THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ONLINE AND OFF LINE WORD OF MOUTH MESSAGES ON TRADITIONAL COURSE CHOICE AT TERTIARY LEVEL

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explain how bachelor of communications students who are enrolled to various courses at Anadolu University value word-of-mouth messages in making a course decision. Use of WOM as a marketing tool in tertiary teaching is not a common practice. As elective course numbers increase, students look for alternative avenues and types of information to be sure of making the best possible course selection. The findings of this study indicate that instructors' previous experiences are not as important as their in-class performances. Another interesting finding of the study is although participants are prone to use internet resources as sources of information; they value the use of computer-mediated and enhanced technologies in teaching. Perhaps the most peculiar finding of the study is senior students are perceived as the most common source of information, and their experiences often seen as a point of reference in choosing a course.

Keywords: Education; word of mouth; marketing; communication.

INTRODUCTION

Turkey with is predominantly young population has been going through a gradual but irreversible transition in its tertiary education institutions. The light at the end of the tunnel was first become visible by the introduction of universities that were founded by various foundations. Until the first university of this kind established, tertiary education was totally at the hand of the government. It was not surprisingly though, state-run universities, due to lack of competition were not near the concept of change, student participation to university administration, and transparency. Voicing 'marketing of courses to students' was an eternal sin and was to be punished by crucifixion in those days. Those days are finally over and more and more state universities are now sailing at unchartered waters of participation and accountability, convincing students to choose among various courses. New degree programs such as double major, increase in distance and online learning programs, and certificate programs have forced universities to listen their students more and alter courses that they 'service' to their 'customers'.

Anadolu University's Açıköğretim Fakültesi (Open Education Faculty) as being a state university, has long been an only source of distance education provider.

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Yet, it has had a rather rigid system and is gradually opening itself to more modular programs. However, it is not alone in the race today. For instance, another state-run tertiary institution, Sakarya University is now with its 10 "hybrid" programs of which blends e-learning modules with face-to-face class meetings emerged as a key player in the distance education sector. The university offers 4 years BA programs in areas such as "e-computer engineering" and "e-industrial engineering" seems about to change the name of the game. Similarly trend can be observed at privately funded tertiary institutions. For instance, Bilgi University offers 6 certificate programs that are to be delivered via online tools. Another private university Beykent also provides BA and certificate level programs such as "information technology", "finance", and "e-mba". Ironically, marketing departments are now marketing to their students.

Extend of such activities are not limited to universities, faculties or to departments. Many private education service providers are now in the game, and they will certainly compete with universities over the same target market. From well-known IT companies to rather local human resources and development companies are now education service providers. The "student- customers" are becoming centerpiece of education activities and it's not up to lecturers or schools to decide who to enroll courses' now students have freedom to an extent that they never had before and they choose among courses and instructors. Just like consumers choose among many goods and services, students too are undergone a decision-making process in deciding an elective course. In fact, they operate with same drive, respond to similar stimulus, use same physical and psychological screens and certainly ask for a service benefit. Because, it is them who will be happy, satisfied or unsatisfied with a 'purchase' decision, often pay the same price that a misled consumer would pay with a product that has no use. Because of Turkish culture, students are less receptive of planned marketing messages; rather they rely on verbal communication if they believe that the source has credibility. Thus, this study investigates the effectiveness of physical WOM in participant's choice of a course. Further, the study also aims to reveal of which factor play decisive role when participants engage any course-related WOM activity both as senders and receivers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In general, WOM is defined as exchange of information about a target object or a person face to face or with the help of a communication medium (Brown, Bary, Dacy and Gunst, 2005). Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) revealed that WOM is seven times more effective than print advertisements, and four times more effective than personal sales pitches in manipulating consumer attitudes and behavior. Naturally, it was not only them but many scholars since have consistently demonstrated the links between WOM and consumer purchasing behavior (Arndt, 1968; Brown and Reingen, 1987; Engel, Blackwell, and Kegerreis, 1969; Howard and Gengler, 2001; Richins, 1983), product success (Day, 1971; Katz and Lazarsfeld,1955), satisfaction with WOM experiences (Burzynski and Bayer, 1977; Harrison-Walker,2001), diffusion of innovations (Singhal, Rogers, and Mahajan, 1999; Sultan, Farley, and Lehmann, 1990; Sun, Youn, Wu, and Kuntaraporn, 2006), perception of risk (Shrum and Bischak, 2001), and persuasion (Bytwerk, 2005; Carl, 2006; Compton and Pfau, 2004; Spangenberg and Giese, 1997).

The majority of research addressing WOM has focused on its generation. The lack of attention paid to the effect of WOM has on receivers represented a significant gap in research addressing WOM activity (Bansal and Voyer, 2000).

In fact, WOM has a strong influence on product and service perceptions (Fitzgerald and Bone, 1995). In earlier stages of purchase decision, consumers are more likely to rely on interpersonal communication. Nevertheless, the primary function of WOM is on perceived risk. The perceived risk types can be categorized as functional or financial risk that is related to product or service, and being financially disrupted and consumer-focused social or psychological risk results from the consumers or prospects' interaction with their social environment (von Wangenheim and Bayon, 2004).

The research on WOM and education relationship is scarce and majority of the studies are based on internet's role in disseminating course or program-related information in tertiary institutions. Borgida and Nisbett (1977) found that college students were influenced by WOM about university level courses. Scholars concluded that WOM message delivered face to face by a single student had a significant impact on students' course choice than written evaluations that comes from large student group.

The internet has changed the landscape of WOM activities as well as teaching and learning. Due to its reach, speed and ease of use some scholars argued that computer-mediated WOM has surpassed traditional WOM and took over the majority of its share in decision-making process. In the scope of this research, the use of various WOM tools and the way it's delivered among Turkish university students will be investigated.

METHOD

Focus groups are used as an initial appraisal technique prior to larger research studies. A focus group inquiry characteristically is best suited for the assessment of attitudes and cognition topics, and it will produce reliable information when used in a triangulation method of data collection (Threlfall, 1999). Scholars suggest that as a qualitative technique, focus groups allow for "the explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be otherwise less accessible to the researchers without the interaction found in a group" (Morgan, 1990; Threlfall, 1999). Due to their synergistic nature, focus groups often produce data that are rarely acquired through individual interviews and may result in powerful interpretive insights and provide access to the social dynamics among specific groups of people (Newton and McKenna, 2007).

In research projects where how people approach events, constructs, previous experiences of others or how people interact are the major aims of the investigation, focus group is deemed as the most profound research method (Krueger, 1994). In focus group studies, researcher, referred to as a moderator, conducts a one to two hours depth interview usually with a group of 6–12 participants drawn from a target population (Klein et al., 2007; Krueger, 1988). The role of the moderator is to create a highly synergistic environment in which participants openly share their perceptions without hesitations (Clapper and Massey, 1996).

In focus groups participants build on each others' ideas, and jointly develop new insights (Calder, 1977). It is assumed that the moderator attempts to develop a deeper understanding of the issue and to see it from the participants' point of views (Krueger and Casey, 2000). It is hypothesized that course-related WOM would emerge as a result of in-class interactions and thus focus group was chosen as the most appropriate method to assess the degree and multitude of interaction. The researcher was administered three focus group sessions and session times are 50, 65, 60 minutes respectively.

Despite some concern on the possible cluttering effect that group dynamics have on the analysis of data (Newton and McKenna, 2007; Reed and Payton, 1997), focus groups were chosen as the most appropriate data collection method. One of the most important reasons behind why focus group method was chosen is focus groups were seen to encourage interaction among participants, and enhance the richness of the data. Clark and Holmes (2007) indicated that focus groups involved a purposive sample as sample methodology.

The researcher attempted to chose the best sample group which believed to best represent the universe of the study, and thus purposive sampling method was applied in selection process. Despite the various views in the focus group literature on how many focus groups would be sufficient, the common view is total of three or four groups are good enough in order to reveal reliable data (Aaker et al., 2004; Daymon, 2002: Krueger, 1994).

Another discussion in the literature is when focus groups start to repeat themselves and come up with same findings that indicates a cut-off point and is an ideal number for focus groups. It is suggested that three focus groups should be planned with the option to conduct additional focus groups if new information was still being collected at the end of the third session (Krueger, 1994).

In this research, three focus groups were administered. All of the participants in the study were chosen among the students at Anadolu University, Faculty of Communication Sciences. Focus groups were administered at Faculty of Communication Science's classrooms. Participants were selected among public relations and communication departments, because student in these departments were believed that they would engage extensive WOM activities.

First focus group consisted of 12 students from public relations and advertising department, second focus group consisted of 12 students from communication department, and the third focus group consisted of 10 students from both departments that were equally represented among participants. The number of male students was 20 and number of female students was 14. As for the ages of participants, they were all in traditional student age bracket ranging from 20 to 22.

The questions were developed based on an earlier literature review and various applications of word of mouth concept. In each focus group, a trained graduate assistant fulfilled the assistant moderator roles.

The moderator role fulfilled by the same researcher in three of the focus groups, and assistant moderator was recorded the findings.

Following the focus groups, written records were thoroughly investigated words by words and themes were determined based on the findings.

By deciphering the sessions, following themes were found to be the relevant to the context of the study.

Themes are effectiveness of the WOM, identity of the referring person, level of academic and practical experiences of instructors, instructors' in-class performance, language of instruction and the use of computer-enhanced learning technologies, senior students' previous experiences, and use of virtual environment

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Table: 1
Focus Group Key Questions

Questions
• **Do you think WOM is effective in your elective course selection decision?**
• **Is identity of the person who makes suggestions on elective courses affects your cour selection decision?**
• **Is level of academic and/or practical experiences of an instructor effective on your cour choice?**
• **How effective is instructors' in-class performances on your decision?**
• **Are factors such as the language of the course or use of computer-enhanced learni technologies effective on your decision?**
• **Do you value the opinions of students who have had the course you are interested?**
• **Do you use virtual environment for information gathering purposes before you make yo final course selection decision?**

RESULTS

The researcher enlisted the focus group responses in five categories. These categories are effectiveness of the WOM, identity of the referring person, level of academic and practical experience of instructors, instructors' in-class performance, language of instruction and the use of computer-enhanced learning technologies, senior students' previous experiences, and use of virtual environment.

Effectiveness of the WOM

Participants anonymously agreed that WOM is effective on their course choice. All of 34 participants have voiced the same argument. They further stated that WOM is the most effective medium in their elective course choices. Duygu pointed that academic advisors are not as effective as they should be and "senior students sometimes replace them". She added that the volume of WOM messages increase during enrollment weeks. When participants asked about which type of WOM is more effective, all but one agreed that negative WOM (nWOM) is more effective with respect to positive WOM messages. This can be best described by "Bad news travels fast" saying. It is well established that negative information usually has more impact on judgment than positive information (Anderson, 1965; Chevalier and Mayzlin 2003; Mittal, Ross, and Baldasare, 1998).

Identity of the Referring Person Participants' response to the question that aims to assess to what extend the identity of the referring person is effective on their course selection grouped under five sub-categories. 29 of the participants indicated that senior students are more effective above all other sources of information. In fact a male student, Mustafa said that:

> "*I manipulated many of junior year students. In doing so, my intention was good and I was operating from 'I suffered, so you don't have to' basis.*"

Hard-working students are found to be credible sources of information and they come after senior students. Majority of the respondents agreed that they may consider the information from senior students, only if these students have a good reputation among others and known as steadily successful.

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Opinions of assigned academic advisors come third in the cycle. Even more interestingly, two of the participants indicated that they do not value what the academic advisors say. Another two participants pointed that they do not care about the source; rather they only value the information content.

Level of Academic and Practical Experiences of Instructors

The review of existed literature suggests that consumers do value the available information more when they have ambiguous situation. This is especially true for the product or service quality (Bone, 1995). Heightened perceived risk, especially for the purchase of search and experience products or services increases the importance of experience. Such risks can be minimized by referring to WOM information, such as online and offline consumer and expert reviews. Experience, on the other hand, refers to frequency of a referring individual's previous encounter with a product or a service that is subject to a WOM activity.

In focus groups, participants were asked whether academic and practical experience levels of instructors affect their course selection. All but three of the participants agreed that despite the fact that they personally value instructors' experiences; however this does not play a part in their WOM activities. A female student whose name is Hurigul made an interesting comment for this question. She said

> "*lecturers may be well-established themselves in industrial circles, and they may be knowledgeable in terms of their intellectual capacity. This makes them trustworthy; there is no question about it. But for me it all comes down to how effective he or she is when lecturing. Is he or she a good instructor or not? This is my primary concern as a student.*"

Response of participants to this question reveals that instructors' experience levels are not one of the factors when they engage in course-related WOM activities. This finding may contradict to literature and can be best explained by the fact that in students' perception an expert in teaching is preferred over to a subject expert with limited instructional capacity.

Instructors' In-class Performance

Although entertainment and seriousness of learning often perceived as rival concepts, participants seem to convey WOM messages related entertaining nature of a course or an instructor. When participants were asked how they perceive the two subjects in learning environment, they were responded that this may depend how well education and entertainment is balanced in a lecture. If the dose of entertainment is well measured and if it not exceeds a reasonable portion of class time, then they may see it as a helping way for increase their learning.

Methods applied during the lectures were emerged as one of the most peculiar subjects in focus group sessions. Use of materials that aligns with the lecture subjects, use of humor, images and other audio and visual tools are all welcomed by the participants.

Thirty one out thirty four participants responded that they value any information about instructors' in-class performances. Participants further stated that instructors' in-class performance and their credibility are interrelated. Similar findings were demonstrated by Frymier and Thompson (1992) study. Scholars found that teachers' effectiveness in the classroom and his or her performance is positively correlated.

Gulfiz said that "*I over value instructors' performances. For elective courses, I want to be entertained a bit. So, the knowledge base of an instructor and his or her ability to turn the lecture into a show are equally important for me.*"

Language of Instruction and the Use of Computer-Enhanced Learning Technologies

Despite the fact that participants' mother tongue is not English, all but three participants strongly suggested that they prefer courses delivered in English. When doing course related WOM, participants specifically underline this factor. They also refer to senior students' experiences quite frequently in this regard. Erkan said that.

> "*I know it's hard for me and for others as well. But when I think of my life after I graduate, I must say English and functional use of computer technologies is something that no one can avoid these days. Yes, I do seek for information on language requirements. The most important think is how fast the lecturer is in English. On the other hand if Erasmus student enrolled to that course, it's also a good thing because it gives me a chance to practice and sharpen my English.*"

As for the computer backed learning technologies, participants agreed anonymously that it's an asset and must be applicable in every single course. A common point is web based learning technologies must be used in courses. In fact, they said they prefer a course with WebCT page over a course which has no such supplemental support facility. Halil indicated that:

> "*I sometimes miss lectures, if it's on the web, then it's a big relief, because I know I will not be jeopardized in exams.*" Another student, Duygu said "*First, I saw WebCT as a burden, I was bit reluctant. Now it's like mobile phone for me.*"

Senior Students' Previous Experiences

As indicated earlier, senior students are seen as valuable sources of information by junior year students. In fact the as Duygu pointed ironically,

> "*Academic advisors are not as effective as they should be and senior students sometimes replace them*". An interesting comment was coming from Mustafa. He said that "*I manipulated many of junior year students. In doing so, my intention was good and I was operating from 'I suffered, so you don't have to' basis.*"

Another piece of information that has been subject to WOM activities is assignments and grading policies of lecturer. Twenty seven participants agreed that they engage course related WOM activities on those factors, either as a facilitator or a receiver.

Twelve participants reported that they are not interested in grading and assignments, rather they ask questions about lecturers' credibility as an academic.

All participants agreed they talk to senior students in order for to gather some sort of course related information.

Use of Virtual Environment

All of the participants stated that they look up to course definition on official school web site. 28 participants indicated that they go further and do some search on the web. These participants look up to "Ekşi Sözlük" RatemyProfessor.com's Turkish equivalent. However, only four participants indicated that they engage further electronic WOM activities, such as logging to student forums and writing comments or the experiences that they have gone through.

Despite the fact that students are more prone to internet, participants pointed that they don't go any further than checking the lecturers' reputation and reading course definitions from the official school web browser. The researcher by no means can be sure about what might be the reason behind this phenomenon. Nevertheless, it is possible to conclude that only few participants have their own laptop, and majority have a desk top at home or at dormitories. Due to the time limitation, students want to spend their spare time for private use or surfing on the web when they logged on to the internet.

The likely answer to why participants do rely on physical form of WOM can be found in Turkish culture. Turkey is located in Mediterranean region. A peculiar characteristic of the region is being more verbal. Such characteristic of the Turkish culture might be the one of the factors that may explain why students refrain from virtual environments for information gathering purposes.

Another reason might be that students are not fully aware of the power they have today. The more students understands the fact that they now can make a choice among countless of educational service providers, the better they demand and refine their wishes and expectations from universities.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The effects of WOM in the educational context have gone largely unexplored. This study aims to explain how bachelor of communications students who are enrolled to various courses at tertiary level value word-of-mouth messages in making a course decision. The researcher enlisted the focus group responses in five categories. These categories are effectiveness of the WOM, identity of the referring person, level of academic and practical experience of instructors, instructors' in-class performance, language of instruction and the use of computer-enhanced learning technologies, senior students' previous experiences, and use of virtual environment.

The findings of this study indicate that instructors' previous experiences are not as important as their in-class performances. Despite the fact that WOM literature indicates a correlation between experience of source and the relief of ambiguity and post-purchase dissonance; participants look for instructors' teaching capacity. Such a finding can be best explained that majority of the participants did not have a real life work experience, and thus do not comprehend the value of 'previous experiences'. Naturally, one can conclude that if a student does not value the blend of academic and practical experiences and its transfer to them, then he or she may be weighing the course from pass or fail perspective. In fact, the findings about 'senior students' previous experiences' actually support the above conclusion. Majority of the participants agreed on they seek and deliver information regarding to course assignment and grading policies, rather than the information about instructors.

An interesting finding of the study is that although participants are less prone to use internet resources as sources of information; they value the use of computer-mediated and enhanced technologies in teaching. Perhaps the most peculiar finding of the study is senior students are the most common source of information, and their experiences often seen as a point of reference in choosing a course. As pointed out by some scholars, students must make choices with very little formal information as to what a course is about and how it will be conducted. This leads them to rely on word of mouth from trusted students who might be familiar with the course or instructor (Davis, Guiltinan, and Jones 1979). It has revealed in this research that prior experience with the instructor or subject matter plays an important role in course-related word of mouth activities (Cadotte, Woodruff, and Jenkins 1987; Curran and Rosen, 2006).

The underlying model here is that there is piece of information that everyone would benefit from knowing, but the only source of information is word of mouth. No hard evidence is provided, and while people exert their opinion, they do not reveal all of their reasons, and the receiver does not observe the entire process by which the story came to him or her. In given circumstances, it is widely accepted that people overlay their personal hopes and fears on what they report

The findings of the study open an array of opportunity for traditional and online distance education service providers. Internet technologies can be used both for the program development and in return such use of technology can be promoted via various marketing communication techniques so as to help establish the overall reputation of tertiary level programs. Universities are no longer unique higher education service providers. They should observe this fact and start working on programs that are designed and delivered in accordance with students' expectations. Evidently, more modular program construct would be one of the solutions. Certificate programs designed in cooperating with sector leaders will attract more attention and will be easy to sell. Designing and altering the programs will provide an opportunity for universities in terms of showing to their target markets how quick adopters they are. And, this can only be achieved with investing in online distance learning. The future lies in "real open" and distant learning: online education.

LIMITATION AND FUTURE STUDIES

As for every research, this study is not exempt from some limitations. The most peculiar limitation of this particular study emerges due to the nature of focus group studies. In other words, the focus group discussions have an inherent limitation that the individuals may not produce the most accurate picture of their attitudes about effect of WOM in choosing a course. This qualitative study consists of the students who were enrolled to bachelor of communications. Administering the similar study on science related subjects may reveal more interesting findings on possible avenues about how to facilitate WOM in helping students to make 'educated decisions'.

Due to the nature of non-parametric studies, findings of this study may not represent the common wisdom of tertiary students. Therefore, carrying out observational and quantitative studies may give more accurate inferences about the possible effects and use of WOM at tertiary institutions. Nevertheless, findings of this study would certainly help developing quantitative research projects on the same subject in future.

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