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Introduction

WOM communications are important in the consumer decision making process (Herr *et al.*, 1991). However, focus to-date has been on traditional, face-to-face exchanges (Mitra *et al.*, 1999) as opposed to online word-of-mouth (E-WOM) communications (Datta *et al.*, 2005); and for goods (Fong and Burton, 2006) as opposed to services (Ugolini, 1999). Yet, WOM appears to be important to services in order to reduce perceived risk and uncertainty often associated with service purchase decisions (Murray, 1991; Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996). Moreover, although the impact of online communities on consumers' purchasing decision-making has been studied (Brown *et al.*, 2007), this has not been done in a Higher Education (HE) context. In addition, cultural differences are known to exist in online purchasing behaviour (Chau *et al.*, 2002), but do these differences also exist at a context level?

This study investigates Taiwanese students' use of discussion boards and the effects this information has on their HE decision-making in two contexts: Taiwanese students choosing a business Master's degree in Taiwan (home-based students) and in the UK (international students). Four research questions were proposed: 1. How is information from discussion boards used by Taiwanese students in the HE decision-making process? 2. How influential is information from discussion boards to Taiwanese students' HE decision-making process? 3. What affects the influential level of information from discussion boards from Taiwanese students' perspectives? 4. Is there any contextual difference on the use of discussion boards between Taiwanese students in Taiwan as home-based students and Taiwanese students in the UK as international students?

Literature review

The growth of online communities has provided additional channels for product/service recommendations, endorsements and E-WOM (Brown *et al.*, 2007). Such recommendations influence consumption choices (Fong and Burton, 2006). For example, discussion boards, chatrooms and newsgroups can influence the adoption and use of products or services (Subramani and Rajagopalan, 2003). Many studies (e.g. Allsop *et al.,* 2007) have discussed the influences of WOM on consumers' purchasing decision-making process, E-WOM has a relatively small but growing body of research (Sun *et al.*, 2006; Fong and Burton, 2006; Brown *et al.*, 2007).

Typical WOM consists of spoken words exchanged with one friend or relative in a face-to-face situation. E-WOM involves personal experiences and opinions transmitted through online written words (Bickart and Schindler, 2001) which appear more formal to the recipient (Sun *et al.*, 2006). Previous studies (Murray; 1991; Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996) on the impact of WOM in the service sector found that consumers rely to a large extent on personal communication and the exchange of experiences with other customers. However, there is still a lack of research in the context of HE choices and how WOM (Alves and Raposo, 2007), especially E-WOM, affects students' HE decision-making process. Yet, online information is widely used in the HE decision making process. University websites were in the top three most accessed information sources (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2005).

Many characteristics of the Internet affect consumers' information search behaviour, such as the speed and scope of access, flexibility and availability of retrieval techniques (Lehto *et al.*, 2006). Cultural differences also exist in on-line search behaviour (Chau *et al.*, 2002). For example, Chinese consumers are more likely to request information from online discussion boards and be more affected by E-WOM than their American counterparts (Fong and Burton, 2006).

This study focuses on students' HE decision-making in two contexts, both home-based students and international students to find out students' use of discussion boards and its effects on HE decision-making. Consumer decision making is defined by the five steps of the consumer decision-making process: (1) need recognition, (2) information search, (3) alternative evaluation, (4) choice, and (5) outcome evaluation (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004). In a HE context, students need to make two key decisions, in the a*lternative evaluation* stage they need to decide upon the "consideration set", a list of universities that they will apply to. In the c*hoice* stage, students need to make an enrolment choice, i.e, which course/institution to join.

Methodological issues

As the focus of this study was to understand the subjective world of students' use of E-WOM in their information search and HE decision-making behaviour, a constructivist-interpretive approach was adopted. Data was collected via semi-structured interviews. 28 Taiwanese students were interviewed, 8 current and 8 potential students for the UK group and 8 current and 4 potential students for the TW group. Data was analyzed using Template Analysis, which involves the development of a hierarchical coding system (King, 1998), and MAXqda.

Findings

Discussion boards were used by both student groups, especially at the enrolment choice stage as respondents wanted comments from current students/alumni on the courses/institutions. However, the influential level of discussion boards on students' enrolment choices was stronger for the UK group.

The Taiwanese (TW) group

The majority of the TW group used two types of discussion boards, PTT Bulletin Board System (PTT) (a widely used discussion board for postgraduate study in Taiwan), and discussion boards within the websites of cram schools they attended (which offer intensive courses to help them preparing the Master's entrance exam).

The TW group used the discussion boards to obtain information from current students about specific Master's courses or general university characteristics, such as teaching ratio. As entrance for master's courses is via exams in Taiwan, many respondents also used discussion boards to discuss previous exam questions or application queries. Some respondents only used discussion boards for emotional support from others who were also preparing for their Masters entrance exams.

> *When you don't feel like studying, you can go to PTT to read messages on how other students got through this stage of [exam] preparation...I don't tend to get involved in discussing previous exam questions [in PTT]...I ask more questions regarding the process of exam preparation, like how other students obtained their exam identification cards from universities or just sharing advice* (Interviewee B).

Discussion boards did not greatly influence respondents' consideration sets. The reason was that the TW group already had several alternative universities/courses in mind from their internal search and reference groups (e.g. experienced friends or teachers). For some TW respondents who received offers from more than one university, in the choice stage, most of them tended to choose two universities themselves and then compare the universities by using external information from reference groups, such as experienced friends or teachers, and then discussion boards. The discussion boards may not be as influential as the information is not seen as reliable. The TW group wanted more comments from current students' on the institutions via online discussion boards, as it was felt that more opinions would lead them closer to the "truth" on the teaching and academic performance of each university. As information reliability was an issue, several respondents also "filtered" the information by ignoring extreme statements:

Some messages [at discussion boards] are also very extreme. I only tend to listen to people who stand in the middle of the two extremes. Overall, although the quality of information is not guaranteed when it's on discussion boards, it's always good to know a bit more anyway (Interviewee E).

The UK (UK) group

Discussion boards were more influential in the UK group's decision-making process. Hello UK, a discussion board operated by volunteer Taiwanese students, was used by most participants as current UK students/alumni were seen as more 'qualified' to advise them about the performance of British universities. Also, as the information was provided by Taiwanese students with the same cultural background, some respondents felt this increased the perceived reliability of the information:

By using Hello UK, I could see Taiwanese students' perspective (Interviewee L).

…I feel more familiar, friendly with students from my country, so they shouldn't want to cheat me…we share the same cultural background (Interviewee J).

Unlike the TW groups' use of discussion boards, the information on Hello UK did influence choice, as experienced students who had studied in the UK were seen as "insiders" who were trusted as they were independent of the universities:

I trust it [Hello UK] very much, because it's an open forum run by a non-commercial organization (Interviewee J).

Discussion and implications of findings

The findings suggest that online discussion boards are providing a venue for E-WOM in a HE setting. Although WOM has been found to be influential in students' HE decision-making (Ugolini, 1999), the impact from E-WOM on HE decision-making is also evident in this study.

This study suggests that online discussion boards are used by both Taiwanese student groups, especially at the enrolment choice stage. Moreover, both groups perceived the information from experienced students as more reliable than the information from university websites.

Although respondents from both groups used discussion boards, their use and attitudes varied by context. The TW group talked to reference groups before using discussion boards, as the former information was rated more highly than the latter type. The TW group may be more concerned about the reliability of information from discussion boards as these students are 'competitors', when one student declines an offer, other students on the waiting list of that university would be made an offer.

Hence, some respondents of the TW group worried that people from discussion boards might spread negative comments about one university to discourage others from accepting the offers and thereby increase their own chances of getting offers from those universities. This could explain why the TW group had lower trust of the discussion boards compared to the UK group. Moreover, the TW group had more internal information as home-based students, so they did not need as much advice from current students as the UK group. This rationale can also be supported by the fact that some respondents of the TW group used discussion boards for fun or emotional support and not only for the information it provided.

By contrast, as the UK group applied to British universities knowing that they did not need to be on a waiting list for offers, they did not worry about whether other potential students would try to mislead them via discussion boards. Also, as the UK group had much fewer personal contacts (reference groups) in the UK compared to the TW group, they relied more on the comments from current students/alumni on the discussion boards.

Both groups were affected by discussion boards in their enrolment choices. Most commonly, "informational influence" (Solomon *et al*., 2002), where students sought information from current students/alumni. When the TW and the UK groups were making Master's choices, they preferred to seek advice from "experts" who had "more experience". A possible explanation on why discussion boards was influential to respondents could be because universities tend to present themselves as outstanding according to their promotional literature (Donaldson and McNicholas, 2004), which is recognised by students "*they [universities] only say good things about themselves*".

Discussion boards could also be influential as HE choice is similar to choosing a professional service, such as choosing an accountant or a G.P., so respondents of this study wanted to seek information that was more "experience-based", as information from "experienced customers" was seen as more believable and realistic (Cho and Joun, 2003).

In terms of managerial implications from this study, university administrators need to be aware of how influential current students/alumni can be in their recruitment of new students. Although HE marketing is undoubtedly important, this study found that it is equally important for universities to spend time meeting the needs of their current students to maximise positive E-WOM and make student recruitment more effective in the long run.

Further research is required on the use of E-WOM in the HE (and indeed FE) sector and within different cultures (both within the East and West) to further identify differences in its use. In addition, the impact of context on the use of E-WOM (and

WOM) requires wider investigation so that we can gain a greater insight into its influence.

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