

The Influence of Communication Sources on a Student's Evaluation of University Selection: A Regional University Study

Ashleigh Bilbe, James Cook University, ashleigh.bilbe@jcu.edu.au
Janelle Rose, James Cook University, janelle.rose@jcu.edu.au

Abstract

Universities are under considerable pressure to recruit students and an understanding of the decision making process of students is necessary. This paper examines the various communication sources students consult including traditional, word of mouth and electronic word of mouth. Further to this four evaluative criteria, trustworthiness, expertise, relevance and risk are used to evaluate the communication sources to allow for a more comprehensive understanding of their influence. The findings of the focus groups indicated that traditional and word of mouth were the dominant sources consulted and the evaluative criteria were appropriate and played a role in influencing the perception of the sources in the study context. To explore these initial findings further, a survey is proposed.

Keywords: University selection, student decision making process, communication sources, evaluative criteria, regional university

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Introduction

The decision making process of students with reference to university selection has been of increasing interest to marketers over recent years (Brennan, 2001; Briggs, 2006; Brown, Varley and Pal, 2009; Cubillo, Snchez and Cervioo, 2006; Maringe, 2006; Moogan and Barron, 2003; Yamamoto, 2006). Much of the research carried out on the university selection of students has employed a high involvement notion with an emphasis on a five-stage decision-making process (Brown, Varley and Pal, 2009; Maringe, 2006; Moogan and Barron, 2003).

Purchase decisions that require high consumer involvement results in the individual placing more emphasis on the information search and evaluation of alternatives stage of the decision making process, as is evidenced where various communication sources are consulted in a students' decision to attend university (Armstrong and Lumsden, 2000; Bonnema and Vander-Waltd, 2008; Yamamoto, 2006). A university must therefore have communications readily available to consumers informing them of programs and other services provided by universities if they are to be competitive in this environment (Webster, 1988). These communication sources can be organised into two categories: traditional media and word of mouth. The emergence of the Internet has created another avenue for communication to take place between the student and others including the university namely electronic word of mouth (Hennig-Tharau et al., 2004; Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels, 2009).

It is proposed that each of the communication sources will have a different influence on the information search and evaluation phase of the consumer decision-making process by potential students. This is due to the consumers' perception of these sources in terms of criteria such as trustworthiness, expertise, relevance and risk and how they are evaluated in contributing to their decision making process.

This research contributes to the literature in that limited research exists to examine the influence of electronic word of mouth within the university context. Further to this, the criteria chosen to evaluate the communication sources will allow for a more comprehensive analysis to be undertaken. The purpose of this paper is to examine the differences among communication sources based on the criteria, and propose hypotheses for future testing. Further to this it will report on the preliminary findings from a series of focus groups undertaken to investigate the role of communication sources and criteria in the study context.

Communication Sources

Various communication sources are consulted in a students' selection of a university (Armstrong and Lumsden, 2000; Bonnema and Vander-Waltd, 2008; Yamamoto, 2006), each of which has a varying influence on the decision making process. A vast amount of research on the communication sources influencing university selection is evident in the literature (Maringe, 2006; Moogan and Barron, 2003; Veloutsou, Paton and Lewis, 2005).

Traditional media is the first communication source to be reviewed and this includes the various communication devices the university employs to reach and influence potential

university students (Veloutsou, Paton and Lewis, 2005). Several studies conducted in the United Kingdom have identified that information generated by the university was the most relied upon source in making their decision (Briggs, 2006; Moogan and Baron, 2003; Veloutsou, Paton and Lewis, 2004; Veloutsou, Paton and Lewis, 2005). Contrary to these studies the research of Maringe (2006) and Armstrong and Lumsden (2000) illustrated that university promotional materials had no influence on a students' decision. Of growing importance is the university's webpage where in one study it was the most influential communication source on a students' decision (Yamamoto, 2006). Other studies have acknowledged the university's webpage as being significant in the decision making process, although not ranked as the most influential (Briggs, 2006; Veloutsou, Paton and Lewis, 2005).

Word of mouth is the second communication source to be reviewed and refers to a conversation with a focus on the sharing of information regarding individuals' experiences with various products and services (Steffes and Burgee, 2009). The most common sources of word of mouth include family members and friends (Gauri, Bhatnagar and Rao, 2008). As a communication source, word of mouth is said to be influential to the decision making process of students with reference to university selection, though it was not ranked as the most influential source (Briggs, 2006; Yamamoto, 2006).

Electronic word of mouth communication is the final communication source to be considered. Although this communication source lacks the face-to-face contact compared to traditional word of mouth (Andreassen and Streukens, 2009), the ability to seek advice from these networks at any time, from any place makes this source attractive to consumers (Cheung, et al., 2009). These online communities are said to have a positive influence on the consumer decision making process (De Valck, Van Bruggen and Wierenga, 2009), and are seen as more credible and of higher relevance to the reader compared to information generated by a marketer (Bickart and Schindler, 2001). Other studies have identified that consumers are more conscious of recommendations made on the Internet due to credibility issues (Wathen and Burkell, 2002). In the context of university selection, social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter allow universities to connect future students online (Gilroy, 2010).

Evaluation of the Various Communication Sources

A consumer's perception and evaluation of the various communication sources will influence the sources that are most influential to the information search and evaluation phase of the consumer decision-making process. Several studies have been conducted and various criteria have been devised for evaluating these communication sources including trustworthiness, expertise, relevance and risk (Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Steffes and Burgee, 2009; Zimmer Arsal, Al-Marzouq and Grover, 2010). It was these four criteria that were deemed most relevant to this context.

Source Credibility

Source credibility plays an important role in the dissemination of information through each of the communication sources. According to Belch and Belch (2007, p. 166) "credibility is the extent to which the recipient sees the source as having the relevant knowledge, skill, or experience and trust the source to give unbiased, objective information." As the definition suggests there are two dimensions of source credibility: trustworthiness and expertise.

Trustworthiness: With reference to traditional word of mouth studies, evidence indicates that sources that are perceived to be trustworthy have an influence on the decision (Gilly et al., 1998; Sweeney, Soutar and Mazzarol, 2008; Wangenheim and Bayon, 2004). Word of mouth is shown to be more trustworthy than other sources such as advertisements, as most discussions are with friends and family, sources that are seen to be trusted compared to a source that is marketer generated (Derbaix and Vanhamme, 2003).

Trustworthiness also plays an important role in assessing the credibility of messages conveyed over the Internet (Cheung et al., 2009). Consumers are more likely to be conscious of the credibility and thus the trustworthiness of electronic word of mouth to a greater extent than compared to traditional word of mouth when searching for information on the Internet (Wathen and Burkell, 2002).

From a traditional media perspective, trustworthiness issues also arise. Communication sources such as the brochures and the webpage may not be associated with a particular source (e.g.: a person) that can be evaluated. The term source credibility in this situation can be conceptualised to refer to corporate credibility, which refers to a consumer's perception of a company's trustworthiness and expertise (Goldsmith, Lafferty and Newell, 2000). It was found that corporate credibility directly influenced the consumer's attitude towards the brand as well as purchase intentions towards the brand (Goldsmith, Lafferty and Newell, 2000; Goldsmith, Lafferty and Newell, 2002). Hence the proposed hypothesis (H1) is as follows: Students will evaluate word of mouth more favourably in terms of trustworthiness than traditional media and electronic word of mouth.

Expertise: Expertise similar to trustworthiness plays an important role in the influence of a message conveyed by the sender. In one of the earliest studies regarding source credibility it was found that expertise played a bigger role in influencing the decision to purchase compared to trustworthiness (Ohanian, 1990). More recently Gilly et al. (1998) and Bansal and Voyer (2000) have found that when word of mouth was actively sought, the effectiveness of the word of mouth message was influenced by the source's expertise. Further to this the higher level of expertise possessed by the sender the less perceived risk associated with decision of the receiver (Bansal and Voyer, 2000).

In examining electronic word of mouth limited research exists concerning the expertise of the sender and their influence on the decision. Research exploring the influence of source credibility, combining expertise and trustworthiness found that a higher level of credibility would enhance the user's adoption of a recommendation made online (Cheung et al., 2009).

With reference to traditional media, rather than evaluating source credibility, corporate credibility of the communication source will be measured. Research to determine the influence of the components of corporate credibility (trustworthiness and expertise) is limited. However research examining the professional services environment suggests that these firms have the ability to offer expert knowledge (Gummesson, 1978), and because of this have an influence on the decision to purchase services (Lian and Laing, 2004). Hence the proposed hypothesis (H2) is as follows: Students will evaluate traditional media more favourably in terms of expertise than word of mouth and electronic word of mouth.

Relevance: Relevance plays a large role in the effectiveness of the dissemination of information. This construct refers to the perception that a source is similar to the decision maker and as such the source's information is seen to be more relevant to the subject (Bither and Wright, 1977; Price, Feick and Higie, 1989). Each of the various communication sources

is affected by the relevance of the message that is being conveyed. Previous research suggests that the more relevant the information the more it will aid in the decision making process (Mishra, Umesh and Stem, 1993). In the online environment the relevance of the information available was found to be influential in the usefulness of the information (Cheung, Lee and Rabjohn, 2008). Unlike media generated sources, electronic word of mouth and word of mouth are said to be more relevant due to the fact these communication sources can generate more product/service interest (Bickart and Schindler, 2001). The ability to provide information that is tailored to the decision maker also makes word of mouth and electronic word of mouth more relevant compared to traditional media (Duhan et al., 1997). Hence the proposed following hypothesis (H3) is as follows: Students will evaluate word of mouth and electronic word of mouth more favourably in terms of relevance than traditional media.

Risk: Perceived risk is shown to be a multi dimensional construct (Kaplan, Szybille and Jacoby, 1974) and “is based on consumers’ judgments of the likelihood of negative outcomes and of the degree of importance of these outcomes to the individual consumer” (Lovelock, Patterson and Walker, 2007, p. 43). It has been noted that the risk associated with purchasing a service is of a higher degree compared to purchasing a product (Murray and Schlacter, 1990).

The level of risk associated with relying on word of mouth communication is said to decrease as the level of expertise increases (Bansal and Voyer, 2000). A study conducted in Taiwan to understand the effects of perceived risk associated with word of mouth communication found that financial and performance risk had an influence on the receivers purchase decision (Lin and Fang, 2006). In relation to electronic word of mouth, research findings indicate that consumers are more conscious of the recommendations made online (Wathen and Burkell, 2002) due to the lack of face-to-face contact, as such they find it difficult to evaluate the credibility of the sender (Cheung et al., 2009).

In terms of traditional media limited research exists to examine the risk associated with this source. This communication source is however associated with a corporate identity – the university. Professional services are shown to possess expert knowledge (Gummesson, 1978) and this decreases the level of risk associated with relying on this communication source (Bansal and Voyer, 2000). Hence the proposed hypothesis (H4) is as follows: Students will evaluate traditional media and word of mouth more favourably in terms of risk than electronic word of mouth.

Method

An exploratory research design using both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods are considered most suitable for this proposed study. Two focus groups with current first year students were conducted to understand the various communication sources that are used to aid in the decision making process of students’ and their effectiveness in influencing their decision. Insights into the evaluate criteria used by students were also investigated. Findings from this initial stage will assist in contextualising the scales borrowed from prior research (Mishra, Umesh and Stem, 1993; Ohanian, 1990; Sirikka, Noam and Michael, 2000) and used to develop the questionnaire. A convenience sample of 400 first year University students will complete the self-administered questionnaire.

Focus Group Findings

The profiles of the focus group participants were male and female first year business students aged between 17 and 40. The majority of the students however were aged between 17 and 19. The results of the focus groups replicates previous research findings conducted in this context (Armstrong and Lumsden, 2000; Bonnema and Vander-Waldt, 2008; Yamamoto, 2006) that both traditional media and word of mouth communication sources are consulted in a students' decision to attend university, some examples include: brochures, university website, friends, family, university open days. There was no suggestion of electronic word of mouth being utilised. Of importance is the university website as this was consistently shown to be an influential and reliable source of information for students during the information search stage. For many students this was the first port of call to obtain information regarding the university. Traditional media in the form of the brochures were not an influential factor for many students rather just a basic information source. In some instances family and friends played a role in influencing university selection, particularly among the younger aged students.

There was a consensus among most members of the focus groups that social networking sites, specifically Facebook should be utilised by universities, however source credibility would determine whether to rely on the recommendation made. If it appeared that this source was not credible the recommendation would be then ignored and would not influence their decision.

When exploring the four criteria to evaluate the various communication sources, each individual criteria played a role in influencing the perception of these sources, risk however to a lesser extent. The participants were less inclined to view their reliance on any of the communication sources with a facet of risk apparent. A linkage was made where the higher the expertise the more trusted the source, therefore the risk of relying on the source decreased.

Conclusion

As competition to recruit university students intensifies (Chambers, 2007; Veloutsou et al., 2004), the role of marketing within a university has grown significantly (Soutar and Turner, 2002). To be able to market a university effectively, an understanding of the choice and decision making process of intending students is necessary (Maringe, 2006). Having a complete understanding of the influence these various communication sources have on university selection will allow universities to better direct their marketing efforts to increase student recruitment. The proposed quantitative study will provide further depth to these initial findings with evidence on the role evaluative criteria play in the assessment of communication sources.

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