gender, and subscription status may interact with marketing and brand experience constructs in shaping subscription decisions.

4.2 Measurement Model Analysis – Outer Loadings

Figure 1 and Table 2 presents the outer loading values for all measurement items. Results confirmed high indicator reliability, with all loadings exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 [15].

For Brand Experience (BE), loadings ranged from 0.883 to 0.909, indicating strong convergent validity and consistent measurement across its five indicators (BE1–BE5). Subscription Intention (SI) showed loadings between 0.862 and 0.920, confirming that each item contributed substantially to the construct.

The construct Social Media Marketing (SMM) recorded loadings from 0.820 to 0.915, reflecting satisfactory indicator reliability. Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) items scored between 0.862 and 0.925, all above the minimum criterion, confirming measurement precision. For the moderating interaction terms, both eWOM × BE and eWOM × SMM displayed perfect loadings of 1.000. This is an expected statistical outcome when applying the product indicator approach in SmartPLS, as the interaction construct is fully represented by the computed product term.

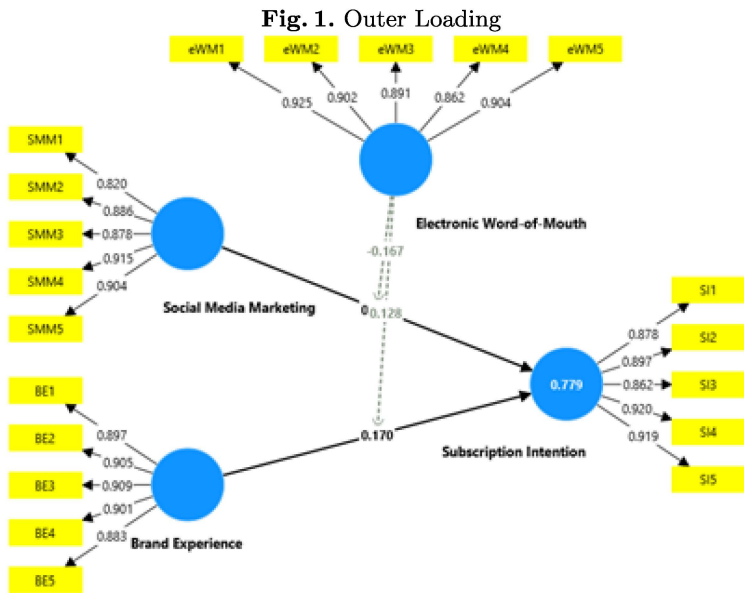


Table 2. Outer Loadings

Indicator × SMM × BE	BE eWOM	eWOM	SMM	SI	eWOM
BE1	0.897				
BE2	0.905				
BE3	0.909				
BE4	0.901				
BE5	0.883				
SI1				0.878	
SI2				0.897	
SI3				0.862	
SI4				0.920	
SI5				0.919	
SMM1			0.820		
SMM2			0.886		
SMM3			0.878		
SMM4			0.915		
SMM5			0.904		
eWOM1		0.925			
eWOM2		0.902			
eWOM3		0.891			
eWOM4		0.862			
eWOM5		0.904			
eWOM × BE					1.000
eWOM × SMM					1.000

4.3 Construct Reliability and Validity Analysis

Table 3 summarizes the construct reliability and convergent validity results for the four latent variables: Brand Experience (BE), Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM), Social Media Marketing (SMM), and Subscription Intention (SI).

All constructs demonstrated high internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alpha (α) values ranging from 0.928 to 0.941, exceeding the minimum criterion of 0.70 [15]. This indicates that the indicators for each construct measured their intended latent variables consistently. Composite Reliability (ρ_c) values varied between 0.946 and 0.955, well above the recommended lower limit of 0.70 and below the upper limit of 0.95, confirming strong reliability without redundancy among indicators. Similarly, ρ_A values (0.928–0.941) were aligned with Cronbach’s alpha results, further reinforcing the reliability findings.

The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.777 to 0.808, exceeding the benchmark of 0.50. This indicates that each construct explained at least 77% of the variance in its measurement indicators, fulfilling the convergent validity requirement.

Table 3. Construct Reliability and Validity

Construct α Reliability (ρ_c)	Cronbach's ρ_{ho_A} AVE	Composite			
Brand Experience (BE)	0.941	0.941	0.955	0.808	
Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)	0.939	0.941	0.954	0.805	
Social Media Marketing (SMM)	0.928	0.928	0.946	0.777	
Subscription Intention (SI)	0.938	0.940	0.953	0.802	

4.4 Discriminant Validity

The discriminant validity shown in Table 4 of the measurement model was assessed using the Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio (HTMT). According to established guidelines, discriminant validity is confirmed when HTMT values remain below 0.85 (conservative threshold) or 0.90 (liberal threshold). The results indicate that all primary constructs—Brand Experience (BE), Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM), Social Media Marketing (SMM), and Subscription Intention (SI)—exhibited HTMT values below 0.90, thus meeting the criterion for adequate discriminant validity. Notably, the BE–eWOM (HTMT = 0.874) and BE–SMM (HTMT = 0.857) relationships approached the liberal threshold yet remained within acceptable limits, while eWOM–SI (HTMT = 0.886) also fell within the permissible range. The remaining main construct pairs recorded lower HTMT values, ranging from 0.743 to 0.862, supporting their empirical distinctiveness.

The model fit analysis in Table 5 confirms that the proposed measurement and structural models meet established PLS-SEM criteria [15]. The Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) value for both the saturated and estimated models was 0.044, well below the maximum threshold of 0.08, indicating an excellent overall fit with minimal discrepancies between observed and predicted correlations. The discrepancy measures were also low, with d.ULS values of 0.415 (saturated) and 0.412 (estimated) and d.G values of 0.451 and 0.449,

Table 4. Discriminant Validity

Construct SMM BE	BE eWOM ×	eWOM	SMM	SI	eWOM ×	
Brand Experience (BE)	0.899					
Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)	0.874	0.898				
Social Media Marketing (SMM)	0.857	0.743	0.882			
Subscription Intention (SI)	0.862	0.866	0.804	0.896		
eWOM × SMM	0.269	0.158	0.129	0.258	0.836	
eWOM × BE	0.321	0.188	0.267	0.258	0.286	0.836

respectively, suggesting only minor deviations between the empirical and model-implied correlation matrices. Furthermore, the Chi-square values for the saturated (386.315) and estimated (382.656) models were highly similar, reflecting stability and consistency in model specification despite the statistic’s sensitivity to sample size. The Normed Fit Index (NFI) scores were 0.885 for the saturated model and 0.886 for the estimated model, approaching the conventional threshold of 0.90 and considered acceptable in the context of PLS-SEM, particularly when paired with the low SRMR values. Collectively, these results demonstrate that the model achieves a strong global fit, providing a solid statistical foundation for advancing to structural path analysis and hypothesis testing.

Table 5. Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Saturated Model	Estimated Model
SRMR	0.044	0.044
d_{ULS}	0.415	0.412
d_G	0.451	0.449
Chi-square	386.315	382.656
NFI	0.885	0.886

The coefficient of determination (R^2) from Table 6 shows that the Subscription Intention (SI) construct achieved an R^2 value of 0.779 and an adjusted R^2 of 0.772. In line with the guidelines of [15], R^2 values of 0.75, 0.50, and 0.25 are categorized as substantial, moderate, and weak predictive accuracy, respectively. Thus, the observed R^2 value reflects substantial explanatory power, showing that the exogenous constructs collectively account for approximately 77.9% of the variance in subscription intention. The minimal difference of 0.007 between R^2 and adjusted R^2 confirms that the model is not overfitted, and its explanatory strength remains stable after adjusting for the number of predictors. This high level of explained variance highlights that Brand Experience (BE), Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM), Social Media Marketing (SMM), and the relevant interaction effects serve as strong predictors of subscription intention within the study’s context. These findings reinforce the robustness and validity of the proposed model, supporting its relevance for both theoretical advancement

and practical implementation in strategic marketing for subscription-based services.

Table 6. R Square

Construct	R^2	Adjusted R^2
Subscription Intention	0.779	0.772

The structural model analysis results Table 7 reveal the standardized path coefficients (β), standard errors, t -statistics, and p -values for all hypothesized relationships, evaluated through a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples in line with [15].

First, Social Media Marketing (SMM) $\rightarrow$ Subscription Intention (SI) shows a positive and statistically significant effect ($\beta = 0.293$, $t = 3.613$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that greater SMM activity is associated with higher subscription intention. This finding reinforces prior evidence that strategic digital engagement effectively strengthens customer commitment [38].

Second, Brand Experience (BE) $\rightarrow$ Subscription Intention (SI) records a positive but non-significant effect ($\beta = 0.170$, $t = 1.516$, $p = 0.065$). While the coefficient suggests a positive trend, it does not reach the 5% significance threshold, implying that brand experience alone may be insufficient to drive subscription intention without reinforcing factors such as trust or peer influence.

Regarding moderation effects, Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) $\times$ SMM $\rightarrow$ SI is negative and statistically significant ($\beta = -0.167$, $t = 2.329$, $p = 0.010$), suggesting that high levels of eWOM may weaken the positive influence of SMM. A plausible explanation is that excessive or low-quality user-generated content can dilute campaign effectiveness [12].

Conversely, eWOM $\times$ BE $\rightarrow$ SI is positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.128$, $t = 1.895$, $p = 0.029$), indicating that positive eWOM amplifies the effect of brand experience on subscription intention. This aligns with the notion that credible peer-to-peer communication can magnify the impact of experiential brand interactions, fostering stronger subscription behavior.

Table 7. Path Coefficients

Path	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	STDEV	t-stat.	p-value
Social Media Marketing $\rightarrow$ Subscription Intention	0.283	0.304	0.081	3.613	0.000
Brand Experience $\rightarrow$ Subscription Intention	0.170	0.157	0.112	1.516	0.068
Electronic Word-of-Mouth $\times$ Social Media Marketing $\rightarrow$ Subscription Intention	-0.167	-0.146	0.072	2.329	0.010
Electronic Word-of-Mouth $\times$ Brand Experience $\rightarrow$ Subscription Intention	0.128	0.111	0.068	1.895	0.029

5 Discussion

The positive and significant influence of Social Media Marketing (SMM) on Subscription Intention confirms its role as both a persuasive and relational driver in subscription-based digital services. Grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) [16], this finding indicates that well-executed SMM strategies shape favorable attitudes, reinforce subjective norms through social proof, and enhance perceived behavioral control by simplifying access to services via interactive features. In practice, this means that engaging, brand-consistent campaigns and community-driven interactions can directly stimulate higher subscription likelihood. From a Relationship Marketing Theory (RMT) [17] perspective, SMM also serves as a trust- and loyalty-building mechanism, with influencer collaborations, value co-creation, and interactive content deepening long-term consumer engagement. This reinforces prior work [1, 18] showing that quality content and credible endorsements are essential for both acquisition and retention strategies.

The non-significant effect of Brand Experience on Subscription Intention highlights a boundary condition in its direct influence. Although richer brand experiences theoretically enhance loyalty [6, 7], the absence of statistical significance suggests that brand experience may require reinforcement from trust, satisfaction, or peer influence before translating into subscription commitment. This aligns with studies showing that its impact is often indirect, mediated by other relational constructs or by transforming utilitarian perceptions into hedonic enjoyment [9]. A possible explanation is that, in this context, brand experiences were not sufficiently differentiated or emotionally resonant to compel immediate action.

The negative moderation effect of eWOM on the SMM–Subscription Intention relationship represents an important and unexpected finding. Contrary to the predictions of Information Adoption Model (IAM) [22] and Trust Transfer Theory (TTT) [17], high levels of eWOM appeared to dilute rather than enhance SMM's impact. This suggests that excessive, low-quality, or negative user-generated content can overshadow marketing messages, introduce skepticism, and reduce persuasive power—an effect consistent with [12, 23]. This finding underscores the critical need for active monitoring and strategic management of eWOM, ensuring alignment with brand positioning to prevent reputational erosion.

Conversely, the positive moderation effect of eWOM on the Brand Experience–Subscription Intention link affirms the synergistic value of combining experiential engagement with credible peer validation. From a TPB perspective, eWOM strengthens subjective norms by providing social proof, while from a TTT perspective, it transfers and reinforces trust generated by positive brand experiences. Prior studies [30, 31] support this, showing that supportive peer communication amplifies emotional bonds (brand love), strengthens loyalty, and encourages ongoing subscription. In digital ecosystems, the interactive nature of social media extends eWOM's reach, enabling positive experiences to influence a wider audience and deepen trust-based relationships.

Taken together, these findings contribute to the literature by clarifying that eWOM's role is contingent—not universally positive—and that its effects differ depending on whether it interacts with marketing-driven content or experience-based brand value. For practitioners, the results highlight the dual necessity of designing high-quality brand experiences and curating peer-generated content to optimize subscription outcomes. Future research should investigate the threshold at which eWOM shifts from being an enhancer to a detractor, as well as the interaction between emotional engagement and information credibility across different digital service contexts.

6 Conclusion

The primary objective of this study was to examine the effects of Social Media Marketing (SMM), Brand Experience, and the moderating role of Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) on Subscription Intention within a digital subscription service context. The analysis revealed three key findings: (1) SMM exerts a strong and significant direct effect on subscription intention, confirming its role as both a persuasive communication channel and a relationship-building mechanism; (2) Brand Experience shows a positive but non-significant direct effect, suggesting that experiential value alone is insufficient to drive subscription without reinforcing factors such as trust and social influence; and (3) eWOM plays a dual moderating role—weakening the impact of SMM when dominated by excessive or negative peer content, but strengthening the Brand Experience–subscription intention link when peer messages are credible and positive.

From a theoretical perspective, these results extend the Theory of Planned Behavior and Trust Transfer Theory by identifying boundary conditions under which eWOM operates as either an enhancer or inhibitor of marketing effectiveness. From a practical standpoint, subscription-based service providers should integrate engaging brand experiences with curated, high-quality eWOM strategies while actively monitoring peer-generated content to prevent brand message dilution.

7 Limitation

It is acknowledged that this study has certain limitations, as is common in empirical research. First, the research was conducted using a single-institution sample of 150 undergraduate students from Universitas Prima Indonesia (UNPRI) PS-DKU Pekanbaru. While this approach ensures homogeneity in respondent characteristics, it may limit the generalizability of the findings to other educational institutions, industries, or cultural contexts.

Second, the study adopted a cross-sectional design, which captures responses at a single point in time. As a result, causal inferences should be interpreted with caution, since temporal dynamics in subscription behavior and changes in digital marketing engagement over time could not be fully examined.

Third, although the research design incorporated procedural and statistical remedies to reduce common method bias (CMB)—including randomization of item order, neutral wording, and collinearity checks—self-reported data inherently carries the potential for social desirability bias and subjective interpretation.

The moderating effects of eWOM were examined without differentiating between positive, neutral, and negative sentiment, nor was the volume or intensity of peer-generated content considered. This may have influenced the observed direction and strength of moderation effects.

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