



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Business Research

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jbusres](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jbusres)

# The influence of word-of-mouth on attitudinal ambivalence during the higher education decision-making process<sup>☆</sup>

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Consumer  
Ambivalence  
Attitude  
Word-of-mouth  
Decision-making process  
Choice

## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of word-of-mouth (WOM) on consumers' attitudinal ambivalence in the context of higher education decision-making. Construal level theory (CLT) is combined with attitudinal ambivalence literature to generate hypotheses about how different types of WOM (i.e., praise and activity) received during the decision-making process reduce attitudinal ambivalence. The subsequent consequences of attitudinal ambivalence for decision-making are also studied. A two-wave survey of applicants to international higher education programs is used to test the hypotheses. This study contributes to the ambivalence literature by showing that different types of WOM information reduce attitudinal ambivalence depending on the temporal closeness of a choice and the consumption of a service. The findings have implications for the management of attitudinal ambivalence and WOM throughout the consumer decision-making process and consequently for assisting consumers in making choices.

## 1. Introduction

Each year, many young adults have to decide whether to pursue their master's degree studies at a particular higher education (HE) institution. In their decision-making process, these HE applicants have to evaluate an institution based on a number of service attributes (Cubillo-Pinilla, Zuniga, Losantos, & Sanchez, 2009; Joseph & Joseph, 1998; Soutar & Turner, 2002). For example, they may consider whether an institution is reputable and highly ranked, whether it is located in a safe country, the kinds of job prospects they could expect after graduating from the institution, or whether the institution has an active student life. In many cases, some attributes are likely to be evaluated negatively while others are evaluated positively, which forces the applicants to make difficult trade-offs between the attributes (Soutar & Turner, 2002). For example, an HE applicant might think that an institution offers high-quality education, but the costs of studying there would be extremely high. Having both positive and negative evaluations of the same consumption object is called attitudinal ambivalence (Priester & Petty, 1996), which is likely to be particularly pronounced in high-involvement contexts (Jewell, Coupey, & Jones, 2002) such as HE (Cubillo-Pinilla et al., 2009).

Attitudinal ambivalence has multiple implications for consumer behavior. Ambivalent attitudes are less durable and impactful

(Tormala & DeSensi, 2008), and worse predictors of behavior than univalent (i.e., predominantly positive or negative) attitudes are (Glasman & Albarracín, 2006). Furthermore, attitudinal ambivalence negatively influences behavioral intentions (Costarelli & Colloca, 2004) and actual consumption (Berndsen & van der Pligt, 2004), and can result in residual doubt (Jewell et al., 2002) and reduced satisfaction (Olsen, Wilcox, & Olsson, 2005) after choices are made. In addition, attitudinal ambivalence is a prominent concept in consumer behavior because it is rare for a given object not to have some attributes that are evaluated positively and others that are evaluated negatively (Fazio, 2007). Thus, attitudinal ambivalence is problematic for marketers, and its reduction should be an important marketing goal in HE institutions worldwide because of the increasing competition for students (Durvasula, Lysonski, & Madhavi, 2011). Based on the existing literature (Olsen et al., 2005), when applicants have less pre-choice attitudinal ambivalence, they are likely to be more satisfied with their chosen institution. Satisfaction, in turn, can be expected to increase their likelihood of recommending the institution and decrease their likelihood of changing to another institution or quitting their studies, based on previous research (Selnes, 1993).

Ambivalence is also problematic for HE applicants because choice-making (in this study, the choice of whether to being studies in an institution), is challenging when one's evaluations toward the attitude

<sup>☆</sup> This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2017.07.014>

Received 19 November 2016; Received in revised form 26 June 2017; Accepted 22 July 2017

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object (HE institution) are conflicting (Van Harreveld, van der Pligt, & de Liver, 2009). One way of reducing attitudinal ambivalence is by utilizing additional information, which may enable the applicant to become more favorable or unfavorable toward the institution (Hodson, Maio, & Esses, 2001). However, the existing research does not show whether some types of information are more useful in this regard than others in the multi-stage decision-making process. This gap is important because consumers may use different types of information in different stages of the decision-making process (Bettman & Park, 1980). Hence, the present study uses construal level theory (CLT) to contribute to the attitudinal ambivalence research. According to CLT, when the final choice of an object (in this case the HE institution) becomes temporally closer, its evaluation becomes increasingly concrete and detailed (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Thus, different types of information with varying levels of abstractness might be beneficial at different stages of the HE decision-making process.

In the present study, this proposition is examined by analyzing WOM information because WOM, which refers to the “informal communications between consumers concerning the ownership, usage or characteristics of particular goods, services and/or their sellers” (De Matos & Rossi, 2008, p. 578) is an important information source for consumers especially in the service context (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Mangold, Miller, & Brockway, 1999; Murray, 1991; Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2008). Services are perceived as more challenging than goods to evaluate prior to purchase because they are intangible, heterogeneous, and perishable (Murray, 1992). WOM can be used to simplify this complexity and reduce perceived risk (Berger, 2014). Furthermore, consumers are likely to rely on WOM in making important decisions because it is perceived as a trustworthy source of information (Berger, 2014). Hence, WOM plays a significant role in shaping consumers' attitudes (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Martin & Lueg, 2013) and service evaluations (Lim & Chung, 2011; Mangold et al., 1999; Murray, 1991; Sweeney et al., 2008). Especially in the HE services context, WOM is a key source of information (Chapman, 1981; Johnston, 2010), and HE applicants are persuaded by the comments and advice of their friends and family members (Chapman, 1981; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Different WOM types have been identified in the existing literature, such as content richness and negative WOM (Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2012, 2014). In this study, however, we focus on WOM praise and WOM activity because they vary in their level of abstractness, which enables advancing ambivalence literature through CLT.

We therefore pose the following research question: *How do different types of WOM information with varying abstractness influence attitudinal ambivalence during two stages of the HE decision-making process (search and choice)?* Hence, the present study contributes to the attitudinal ambivalence literature by demonstrating the reduction of attitudinal ambivalence at different time points. This understanding is important because decision-making often involves a multi-stage process (e.g., Puccinelli et al., 2009). Investigations of only one point of the process yield only a partial understanding of consumption-related phenomena, such as attitudinal ambivalence. However, by studying two types of information, this study contributes to the attitudinal ambivalence literature by demonstrating that in terms of attitudinal ambivalence reduction, information on different levels of abstraction is required depending on the consumer's temporal distance from the final choice. From a managerial perspective, our results show which types of WOM should be promoted at different stages of the decision-making process to assist consumers in attitudinal ambivalence reduction, especially with regard to the marketing of HE services. Furthermore, we discuss potential ways of promoting these different types of WOM. This paper will begin by proposing a conceptual model and developing hypotheses. The model is then tested using regression analysis, and the results are discussed from both theoretical and managerial perspectives.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Attitudinal ambivalence

An attitude refers to “general and enduring favorable or unfavorable feelings about, evaluative categorizations of, and action predispositions toward stimuli” (Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994, p. 401). Traditionally, attitudes have been conceptualized as unidimensional, that is, as either positive or negative (Jewell et al., 2002). However, attitudes toward an object can also consist of both positive and negative components, meaning that they are ambivalent (Thompson, Zanna, & Griffin, 1995). Ambivalence is a property of attitudes (Jewell et al., 2002), meaning that it operates similarly to an adjective. Hence, attitudes can be described as univalent or ambivalent. In addition, a summary evaluation such as an attitude consists of components that can involve emotions, beliefs, or previous behavioral experiences with the object (Fazio, 1995). When there are both positive and negative components in the evaluative structure, the attitude is ambivalent (Krosnick & Petty, 1995). Services are often evaluated based on several attributes that can be perceived positively or negatively. For example, an HE applicant may hold both negative beliefs (e.g., high costs of studying in the institution or inactive student life) and positive beliefs (e.g., the institution is highly ranked and located in a country that has a good academic reputation) about an HE institution. These conflicting beliefs then constitute an ambivalent summary evaluation of the HE institution.

According to cognitive dissonance theory, people are inherently motivated to resolve psychological conflicts (Festinger, 1964<sup>1</sup>) mainly because they are uncomfortable (Van Harreveld, Schneider, Nohlen, & Van der Pligt, 2012). In the case of ambivalence, the uncomfortable feeling arises when both positivity and negativity are simultaneously accessible, leading to the awareness of attitudinal ambivalence (Newby-Clark, McGregor, & Zanna, 2002). This case may apply particularly when there is a need to commit to a choice, leading to uncertainty-induced physiological arousal (Van Harreveld et al., 2012). In addition, when the decision-making process involves a choice (in the present case, whether to start studies in a particular HE institution or decline the offer), an ambivalent consumer may anticipate regret for making the wrong choice. For example, the HE applicant may anticipate the thought, “I should not have started my studies in this institution”. Furthermore, attitudinal ambivalence involves both positive and negative evaluations of the important aspects of an object (Jewell et al., 2002). Hence, HE applicants are likely to be motivated to reduce attitudinal ambivalence during decision-making.

The existing literature has studied various coping mechanisms that may help people to resolve attitudinal ambivalence and therefore make a favorable or unfavorable choice. When regret about making a bad decision is anticipated and a decision is important, an accuracy motivation is likely to prevail, leading to effortful problem-focused coping based on the need to make the best possible decision (Van Harreveld et al., 2012). Thus, people are likely to increase their decision-making efforts in order to increase their confidence in making the decision (Van Harreveld et al., 2009). We expect this to be the case in HE decision-making because of the importance and investment-like nature of the HE decision. One effortful way to reduce attitudinal ambivalence is to acquire additional information (Hodson et al., 2001; Jonas, Diehl, & Brömer, 1997). Because WOM is a key source of information

<sup>1</sup> Dissonance differs from ambivalence because it occurs after committing to a particular choice or behavior that is in conflict with a person's attitude, whereas ambivalence occurs before a person has committed to one option (Van Harreveld et al., 2009). Furthermore, dissonance involves a conflict between attitude and behavior, whereas ambivalence involves a conflict between two attitudinal components, such as beliefs about an attitude object (Van Harreveld et al., 2009). Hence, dissonant individuals try to feel good about a choice that they have already made, whereas ambivalent individuals have not yet committed to a choice and try to make the best possible decision (Van Harreveld et al., 2009).

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