

## Online (eWOM) and Offline (WOM) Channel Evaluation by Indian Higher Education (HE) Students, for Choosing Business Administration Degree in the UK

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### ABSTRACT

This research work is undertaken to understand the phenomenon of WOM (word of mouth) and eWOM (electronic word of mouth) for Indian students applying for HE (higher education) business administration degree in the UK. The prevalence of individual level factors is affected by social media exposure in the modern world of communication. The study attempts to understand student decision making journey and the extent eWOM impacts the individual student's decisions, as they collect information from websites, friends, families, agencies, apart from online social media. The results depicted that in 'search phase' WOM impacted more than eWOM, but in 'choice set' stage eWOM has preferred channel that impacted their final decision on UK business administration course and UK university choice.

**Keywords:** eWOM, WOM, Higher Education, Indian student, UK Business Administration Courses

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of word of mouth (WOM) communications has gained much prominence in the marketing world since the last decades (Daugherty and Hoffman, 2014). It refers to the exchange of information about products and/or services between consumers who could be friends and friends, relatives, neighbours, co-workers. WOM is considered to be more trustworthy and credible than advertising content posted by marketers on commercial sources (Litvin et al. 2008) (Wandel, 2008). Gupta and Harris (2010) stated that if the user generated content representing views, opinion, and suggestions by consumers, shows no interest in promoting a brand/product or its sale.

#### Background Context

The advent of internet and computers has revolutionised the aspect of the human interactions, and the WOM 'word of mouth' that existed in social circles, eclipsed to a new form called eWOM (electronic word of mouth) (Qui et al. 2012). Even though the practices are similar, the traditional form of WOM exists in the physical world of communication, while the eWOM requires an online digital (online) platform to exist and get disseminated. Lee and Youn (2009) argued that the unique facet of eWOM has expanded from the known human interactions towards unknown people (strangers) online, as long as their orientation towards an issue and preferences are similar. It has also led to C2C (consumer to consumer) communication interactions online, which has been embedded in various forms of social media technologies, fuelling the practice of eWOM to influence decisions (Li and Zhan, 2011).

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The above discussion when related to students as consumers, who tend to search HE (higher education) educational institutions (college, university), shows the intense information search process for pursuing HE courses in the foreign universities. Students as consumers are faced with similar dilemmas, as to which university they must choose, which courses to select, for pursuing HE, amidst the presence of others. The methods of obtaining information about foreign HE courses by students is twofold; with the universities using a physical model of advertising in newspapers, meeting prospective students in a career fair, and through third party agencies recruiting international students for specific courses in different universities. The second mode of information gathering process is through official university websites on the internet, use of social media, blog, discussion forums, which also include eWOM in social media (Ludwig et al. 2013). The usefulness of information to the student that aids in the final choice of destination for HE study, however, may vary, between verbal WOM and eWOM usage patterns. It is yet not known which sources are more credible in terms of making the right decision which this research study attempts to undertake. This may be crucial, as any decision made based on WOM, or eWOM communication is likely to impact the students' career. Therefore the current study aims to evaluate the impact of online (eWOM) and offline (WOM) channel that influences the final choice of HE universities of students in India for pursuing Business Administration degree in the UK.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media allows the users in a group with similar thoughts and preferences to share and collaborate in the form of opinions, reviews, and suggestions against the queries (Park et al. 2009). The use of 'word of mouth' in the social circle has gained popularity due to its power of being more trustworthy (Keller, 2007), as it is user generated and reflects un-biasedness (Allsop et al. 2007). WOM as an interaction tool helps to seek more information, form online communities (Brown et al. 2007), as the process helps to relate to the gaps in consumer's

perception, at pre-purchase information search phases. Moe and Schweidel (2012) pointed out that marketers missing out on providing information fuels consumers to communicate and Daugherty et al. (2008) argued that WOM has created a power shift from the marketers to the consumer's hands. WOM has led to the information search behaviour to reach next level from being passive to an active seeker of interactive opinions, while Huete-Alcocer (2017) stated the freedom to contribute of their own in social media network is also important. Therefore the marketer point of view of a unidirectional message to prospective students (universities advertising) against the consumers' side (students) eWOM (bi-directional communication flow), who use social media to state their experiences enjoy a higher level of trust. Seeking HE (higher education) as an aspiration shows students as consumers as they seek to pay for the university fees (Parrot and Tipton, 2010), It is a high value transaction as for many international students funding HE needs education loans (Mangan et al. 2010) which affects their final 'choice set' for course (degree), university, with additional set of decisions for living costs, transport, and food costs associated in final decision. To pursue their ambition, the students are likely to engage in extensive information search about their final choice that consists of factors discussed above.

### Word of Mouth (WoM)

Word of mouth has been analysed in marketing management from the consumers' perspective, while the origin can be traced back the start of the civilisation, and in sociology discipline. It involves sharing of information (O'Reilly and Marx, 2011), face to face 'one to one' or 'one to many', 'many to one' equations which have a non-commercial motive embedded in it (Litvin et al., 2008). King et al. (2014) explained that it is an informal exchange of information between a communicator and receiver, to seek answers to query (obtain), or sharing experiences (share). The interpersonal exchange of information related to consumption experience has shown to impact the individual's decision making process, and have been particularly found to impact sectors like

tourism, hospitality. Though Daugherty and Hoffman (2014) argued that the importance of WOM is that, it does impact the personal state of beliefs and alters the individual's perception against the existing level of knowledge. Thus the WOM phenomenon in a social circle generally involves opinions, concern, review of a personal experience which a particular individual has more credibility and trust (Lee and Youn, 2009), due to past consumption experience which the other party has not. The aspect traditional WOM is slow, limited to a circle where physical face to face real time communication is possible and is a private face to face dialogue/conversation which has shown 'trust' to be generated as the information is shared across WOM. Kimmel and Kitchen (2014) stated WOM in low and high involvement products or services is important, as time and complexity to achieve a final decision differs in both the cases.

Earlier studies have shown links of buyer sellers' interaction at the point of sales, consumer opinions (who have already purchased) to positively impact the final decision, with particular emphasis on high risk purchase decisions (Mangold and Smith, 2012). For the students using word of mouth, with family, friends, neighbours, is a complex decision, however, it challenges the consumerism domination of marketing making WOM to stand out, due to credibility (Brown et al., 2007).

For Indian HE students pursuing aspiration of business administration degrees in the UK using word of mouth is natural as they want to evaluate the best possible options available for their intended behaviour of the final selection of a HE course and college. The prevalence of WOM for a given batch of students is closely linked to the direct or indirect exposure to events such as foreign education career fairs, agencies offering abroad education services, banks offering foreign education loan or newspaper advertisements for student recruitment reported by the candidate's reference groups.

### **Electronic Word of Mouth (eWoM)**

eWOM (electronic word of mouth) is an expression of a former customer statement which can be either positive or negative, for a multitude of people through an electronic medium (internet, digital media, television media) (Peres et al. 2011). The rapid growth of digitalisation in the world has led education sector to state their presence through official websites for educational institutions, blogs or discussion boards, social media platform at the supply side (Abubakar and Ilkan, 2016). Changes in the consumer behaviour while using online platform with the advent of technology (Punj, 2013), adoption of technology gadgets, linking individual self to immediate reference groups (family, friends, colleagues, neighbours) has increased in different industry sectors. Students as consumers (demand side) are also using the online platform to enquire, express about the services (at pre-consumption and post-consumption) stages in the education sector. Thus, engaging in eWOM, for searching those gaps in the information about products or services shows the trust and intention towards online reviews (Sotiriadis and Van Zyl, 2013), which helps to deal with consumer's inability due to a gap in information at pre purchase decision stages (Yeh and Choi, 2011).

The eWOM phenomenon is based on ICT (information communication technology), unlike WOM which exists in the physical world and is faster method to use communication patterns that help to discover and satisfies the need of information search. However, online eWOM has strangers talking with strangers on similar issues, which impacts the credibility issue of information quality (Hussain et al., 2018). It diffuses the original purpose of communicating a message in a review shows user having consumed a product/service is sharing experience is more authentic (Filiari, 2015), which eWOM helps to spread into a much larger network of strangers and the motive of procuring eWOM through shared opinion, review fails to be controlled and diluted denigrating information quality (Spinelli, 2010). eWOM has speed, reach, real time as default structural characteristics, which however is directed eWOM to be effective in

terms of business and consumer interaction. Sotiriadis and Van Zyl (2013) however, argued that issue of trust and credibility is more certain as consumers previous experience is expressed through eWOM, and even use of Twitter (in text mode) is able to bring involvement.

The issue of eWOM in the foreign university education particularly in HE sector, is relevant as distance matters for international students, while the presence of the self advertisement channels or digital identities of educational organisations, official university websites to proclaim university attractiveness (Wilkins and Huisman, 2013), do not contain student experiences, reviews, ratings for the services received. This has led to emergence of third party university ranking (Dill and Soo, 2005) university rating websites (webometrics.info, timeshighereducation.com, QS World university rankings) which uses the user generated (by ex-students, alumni) eWOM in the online platform. While the university advertises its branded courses as products, projecting university as a brand (Chapleo, 2011), in a competitive education market; the students as consumers experience the university 'taught course' over a period of time by consuming services by paying a course fee (Oldfield and Baron, 2000).

The grey areas of information about the stay, teaching quality, campus life, which is the subjective experience of a student's life, is available through eWOM from ex-students (alumni) or from those who are currently pursuing their degrees. Students who are highly satisfied with university experience is likely to express positively through the use of eWOM (C2C) affecting the surrounding social network of HE degree international aspirants (Libai et al. 2010). While eWOM is easily accessible for users who have access to internet, computers, smartphones, it can be viewed by a multitude of people in any given time (one to many), making the information to be more open across social media networks. eWOM for students hence is important for sender and receiver exchange platform, as the anonymity factor related to experiences and sharing of critical consumed experiences, may have negative image affecting

university perception for global students.

As a medium, there are more choices thousands of review and comparison websites, chat rooms, discussion forums, instant messaging, email which are different forms of communication channel which students as consumers use, trying to maximise search within known and unknown social networks. Therefore the rising importance of eWOM in international HE student aspirants is gaining grounds due to its higher information diffusion speed capabilities, across wider user based social media networks. The factors of sender-receiver privacy and information credibility that aids in information exchange process impacts the international student's final choices in selecting the right university and courses for HR study abroad.

#### **Student Decision-Making Process:**

The individual factors like personal choices, economic condition and social outlook with age form a key role in the final choice of HE university and course. Mangan et al. (2010) argued the socio-economic status which comprises of income, social status, and education helps the candidates to orient themselves towards the final decision of pursuing a foreign HE degree. However, the degree of usage of social media depends on individual orientation towards physical and digital divide, as (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008) study reported that low education level tends to use social media for entertainment instead of obtaining credible information for the final decision regarding studies.

Using the 'uses and gratifications' framework by McQuail shows the use of personal identity, information availability, integration and social interaction in the traditional communication platform. The advent of digital media and social media network has rendered the power of the decision making process to be 'dynamic' and at the individual level (Dahlgren, 2013). The students belong to a larger part of the social network at their lifecycle stage, which helps to form a greater number of interaction links using poly media approach (Madianou and Miller, 2013). This helps to maximise the



procuring of information digitally, that labels the individualist factors and capabilities in their social circle. It also exhibits a systematic difference in using technology against their parent's generation of procuring information through WOM. Keller and Lehmann (2008) stated that new generation preference on social interaction with higher multiple exposures than physical exposure to obtain information for their social and psychological well being is a shift which will continue. From the consumer perspective, the 'purchase influence' of the information exchanged between the sender and the receiver impacts the latter's psychological level. Therefore, the decisions based on the social connections with strangers are perceived credible (Lim and Van Der Heide, 2014), as the unknown user in an extended social network, to the receiver appeals more. The university and the course selection criteria follows the process of (pre-disposition, search and choice) for a user, where, the seeker of knowledge is bound to be influenced equally by WOM or eWOM at different stages of the decision making process.

Hence, the influence of word of mouth in university choice for an individual is likely to be influenced by the least reliable, least influential and least important source over their family and friends (Parrot and Tipton, 2010). Linking it to MSD (media system dependency) theory that elaborates about the audience-media-society relationship, helps the individual to live in the world of connectedness, outside the family, neighbourhood network. Thus student's final decision making depends on the characteristics of sender, the message (information in itself) or opinion/review (Moe and Schweidel, 2012), and the noise factors like the situational issues, enduring involvement (difficulty in searching, lack of time and lack of information) that affects the channel choice characteristics (Wom and/or eWOM) for individuals. The process of advice giving and taking is an information exchange process and happens in multiple stages. The influencers like friends, family using WOM impacts individual level engagement towards a decision for the college search, though the student challenge with the length (time factor) impacts the individual searching strategies till

the final choice is made. Therefore it is evident that different search patterns help in final decision making as individual continually looks for new information (Pempek et al. 2009). Engagement in C2C communication in online communities sharing similar preferences is a need satisfaction which in the process adds value to the existing knowledge repository for evaluation (Sheldon et al. 2011) (Mangold and Smith, 2012). This is supported by the fact that educational institutions also have adopted social media marketing channels to influence the prospective students over the existing traditional form of advertisement, roadshows, agency based student enrolment, or participating in the 'study abroad' career fairs. Social media presence of the universities is an alternate channel that generates eWOM, supports the service encounters fulfilling the foreign student's online queries for their final choice of courses, institutions (college/ university). Mangan et al. (2010) stated that there is a prevalence of online third party university rating sites, forums, and discussion boards the fuel eWOM which states course fees, living cost that forms the fundamental contribution to the final decision making process. This is a multi stage criteria process as the choices to be made by the student.

The above discussion leads to the formation of hypothesis based on the gaps which exist for the Indian HE aspirants for business administration courses in the UK. The Independent Variable (IV) is word of mouth, identified as WOM (which is in person conversations with family, friends, neighbours, course counsellors, or college representatives visiting India), eWOM (is an online expression of positive or negative statements, reviews, opinions, ratings, suggestions). eWOM here is Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube social media networking platforms used by Indian HE students and secondly the university rating discussion boards (forum) where ratings, reviews, opinions about universities, courses are posted and read online by individuals from all across the world. The importance of universities in the UK offering business administration courses with different

specialisation offerings attracts the prospective Indian student to undergo three phases described earlier. In many instances, the aspirant is bound to form a choice set while searching information, which consists of tuition fees, university location, hostel facilities, scholarship availability and forms the basis of final decision making criteria for course and university choice.

The dependent variable (DV) is the impact of the above, which the Indian HE aspirant for UK business administration courses, perceive and express in intensity.

- **H<sub>1</sub>:** Indian students (aspiring for HE) perceive verbal WOM to be more effective than eWOM while making their final decision to choose a university for pursuing a BA in the UK
- **H<sub>2</sub>:** Indian students (aspiring for HE) make significant use of eWOM for information search phase when faced with 'choice set' dilemma for pursuing business administration courses in the UK

And finally the third hypothesis,

- **H<sub>3</sub>:** eWOM (on social media networking) is perceived to have greater influence as compared to online/review websites for Indian students' information search and choice of college for doing a BA course in the UK

### 3. RESEARCH METHODS

#### Data collection

Primary data in the current research was collected using quantitative data collection methods. Quantitative data can be collected through experiments, survey, questionnaire, and case studies. However, the most feasible method to collect voluminous data in a limited time period is a survey which was implemented in the current study. Survey is also cost effective, convenient and flexible method to collect data, and can be carried out using both, online and offline techniques. Therefore, the survey was conducted by distributing structured, closed ended questionnaires to 265

students enrolled with British Council Library in different cities of India, especially Kolkata, Delhi, Chennai, and Mumbai. The raw data obtained from 265 respondents in the survey was integrated with statistical software while trying to analyse the data, the theoretical studies carried out in the literature review was revisited and triangulated with the empirical findings. The questionnaire was distributed for three days in all the four centres where students prepare for HE admission activities for the UK.

Closed ended questionnaires helped to capture the response of students with regards to given options in the survey. The questionnaires were designed based on the concepts and variables studied in the literature review to test existing theoretical claims and assumptions. The purpose of the survey was to identify whether students in India considered information on online channels (eWOM) or offline channels (verbal WOM) to make their final decision in choosing a higher education university and a course in 'Business Administration' in the UK.

#### 4. DATA ANALYSIS

The research applied the procedure randomisation on the Indian HE aspirants on the demographic variables and their differences in the variables- gender, age and applying for UK business administration courses. The chi-square obtained wanted to test if the sample of 265 data collected from British council library centres against the whole population had no significant difference in gender (male, female) and age. However, significant differences in the other variable - applying for UK business administration courses ( $X^2 = 15.92$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .05$ ), was found. The analytical procedure and results show that the students first search and then formed choice sets that used WOM, eWOM extensively. The rating scale used 5 scales - with neither agree or disagree (neutral) eliminated with strongly agree and agree collapsed, to 'agree', similarly strongly disagree and disagree collapsed into 'disagree'.

The test of hypothesis is carried out with the chi-square test to understand the differences in WOM and eWOM perception of Indian HE

aspirant students for business administration courses and college choice in the UK. The independent variables used are UK HE university choice process, type of social media, type of word of mouth for the first hypothesis.

The traditional WOM during university choice process to be influence over eWOM for pursuing business administration courses in the UK

**Table 1: Chi-Square Test of perception of traditional WOM during university choice process to be influenced significantly over eWOM for pursuing UK business administration courses by Indian students**

Item	Agree	Disagree	Total
(WOM) in-person conversations with friends, family, admission counsellors, college representatives	67.5% (N=179)	32.5% (N=86)	100% (N=265)
(eWOM) Online reviews in general	55.7%(N=117)	44.3%(N=93)	100%(N=210)

The second hypothesis that states Indian HE aspirant students use eWOM significantly more than WOM to narrow down their 'choice set' dilemma for selecting the business administration courses in the UK. In this case, the online eWOM usage during the 'search phase' and eWOM usage in 'choice set' phase is segregated. The question prompts used are "following sources of information that influenced my final decision to pursue business

administration courses in UK" for search phase, while "sources of information which impacted my final decision to attend \_\_\_\_\_ UK university with \_\_\_\_\_ course to which my application was accepted". The chi-square results show a significant difference ( $X^2=36.07$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.05$ ) that suggests Indian HE students aspiring to pursue business administration courses was perceived highly important in search phase than 'choice set' phase.

**Table 2: Chi-Square Test of eWOM for pursuing UK business administration courses by Indian students at search phase and choice set phase**

Item	Agree	Disagree	Total
Online comments in UK university and course During search phase	67.5% (N=179)	32.5% (N=86)	100% (N=265)
Online comments in UK university and course During choice phase	55.7%(N=117)	44.3%(N=93)	100%(N=210)

The third hypothesis tests had two different Chi-square tests, the first one which had Indian students who have used third party UK university rating websites for university ranking, visited forums, visited discussion boards. This is to understand the degree of eWOM used during social media engagement during the search phase, exchange of information in social media platform like

Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Google+. Another test was on eWOM consumed by replying in online social media platform during the online review of universities, online review of courses in business administration to narrow down their 'choiceset' criteria towards decisional finality. The results showed a significant difference with ( $X^2=108.50$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<0.5$ ) in table 3,

**Table 3: Chi-Square Test of eWOM used for pursuing UK business administration courses by Indian students at search phase**

Item	Agree	Disagree	Total
Online comments posted to third party university rating/ reviewing websites online	79.8% (N=182)	20.2 (N=46)	100% (N=228)
Online review/ comments posted in Facebook university page, Linkdin, Google+	30.3%(N=61)	69.7%(N=93)	100%(N=201)

In table 4, the significant difference is predicted ( $X^2=14.20$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p <.05$ ) as shown below; it is evident that eWOM in the search phase by Indian HE aspirants in online reviews/

ratings/forum website have influenced them a higher degree. This result disproves the third hypothesis.

**Table 4: Chi-Square Test of eWOM used for pursuing UK business administration courses by Indian students at choice phase Conclusion:**

Item	Agree	Disagree	Total
Online comments posted to third party university rating/ reviewing websites online	51.6% (N=112)	48.4 (N=105)	100% (N=228)
Online review/ comments posted in Facebook university page, Linkdin, Google+	33.5%(N=63)	66.5 (N=125)	100%(N=201)

The above results interpretation show that eWOM during the UK university search is a dominant factor due to the presence of multiple channels (websites, review sites, ranking sites) of UK universities that affect the Indian student's perception as they seek information. The eWOM channel and information availability surpasses the one to one face to face traditional WOM channel, as it allows maintaining the real time connectivity much more online connections. Therefore, the involvement of the strangers in online social media websites, forums/discussion boards finds a steady audience from the Indian HE students aspiring for business administration courses in the UK. The eWOM prevalence offers more options as a channel while it provides in-depth reviews from students making the information availability to be credible for individual decision making 'choice set'. Thus it meets the MSD theory discussed above, as eWOM as a channel satisfies individual career goal, individual decision for pursuing HE in business administration in the UK. Though WOM exists in the UK university search process, eWOM makes a significant impact on the Indian student's trying to decide multiple factors (course, university choices). The high preference on eWOM with strangers over social media platform satisfied the university search behaviour goals as it is distinct in rendering credible information from students who have already consumed the services. It also challenges the previous notion of parental influence, university admission agents using WOM (Levitz, 2014), along with the open day (campus tours) which have been eclipsed with a

more influential source eWOM, that is affecting the Indian HE students final decision for pursuing business administration courses in the UK. To simplify the complex choice set factors, the Indian students have maximised the reach factor in social media networking platform seeking specific information (gaps in current knowledge repository) through eWOM which is a strategy to increase penetration of their queries posted during search and choice set stages.

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