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Research Paper

Harnessing Digital Engagement and e-WoM: Impact on Perceptions and Military Career Choice Intentions

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ABSTRACT: *This study examines how views and decisions regarding military career choices in the Punjab region are influenced by electronic word of mouth (e-WoM) on social media. Given how important social media is in influencing public opinion, especially among younger generations, this study looks at how perceptions of military careers and subsequent career choices are influenced by elements like message credibility, quality, quantity of information, source credibility, social media engagement, and social influence. Based on the Information Adoption Model and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), the study investigates how these concepts influence people's perceptions about military jobs. Data was gathered from 500 respondents, ages 18 to 30, from different Punjabi educational institutions using a structured questionnaire. To find correlations between the variables, the data were examined using statistical methods like regression analysis and structural equation modelling (SEM). The results show that e-WoM has a major impact on how people see military vocations, with message and source legitimacy playing a major role. The association between e-WoM and career decisions was found to be mediated by social media activity, highlighting the significance of active online participation. These findings imply that in order to positively impact career intentions, military recruitment initiatives on social media platforms should concentrate on increasing the content's engagement and legitimacy. The study's conclusions are especially pertinent to improving military recruitment tactics by using social media to interact and sway prospective recruits. This study provides insights for enhancing recruiting communication tactics to draw young talent to military occupations and establishes the framework for future research examining the influence of social media in career decision-making processes.*

KEYWORDS: *Social Media, Electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WoM), Military Career Aspirations, Recruitment Strategies*

I. INTRODUCTION

The advent of social media has revolutionized communication by providing a forum for people to share their thoughts, opinions, and suggestions. As potential hires increasingly rely on electronic word-of-mouth (e-WoM) as a crucial information source, the aforementioned shift has significant ramifications for professional decision-making. According to Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), "e-WoM" refers to informal communication that occurs on digital platforms and influences people's thoughts and behaviour on a variety of subjects, including career decisions. In the context of military careers, the role of e-WoM has grown in significance as potential recruits seek guidance from peers, veterans, and current service members. Social media users can obtain a multitude of information on military life, job openings, and service members' experiences. This readily available and customizable information allows users to filter content based on their interests and relationships (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). People may discuss issues, ask questions, and seek validation from their networks due to the nature of social media. This encourages communication and involvement. Thus, opinions expressed on these platforms can have a significant impact on how potential recruits perceive the appeal and realities of military duty (Chen et al., 2016).

Because e-WoM is often amplified by social influence and group dynamics, its impact extends beyond individual encounters. Social identity theory holds that a person's social groupings have an impact on how they see themselves (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In this case, potential recruits may consult their friends and relatives for guidance, which makes internet remarks even more important. By bringing users together with others who share their interests or experiences, social media's interactive features foster a sense of community and support users' views toward military employment (Dholakia et al., 2004). Furthermore, the impact of e-WoM on military recruitment is especially significant in regions with a long history of military service. For instance, there may be significant cultural differences in how people see and share information on military employment (Holt & Marques, 2021). While unfavourable perceptions can deter potential recruits, positive experiences veterans provide can increase the attraction of military careers. Through a feedback loop produced by the social validation that e-WoM provides, positive narratives can raise interest in military careers, whereas negative narratives can decrease their attraction (Valenzuela et al., 2017).

In light of these factors, military organizations must understand the motivations behind e-WoM and how it influences attitudes toward military professions. Employing social media-driven communication strategies can help recruiters build deeper relationships with possible candidates. For example, organizations can request stories and experiences from active-duty members and veterans to produce authentic content that appeals to potential recruits (Bagozzi et al., 2019). Furthermore, due to the rapid development of social media, more research is required to understand how society perceives and anticipates military service as a result of these platforms. Military recruitment campaigns have a unique opportunity to thrive in the digital age thanks to the connection between e-WoM and social media participation. To enhance recruitment strategies and foster positive perceptions of military careers among potential recruits, it will be crucial to understand the dynamics behind the evolving information-sharing environment. In conclusion, there are still many unresolved issues about the relationship between social media, e-WoM, and career decisions that impact military recruitment. Given that prospective recruits are increasingly searching online for training, military organizations would benefit greatly from knowing how e-WoM influences recruits' perceptions. Through the use of this data, stakeholders may more successfully traverse the digital terrain and improve their capacity to draw in and keep talent in a setting that is becoming more and more competitive.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND RESEARCH GAP

When examining the ways in which electronic word-of-mouth (e-WoM) affects military career choices, a number of significant theories offer frameworks for comprehending the ways in which e-WoM affects attitudes and plans for military vocations. According to the Social Influence Theory, people are influenced by the beliefs and actions of the others in their social networks (Kelman, 1958; Cialdini, 2001). Because friends and family have a big impact on the views of potential recruits, social media amplifies these influences (Wong et al., 2010). Enlistment may be encouraged or discouraged by either positive or negative e-WoM (Gilbert, 2008). Social media's instantaneity amplifies this effect (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), confirming how attitudes of dominant social groups influence how people see military jobs (Cialdini et al., 1990). Persuasive messages affect attitudes via two paths, according to the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM): the central route, which involves deeper cognitive processing, and the peripheral route, which involves surface-level cues (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). While peripheral processing may produce less resilient attitudes (Cacioppo & Petty, 1984), central processing for military recruitment results in more stable career decisions (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983). Recruitment intentions are influenced by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control, according to the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991). According to Browning et al. (2013), Holt et al. (2018), and Armitage & Conner (2001), e-WoM affects recruits' opinions, social pressures, and confidence in their ability to meet military demands. Last but not least, the impact of e-WoM is increased when users are exposed to high-quality, reliable content, according to Digital Engagement Theory (Cheung et al., 2009). Since information from reliable sources improves opinions of military careers, credibility is essential (Metzger et al., 2010; Carlson & O'Cass, 2010). To successfully influence recruitment results, military organizations need to produce interesting, reliable material (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010).

Social media has developed into an essential tool for communication and business, giving marketers the ability to interact directly with customers and instantly affect their decisions to buy. By providing information that appeals to their audience on social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, businesses can create enduring relationships with their clients (Erkan, 2015). Customers actively seek out information, reviews, and suggestions from their peers or influencers in an interactive setting, which shapes their purchasing decisions (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Because customers trust the opinions and experiences of individuals they encounter online, electronic word-of-mouth, or e-WoM, has become a crucial component of this process (Litvin et al., 2017). According to studies, social media platforms benefit marketers and consumers alike by encouraging value co-creation activities that help companies adjust and meet the constantly shifting wants of their clientele (Oksi et al., 2016). Additionally, social media gives people a way to create and share

electronic word-of-mouth (e-WoM) messages that have a big influence on how consumers think, especially in sectors like fashion, electronics, and education (Ali et al., 2019). These exchanges, whether via peer recommendations or influencer relationships, have a significant impact on consumer behaviour by improving brand impression, engagement, and eventually purchase intention (Kudeshia & Kumar, 2016). By delivering individualized and targeted messages that increase engagement and impact purchase decisions, marketers can take advantage of these dynamics by customizing content for particular customer groups (Lin et al., 2012). Particularly in e-WoM, visuals are essential for drawing in customers and strengthening their bond with a company (Farzin & Fattahi, 2018). Furthermore, the capacity to interact with customers prior to, during, and following the decision to buy has changed the marketing environment and enabled firms to offer ongoing value (Kunja & Gvrk, 2017). Social media, for example, provides consumers with the information they require, like product reviews or feature comparisons, which impact their choices at every turn (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). As a result, companies may swiftly and affordably launch new products, measure market reaction, and affect customer behaviour across a large audience by using platforms like Facebook or Instagram (Ali et al., 2019). According to research, marketers may better tailor their strategies to the needs of consumers and increase customer satisfaction and loyalty by having a thorough understanding of social networking sites and their users (Erkan, 2015). Because of this, social media is an essential component of the contemporary marketing mix, giving companies a strong tool for efficiently understanding, interacting with, and influencing their target audience (Litvin et al., 2017).

The literature currently available on the impact of social media and e-WoM on job choices is noticeably lacking, especially in non-commercial fields like the military. Although social media's influence on consumer behaviour and purchase intentions has been thoroughly studied in the literature (e.g., Zubair & Kaur, 2021; Shankar & Reddy, 2022), less focus has been placed on how e-WoM influences important life decisions like career choices. In particular, nothing is known about how e-WoM affects how people see military employment, a field that is primarily controlled by official recruitment methods. Furthermore, the relationship between social media-driven job decision-making and regional differences—like those observed in Punjab, India, where sociocultural dynamics and military links are prevalent—has not been investigated. As a result, there is a substantial research gap that presents a chance for additional study into how e-WoM influences job choices in this particular setting.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

With regard to military vocations, this study intends to investigate the critical role that digital engagement and communication drivers—such as message quality, message credibility, information quantity, source credibility, social media engagement, and social influence—play in influencing electronic word-of-mouth (e-WoM). It also examines the ways in which this e-WoM affects people's opinions of military occupations and, in turn, their desire to pursue them. The study ends with practical suggestions for military recruiters looking to maximize their social media content and techniques in order to successfully sway opinions and career decision intentions through e-WoM.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A quantitative/descriptive research strategy was used to accomplish the study's goals. The sampling unit consisted of respondents from five major Punjabi cities: Ludhiana, Amritsar, Jalandhar, Patiala, and Bathinda. Convenience sampling was used to obtain a total sample size of 500 (100 from each city). To ensure reliability, the sample size was determined using a formula for a finite population. A structured, self-designed questionnaire with Likert scale statements about e-WoM, digital engagement, and perceptions of military careers was used to gather primary data, while research papers, journals, periodicals, and online sources were used to gather secondary data. While inferential statistics, such as Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) using AMOS 22, were used to evaluate the relationships between digital engagement drivers, e-WoM, perceptions of military careers, and career intentions, descriptive statistics offered insights into the demographic profiles of the respondents. Based on respondents' responses to the questionnaire, the findings and their interpretations are presented in a way that supports the goals of the study.

V. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The respondents' demographic profile offers important insights that could affect military recruitment tactics. In order to balance gender representation in military occupations, recruitment efforts may need to prioritize targeting female candidates, as indicated by the majority's male (69.4%) gender. Recruitment campaigns might concentrate on taking advantage of this age group's receptiveness to employment chances by crafting messages that speak to their hopes and future objectives, given that a significant percentage of respondents (69.6%) were unmarried and relatively young, falling between the ages of 18 and 21 (32.6%) and

22 and 23 (23%). The majority of respondents (44.8%) have at least a doctorate degree, indicating that professional training, career growth, and the educational advantages of military careers should be prioritized in military recruitment tactics. Given that the majority of respondents (66%) are employed, marketing may emphasize advantages like job security and career advancement to encourage working individuals to transfer to military roles. Furthermore, by distributing the sample equally across the five largest Punjabi cities, specialized and culturally appropriate recruitment techniques might be used to appeal to the local populace and guarantee greater participation throughout Punjab.

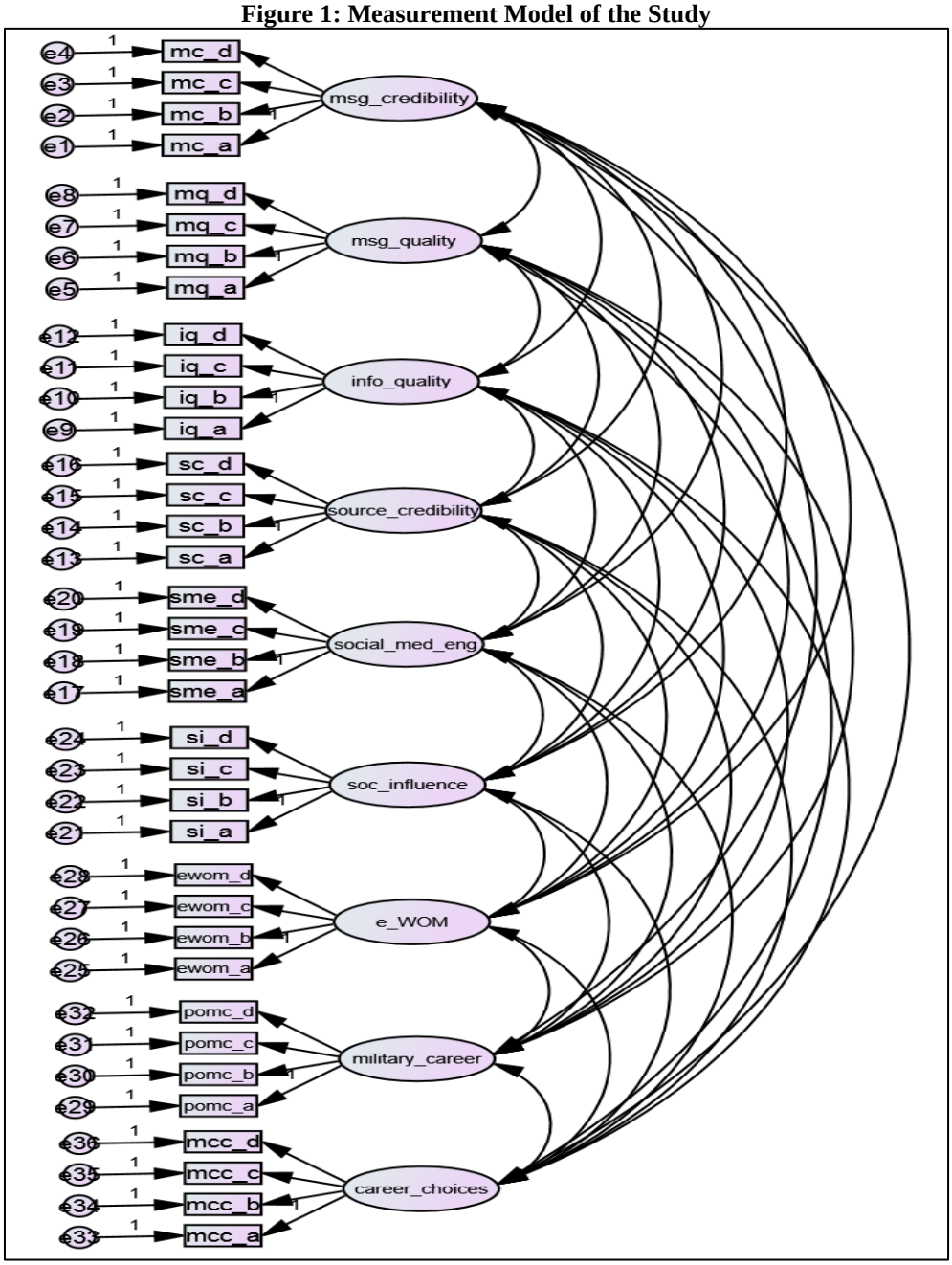
Table 1: Respondents Profile

		Count	Column N %
Gender	Male	347	69.4%
	Female	153	30.6%
Marital Status	Single	348	69.6%
	Married	152	30.4%
	Widow/Widower	0	0.0%
	Divorced	0	0.0%
Age	18 - 21 years	163	32.6%
	22-23 years	115	23.0%
	24 - 26 years	94	18.8%
	27-30 years	74	14.8%
	above 30 years	54	10.8%
Qualification	10+2	63	12.6%
	Graduation	224	44.8%
	Post-graduation	213	42.6%
Occupation	Business/Self-employed	68	13.6%
	Employed	330	66.0%
	Unemployed	102	20.4%
Residential Location	Ludhiana	100	20.0%
	Amritsar	100	20.0%
	Jalandhar	100	20.0%
	Patiala	100	20.0%
	Bathinda	100	20.0%

5.1 Reliability and Validity of Constructs (Independent) using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

As is customary in social science research, the study uses validated scales from earlier studies to guarantee the validity and reliability of its constructs. Since all of the variables were modified from reliable sources, the study's trustworthiness was increased. Sussman and Siegal (2003) and Kim and Lee (2017) served as the foundation for Message Credibility, while Flanagin and Metzger (2000) and Appelman and Sundar (2016) served as the basis for Message Quality. Rieh (2002) and Yang, Sun, and Lee (2010) provided information on information quantity, whereas Pornpitakpan (2004) and Ohanian (1990) provided information on source credibility. Malthouse et al. (2013) and Muntinga et al. (2011) provided the social media engagement measures, and Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) and Cheung and Thadani (2012) provided the e-WoM constructs. Venkatesh et al. (2012) and Lee et al. (2015) served as the models for Social Influence. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) and Ajzen (1991) served as the foundation for the Military Career Choices framework, while Jahn and Kunz (2012) and Venkatesh and Davis (2000) established the Constructs for Perceptions of Military Careers. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was employed via SPSS-AMOS (version 22) to validate the constructs by restricting cross-loadings and verifying the model fit. Although employing these established measures improves the study's reliability, it's crucial to evaluate their appropriateness for the particular context.

Figure 1: Measurement Model of the Study



The majority of observed variables show strong associations with their underlying latent constructs, according to the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) factor loadings. Factor loadings over the suggested threshold of 0.70 indicate valid measurement. While MC3 is marginally lower at 0.667 but still respectable, three items for MC surpass 0.70. High dependability is also demonstrated by Message Quality (MQ) items, however MQ2 is only slightly below the 0.70 threshold at 0.698. With the exception of IQ2, which is still adequate at 0.659, Information Quantity (IQ) contains substantial loadings. Items with Source Credibility (SC) tend to load well, however SC4's loading is lower at 0.611. Excellent dependability is shown by Social Media Engagement (SMC) items that consistently load above 0.70. Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WoM) and Social Influence (SI) items load consistently as well, while e-WoM4 (0.627) and SI3 (0.681) fall just short of the threshold but are still within reasonable bounds. With loadings consistently above 0.90, Perceptions of Military Careers (POMC) demonstrates remarkable dependability. Finally, the items in Military Career Choices (MCC) are well-represented, although MCC3 (0.664) is only a little bit below the optimal level. The majority of items meet or surpass the suggested 0.70 factor loading threshold, indicating that the measurement model retains its integrity overall.

Table 2: Factor Loadings

			Estimate
MC1	<---	Message Credibility	0.755
MC 2	<---	Message Credibility	0.738
MC 3	<---	Message Credibility	0.667
MC 4	<---	Message Credibility	0.838
MQ1	<---	Message Quality	0.707
MQ 2	<---	Message Quality	0.698
MQ 3	<---	Message Quality	0.795
MQ 4	<---	Message Quality	0.712
IQ1	<---	Information Quantity	0.761
IQ 2	<---	Information Quantity	0.659
IQ 3	<---	Information Quantity	0.781
IQ 4	<---	Information Quantity	0.729
SC1	<---	Source Credibility	0.729
SC 2	<---	Source Credibility	0.728
SC 3	<---	Source Credibility	0.802
SC 4	<---	Source Credibility	0.611
SMC1	<---	Social Media Engagement	0.805
SMC 2	<---	Social Media Engagement	0.875
SMC 3	<---	Social Media Engagement	0.802
SMC 4	<---	Social Media Engagement	0.826
SI1	<---	Social Influence	0.708
SI 2	<---	Social Influence	0.792
SI 3	<---	Social Influence	0.681
SI 4	<---	Social Influence	0.748
e-WoM 1	<---	e-WoM	0.787
e-WoM 2	<---	e-WoM	0.722
e-WoM 3	<---	e-WoM	0.808
e-WoM 4	<---	e-WoM	0.627
POMC 1	<---	Perceptions of Military Careers	0.947
POMC 2	<---	Perceptions of Military Careers	0.957
POMC 3	<---	Perceptions of Military Careers	0.962
POMC 4	<---	Perceptions of Military Careers	0.92
MCC 1	<---	Military Career Choices	0.752
MCC 2	<---	Military Career Choices	0.811
MCC 3	<---	Military Career Choices	0.664
MCC 4	<---	Military Career Choices	0.758

Strong internal consistency is shown by the reliability statistics for the constructs utilized in the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), and all constructions have Composite Reliability (CR) values more than 0.70, which indicates good reliability. The fact that the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values are higher than 0.50 indicates that the constructs explain a sizable portion of the variance.

Table 3: Reliability Statistics of Constructs

	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)
Perceptions of Military Careers	0.972	0.896	0.537	0.974
Message Credibility	0.838	0.565	0.537	0.850
Message Quality	0.819	0.532	0.122	0.824
Information Quantity	0.823	0.539	0.253	0.829
Source Credibility	0.811	0.519	0.103	0.823
Social Media Engagement	0.897	0.685	0.428	0.901
Social Influence	0.823	0.538	0.428	0.828
e-WoM	0.827	0.547	0.355	0.840
Military Career Choices	0.835	0.560	0.355	0.843

"Source Credibility" is still acceptable despite having a somewhat lower AVE (0.519). Although the Maximum Shared Variance (MSV) values for "Message Credibility" and "Perceptions of Military Careers," in particular, indicate substantial overlap, they nonetheless satisfy the requirements for discriminant validity. Constructs such as "Social Media Engagement" and "Perceptions of Military Careers" have high MaxR(H) values, suggesting the possibility of near-perfect dependability. All things considered, these statistics support the dependability and validity of the model's constructs for additional study.

Table 4: Discriminant Validity of Constructs

	POMC	MC	MQ	IQ	SC	SME	SI	e WOM	MCC
POMC	**0.947**								
MC	0.733	**0.752**							
MQ	0.349	0.168	**0.729**						
IQ	0.503	0.066	-0.010	**0.734**					
SC	0.321	0.182	-0.023	0.008	**0.721**				
SME	0.354	0.097	-0.133	-0.066	0.253	**0.828**			
SI	0.308	0.182	0.030	0.005	0.038	0.654	**0.733**		
e-WoM	0.537	0.270	0.131	0.102	0.218	0.592	0.432	**0.739**	
MCC	0.476	0.221	0.123	-0.146	0.273	0.433	0.153	0.596	**0.748**

*Perceptions of Military Careers: POMC, Message Credibility: MC, Message Quality: MQ, Information Quantity: IQ, Source Credibility: SC, Social Media Engagement: SME, Social Influence: SI, Electronic Word of Mouth: e-WoM, Military Career Choices: MCC

Each construct in the model is sufficiently different from the others, according to the discriminant validity of the constructs, which is evaluated using the Fornell-Larcker criterion. Discriminant validity is confirmed when each construct's square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) is greater than its correlations with other constructs. In contrast to its relationships with other constructs such as Message Credibility (MC) (0.733), Perceptions of Military Careers (POMC) has a square root of AVE of 0.947. The uniqueness of MC, Message Quality (MQ), and e-WoM is further supported by the fact that their AVE values are higher than their inter-construct correlations. All things considered, the model's dimensions satisfy the Fornell-Larcker criterion, guaranteeing sufficient discriminant validity for more research.

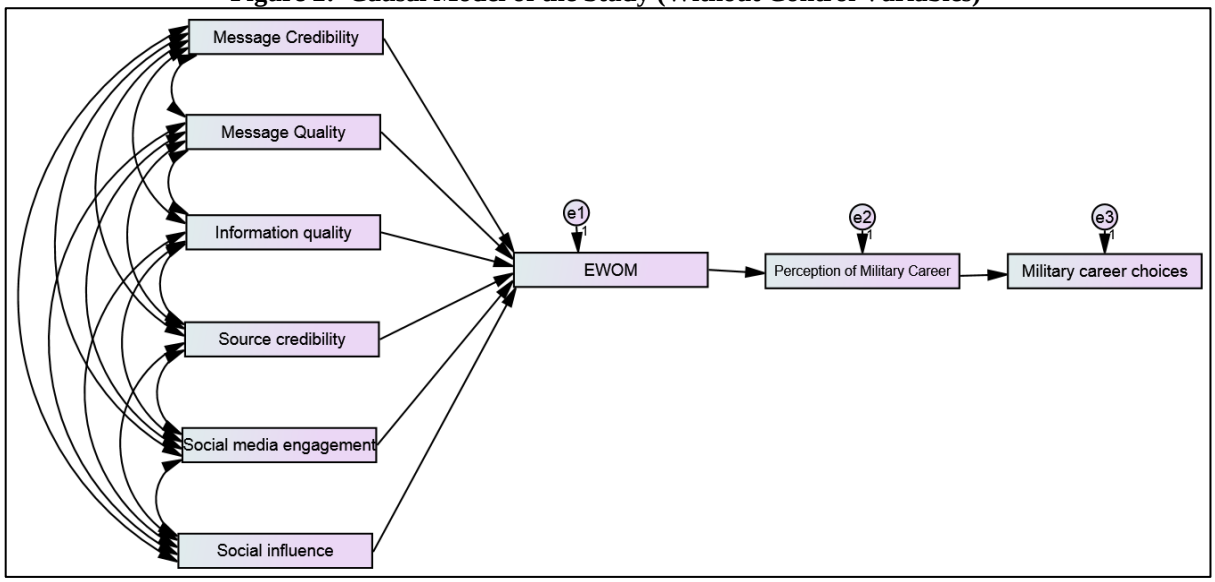
Table 5: Model Fit Indices

CMIN/Df	2.491	<3 Very good; <5 acceptable
CFI	0.935	>.90 good fit
TLI	0.918	>.90 good fit
IFI	0.917	>.90 good fit
RFI	0.938	>.90 good fit

NFI	0.921	>.90 good fit
RMSEA	0.055	<.08 acceptable, <.05 very good

Several fit indices show that the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) model fits the observed data well. The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) of 0.935, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) of 0.918, Incremental Fit Index (IFI) of 0.917, Relative Fit Index (RFI) of 0.938, and Normed Fit Index (NFI) of 0.921 all surpass the 0.90 threshold, indicating strong model fit, while the CMIN/df ratio of 2.491 is within the "very good" range. Furthermore, an adequate fit is suggested by the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) of 0.055. When taken as a whole, these indices verify that the model is precise and adequately captures the connections between the constructs.

Figure 2: Causal Model of the Study (Without Control Variables)



Significant correlations across the model are revealed by the hypothesis testing, underscoring the impact of several factors on military career choices and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WoM). e-WoM is strongly impacted by message quality (H1), information quantity (H2), source credibility (H3), social media engagement (H4), message credibility (H5), and social influence (H6). These factors show that online conversations about military careers are stimulated by well-structured, reliable, and interesting content. Furthermore, e-WoM (H7) has a significant impact on how people regard military vocations, influencing their opinions on their appeal and viability. Last but not least, thoughts on military careers (H8) have a big impact on real career decisions, suggesting that favourable views fuelled by social influence and online discussion are important in encouraging people to think about pursuing careers in the military. These results highlight how important online interactions are in influencing people's opinions and choices about careers.

Table 6 : Results of Causal Model of the Study

			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Result	Hypothesis
e-WoM	<---	Message Quality	0.328	0.043	7.629	0.001	Sig.	H1
e-WoM	<---	Information Quantity	0.105	0.018	5.971	0.004	Sig.	H2
e-WoM	<---	Source Credibility	0.202	0.023	8.806	0.000	Sig.	H3
e-WoM	<---	Social Media Engagement	0.68	0.029	23.467	0.000	Sig.	H4
e-WoM	<---	Message Credibility	0.434	0.042	10.387	0.003	Sig.	H5
e-WoM	<---	Social Influence	0.462	0.039	11.891	0.002	Sig.	H6
Perceptions of Military Careers	<---	e-WoM	0.831	0.038	21.932	0.000	Sig.	H7
Military Career Choices	<---	Perceptions of Military Careers	0.511	0.031	16.302	0.000	Sig.	H8

VI. Conclusion

The results of this study show how important electronic word of mouth (e-WoM) is in influencing people's opinions and choices about careers in the military. Key determinants of e-WoM include message quality, information quantity, source credibility, social media engagement, message credibility, and social influence. These factors all have a substantial impact on how people view military professions. These opinions, which are formed by online conversations and exchanges, have a direct impact on employment decisions, underscoring the significance of digital platforms in hiring practices. The study's conclusions are especially pertinent to military groups and recruiters since they imply that using interesting, reputable, and high-quality information on social media might promote favourable opinions and eventually increase recruitment. Employing social influence and trustworthy messaging to promote more positive perceptions and career consideration, recruiters can improve their online communication tactics by comprehending the power of e-WoM. Additionally, this study implies that user engagement on social media might increase the virality of content relevant to the military, highlighting the significance of regular, active online participation. These findings highlight the importance of fostering digital literacy and credibility in military career initiatives for policymakers. In order to gain a better understanding of focused recruitment methods, it may be worthwhile to investigate the moderating effects of demographic characteristics on the relationship between e-WoM and career choices.

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