Predictors of Positive and Negative Word of Mouth of University Students: Strategic Implications for Institutions of Higher Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine relationships between levels of student satisfaction with various attributes of the university experience and the extent to which students engaged in positive and negative word of mouth to individuals from outside of the institution. Utilizing a sample of 109 undergraduate students enrolled in business courses at a small Midwestern university, results indicated that while levels of satisfaction with 7 of 15 attributes were significant predictors of positive word of mouth and levels of satisfaction with 5 of the 15 attributes were significant predictors of negative word of mouth, reported levels of satisfaction with only two of the attributes were significant predictors of both positive and negative word of mouth. Thus, findings suggest that dissatisfaction with attributes associated with negative word of mouth varied from those attributes leading to positive word of mouth when students were satisfied with them. Implications for administrators, faculty, and staff are discussed and suggestions for future research are provided.

Keywords: Word of Mouth, Student Satisfaction, Consumer Complaining Behavior, Marketing Strategies, Higher Education Marketing

1. Introduction

In the marketing literature, it is well established that consumer word of mouth has a significant influence on anorganization's ability to attract new customers as well as retain current customers (e.g., Lam, Lee, and Mizerski, 2009) with positive word of mouth being influenced heavily by high levels of customer satisfaction (deMatos, Alberto, and Rossi, 2008) and negative word of mouth being impacted directly by lower levels of customer satisfaction (Johnston, 1998). Past studies have indicated that, depending on the product, word of mouth is a primary factor associated with 20-50% of all purchase decisions (Bughin and Doogan, 2010). Thus, measures aimed at promoting positive consumer word of mouth and minimizing or eliminating those factors that may lead to negative word of mouth are important elements of an organization's overall marketing strategy. Previous studies have found that such variables as quality of rapport with customers (Macintosh, 2009), customer loyalty (Ashley and Varki, 2009; Katicci and Dortvol, 2009)), perceived customer switching costs (Lee and Romaniuk, 2009), difficulty of customers being able to lodge complaints with entities (Oh, 2006), and perceived levels of product quality (de Matos et. al., 2008) are all significant predictors of word of mouth behavior of customers.

Moreover, individual characteristics including attitudes toward complaining (e.g., Wright, 1996), gender (Naylor, 1999), and degrees to which individuals seek social approval (Naylor and Klesier, 2000) also influence degrees to which customers are likely to engage in positive or negative word of mouth regarding a product or an organizational entity. Thus, it is clear that consumer word of mouth is influenced by a large and complex variety of factors. While a large number of general predictors of positive and negative word of mouth have been investigated in research contexts, relatively little is known regarding how levels of customer satisfaction with specific attributes of goods or services on offer by an organizational entity might impact degrees to which customers engage in positive or negative word of mouth. This situation is true regarding factors contributing to positive and negative word of mouth behavior by university students. As the market for higher education continues to become more competitive (e.g., Wright, Palmer, Eidson, and Griswold, 2010) it is imperative that those individuals responsible for recruitment and retention of students obtain a better understanding of factors leading to both positive and negative word of mouth.

2. Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine potential relationships between student satisfaction with various attributes of the university experience and the extent to which students engage in positive and negative word of mouth behavior. Unlike many past studies that examined these relationships based on general criteria, this study focused on the potential impacts of satisfaction with specific attributes on word of mouth behavior.

3. Methodology

The data collection methodology for this study was survey research. Specifically, a total of 109 students enrolled in undergraduate business courses at a small Midwestern university completed a questionnaire consisting of Likert scaled items that asked respondents to express their levels of satisfaction with fifteen different attributes of the university experience (i.e., 1 = Very Dissatisfied to 5 = Very Satisfied). Attributes encompassed such areas as satisfaction with the quality of and interactions with faculty members, university housing and infrastructure, student activities, and various student support services. Students were also asked to indicate the number of acquaintances and/or relatives not living in their households with whom they had discussed a positive experience at the university. They were then asked to provide information on the number of acquaintances and/or relatives with whom they had discussed a negative experience at the university. Correlation analysis was utilized in order to assess relationships between levels of satisfaction with various attributes of the university experience and the frequency of both positive and negative word of mouth behavior. Results of this analysis are provided in Tables 1 and 2.

4. Results

Descriptive statistics for all variables are provided in Table 1. Results indicated that, overall, students were most satisfied with attitudes of faculty members, the quality of business school faculty, content of courses, and athletic facilities. Students were least satisfied with the quality of food services, parking, residence halls, and tutorial services. Results of the correlation analysis indicated that levels of satisfaction with 7 of the 15 attributes were predictors of positive word of mouth by students (See Table 2). These attributes included quality of business school faculty, availability of instructors, attitude of faculty toward students, quality of residence halls, parking, tutorial services, and athletic facilities. As expected, signs of all coefficients were positive. Results of the analysis also indicated significant negative correlations between levels of satisfaction with 5 of the 15 attributes and negative word of mouth by students (See Table 3). These attributes included overall quality of faculty at the university, quality of residence halls, food services, student activities, and tutorial services available to students. Interestingly, only two of the 15 attributes (quality of residence halls and tutorial services) had statisticallysignificant correlations with both positive and negative word of mouth.

5. Discussion

Findings of this study illustrate that student satisfaction (or the lack thereof) with certain attributes of the university experience were more likely than others to have an influence on positive and negative word of mouth behavior. This particular finding was no surprise. However, a moresignificant finding was that attributes that were related to positive word of mouth behavior were generally different than those attributes that were related to negative word of mouth. This finding seems to be consistent with dual-factor models proposing that "satisfiers" and "dissatisfiers" are essentially two different sets of attributes (e.g., Herzberg, 1966). In this study, student dissatisfaction with attributes including student activities, food services, and the overall quality of faculty members were significantly related to negative word of mouth behavior. However, satisfaction with these attributes did not result in more positive word of mouth behavior. These findings suggest that the attributes were viewed by students as being basic expectations, or as Herzberg labeled them, "hygiene factors".

In contrast, student satisfaction with attributes including quality of business school faculty, availability of instructors, attitude of faculty members toward students, parking, and athletic facilities were all associated with positive word of mouth behavior, but were not related to negative word of mouth behavior. Therefore, these attributes seem to be very similar to what Herzberg labeled "motivation factors". In this situation, levels of quality that exceeded some basic level of expectation resulted in positive word of mouth behavior. An implicit assumption would also seem to be that respondents generally felt that basic expectation levels for these attributes were being met and, hence, did not result in creating significant levels of negative word of mouth behavior.

6. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

In order to gain further insight into identifying factors contributing to both positive and negative word of mouth behavior by students, this type of study should be replicated at other types of institutions. Respondents in this study were predominately full-time, traditionally aged students who were generally active in extracurricular activities such as athletics and student organizations. Thus, student levels of engagement in campus life were generally high. As a result, the emphasis that these students placed on various attributes may vary from those that older, part-time students place on attributes. Future studies may also wish to consider a host of additional attributes that may influence word of mouth behavior by students. For example, attributes such assatisfaction with financial aid services, tuition rates, and perceived reputation of institutions may influence word of mouth as well.

Moreover, it may be instructive for future research to also incorporate individual characteristics of respondents, such as age, gender, full or part-time status, and general attitudes toward complaining into predictive models. In this manner, researchers can begin to gain a richer understanding of additional dynamics that may influence word of mouth behavior.

7. Conclusion

Word of mouth has an important influence on consumer purchase decisions. The decision to attend a particular institution of higher education is no exception and, given the high switching costs once an individual enrolls in a particular institution, word of mouth influences may play an even more significant role in an individual making such purchase decisions. This would seem to be particularly true if word of mouth information was obtained from a source viewed as highly credible, such as a close friend or relative.   Thus, it is extremely important that faculty, administrators, and staff of institutions identify and ensure enhancements to factors that may influence positive word of mouth the most and, at the same time, take measures to improve performance on factors that may promote negative word of mouth by students.

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Table: Descriptive Statistics for all Variables

Attribute	Mean	Standard Deviation
Academic Advising Services	3.672	.882
Overall Quality of Faculty	3.907	.638
Quality of Business School Faculty	4.119	.658
Course Content in Major Field	4.068	.642
Availability of Instructors	3.775	.808
Attitude of Faculty Toward Students	4.129	.721
Quality of Residence Halls	2.792	1.051
Food Services	2.482	.896
Student Activities	3.526	.849
Computer Services	3.859	.714
Parking	2.777	1.130
Career Services	3.512	.891
Library Facilities	3.813	.804
Tutorial Services	3.449	.853
Athletic Facilities	4.021	.887
Number of individuals Positive Comments Made To	2.938	1.253
Number of Individuals Negative Comments Made To	2.618	1.356

Table2: Correlations between Satisfaction with Various Attributes of the University Experience and Frequency of Positive Word of Mouth Behavior

Attribute	r	p-value
Academic Advising Services	.157	.078
Overall Quality of Faculty	.137	.057
Quality of Business School Faculty	.208	.009**
Course Content in Major Field	.036	.633
Availability of Instructors	.198	.037*
Attitude of Faculty Toward Students	.181	.041*
Quality of Residence Halls	.314	.005**
Food Services	.085	.469
Student Activities	.195	.100
Computer Services	.070	.444
Parking	.155	.034*
Career Services	.137	.119
Library Facilities	.122	.258
Tutorial Services	.197	.044*
Athletic Facilities	.171	.045*

* $p \leq .05$
** $p \leq .01$

Table3: Correlations between Satisfaction with Various Attributes of the University Experience and Frequency of Negative Word of Mouth Behavior

Attribute	r	p- value
Academic Advising Services	-.157	.038
Overall Quality of Faculty	-.280	.0004**
Quality of Business School Faculty	-.007	.312
Course Content in Major Field	-.142	.090
Availability of Instructors	-.040	.332
Attitude of Faculty Toward Students	-.085	.242
Quality of Residence Halls	-.352	.0002**
Food Services	-.282	.002*
Student Activities	-.255	.001**
Computer Services	-.037	.597
Parking	-.131	.262
Career Services	-.164	.077
Library Facilities	-.014	.643
Tutorial Services	-.257	.006**
Athletic Facilities	-.160	.065

* $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$