Looking inside the black box: connected students and university decisions

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Structured Abstract

Purpose: Review and evaluate decision making models to establish if they adequately reflect the journey of prospective full-time postgraduate students.

Method: Review of literature, followed by primary research. A qualitative approach consisting of 7 focus groups (total of 49 students) and 5 unstructured interviews. Judgemental/purposive sampling method.

Findings: Rational and emotional elements found that suggested a limited few have a back and forth approach. Different application patterns were found, but no evidence this changed their decision journey. High usage of and reference to WOM/e-WOM.

Implications: Although some non-linear & emotional elements were found, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that a more circular approach is relevant to Higher Education decision making.

Keywords: consumer decision making models; Millennials; Higher Education; postgraduate students

1. INTRODUCTION

Organisations need to effectively reach their target audience during the decision making process, and therefore should understand how to appropriately communicate with them (Tuten and Solomon, 2013). The era in which a person is born can exert significant influence on their behaviour as consumers (Solomon, 2009), with Millennials (born 1982 – 2004) being highly digitally literate (Sessa et al., 2007; Moore, 2012). However, some suggest marketing is viewed more negatively and there is growing cynicism towards it, as it is out of control and not seen as a fulfilling relationship (Parsons and Maclaran, 2009; Sheth and Sisodia, 2005). Consumers are therefore often ignoring marketing, and want to engage with brands differently (Mix and Katzberg, 2015), for example through brands providing inspiring content and stories that draw consumers to the brand, rather than pushing out brand controlled messages (McCabe, 2015).

There are many studies that explore the consumer decision making process, with a variety of models proposed, which will be reviewed in this paper. However, Darley et al. (2010), suggest further research is needed into online consumer behaviour and the decision making process. Research is starting to emerge that suggests consumer decision making models need to adapt due to the influence of digital media. However, higher education (HE) appears to be clinging uncritically to outdated models, and Taylor (2002) states that increasing numbers of postgraduate students mean they are an important revenue stream to understand. Higher education in the UK is estimated at £39.9bn, or 2.7% of GDP (Lock, 2015), with over 400,000 people employed at UK universities and 538,000 postgraduate students in 2016 (Universities UK, 2016). The aim of this paper therefore, is to review and evaluate decision making models; and through qualitative primary research, establish if they adequately reflect the journey of prospective full-time postgraduate students in a contemporary media environment.

2. REVIEW OF DECISION MAKING MODELS

Views regarding how to categorise consumer decision making and models are varied, and to some extent dependent upon which field the study draws on. The behavioural perspective has a focus on black box type models that focus on behaviour as a result of particular stimuli, and do not provide understanding of the internal consumer decision process, i.e. the area within the black box (Kotler et al., 2004). The cognitive paradigm has a focus on thought processes and decision making stages of activities, with the original 1968 Engel, Kollat and Blackwell model undergoing a number of revisions (Darley et al., 2010). The main stages centre around recognition of a need, search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase, consumption and post purchase evaluation and traditionally have been presented as a rational and linear process. There continues to be discussion regarding how relevant and appropriate this is in today's communications environment (See Mix and Katzberg, 2015). More recently, research suggests a more circular, continuous process, rather than stages (for example see Lye et al. (2005), Court et al. (2009), Nobel (2010), Hudson and Hudson (2013), Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014), Mix and Katzberg

(2015). Mix and Katzberg (2015) talk about a back and forth approach, often involving both online and offline, without any sort of plan, illustrating a high degree of emotion rather than rationality. Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) develop three shopper journeys, showing emotion, a more circular approach and highlighting the influence of social media and influential groups within the process. The Millennial population are highly influenced by their peers and are always connected (Euromonitor International, 2011), meaning social media is likely to play an important role.

Decision making process models within HE do not seem to have progressed in the same way as that outside the sector. Decision making is still presented around a series of stages, such as that provided by Maringe (2006) of pre-search behaviour, search behaviour, application stage, choice decision and registration, along with many others that suggest similar stages (for example see Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001a), Vrontis et al. (2004)Brown et al. (2009)). This suggests that decision making within education is still based upon a rational and linear approach. However, Hodkinson and Sparkes (1995) and also Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001b) found that feelings and emotions also influenced decisions, and therefore decisions were only partly rational. It should also be noted that there has been some discussion regarding whether students can be regarded as consumers or not (for example see Conway et al. (1994), Svensson and Wood (2007), Gibbs (2008), Barnett(2011), Maringe (2011)). However we classify students, it is clear that they are behaving more like consumers with the introduction of fees and the increasing amounts of data students can base their choices on.

The conceptual framework for this research is identified in Figure 1, and is illustrated as a circular rather than linear process, as research outside of HE suggests consumers do not now start with a wide initial choice set (Court et al., 2009), but add and subtract brands (Hudson and Hudson, 2013; Court et al., 2009). Furthermore, they continually engage with brands and their peers regarding their decision (Nobel, 2010; Hall and Towers, 2017). Five stages within this process are suggested, based upon previous models outside of HE and also utilising HE model stages.

Figure 1: conceptual framework
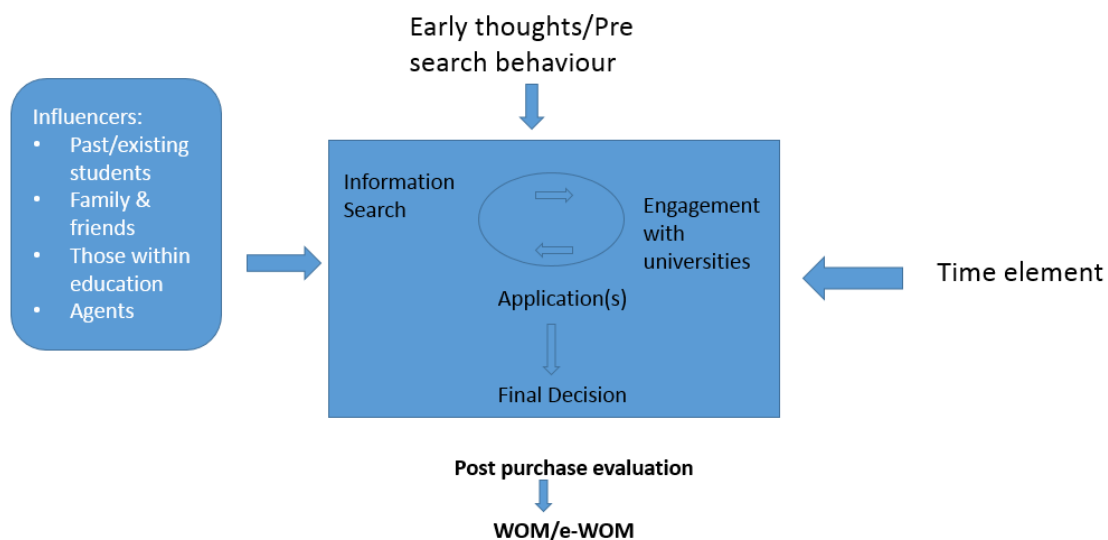
The framework contains a variety of phases:

1. Information search: This phase is present in all models. However, different search patterns have been found (Usher et al., 2010; Furse et al., 1984), and consumers now continually engage with brands and look for new information (Nobel, 2010), rather than previously, where information was used to evaluate a wide initial choice set and then narrow down as suggested by Lewis in 1903 (Vazquez et al., 2014). Information search is therefore shown as an ongoing process until a final decision is made.
2. Engagement: Previous models have not explicitly included engage until a final stage, however, purchase of a high involvement service is likely to mean that engaging with the university will help in decision making and ultimately a choice. For example, Maringe (2006) stresses the importance of maintaining dialogue and making a psychological bond between university and student.

3. Application(s): an application stage is present in a number of existing HE models (e.g. Litten (1982), Maringe (2006)). Students are known to put in multiple applications and accept multiple offers (Maringe, 2006), which suggests they haven't yet made a choice. This phase appears therefore similar to the evaluation stage in models such as Blackwell et al., (2001) or Court et al (2009). There appears to be little or no research regarding application patterns by students, which is interesting to note, as an application gives a university an opportunity to start building a relationship with a potential student.

4. Final decision: This phase is present in all existing models, and a decision is made at some point, based upon attributes or criteria important to the student (Soutar and Turner, 2002). These criteria used vary between students (Soilemetzidis et al., 2014).

5. Post purchase evaluation: This phase is only present in some of the models. Unhappy customers write far more about their experience (Walker, 1995). However, consumers are now encouraged to write reviews both positive and negative through sites such as Tripadvisor.com, and they have recently taken on a much larger role in the consumer decision process (Moe and Trusov, 2011). This suggests that students are therefore also likely to undertake an evaluation and engage in word of mouth (WOM)/electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) regarding education decisions.

Influencers: Whilst not part of the stages, this is an important area to consider. A wide range of people are known to influence decisions regarding HE choice including friends, family and teachers (Usher et al., 2010), universities (Veloutsou et al., 2005), and outside of HE ratings and reviews made by past users (Wolny and Charoensuksai, 2014). Agents are also likely to play a key role, with 36.5% of overseas students recruited in this way (Havergal, 2015).

Finally, a time element has been included as previous research has suggested that those who undertake decisions with limited time available, have different patterns of behaviour (Johnston et al., 1997). It is not unreasonable, therefore, to factor in the time element for applicants that commence their journey earlier or later.

3. METHOD

A phenomenological approach was taken, as it assumes that a person's life is socially constructed, and seeks to explore the views and experiences of only those that have lived the experience that is under study (Goulding, 2005). Primary research consisted of two stages: stage one involved seven focus groups, with a total of 49 participants of which 23 were home students, 13 were EU students and 13 were international students. Stage two involved 5 unstructured interviews of which 2 were home students, 2 were EU students, and 1 was an International student. Non-probability sampling methods have been used for both stages of research, utilising judgemental/purposive sampling (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). This ensured those selected represented the international nature of postgraduate students, and only consisted of those that have lived the experience as discussed by Goulding (2005). Focus groups and interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and recurrent meaningful themes established from the participants stories (Strauss & Corbin 1998). All respondents attended one university in the North of England, and were on marketing related postgraduate courses.

4. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS
4.1 Stage 1 primary research – focus groups

The key findings from the focus groups are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of key findings from focus groups

Area	Example quote	Discussion
Is it linear?	"I had already gotten accepted at two others, but then I discovered this one and the course was better" FG6	A number of comments illustrated a non-linear process for a variety of reasons (e.g. lengthy acceptance process, friends later influence on other courses/universities, finding more courses)
Is it emotional?	"I have always had passion for English people, because of the game on Commodore 64 when I was young… was about Manchester United. I was really young about 8" FG6	There were a limited number of quotes that suggested a more emotional approach

Time Element: When did they start to think about postgraduate study?	"Less than a month before…" FG2	The majority of responses fitted into 1-2 years before starting, with 2 responses 3-4 years prior, with 5 students 9 months to 1 month prior. Many reasons focused around not securing the job they wanted, or the job not turning out to be as they expected.
Application(s): What was their application pattern?	"I applied to one in England and two in Germany" FG4	Five application patterns established: 1. Multiple countries – multiple applications to more than one country 2. Country – multiple applications within one country 3. Regional – multiple applications, focused on one region 4. City – multiple applications around one city 5. Single – only one application
Information Search: How did they become aware of university?	"Through a website, find a UK university, MMU was at the top, a reviewed one" FG2	Professional bodies and links to them, agents, searching online, and recommendation by friends/ family/those within education were the main ways they became aware.
Influencers: Who influenced	"I would rather talk to past students" FG2; "My brother convinced me" FG5; "student room forum" FG3	Three main influencers were found: past and existing students; family and friends; and those within education, including agents.
Postpurchase: Who did they tell?	"I have spoken to my old tutors" FG2 "I have Tweeted a lot of things I have been doing in class" FG4	Quite a number of students had undertaken eWOM/WOM through blogs, Twitter, Facebook. Others had spoken to their old tutors and undergraduates.

4.2 Stage 2 primary research – unstructured interviews

The detailed findings from this stage will be presented at the conference, which will clearly plot each individual decision journey. What was striking from the interviews was how rational and linear each of the five journeys plotted were. There was no evidence of any back and forth regarding their journey for selection of universities/courses. All five students started thinking about postgraduate study 1-2 years prior to arrival. All five students considered a range of universities/courses, with three students looking at multiple countries, one student looking at multiple applications within one country, and one student looking at multiple applications around one region. One of these students undertook the process via an agent. Even though the application patterns were different, each appeared to go through the process in a similar manner: they searched for a range of information, they were all influenced by others (for example, reviews on Facebook, past student experience, undergraduate teachers, friends and family, agent), and they made their choices based upon a range of criteria (e.g. cost, content, accreditations with professional bodies, location, practical nature). A number had undertaken WOM/e-WOM at the post purchase evaluation stage.

5. DISCUSSION/IMPLICATIONS

There is conflicting information between the focus groups and interviews regarding rational/linear approach, which will be clarified through further planned interviews. All the students interviewed started the process in good time, did not experience any real issues with the process, and this may suggest that they did not need to add or subtract selected or new universities/courses. Future interviews therefore may need to include late applicants, and those that experienced issues during the process. For example, during the focus groups it was clear that further universities/courses were added at a later date due to slow response or a negative experience during the application process for some students.

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