

An Analysis of Word-of-Mouth Communication amongst Students. Do UK Students Behave Differently from Their Overseas Counterparts?

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Abstract

This paper examines students' reports of speaking about their experiences of higher education in the UK. It specifically investigates differences and similarities between UK and overseas undergraduate students' experiences of word-of-mouth. The study illuminates the comparatively high level of intentions of all students to speak positively about their HE experience. The study demonstrates strong disagreement amongst both UK and international students regarding intentions to speak negatively. That is, students say, often strongly, that they do not intend to speak negatively about their time at university. The study provides an empirically informed definition of word-of-mouth communication appropriate to the HE sector. It is hoped that the study can be replicated within Asian or Middle Eastern contexts to examine students' intentions to emit word-of-mouth within non-UK institutions.

Keywords: word-of-mouth, advocacy, students, cross-cultural, higher education

Background

Word-of-mouth communication is arguably an important aspect of the student experience. Positive conversations about University life may be outcomes of experiences characterized by commitment, satisfaction or perceived value (Cownie 2014; De Matos and Rossi 2008), but also at the heart of behaviours which define university life alongside engagement within the learning process and interactions within the social context. The purpose of this study is to define word-of-mouth communication within the context of HE, to measure the extent to which undergraduate students emit positive and negative word-of-mouth, and to analyse similarities and differences between UK and overseas students' reports of word-of-mouth within the context of study at UK higher education institutions (HEIs). Recent years have seen a small number of studies examining word-of-mouth in the context of HE (Bruce and Edgington 2008; Herold and Sundqvist 2013; Li 2013; Li and Wang 2010; Mitsis and Foley 2012; Patti and Chen 2009; Swanson et al. 2003; Taylor 2009). The focus of many of these studies is positive word-of-mouth communication; this study seeks to extend this analysis to also include negative word-of-mouth.

Literature Review

Marketing communication scholars are increasingly interested in the study of word-of-mouth communication, within both offline and online contexts. Initial conceptualisations of word-of-mouth saw it as part of the advertiser's armory (Arndt, 1967), this continues to an extent within the recent work of Kimmel and Kitchen (2013) who are particularly interested in the impact of social media on word-of-mouth behaviours. Recent scholarship examines word-of-mouth as an outcome of relationship marketing concepts and practice (e.g. De Matos and Rossi 2008; Fullerton 2005, 2011; Harrison-Walker 2001). Relational participants speak positively about their relational partner, when they consider themselves within relational exchanges characterized by commitment, trust or gratitude (Palmatier et al. 2009).

The last ten years have seen a small but increasing number of studies of word-of-mouth within the context of higher education. In the main these studies have focused upon the receipt of word-of-mouth communication and its role as an information source within decision making, either prior to university entry (Herold and Sundqvist 2013; Patti and Chen 2009), or within the process of choosing options of study once at university (Taylor 2009). The emission of word-of-mouth, has been the subject of study within the Australian (Mitsis and Foley 2012), American (Bruce and Edgington 2009) and Taiwanese (Li 2013) contexts. This is the first study which compares the extent of intentions to emit word-of-mouth communication amongst UK and overseas students studying within UK HEIs.

Conceptualising word-of-mouth

Despite its age, Arndt's (1967) seminal definition of word-of-mouth communication arguably stands the test of time. Arndt (1967) conceived word-of-mouth (advertising) as:

Oral, person-to-person communication between a perceived non commercial communicator and receiver concerning a brand, a product, or a service offered for sale.

Arndt (1967:190).

Arndt's (1967) original words resonate within Harrison-Walker's (2001) much cited (e.g. Sun et al. 2013; Mitsis and Foley 2012) definition:

Informal, person-to-person communication between a perceived non-communicator and a receiver regarding a brand, a product, an organization or a service.

Harrison-Walker (2001:63).

Like Harrison-Walker (2001), Patti and Chen (2009) also draw from Arndt's (1967) definition and base their work within the context of higher education, upon their adapted definition of word-of-mouth communication:

An informal, person-to-person communication process of information searching between a perceived non-commercial communicator and third parties about consumers' feelings after services post-consumption

Patti and Chen (2009:360).

Whilst Patti and Chen (2009) usefully retain the notion of informality and reinforce the non-commercial orientation of word-of-mouth communication, their definition appears to be overly focused on consumers' feelings excluding notions of rational transmission of information emphasized by Brown et al. (2005).

Patti and Chen's (2009) focus upon 'post-consumption' is a little unclear, but if this is interpreted as in essence implying communication based upon episodes of consumption (rather than following the absolute conclusion of consumption), then the context aligns with that required for this study.

De Matos and Rossi (2008) used Westbrook's (1987) definition to underpin their meta analysis of research in the area of word-of-mouth communications, seeing word-of-mouth as,

informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage or characteristics of particular goods and services and/or their sellers

Westbrook (1987:261. c.f. de Matos and Rossi 2008:578).

This definition provides a broader context for word-of-mouth communication than that offered by Patti and Chen (2009) and in particular its reference to the characteristics of services and sellers provides a parallel with the study of word-of-mouth communication in the context of higher education, in which students may speak of the experiences they have and the institution within which they reside.

However, Patti and Chen's (2009) work has relevance because of the similarity of the research context, it is therefore worth noting that their definition resulted in the identification of three types of word-of-mouth

communication: Service information gathering triggers and guidance (e.g. 'The programme leader can help you'); subjective personal experience (e.g. 'I loved studying with tutor x'); and personal advice (e.g. 'I'd seriously recommend you apply to this University').

Thus in the context of this study and drawing from the work of previous scholars (including Arndt 1967; Harrison-Walker 2001; Patti and Chen 2009; and Westbrook 1987) word-of-mouth communication is defined as:

Informal, interpersonal, planned or spontaneous non-commercial communication, about higher education experiences, participants and institutions (including information guidance, subjective personal experience and personal advice) originating from students and orientated towards other students and external audiences.

Thus, specifically, this study is interested in communication:

- regarding higher education experiences, participants or institutions;
- between students and from students, to strong and weak ties within and outside the university context;
- conversational, including oral, face-to-face comment and verbal comment on social networking sites;
- of both positive and negative valence.

Valence and intentions

Scholarship has long recognized the existence of both valences of word-of-mouth, indeed Arndt (1967) himself suggested that 'advice offered to the receiver need not be positive. Recommendations favouring non-purchase will be considered word-of-mouth advertising' (Arndt 1967:190). Indeed the characteristics of word-of-mouth, its spontaneous and uncontrollable nature mean that conversations may not neatly fit into 'positive' and 'negative' boxes as they flow from topic to topic. Nevertheless studies adopting both qualitative and quantitative forms have sought to measure the extent of negative and positive

word-of-mouth within consumer contexts, finding variation by context. Therefore whilst a series of scholars (e.g. Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; DeCarlo et al. 2007; Goles et al. 2009; Luo 2007) have found negative word-of-mouth to be the more prevalent, Romaniuk's (2007) work on word-of-mouth in the context of television viewing found positive word-of-mouth to be the more extensive and impactful. Indeed East, Hammond and Wright's (2007) word suggesting a 3:1 ratio between positive and negative word-of-mouth is much cited including by Kimmel and Kitchen (2013).

This study seeks to examine word-of-mouth intentions, in line with the approach taken by a series of scholars interested in word-of-mouth as an outcome of relational exchange (e.g. Fullerton 2005, 2011). Mazzarol et al.'s (2006) qualitative study of word-of-mouth recognized reliance on memorized recollections to be a limitation of their study. Focus on intentions avoids reliance on such recall of behaviours, however intentions may not be as good a predictor of those word-of-mouth behaviours (Wangenheim and Bayon 2003) as might be intuitively assumed.

Culture and word-of-mouth communication

A series of studies have suggested that culture may have an influence on word-of-mouth communication. Lam et al. (2009) examining the impact of cultural values on new product diffusion, found that cultural values drawn from Hofstede's (1991) work impacted word-of-mouth behaviours to in and out groups. Within the context of referral marketing, Schuman et al. (2010) found uncertainty-avoidance to have an impact on the effect of received referrals within relational service exchange. Money et al. (1998) examining referrals within the business to business context, found that national culture impacted receipt of referred sources. Increasingly work which considers culture and word-of-mouth is within the context of electronic word-of-mouth, embracing blogs (e.g. Ma 2013), social networking (e.g. Chu and Choi 2011) and general web-based communication (e.g. Zhang and Lee 2012). Therefore there is some evidence that culture may have an impact on word-of-mouth whether it be the generation of word-of-mouth (as in this study) or its receipt.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research approach using online survey method with a research tool employing statements evaluated on a 1-7 ordinal scale. The survey was distributed to a research population estimated to comprise 7190 undergraduates at four UK universities. A pilot study allowed the use of exploratory factor analysis in order to develop reliable scales for two constructs 'intention to emit positive word-of-mouth' and 'intention to emit negative word-of-mouth'. Items for positive word-of-mouth were routinely drawn from underpinning scholarship (e.g. Brown et al. 2005; Fullerton 2005; Harrison-Walker 2001; Lacey et al. 2007; Roman and Cuesta 2008) whilst items for negative word-of-mouth were adapted for valence as few appropriate extant measures existed. Principal components analysis and direct oblimin rotation identified five items for each construct which produced reliable scales based on the pilot dataset (Cronbach Alpha 0.880 for 'intention to emit positive word-of-mouth'; 0.883 for 'intention to emit negative word-of-mouth'). Whilst scales were reliable, the pilot data highlighted at an early stage reasonable variation in the responses to the positive word-of-mouth statements, but considerable skew in the responses to negative word-of-mouth statements.

Findings and analysis

A total of 1474 undergraduate students participated within the study of which 1129 (77% of respondents) completed all questions. Whilst the majority of respondents were from the UK, 168 overseas students (self-identified as such) completed the survey, of which 157 completed all questions relating to word-of-mouth communication. Table 1 illustrates the breakdown of responses from overseas students. A clear limitation to the analysis is borne from the lack of distinction between country within the overseas students' responses. This means that comparisons will only be able to be made between self-declared UK and overseas undergraduate students rather than by Hofstede's (1991) cultural values as the work of Lam et al. (2009) and Schuman et al. (2010) had achieved within the consumer context.

Table 1 Responses by category of student

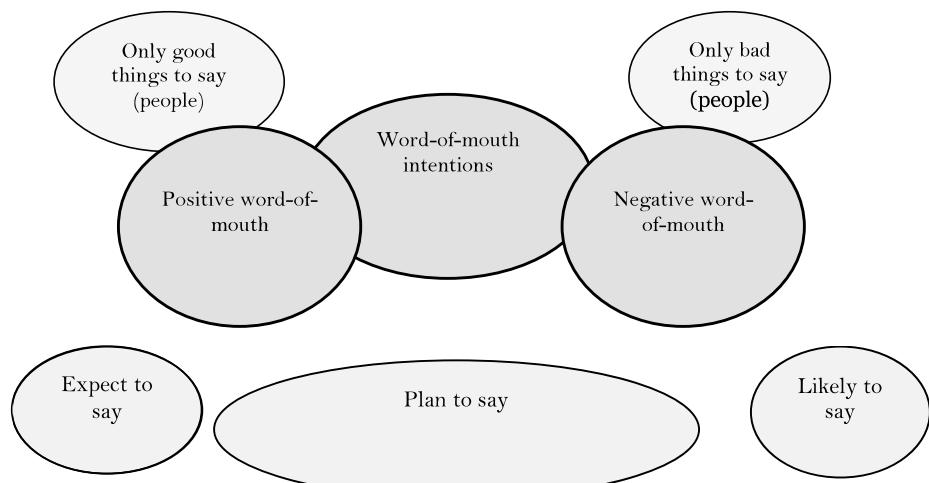
Category	Overseas students	As % of all overseas responses	As % of all responses (UK and overseas)
Male	74	44%	38%
Female	93	56%	62%
Year 1	50	30%	41%
Year 2	53	32%	27%
Year 3	25	15%	18%
Year 4	27	16%	14%
Parents didn't attend HE	114	68%	58%
Parents attended HE	54	32%	42%

The full dataset confirmed the reliability of scales for 'intention to emit negative word-of-mouth' and 'intention to emit positive word-of-mouth', with Cronbach Alphas of 0.846 and 0.839 respectively, a slight reduction in the pilot data scores. Before the descriptive analysis of data was undertaken, checks for collinearity were undertaken. As items were ordinal variables, they were correlated using Spearman's rho (Cohen et al. 2011). Of the 50 potential correlations for word-of-mouth (10x10/2), four were over 0.7 (excluding those at 1.0), all of which were between items measuring the same construct (see appendix 1). No correlations were over 0.8 thus tests demonstrated that the word-of-mouth constructs were not highly correlated or demonstrating collinearity.

The process of exploratory factor analysis resulted in the generation of five measures for both 'intention

to emit positive word-of-mouth' and 'intention to emit negative word-of-mouth'. Examination of the selected measures for 'intention to emit positive word-of-mouth' reflected the following themes: only good things to say (about people); willing to go out of my way to recommend/encourage; plan to say; expect to say. Accepted items for intention to emit negative word-of-mouth, reflected themes of: plan to say; likely to say; only bad things to say (about people). The only themes which were apparent for both positive and negative word-of-mouth, were 'plan to say'.

Figure 1 seeks to identify those themes which appear to define 'intention to emit positive word-of-mouth' and 'intention to emit negative word-of-mouth', within the context of higher education.

Figure 1 Intentions to emit word-of-mouth within higher education

Drawing from the conceptual themes illustrated in figure 1 this study proposes definitions of students' intentions to emit word-of-mouth within the context of higher education to:

Students' plans and expectations of the good things they might say regarding their University and tutors to other students and external audiences such as family and friends.

And

Students' plans and self-assessed likelihood of the bad things they might say regarding their University and tutors to other students and external audiences such as family and friends.

It was interesting to note that the subjects University and tutors were as equally represented as they might be in the final selection of measures for both positive and negative word-of-mouth intentions, thus both find their place within the definitions provided. Reflecting on this research, it might have been of value to more specifically include reference to students' experiences as the subject of word-of-mouth, as initially indicated within the literature review, although the assumption of this research was that

students' experiences were reflected in their judgments about academics and University.

Intention to emit positive word-of-mouth communication

Participants demonstrated general agreement with statements measuring 'intention to emit positive word-of-mouth' (5, 6 or 7 on a scale of 1 to 7 where 1 is strongly disagree and 7 is strongly agree). Table 2 shows that at least 60% of participants agreed with each statement, with nearly three quarters agreeing that they would be 'willing to encourage friends and relatives to study with my University'. Measures focused on either university or tutors; no consistent distinction between these as foci for positive comment emerged. The highest proportion of agrees related to conversations about the institution, the lowest proportion of disagrees related to conversations about tutors. Just 11% of students disagreed to any extent with statements relating to their plans and expectations regarding positive conversations about tutors. Modes were 6.0 for four of the five measures (table 2). Thus we can see that the majority of undergraduate students are well disposed to speak positively about their experience at university.

Table 2 Breakdown of completed responses by intention to emit positive word-of-mouth

Item	Mean/Mode	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)	6 (%)	7 (%)
I have only good things to say about my tutors.	Mean: 4.71	3	6	13	19	23	29	8
	Mode: 6	22				60		
When the topic of Universities comes up in conversation I am willing to go out of my way to recommend my University.	Mean: 4.95	3	6	8	18	23	26	17
	Mode: 6	17				66		
I plan to say positive things about my tutors to other people.	Mean 5.05	1	3	7	21	28	30	11
	Mode : 6	11				69		
I expect to say positive things about my tutors to other people.	Mean: 5.05	1	3	7	21	28	30	11
	Mode: 6	11				69		
I am willing to encourage friends and relatives to study with my University.	Mean: 5.29	2	4	6	14	23	30	21
	Mode: 6	12				74		

Whilst there was an imbalance between the number of participants from the UK and from overseas, there were sufficient overseas respondents to allow the application of non-parametric tests on responses to the measures for positive word-of-mouth.

Statements were subject to the Mann Whitney U and Kruskal Wallis tests (table 3). The outcome of the tests was that none of the items showed any significant difference by country of origin. Thus we conclude that students' country of origin has apparently little impact on their reported intentions to emit positive word-of-mouth communication.

Interestingly gender, parental experience of HE and year of study also had no significant impact on intentions

to emit positive word-of-mouth (table 3). Gender had just one significant difference with females tending to agree more and disagree less than males with the statement 'When the topic of Universities comes up in conversation I am willing to go out of my way to recommend my University' (8.5pwom6). However institution of study and even more so, subject of study, did have a significant impact on intention to emit positive word of mouth.

Therefore we can see that participant characteristic has limited influence on students' intentions to speak positively about their experience of university. There was however some variation by students' institution and subject of study.

Table 3 Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal Wallis test outcomes of significance

Measure	Country of origin	Gender	Parental experience of H.E.	Year of study	Institution of study	Subject of study
8.4pwom5	0.644	0.599	0.567	0.907	0.000	0.047
8.5pwom6	0.551	0.006	0.852	0.723	0.035	0.049
9.3pwom7	0.489	0.100	0.876	0.809	0.001	0.001
9.4pwom8	0.776	0.589	0.637	0.439	0.302	0.016
9.5pwom9	0.932	0.380	0.961	0.576	0.387	0.016

Bold indicates significant difference <0.05

Intention to emit negative word-of-mouth communication

Participants demonstrated general disagreement (62-91%) with statements associated with 'intentions to emit negative word-of-mouth'. The strength of that disagreement was apparent (see table 4) with over half of all participants strongly disagreeing (1 on a scale of 1 to 7)

with the statement 'I have only bad things to say about my tutors' and nearly half of all students strongly disagreeing with the statement 'I plan to say negative things about this University to other people'. Modes were 1 for four of the five statements corroborating the strength of feeling (table 4).

Table 4 Breakdown of completed responses by intention to emit negative word-of-mouth

Manifest variable	Mean/Mode	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)	6 (%)	7 (%)
I plan to say negative things about this University to other people.	Mean: 2.01 Mode:1	48	28	10	6	5	2	1
		86				8		
I plan to say negative things about my tutors to other people.	Mean: 2.21 Mode: 1	38	31	13	11	5	2	1
		62				8		
I am likely to say negative things about the my tutors to other people.	Mean: 2.48 Mode:2	31	32	13	11	10	3	1
		76				14		

Manifest variable	Mean/Mode	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)	6 (%)	7 (%)
I am likely to say negative things about the University to other people.	Mean: 2.19 Mode: 2	40	30	12	8	7	2	1
		82				10		
I have only bad things to say about my tutors.	Mean: 1.78 Model: 1	54	27	10	5	1	1	1
		91				3		

Again non-parametric tests were used to identify significant differences in intentions to emit negative word-of-mouth by participant characteristic. Country of origin elicited no significant differences in the data (table 5), thus we can conclude that there is no evidence that overseas and UK students have different intentions to speak negatively about their experiences of higher

education. Indeed and perhaps unsurprisingly a similar pattern emerged as for positive word-of-mouth: Subject of study had the most impact on differences in students' responses, with institution of study generating significantly different response to three of the five statements measuring negative word-of-mouth.

Table 5 Mann-Whitney U and Kruskall Wallis test outcomes of significance

Manifest variable	Country of origin	Gender	Parental experience of H.E.	Year of study	Institution of study	Subject of study
8.1nwom3	0.289	0.007	0.160	0.187	0.013	0.000
8.2nwom3	0.494	0.249	0.003	0.449	0.013	0.000
9.1 nwom 5	0.973	0.413	0.153	0.375	0.667	0.000
10.1nwom7	0.569	0.039	0.148	0.203	0.336	0.000
10.2nwom8	0.811	0.552	0.294	0.702	0.015	0.030

Bold indicates significant difference <0.05

Conclusion

This study develops new definitions for word-of-mouth intentions appropriate for the context of higher education. The study finds that overseas and UK undergraduate students studying at universities in the UK report the same intentions to speak both positively and negatively about their experiences, university and tutors. This is perhaps surprising given the importance attributed to culture within word-of-mouth communication highlighted by authors such as Lam et al. (2009), Money et al. (1998) and Schuman et al. (2010). There is no doubt that the lack of differentiation of overseas students in the study into country of origin or by Hofstede's (1991) cultural values, may have concealed any differences, but it is likely that the

numbers from each country or even continent may have been too small to provide significant results within this study. It is suggested that this study be replicated perhaps as part of a broader piece of research examining relational exchange within student populations attending Asian institutions, with word-of-mouth as a consequence to relational variables such as commitment, trust and gratitude. Such a study should specifically seek to gather data from distinct national groupings.

Implications

This study suggests that the impact of cultural differences highlighted in the literature is not evident within a body of students who travel to engage in their undergraduate study in the context of those students' intentions to speak positively or negatively about their university experience. This may be a consequence of the

types of students who are prepared to move overseas at a comparatively early age or it may be a response to overseas students' immersion within the UK education process over a period of a minimum 4 months and a maximum of over 3 years (the time into their UK university experience which respondents were assumed to be at when they participated in the study). It is possible that differences by country were in effect cancelled out within the body of data, and future research should seek to resolve this limitation.

The aim is to continue to investigate word-of-mouth communication amongst students across cultural boundaries and the author welcomes opportunities for research

collaboration within Asian, Middle Eastern, American or European contexts. It would be interesting to compare the responses of overseas students with native students studying within these geographical areas, to uncover whether the similarities uncovered here are consistent with the types of students who choose to study abroad, or whether they are particular to international students' experiences within the UK.

Originality

This is the first paper to analyse word-of-mouth intentions amongst UK and overseas undergraduate student populations within the UK higher education context.

Appendix 1 Correlations between manifest variables.

Word-of-mouth measure	Word-of-mouth measure	Same/different construct	Correlation*
8.2nwom3	9.1 nwom 5	same	0.734
8.5pwom6	9.5 pwom 9	same	0.727
9.3pwom7	9.4 pwom 7	same	0.772
8.1nwom3	10. 1nwom7	same	0.723

*Spearman's rho correlation

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