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The Role of Word-of-Mouth and Official Concerns in Student Course Selection

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the factors influencing students' course selection process, with a particular focus on how these factors can be understood from a marketing perspective. To gather qualitative insights, three focus groups were conducted. The data from these discussions revealed that participants' responses generally fell into two broad categories: evaluations based on word-of-mouth (WOM) and evaluations based on official concerns. The evaluations related to word-of-mouth highlighted several important factors. Students emphasized the significance of instructors' in-class performance, noting that how well an instructor delivers content and engages with students plays a crucial role in their course selection. Another factor that emerged was the attractiveness of course-related virtual environments. The quality and appeal of online resources associated with the course, such as course websites or discussion forums, were important considerations for students. Additionally, the toughness of course assignments and the fairness of grading policies were key aspects that students considered when choosing courses. They tended to favor courses where they felt the workload and evaluation methods were manageable and transparent. On the other hand, evaluations based on official concerns brought to light the importance students placed on the academic and practical experience of instructors. Students valued instructors who had a strong academic background and relevant practical experience, viewing these attributes as indicators of the quality and relevance of the course. The use of computer-enhanced learning technologies also featured prominently in students' decision-making process. The integration of digital tools and technologies in teaching was seen as a significant factor that could enhance the learning experience. The study suggests that, much like consumers in the marketplace, students engage in a careful decision-making process when selecting courses. They actively seek out reliable information, primarily through word-of-mouth from senior students who share their experiences and opinions about courses and instructors. In this context, the performance of courses and instructors is evaluated in a manner similar to how consumers assess products and services, with word-of-mouth playing a critical role in shaping students' perceptions and choices. This insight highlights the importance of understanding the various factors that influence students' course selection, as these can inform more effective strategies in academic marketing and course design, ensuring that offerings are better aligned with students' needs and preferences.

Keywords: Course Selection, Word-of-Mouth, Academic Marketing, Student Decision-Making, Higher Education

JEL Codes: I21, M31, A22

1. INTRODUCTION

As the world around us evolves, so do universities. The introduction of new degree programs, such as double majors, the expansion of distance and online learning options, and the proliferation of certificate programs have compelled universities to better understand their students' expectations and manage the performance of their services accordingly. Ironically, marketing departments within universities now find themselves needing to market their offerings not just externally, but to their own students as well. This shift in focus extends beyond the broader institutional level, reaching down to faculties, departments, individual courses, and even instructors. In this new landscape, students have become the central focus of universities, and it is no longer solely up to lecturers or schools to determine who enrolls in their courses. Students today, who juggle dual roles as both learners and consumers, naturally approach their educational choices with the same decision-making process they use when selecting goods and services. They are driven by similar motivations, respond to comparable stimuli, and employ both physical and psychological filters in their decision-making. At the core, students seek benefits from their educational choices, just as consumers seek value in their purchases. The satisfaction or dissatisfaction they experience from a 'purchase' decision—whether choosing a course or instructor—can have significant consequences, much like a consumer who suffers from selecting the wrong product. Given these stakes, students, like any other consumers, actively seek out appropriate information to make informed decisions and avoid potential losses. This makes listening to students and understanding the factors that influence their course selection process increasingly important. The key question that arises is: What drives course selection behavior? Understanding the underlying motivations and decision-making processes of students is essential. This is where attention should be focused, shedding light on the critical factors that influence how students choose their courses and instructors, and ensuring that universities can meet their expectations effectively.

The purpose of this study is to explore the various components that influence students' course selection process, particularly from a marketing perspective. The central research question driving this inquiry is, "How do students choose a course?" This type of open-ended, exploratory question is well-suited to qualitative research methodologies, which are

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designed to generate hypotheses (or propositions) rather than to test them, as noted by Bruck (2005). Qualitative methods are particularly valuable for uncovering the underlying factors behind a phenomenon, such as course selection, and for providing new or fresh perspectives on topics that are already somewhat understood (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). By employing these methods, the study aims to delve deeper into the decision-making process of students, revealing the nuanced influences and considerations that guide their choices. This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the factors at play, potentially offering insights that can inform strategies for better aligning course offerings with student needs and expectations.

2. METHODOLOGY

In research projects where understanding how people approach events, interpret constructs, interact with others, or draw on previous experiences is the primary goal, focus groups are considered one of the most effective research methods (Krueger, 1994). Despite some concerns regarding the potential for group dynamics to complicate data analysis (Newton and McKenna, 2007; Reed and Payton, 1997), focus groups were chosen as the most suitable data collection method for this study. The purpose of this study is to explore students' course decision behavior, and the focus group technique was deemed ideal for facilitating discussions where participants could recall, share, and examine the factors they consider before selecting courses. This method provided an appropriate platform for interaction and discussion, which enhanced the depth and richness of the data collected.

While there are varying opinions in the literature about the optimal number of focus groups required to gather reliable data, the general consensus is that three or four focus groups are sufficient (Aaker et al., 2004; Daymon, 2002; Krueger, 1994). Another consideration in the literature is the point at which focus groups begin to yield repetitive findings, indicating that a sufficient amount of data has been collected. It is recommended to plan for three focus groups initially, with the option to conduct additional sessions if new information continues to emerge (Krueger, 1994). In this study, focus group sessions were conducted until the researchers were confident that the data had become repetitive, resulting in a total of three focus groups. Each session lasted approximately one hour. The sample for the focus groups was selected using a purposive sampling method, as suggested by Clark and Holmes (2007). This approach was also adopted in this study to ensure that the most appropriate participants were chosen. All participants were students at Anadolu University, Faculty of Communication Sciences, which was selected as the research site because it offers a wide variety of courses—more than 65 elective courses were available during the semester in which the study was conducted. This diversity of course offerings provided a robust context for exploring course selection behaviors, akin to the increasing choices available to consumers in the marketplace.

The focus groups were held in classrooms within the Faculty of Communication Sciences. The first focus group consisted of 12 students from the public relations and advertising department, the second also had 12 students from the communication department, and the third focus group included 10 students from both departments, equally represented. The participant pool included 20 male students and 14 female students, all within the traditional college age range of 20 to 22 years. One of the researchers acted as the moderator for all three focus groups. The moderator's role was to create a highly synergistic environment where participants could openly share their perceptions without hesitation (Clapper and Massey, 1996; Imran et al., 2021). The goal of the moderator was to develop a deeper understanding of the issue from the participants' perspectives (Krueger and Casey, 2000; Imran et al., 2023). Additionally, a trained graduate assistant served as the reporter, recording the discussions in each focus group. A well-formulated research question is critical to a successful study, particularly in qualitative research, where it guides the focus of the investigation. A strong research question clearly identifies the phenomenon being studied and specifies what the researcher aims to understand about the subject (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Such questions should be deliberately open-ended and broad to allow the researcher to uncover relevant variables in the data (Corbin and Holt, 2004). This approach ensures that the research remains flexible and responsive to the insights that emerge from the participants' discussions.

3. DISCUSSION

According to the aggregated findings, the focus group participants' responses clustered into two main categories: evaluations related to word-of-mouth (WOM) and evaluations based on official concerns. The WOM-related evaluations emerged as significant factors influencing course selection, including instructors' in-class performance, the attractiveness of course-related virtual environments, and the difficulty of course assignments and their grading policies. On the other hand, the official concerns-based evaluations highlighted the importance of instructors' academic and practical experience and the use of computer-enhanced learning technologies. Participants unanimously agreed that WOM is the most influential factor in their course choice decisions. WOM, generally defined as the exchange of information about a particular subject or person either face-to-face or through a communication medium (Brown et al., 2005), plays a critical role in shaping students' perceptions. The focus group discussions revealed that senior students' previous experiences are the most trusted source of information when selecting courses. All 34 participants echoed this sentiment, consistent with WOM literature, which indicates a correlation between the experience of the source and the reduction of ambiguity and post-purchase dissonance. Senior students are highly regarded by junior students as valuable sources of reliable information. Moreover, participants emphasized that the identity and reputation of the referring person are crucial, with 29 participants specifically indicating that senior students' advice is more effective than other information sources.

Hard-working students with a strong reputation among their peers were also found to be credible sources of information, coming in second after senior students. The majority of respondents agreed that they would consider information from senior students only if those students are known to be consistently successful. Academic advisors' opinions were less

influential, ranking third in the decision-making process. Interestingly, two participants expressed that they do not value academic advisors' advice at all, while another two noted that they care more about the content of the information rather than the source itself. These findings align with earlier research by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), who found that WOM is significantly more effective than other forms of communication, such as print advertisements or personal sales pitches, in influencing consumer attitudes and behavior. Another intriguing finding emerged when participants were asked which type of WOM is more impactful. Almost all participants agreed that negative WOM (nWOM) has a greater influence on their course decisions compared to positive WOM messages. This is consistent with established research showing that negative information often has a stronger impact on judgment than positive information (Anderson, 1965; Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2003; Mittal et al., 1998). This tendency can be explained by the psychological principle that losses tend to loom larger than gains (Kahneman and Tversky, 1976), leading students to prioritize avoiding potential negative outcomes.

Instructors' in-class performance and credibility were identified as interrelated factors in course selection. One participant summed up the general sentiment: "Lecturers may be well-established in industrial circles, and they may have substantial intellectual capacity, making them trustworthy. But for me, it all comes down to how effective they are in the classroom. Are they good instructors? This is my primary concern as a student." This perspective is supported by research showing a positive correlation between teachers' effectiveness in the classroom and their overall performance (Frymier and Thompson, 1992). Participants also highlighted the importance of the "fun factor" in elective course choices, linking it to the availability of engaging virtual tools and the instructor's teaching style. One participant elaborated: "Why fun? If a course comes with a web page or an RSS mechanism, it's absolutely fun. Imagine you have an 8:30 am class, and you receive an SMS saying the lecture is canceled. That's fun." Most participants agreed that they gather information on these aspects primarily from senior students.

In addition to these findings, the study revealed that students are more concerned with the difficulty of course assignments and grading policies than with the instructors themselves. WOM plays a significant role in reducing perceived risks associated with course selection, such as the risk of failing a course, which can lead to financial losses and psychological stress. Perceived risks are categorized as functional or financial risks related to the course and psychological risks stemming from social interactions (von Wangenheim and Bayon, 2004). Consistent with the literature, students use traditional WOM to mitigate these perceived risks, avoiding courses perceived as overly challenging or risky. While participants acknowledged that information from official sources—such as course descriptions and instructor qualifications—does influence their decisions, this dimension was observed to have a more limited impact compared to WOM. Students noted that while they frequently use the internet for various aspects of daily life, they typically only check instructors' reputations and course descriptions when it comes to course selection. The researchers speculated that limited access to personal laptops and reliance on desktop computers at home or in dormitories might influence students' tendency to prioritize more personal uses of the internet over academic research. The study also found that students place less importance on instructors' previous academic and practical experiences, focusing instead on their in-class performance. This preference for information gathered through WOM over official sources underscores the value students place on personal recommendations and real-life experiences. Finally, participants unanimously agreed on the importance of integrating computer-enhanced learning technologies into courses. They expressed a strong preference for courses that include web-based learning tools, such as Web CT pages, wikis, and RSS feeds, viewing these features as essential for a modern and engaging educational experience.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, one of the most distinctive findings of this study is that word-of-mouth (WOM) messages from senior students serve as the most common and influential source of information for other students when choosing a course. Senior students' experiences are frequently regarded as a critical point of reference, shaping the course selection decisions of their peers. This reliance on peer advice highlights the significant role that informal networks and personal experiences play in the academic decision-making process, underscoring the importance of understanding and leveraging WOM in educational contexts. As noted by some scholars, students often have limited formal information about the content and conduct of a course when making their selections. This lack of detailed information drives them to rely heavily on word-of-mouth (WOM) from trusted peers who are familiar with the course or instructor (Davis et al., 1979). In this context, prior experience with the instructor or the subject matter becomes a crucial factor in course-related WOM activities, as students tend to seek out and value the insights of those who have previously engaged with the course (Cadotte et al., 1987; Curran and Rosen, 2006). This reliance on peer feedback underscores the importance of informal networks and personal experiences in guiding students' academic decisions. Naturally, it is not just these findings but a substantial body of research that has consistently demonstrated the strong connections between word-of-mouth (WOM) and consumer purchasing behavior (Arndt, 1968; Brown and Reingen, 1987; Engel et al., 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), the diffusion of innovations (Singhal et al., 1999; Sultan et al., 1990; Sun et al., 2006), perception of risk (Shrum and Bischak, 2001), and persuasion (Bytwerk, 2005; Carl, 2006; Compton and Pfau, 2004; Spangenberg and Giese, 1997). Similarly, in the context of academic decision-making, students seek reliable information and often turn to senior students through WOM activities to guide their course selections. Just as consumers evaluate products and services, students assess courses and instructors based on WOM feedback. They rely on the experiences shared by their peers to gauge the effectiveness of instructors, the perceived quality of the course, and even the attractiveness of the associated virtual learning environment. Additionally, to manage perceived risks—such as the difficulty of course assignments and grading policies—students frequently consult senior students. These consultations

help them make informed decisions, similar to how consumers seek to reduce risk before making a purchase.

The strong influence of WOM on product and service perceptions, as noted by Fitzgerald (1995), is equally applicable to the academic environment. The patterns observed in consumer behavior are mirrored in students' course selection processes, where WOM plays a pivotal role in shaping their choices and perceptions. This underscores the powerful impact of peer communication in both consumer and academic decision-making contexts. The majority of research on word-of-mouth (WOM) has traditionally focused on its generation—how WOM messages are created and disseminated. However, significantly less attention has been given to how these messages are received, processed, and evaluated by the recipients, which represents a notable gap in the existing literature on WOM activity (Bansal and Voyer, 2000). The novelty of this research lies in its departure from the conventional focus on WOM generation. Instead, this study centers on the dynamic process of how WOM messages are actively sought out and critically assessed by the receivers. Although the study sheds light on important aspects of WOM, it did not capture all dimensions of WOM activity. One reason for this could be the theoretical sampling method used in the study, which might have limited the diversity of WOM dimensions that surfaced.

This limitation should be acknowledged as a potential constraint of the research. However, it is important to note that the data collected during the three focus group sessions reached a point of saturation, with themes and responses consistently repeating, suggesting that the study effectively captured the most relevant aspects of WOM as they pertain to the course selection process. However, the limited appearance of WOM dimensions in this study may not be a limitation but rather a significant finding in itself. Had the researchers employed a structured questionnaire for data collection, students would have been compelled to respond to predetermined items that likely covered all possible WOM dimensions. In such a scenario, respondents might have been nudged to fit their responses within the confines of the researcher's predefined framework. In contrast, the approach taken in this study intentionally avoided imposing a structured frame on the participants. The researchers did not set out to validate a specific set of preconceived notions or hypotheses. Instead, they embarked on an exploratory journey to uncover the underlying reasons behind students' course selection choices. By allowing the data to emerge organically through open-ended focus group discussions, the study was able to reveal the most relevant and natural WOM dimensions that genuinely influence students' decisions. This method provided a more authentic and unfiltered insight into the course selection process, reflecting the true priorities and considerations of the students without the constraints of a pre-structured questionnaire.

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