



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## International Journal of Educational Research

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

## Understanding and predicting student Word of Mouth

Luke Greenacre<sup>a,\*</sup>, Lynne Freeman<sup>b</sup>, Karen Cong<sup>b</sup>, Tom Chapman<sup>a</sup><sup>a</sup> Management School, University of Southampton, Southampton, United Kingdom<sup>b</sup> Faculty of Business, University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, Australia

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 10 May 2013

Received in revised form 8 October 2013

Accepted 30 October 2013

Available online

## Keywords:

Communication

University choice

Promotion

Reputation

Information search

Word of mouth

## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Potential students often learn about University offerings through peer communication, in particular, peer Word of Mouth (WOM). Without an ability to predict and influence such WOM, Higher Education managers cannot accommodate it in their marketing strategies. Using a two phase procedure we address this by proposing a method that can be used to predict what will be communicated by WOM. Using that method we then develop an understanding of what information is communicated by WOM.

**Method:** A qualitative phase identifies that potential students use two decision processes when selecting information to communicate about a university. A second choice-experiment phase models the information communicated by WOM as a consequence of one of those decision processes.

**Findings:** Results demonstrate that multiple decision processes are used by students when determining what to communicate by WOM, and that specific student groups communicate different information when assisting a peer to choose a university to attend.

**Practical implications:** The results highlight the ability of institutions to influence student WOM, and the procedure developed provides a practical tool for predicting WOM so that custom marketing messages can be developed to assist student choices of HE provider.

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## 1. Introduction

Higher Education (HE) institutions are seeing almost unprecedented changes in funding and stakeholder expectations. In many western countries student fees are increasing, often in response to lower government funding for universities. One outcome is that students' have evolved to focus heavily on obtaining return on investment from their learning (Keane, 2012; Spronken-Smith, Bond, Buissink-Smith, & Grigg, 2009). These changes are leading HE managers to adopt commercial marketing practices with a view to better communicate key information to potential students with the hope of maintaining, and possibly, increasing their share of applications (Kalafatis & Ledden, 2012; Mazzarol, Soutar, & Seng, 2003; Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009; Moogan, 2010). The management of Word of Mouth (WOM) communication is one such commercial practice that continues to attract considerable interest in the HE sector (Bruce & Edgington, 2008; Patti & Chen, 2009; Teo & Soutar, 2011).

The challenge presented by WOM is that embracing it as a means to communicate to potential students about the HE institution cedes control over marketing messages to the consumer and not the marketing manager (Frenzen & Nakamoto, 1993; Kalafatis & Ledden, 2012; Ng & Forbes, 2009). Relinquishing control of what information is being spread about the institution raises an interesting issue; how can a university, that now has little control over marketing messages, adequately plan a communications strategy that can reach potential students? At the most basic level an institution needs to know if a

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 07557144896.

E-mail addresses: [l.greenacre@soton.ac.uk](mailto:l.greenacre@soton.ac.uk), [luke.greenacre@gmail.com](mailto:luke.greenacre@gmail.com) (L. Greenacre).

particular favourable or unfavourable message is likely to be communicated. A favourable message can be supported through marketing effort, while an unfavourable message will require corrective action to be taken (Khare, Labrecque, & Asare, 2011).

In either case, for effective strategic planning, an HE institution needs to be equipped with knowledge about what potential students will talk about when discussing the institution and its offerings (Patti & Chen, 2009). Present research provides little guidance for managers facing this issue. Most attempts at understanding precisely what people communicate by WOM rely heavily on a posterior analysis of what has already been said (Patti & Chen, 2009; Wangenheim & Bayon, 2004). This could include analysis of online blogs and chat rooms, surveys with prior students, and evaluation of other records of interpersonal communications (Croft, Boddy, & Pentucci, 2007; Patti & Chen, 2009). While such research is useful for understanding how consumers have behaved in the past, it is not necessarily useful in understanding WOM behaviour in the future. In HE markets in particular, the (potential) consumers being served by the HE institution change each year as new students seek to commence their studies and others finish. The focus of this paper is thus on understanding WOM in the HE sector, and as a by-product, developing a theoretically relevant procedure that allows us to *predict* what content will be communicated by WOM among potential students groups.

## 2. Students as senders of WOM information

At the individual level WOM is the communication of information from one person, a sender, to another person, a receiver (Frenzen & Nakamoto, 1993). These people can be any stakeholder, but in this case we are specifically interested in the peer communication among potential students. Peer to peer communication has been identified as being of particular importance to this age group, characterised as Generation Y, when they are making choices (Williams & Page, 2011). An earlier phase of this research confirmed (in press) that this was the case when students were deciding which HE institutions to apply to. Both the actions of the sender in determining what to communicate, and the receiver in determining what they will seek out, listen to and use are important when predicting the content that will flow by WOM among students (Patti & Chen, 2009; van Noort, Antheunis, & van Reijmersdal, 2012).

Considerable research has focused on the receiver and their search for information (Gilly, Graham, Wolfenbarger, & Yale, 1998; Price & Feick, 1984; Simões & Soares, 2010). While the receiver is important we argue that they are subordinate to the sender. Regardless of the wishes of a receiver, the sender determines the specific information content a receiver will obtain, or in some cases will not obtain. Past research has stressed that the perceived impartiality of the sender is a mechanism for creating trust in the receiver, leading to real changes in consumption decisions (Chan & Ngai, 2011; Cruz & Fill, 2008). Therefore it is critical to focus on understanding and modelling the behaviour of senders when determining the messages potential students acting as senders are likely to communicate by WOM (Frenzen & Nakamoto, 1993).

As with any social behaviour a broad range of components to sender behaviour can be considered. The literature particularly focuses on two; the selection of a *partner* with whom to exchange information, and the selection of the *information* content comprising the WOM message (Bruce & Edgington, 2008; Frenzen & Nakamoto, 1993; Step & Finucane, 2002). The choice of *partner* with whom to exchange information has received little attention in the literature; although numerous studies have identified general difference in WOM behaviour based on whom a person, or student, is talking to. For example, difference in communication content can be found amongst senders and receivers of different genders, relationship types, and cultural demographics (Awad & Ragowsky, 2008; van Noort et al., 2012). This indicates that to offer realistic insight into student WOM any models of WOM must recognise differences in various student groups.

The selection of *information* content, the other main focus of WOM research, often only examines a message's valence. Whether WOM is positively or negatively disposed to the object being discussed is the most common description of information content (Doh & Hwang, 2009). What much of this research neglects is that WOM can offer much more diagnostic insight into the nature of a product or service, in this case helping a potential student evaluate an HE institution, rather than just stating whether it is generally 'good' or 'bad'. Some research has considered the co-creation of understanding that can arise through WOM, presenting a much richer examination of WOM content (Cova, Pace, & Park, 2007). Unfortunately, such research offers no mechanism to predict future WOM and too often neglects the dominant role of the sender in determining the nature of information content being exchanged.

## 3. Understanding student WOM: motivations and behaviours

A potential student acting as a WOM sender is able to derive rewards from their participation in a WOM exchange. These rewards can arise from such things as serving the needs of themselves, for example not sharing knowledge about courses with limited enrolment (Rubin & Martin, 1988; Sakalaki, Richardson, & Thépaut, 2007); serving the needs of their exchange partner, for example helping a trusted friend choose the 'right' course for them (Montero, 2008); or even serving the needs of the institution being discussed, for example if they are emotionally attached to it due to a family members' previous attendance (Aspara, Olkkonen, Tikkanen, Moisander, & Parvinen, 2008). The sources of these rewards are often cited in literature that considers the motivations underlying WOM exchanges (Sundaram, Mitra, & Webster, 1998). This notion of reward selection gives insight into how motivation is shaped by the sender student.

Using this insight it can be asserted that given the precise reward combination sought, a potential student will *choose* WOM behaviour that maximises the probability of obtaining these rewards. Such an assertion complies with utility

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