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Social and peer influences in college choice

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Abstract

College is a high involvement decision making where students are expected to evaluate several college offerings before selecting a college or a course to study. However, even in high involvement product like college, students get influenced by opinion leaders and suffer from social contagion. This narrative style study, involving 98 first year students, was able to demonstrate that social contagion differs with regards to gender, ethnicity and personality. Recommendations from students with academically strong background would impact on the college choice of the undergraduate students and limit information search. Study was able to identify the incidence of anchoring heuristics amongst the students. Managerial implications with regards to design of marketing campaign follows at the end of the study.

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1. **<u>Introduction</u>**

Power of Word of Mouth (WOM), whether face to face or online, can never be underestimated. Corporate world have started investing millions of dollars in creating positive word of mouth marketing campaign especially focusing on earned media. Whether it relates to adoption of new product, or selection between alternative brands or just watching a television show; the WOM plays a significant role in consumer decision making process.

Universities and colleges, chasing students to increase revenues, have been slow to react to this change and relying on traditional media to attract students. Initially WOM was used to increase awareness but nowadays it's increasingly being used to shape attitudes of consumers (students in this study). Persuasion value of WOM has resulted in it becoming an integral part of promotional budgets of advertisers. One of the reason for this change is realisation, on part of advertisers, that customers acquired through WOM have more long term value, as compared to, those acquired by paid advertising (Villanueva et al. 2008). Moreover, WOM has greater impact on brand choice as compared to traditional advertising or personal search on the internet (East et al. 2005). It is, therefore, important for universities and colleges to use social influence in order to shape the attitudes of the students (Leenders 2002) and let one consumer influence others (Phelps et al. 2004).

The present study is based on three assumptions about the decision making process adopted by consumers (students). First, students do get influenced both face to face and in online setting, while making decision about the university which means there is a social contagion. Second, some students, termed as opinion leaders, exert more influence over others with regards to choice of college and majors. Third, social contagion impacts on the extensiveness of search amongst students when it comes to decision about the high involvement decision about the college choice. First two assumptions are based on the several studies with regards to role of social contagion and WOM in shaping the attitudes of consumers about adopting or purchasing the product (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Godes and Mayzlin 2004; Huang et al. 2011; Liu 2006; Trusov et al. 2009). The third assumption is the outcome of the first two assumptions.

However, there are critics who feel that there is overemphasis on the role of WOM in influencing attitudes, especially when the idea or a concept is new (Van den Bulte and Stremersch 2004). In many cases, traditional advertising played a independent role in influencing the attitudes of consumers and supplements the impact of WOM (Bruce et al. 2012). Still others have questioned the effectiveness of the opinion leaders in influencing the decision of the consumers (Watts and Dodds 2007).

This study is unique in the sense that it will assess the social contagion and opinion leaders' influence for a high involvement product like college choice and majors. Normally, student's choice of college and selection of major is a key decision in their life and they are expected to carry out an extensive internal and external search before they make decision about the college or a major. Assumptions mentioned earlier would be studied with regards to the college choice.

After developing research questions, the discussion will proceed to research methodology and design. Marketing implications and contribution to theory would help conclude the article.

2. **Research Questions**

2.1 Social Influence

Impact of social influence on consumer decision making process is established in literature(Dahl et al. 2001). Consumers often rely on evaluation of their decision by their reference groups and family members. University education is a public decision and therefore consumers are susceptible to social influence. There are several studies that have studied social influence or social contagion from the perspective of new product adoptions (Aral and Walker 2011; Iyengar et al. 2011; Risselada et al. 2014). Relationship of social influence and culture and for that matter between social influence and personal characteristics have been demonstrated(Laroche et al. 2005).

The importance of connected consumer, who can influence others, has resulted in rapid spread of information among networks as postulated by social contagion theory and extensively discussed in marketing literature (Aral

and Walker 2011; Bilgicer et al. 2015; De Bruyn and Lilien 2008; Libai et al. 2010; Risselada et al. 2014). Spread of the word of mouth through social contagion was found to exert influence even after controlling the net marketing effects and that usage volume of the network by members was instrumental in spreading the message and creating buzz (Iyengar et al. 2011). Students tend to follow both descriptive and injunctive norms while selecting the college as it wants to be part of associative or aspirational reference group.

University education is a highly intangible and variable service that might be susceptible to external cues for evaluation purposes. This external cues can be in form of reference groups wherein a consumer wants to be seen as someone like them(Escalas and Bettman 2005). This impacts choice of majors and university. Previous, research did take into account the role of gender, culture, ethnicity with regards to reference groups. However, the question whether student would like to choose a university that is associated to one gender, or a particular ethnic or religious group, or are known to specialize in a particular field, or serve a specific nationality, is not fully answered with regards to college choice. Role of dissociative reference group also cannot be taken on the face value either. Normally, consumers would not like to consume products that are perceived to be used by groups that they don't want associate with. For example, men normally avoid feminine products and vice versa (White and Dahl 2006).

Thus, this research assess whether college choice is as a result of social influence such that this influence is subjected to gender, personality of the student, ethnicity, nationality and family ties irrespective of marketing efforts exerted to influence the student's decision.

2.2 Opinion Leadership

Another aspect discussed in this article is the role of opinion leaders in influencing the college choice and majors. We, as human beings, use approval and liking cues to help maintain relationship and gain approval. Once students like and approve of either their class fellows or their seniors or

for that matter a celebrity, they might take actions to cultivate relationship with them (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004; Hoorn et al. 2014). Following an opinion leader, based on what people like and approve of, is based on heuristics wherein they automatically accept requests and even prompts from people they believe have better knowledge even though they might be strangers (Wiltermuth 2012). Opinion leaders, a small group of people, have influence over vast majority of people (Lazarsfeld and Katz 1955) and have relevant expertise and are ready to share their expertise with others and are termed as market mavens (Gielens and Steenkamp 2007).

Influential people on the network have substantial social capital and are termed as opinion leader or influentials or hubs (Goldenberg et al. 2009; Ronchetto Jr et al. 1989; Watts et al. 2007) and that these are socially more influential than other members in the community. While some researchers have questioned the role of opinion leaders (Watts and Dodds 2007; Watts et al. 2007), there is growing evidence about the role played by opinion leaders in shaping the attitudes of the consumers (Goldenberg et al. 2009; Iyengar et al. 2011; Keller and Berry 2003). This influence need not be face to face but can be based information about other person (Robins et al. 2001).

Goldenbeg et al. 2009 have identified three traits in opinion leaders. First, they have power to influence and often charismatic. Second, they are knowledgeable in general and particularly in their filed. Third, they have very large following on social networking sites. Opinion leaders are highly involved and that have tendency to share their marketplace knowledge inputs are sought due to their expertise as they have knowledge in a product class and share this information in online communities. Influencers, on the other hand, are termed as hubs due to their extensive network but might not necessarily be knowledgeable(Gladwell 2006; Goldenberg et al. 2009). Influentials (or hubs) due to their extensive network possess a lot of social capital an can aid in adoption of ideas and product(Keller and Berry 2003). These hubs might not adopt the product or ideas themselves but due to the repeated exposure their network might be influenced to adopt(Goldenberg et al. 2005). These would have directly influence on the speed of adoption and the eventual

market size(Goldenberg et al. 2009). Therefore, online community members are either classified as influencers or imitators (Van den Bulte and Joshi 2007).

To get deeper understanding, this study focuses on the type of opinion leaders that exerts higher influence in decision making by students as this is a high involvement and speciality product with substantial amount of risk. Whether students follow opinion leader's behaviour and heuristically make decision to go to a college or select a major is a question to be explored in this study.

2.3 Limits on Information Search

Consumer behaviour literature has extensively discussed models of consumer information search. Several variables are identified to have influence on consumer's search for information like ability, motivation, costs, benefits and product knowledge (Schmidt and Spreng 1996). Perception of risk would also have result in higher information search amongst consumers and that includes social risk as well (Hugstad et al. 1987). Information search might be higher for functional or utilitarian products but lower for value expressive hedonic products (Park and Moon 2003). Even age is said to limit the information search with aged people contending with lesser information while making decision (Mata and Nunes 2010) and so is the gender (Laroche et al. 2000). Another very significant factor that might limit the search is the previously held beliefs, attitudes and self-serving conclusions of the consumer (Jonas et al. 2001).

Consumers might search for less information when they are influenced by the opinion leaders and would be inclined to make decision without seeking information. University or a major involves high risk and it's a functional product for undergraduate student which would result in higher information search. The study assumes that social influence of reference groups and opinion leaders would limit the search of students even though its high involvement product. Would social influence limit the search for university or a major? The answer is far from obvious. Students who selected

a university or a major and are credible might be able to sway the opinion of the students who are predisposed to enrolling in university.

Products that are promoted using normal advertising channel and have perceived risk with ambiguity would foster contagion influence by existing heavy users (Iyengar et al. 2011). University, as a service, has all three aforementioned characteristics and therefore student's choice is expected to be influenced by students who are already studying in the university and are also regarded as experts.

3. **Research Methodology and Design**

Epistemologically the consumer research uses positivist approach involving analysis of statistical data. However, there is increasing usage of interpretivist paradigm for analysis of consumer behaviour with methods like existential phenomenology which tried to study the human action from a contextual perspective and postulates that there is a reality beyond abstract numbers (Goulding 1999; Hirschman and Thompson 1997; Lindberg and Østergaard 2015; Thompson et al. 1989). One of the methodology emanating from the interpretivist epistemology is narrative paradigm (Shankar et al. 2001) which is used in this study. Another feature of this study is that its context dependent trying to understand the whole process rather than parts of it (Rubin and Rubin 2011).

Narrative paradigm calls for constructing the worldview of participants as co-creators rather than in an interview form eliciting response. It's writing story about their consumption experience. The fundamental aspect of research paradigm is that the co-creators of narratives and in midst of similar life experience (Goulding 1999). Here, co-creators are student themselves who have gone through the college choice and are in the final year of the undergraduate degree program and author's students in consumer behaviour class. Both, participants and the co-creators, have lived in the same country, have done schooling in and selected the college in the same context of Dubai. Co-creators and participants can share their

consumption experiences and co-create narratives of the college choice and major following 'emic' approach where participant's voice was allowed to emerge ([Wallendorf and Brucks 1993](#)).

This study, in particular, used trained students who understand the consumer behaviour and have read several articles on consumption behaviour and patterns and have their own recent consumption experience backed by the knowledge of the cultural and social factors. Author personally supervised first few sessions of writing of narratives and guiding the process wherever necessary.

On completion of the writing of the narratives, co-creator and the participant review the text and present an interpretation agreed by both of them. This requires rapport between both the co-creator and participants and therefore a purposive sample was selected. Co-creators identified the participants who are studying in first year of the degree program at any university in UAE.

With the aim of studying the college choice amongst the undergraduate students, there were 6 co-creators who wrote 98 narratives using structured guidelines to ensure coverage of all aspects of the research questions. About 31 narratives were incomplete and not usable for the study and therefore not included in this study. Stratified purposeful sample was used to ensure that all different types of universities got selected (see Table 1 for types of universities). Federal universities were not included as study in those universities are for nationals and is free with very high demand, as compared to, supply.

Table 1 : Profile of Participants				
Nationality		**Gender**	**University**	
South Asian	31	Male= 40	Branch campus (From G8 Countries) - BC1	37
South East Asian	11	Female= 58	Branch campus (From Non-G8) - BC2	21
Middle Eastern	19		Public universities - PU	6
Central Asian	25		Local university serving a particular ethnic group LU1	11
Africa	12		Local university general - LU2	23

4. Results and Discussions

Analysis of the contents formed the basis of the narrative style interviews (Schilling 2006) and then the results are compared under theoretical lenses (Kassarjian 1977). Narratives are then drawn together to present as an integrated whole (Polkinghorne 1995). The text of the narratives consisted of 1000+ prosaic text and the task of the author was to find the structures and themes (Kvale 1992).

Analysis of the results are organised in three themes following the sequence of the three research questions outlined earlier:

4.1 Level of Social Influence

The decision making process with regards to selection of the college is both complex and simple. Complex in terms of credence aspect of the offering and simple with regard to amount of time and efforts spent to make decision to enrol. The level of social influence in this process was found to be substantial with more than 90% of the respondents reporting medium to high level of influence from friends, seniors and family members (excluding parents). Analysis of the results with regards to social influence are analysed in following subsections

Table 2: Role Social Influence					
4.1.1 Gender	Family (excluding parents)	Associative Groups	Seniors in School	Fellow students in School	No Social Influence
Gender					
Male	11	13	34	30	12
Female	26	41	15	12	6
Nationality					
South Asian	14	17	18	37	14
South East Asian	31	11	35	10	13
Middle Eastern	23	39	18	14	6
Central Asian	45	9	30	11	5
Africa	51	17	9	19	4
Personality					
Individualistic	37	13	11	16	23
Interdependent	30	31	13	17	9
					Figures in percentages

Social Influence

Females are more susceptible to social influence with regards to selection of college and programs. Males were more likely to follow hubs in their school either they be senior students or fellow students. On the other hand females were found to follow the college choice suggestions of the family members and peer groups (See Table 2). One of the student explaining her choice said:

"My father is a finance professional and has tremendous knowledge and therefore can guide me better as to what would be helpful in my career"

However, a student studying at branch campus of a western university felt that substantial number of his seniors at school choose to go to a particular university:

"All top scorers in my class choose University of….. and therefore it was a good choice"

While only 6% of females claims to not get influenced, the figure was 12% for males.

4.1.2   Ethnicity and Social Influence

While analysing the data, an emerging trend that seems to be dominant is the differences in social influence patterns based on ethnicity. South Asian and South East Asian indicated a comparatively lower level of susceptibility to social influence. While South Asian students accept influence of fellow students, the South East Asian students follow seniors in the school. Students hailing from these two regions are highly interdependent and can work well in teams. One of the South Asian student explained her decision to join university of chosen by her class fellows:

"My class fellows with whom I used to work during my school life decided to join ……. University which prompted me to join as I can continue to work with them. We now have a cohesive group and are able to complete a lot of class projects that involves working in groups"

Students from the Middle East regions were very much predisposed to be influenced by associative groups outside of school with second most

important factor being the family. One of the student from Syria enlightened the interviewer explaining the influence:

"One of very close family friend of mine choose to go to a local university as there was an environment of learning where most of the students were Arabs and it was very comfortable to interact with them. I did explore several universities but finally decided to join local university with significant number of Arab students"

But another student from Iran disagreed joining universities based on cultural affinity. He explained that how he values multi-cultural environment which was cited as important factor by 13% of the respondents.

"Many of my friends joined University of …… due to high quality of teaching and academics. When I visited the university it was very multi-cultural in nature. Faculty members were highly educated".

With regards to Central Asian students, it was the family members and parents that were key decision makers with regards to college selection. Parents were key decision makers and seems to have actively involved in college choice with seniors in schools who already came to Dubai were contacted for reference. Seniors, considered as experts, were like expert opinion leaders and they have possessed referent power.

Last group of students were from Africa and they also had substantial influence from family and parents. One of the student explained:

"My family gathered information about several universities in UK and Canada and then finally decided to choose Dubai. We came here on a visit and visited several universities and then decided on University of …..".

4.1.3   Personality Type

Students with individualistic personality are expected to make decisions on their own and limit social influence. Consistent with the theory about 23% of the students with individualistic personality indicated that they were themselves researched about the university and made the decision to go to the university. One of the students explained the process thus:

"I researched first by exploring the websites of the universities, then checked the rankings of the universities in their home country and finally selected to study at ….. University. My decision was based on international profile of the university"

Interdependent personality type students indicated a higher level of social influence. However, both type of personality type were relied on the family members including parents as the parents were primarily responsible for footing the college bill.

4.2 Role of opinion Leaders

There were four types of opinion leaders identified in this study. They include fellow students (current or seniors), guidance counsellors at school, students who are from associative peer groups and family members. The interviews identified that level of influence of these opinion leaders is substantial. Students who have an excellent academic track record and have already selected a particular university were seen to have substantial impact as compared to current class fellows. Growth of social media has led to endorsement of the products with many interviewees reported that they were effected by endorsement of the university on Facebook by either their student representatives in school or academically strong students. Student's word of mouth effects have considerable impact on the decision to select a university. One of the student explained the process:

"I did an extensive search of the universities and visited 6 to 7 universities. I also went and checked the websites of the universities and asked for recommendations from my friends on Facebook"

Another student commented thus:

"I read reviews of the university on blogs but that was very limited. Most important was the guidance counsellors recommendation and then I visited the university. I did went to one more university and did not do thorough search."

Female student's consideration set contains higher number of universities, as compared to, male students (See Table 3). Most of the students had at least two universities (43%) in their final consideration set while 21% had three. Very few students had only one decided university (4%) and practically all of them were males and individualistic. Extensive search was carried out by about 13% of the student and most of them were females a

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Table 3: Universities in Consideration Set				
	Five or More	Four	Three	Two	One
Gender					
Male	5	8	7	31	4
Female	8	11	14	12	0
Total	13	19	21	43	4
Personality					
Individualistic	1	5	9	37	4
Interdependent	12	14	12	6	0
Total	13	19	21	43	4
				Figures in percentages

rdependent.

Word of mouth or recommendations of opinion leaders (student representatives or academically strong seniors) also acts as anchor for student's choice. Around 50% of students reported that they did select the universities that was first recommended by opinion leaders though they did evaluated other universities confirming the anchoring heuristics. Explaining the decision process one of the student said:

"One of my seniors suggested that I check out ….. University, where she was enrolled, as university's faculty was very qualified. I went and had discussion with admissions staff and was very impressed. I went to another university to check out but finally selected this university"

The effectiveness of the recommendation of opinion leaders was based on their actual adoption rather than mere recommendations. This is the reason why senior students with strong academic background were considered more trustworthy and seems to possess the required expertise to evaluate the university and programs. These recommendations from associative reference groups i.e., students perceived to be similar to their

own are more effective as compared to other students conforming the previous finding ([Berger and Heath 2007](#)).

Role of opinion leaders has been clearly evident with several students reporting that they did take into account the recommendations of their fellow students. Most the opinion leaders were perceived as experts. However, charisma and extensive network of opinion leaders as identified by Goldenberg et al (2009) was not evident.

4.3 Limits to Information Search

Information search with regards to speciality product like university education is natural. However, the findings contends that recommendations of opinion leaders did limit the search. Females searched more, as compared to, male students (See Table 4). Male students were contended with websites, exhibition and university visits. On the other hand female students also connected with fellow students on social networking websites. Explaining the information search, one of the female students described her experience thus:

"I went through several brochures, visited two exhibitions, had conversation with admission staff of universities and also connected with ex-students from my high school before enrolling into university program."

One of the other student explained his experience:

"The task of selection of university was simple as there are very few options in Dubai. We have two to three choices and with the budget it mind, it was pretty straightforward to select the university…."

Opinion leader's recommendation did limit the information search which is awareness stage rather than evaluation stage. This is not consistent with the findings ([Godes and Mayzlin 2009](#)) wherein the social contagion was found to be operate at evaluation stage. This has substantial implications for the marketing efforts of the universities wherein they can use opinion leaders to limit the information search by students. Word of mouth would then play a substantial role.

Table 4: Limits on Information Search				
	Extensive	Intermediate	Limited	Negligible
Gender				
Male	11	19	13	3
Female	19	24	10	1
Total	30	43	23	4
Personality				
Individualistic	22	24	7	2
Interdependent	8	19	16	2
Total	30	43	23	4
Figures in percentages				

Students with individualistic personality did an extensive search as mentioned in Table 4. They relied on several pieces of information from varied sources before making a decision. Their reliance on recommendations of the opinion leaders was limited. Risk perception did not result in extensive search and students did follow recommendations of opinion leaders.

Study was able to answer all three research questions and underlined the presence of social contagion wherein students were influenced by opinion leader's recommendation. The level of social contagion varied depending on gender, ethnicity and personality type. Opinion leaders were regarded as experts but presence of extensiveness of their network was not evident. Recommendations of opinion leaders did limit the search amongst students even though the college education has perceived risk and is a credence product. Next section will assess the marketing implications arising from the study.

5. **Marketing Implications**

Current students with strong academic credentials can serve as brand ambassadors for the universities in their marketing efforts. These brand ambassadors need to be nurtured and trained often provided with some incentives in form of scholarships from the universities. They can represent universities at their own high schools, at exhibitions, play an active social media role and during open days. One very clear outcome of the study is to design campaigns where opinion leaders (current academically strong

students) would assume central role. Previous studies were sceptic about probability of identifying opinion leaders and marketing it to them ([Iyengar et al. 2011](); [Watts and Dodds 2007]()). However, with regards to universities, this is fairly easy as these are their own students coming from varied schools and personalities and can form associative groups in online communities with students. Seeding them with marketing messages would be much easier as they already have positive recommendations to share. This would also limit the information search amongst prospective students as the study has demonstrated the role of the opinion leaders in information search i.e. awareness stage.

Other very important strategy for universities would involve attracting opinion leaders from every school, possibly, by giving scholarships. These can then be the brand ambassadors in future and also influences the current peers in the graduating class in the school. This will help managers to seed the opinion leaders across targeted schools.

Parents and family members play an influential role as they fund the higher education in Dubai. Universities need to reach them with marketing messages but use nudging([Thaler and Sunstein 2009]()) to convey the messages. Overt messages might lower the positioning of the university in minds of the parents who might not be consumer but customers.

Universities need to start the process of marketing and providing scholarships at the start of the recruitment season due to the incidence of anchoring heuristics. Opinion leaders who enrol early would serve as anchors and would lead to comparison of other universities based on the name of the first university mentioned.

Managers would also like to assign active role for opinion leaders on social media, predominantly, as brand ambassadors by participating in discussion and increasing their network (indegree). Large number of connections would also lend credibility to the opinion leaders and serve as effective part of the marketing campaign. Again, they need to be trained in using nudging, rather than, very explicit marketing messages emphasising the

quality of the education and employment opportunities as this was identified as the main factor in choosing the university.

6. **Limitations and Future Study**

The above analysis is quite comprehensive but is based on findings from one city i.e. Dubai. Corroboration of these significant finings can be carried out by further studies in other cities and countries. Further research with regards to contagion process would provide insights about how indegree and out degree would impact on students choice of the university.

Another limitation of the study is its restriction to undergraduate recruitment as the sample was limited to first year students. However, graduate recruitment plays a significant on bottom line of many universities.

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