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Do Consumers Consider *Word of Mouth* for Crucial Life Decisions?

An examination of the impact of “word of mouth” with regards to high risk credence in the higher education sector

Abstract

This study reexamines the *Theory of Reasoned Action* (TRA) in a culture with higher uncertainty avoidance and power distance and analyzes how homophily and the ability (expertise) of word of mouth (WOM) sources impacts on the consumer attitudes and purchase decisions with respect to such high risk credence products as college selection. Using an interpretivist approach to model building, the study comprises forty-one interviews, finding that WOM made a significant impact on attitudes but not on purchase behaviors. Homophily with friends was regarded as an important factor at the search stage but strong ties were more important in the purchasing of the product. Expertise and the credibility of the WOM played a significant role in generating trust in WOM, resulting in attitude change, although with a minimal impact on purchase behavior. The article concludes with implications for practice.

Keywords: Homophily, opinion leaders, WOM, attitude, purchase decisions, credence product, cross-cultural marketing

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1. Introduction

Strategic decision making in marketing has relied on how consumers search for information and evaluate alternatives ([You et al. 2015](#)). Towards this end, much research has focused on sources of information classified as impersonal (advertisements) and interpersonal (word-of-mouth) ([Maity et al. 2014](#)). Whether relating to the adoption of new products, or a selection among, alternative brands, or simply watching a television show, WOM (word of mouth) plays a significant role in the consumer decision making process and is the subject of extensive studies in the literature of consumer psychology. The effect of WOM is dependent on the product type ([Park and Lee 2009](#)) and trust in the WOM communications ([López and Sicilia 2014](#)).

The study of WOM has utilised the *Theory of Reasoned Action* (TRA), propounded by [Fishbein and Ajzen \(1975\)](#) (see Fig 1), which posits that consumption behaviours are dependent on how consumers search and evaluate products. A number of studies have explored this assertion: fast food consumption with culture as a moderating variable ([Bagozzi et al. 2014](#)); search products (which can be evaluated before purchase, for example, cameras) with the moderating variable of expertise ([King and Balasubramanian 1994](#)); banking products with the mediating variable of trust ([Dimitriadis and Kyrezis 2011](#)); experience products (mostly services which can be evaluated after service delivery, like tourism) with past behaviour as the moderating variable ([Kim et al. 2011](#), [Ryu and Jang 2006](#)); and physical goods or services with regards to digital products ([Pascual-Miguel et al. 2015](#)).

---- Figure 1 here----

TRA has also been studied with regards to WOM's impact on attitude formation and behaviour ([Palka et al. 2009](#)), trust in online environment ([Benbasat et al. 2008](#)), negative word of mouth ([Cheng et al. 2006](#)), eWOM and informational motive ([Lee and Song 2010](#)). However, [Gupta and Harris \(2010\)](#) identified that studies with regards to credence product (requiring specialized expertise to evaluate) presents a gap in the literature that needs to be bridged. A subsequent study, [Pan and Chiou \(2011\)](#) used a comparison of two product types, experience and credence, using hotel services and healthy food respectively, and found that consumers trusted WOM for credence products more than experience products. People who are similar (homophily) did not found strength of ties as a barrier to trust. This research seeks to further study the TRA by adding culture as a construct, specifically with regards to higher uncertainty avoidance and power distance in Hofstede's model ([Prayag and Hosany 2014](#)).

The impact of WOM on attitude-behaviour relationships depends on trust in WOM sources ([Pan and Chiou 2011](#)). There are several aspects of trustworthiness as per [Mayer et al. \(1995\)](#), including ability, benevolence and integrity. This study, dealing with high risk credence products, considers ability (expertise) apart from homophily and tie-strength.

The present study is based on three assumptions about the decision making process adopted by consumers. First, consumers are influenced by WOM when making purchase decisions. Second, some consumers, termed as opinion leaders with expertise, exert more influence and evoke higher levels of trust. Third, homophily and tie-strength plays an important role in shaping the attitudes of consumers and evokes trust in WOM.

However, some critics feel that there is an overemphasis on the role of WOM in influencing attitudes, especially when the idea or a concept is new ([Van den Bulte and Stremersch 2004](#)). In many cases, traditional advertising played an independent role in influencing the attitudes of consumers and supplemented the impact of WOM ([Bruce et al. 2012](#)). Still others have questioned the effectiveness of opinion leaders in influencing the consumer decision ([Watts and Dodds 2007](#)).

This study is unique in the sense that it will assess the role of WOM in shaping attitudes and purchase behaviours as well as studying the characteristics of WOM source with regards to TRA. It will study the impact of opinion leader influence (expertise), homophily, and tie-strength. Using trust in WOM sources as a mediator that strengthens the relationship between WOM and attitude, this study will assess moderators of this relationship, i.e. product type and cross-cultural contexts. After developing research questions, the discussion will proceed to research methodology and design. We conclude the article with a discussion of marketing implications.

2. Research Questions

2.1 Influence of WOM on attitudes and purchase decisions in high context culture

Several studies, spanning decades of work, have established the relationship between attitudes and behaviours in an attempt to understand how attitudes influence behaviours ([Ajzen 2001](#); [Bargh et al. 1996](#); [Fazio 1990](#)). Earlier studies that advocated an information-processing model ([Hovland et al. 1953](#); [McGuire 1972](#)) suggested that all WOM results in attitude change. Later studies have found that that the persuasive effect of WOM depends on

source, content, and context of WOM ([Petty and Cacioppo 1986](#); [Sparks et al. 2013](#)). Explaining these factors, [Ajzen and Fishbein \(2000\)](#) postulated that the source of the message is critical in attitude formation. A study of consumer attitudes towards fast food restaurants, [Bagozzi et al. \(2014\)](#) found that consumers relied on WOM when they went with their friends but acted according to their previous experience and beliefs when they were alone. However, the influence of WOM on Attitude-behaviour relationship was found to have varying effects in different cultures ([Fong and Burton 2008](#); [Lee et al. 2012](#); [Lien and Cao 2014](#); [Money et al. 1998](#); [Yang and Wang 2015](#)). First research proposition: Whether attitudes towards purchasing credence products is influenced by WOM and impacted by source of WOM and culture?

2.2 Opinion Leadership (Expertise and credibility of the WOM source)

Several studies have explored trust in WOM sources and its antecedents. These include: consistency, ([See-To and Ho 2014](#)), integrity and honesty ([Suh and Han 2003](#)), transparency ([See-To and Ho 2014](#)), reliability ([Horst et al. 2007](#)); homophily ([Brechtwald and Prinstein 2011](#); [Duffy 2015](#)), valance of WOM ([Pan and Chiou 2011](#)), volume of WOM ([Chin-Lung et al. 2013](#)); and expertise of WOM source ([Cho et al. 2014](#)). A second line of research pertains to the expertise and credibility of WOM sources, because credence products presents higher risk for buyers and therefore knowledge and expertise play an important role ([Iyengar et al. 2011](#)). Opinion leaders, a small group of people, have influenced a majority of individuals ([Lazarsfeld and Katz 1955](#)). They have relevant expertise and are ready to share this with others. They are termed *market mavens* ([Gielens and Steenkamp 2007](#)).

While some researchers have questioned the role of opinion leaders ([Watts and Dodds 2007](#); [Watts et al. 2007](#)), there is growing evidence of the role played by opinion leaders in shaping the consumer attitudes ([Goldenberg et al. 2009](#); [Iyengar et al. 2011](#); [Keller and Berry 2003](#)). Experts in their field are construed to be reliable and trusted ([Lu et al. 2014](#)). Second research proposition: What's the role of expertise and credibility of WOM sources with regard to credence product?

2.3 Homophily and Tie-Strength

Another aspect of trust in the WOM message comes from homophily and tie-strength. Though the expertise of the source in the product area invokes trust in the WOM,

similarity with the WOM source (homophily) was found to be more credible than that of unknown experts. [Duffy \(2015\)](#). Apart from homophily, [Shan and King \(2015\)](#) found that strong ties on the network (with known people) were more influential in shaping attitudes as a result of WOM than expertise of the opinion leaders. Tie-strength was found to play a dominant role in high context culture with high power distance ([Samaha et al. 2014](#); [Yamagishi and Yamagishi 1994](#)) and expected to influence behavior ([Chang Soo and Praveen 2016](#)).

Homophily and tie-strength play a crucial role with regard to adolescents, as compared to older people. Adolescents trust WOM from people similar to them with strong ties ([Brechtwald and Prinstein 2011](#); [Dickinger 2010](#); [O'Connor 2008](#); [Racherla and Friske 2012](#); [Sparks et al. 2013](#)). However, many times homophily or similarity is not restricted to age, ethnicity, or location, but to people with similar interests or those who are like-minded ([Park et al. 2014](#); [Sweeney et al. 2014](#)). Uncertainty avoidance, a part of cultural dimension, was found to be a moderating variable by [Schumann et al. \(2010\)](#), positing that it impacted trust placed in WOM communications. Third research proposition: How homophily and tie-strength effect WOM in high risk product in a culture with higher uncertainty avoidance and power distance?

3. Research Methodology

This study on WOM adopted qualitative research common in social sciences ([Bryman and Bell 2015](#)) and consumer research. Marketing in general and consumer research has traditionally adopted a positivist approach. However, there are studies in this spectrum that have adopted interpretivist approaches ([Burchill and Fine 1997](#); [Goulding 1999a](#); [Goulding 1999b](#); [Hirschman and Thompson 1997](#); [Kozinets et al. 2010](#); [Lindberg and Østergaard 2015](#); [Pettigrew 2002](#); [Shankar et al. 2001](#)). This study adopts an interpretivist approach using semi-structured interviews (N=41) to understand how and why WOM impacts on attitude change. This attitude change is moderated by type of product within a Middle Eastern cultural context that is typified by high power distance and uncertainty avoidance. This will provide a richer understanding of a phenomenon which is a foundation of qualitative approach ([Guba and Lincoln 1994](#)). This approach is particularly helpful in understanding constructs like attitudes, trust, homophily and opinion leadership ([Partington 2001](#)). Interviews will provide information about the WOM as perceived by individuals ([Hannabuss 1996](#)) and will help build a revised model of TRA. As the

interpretivist approach assumes that the researcher is the co-creator of the reality, socially desirable answers can be explored further to understand this reality ([Bryman and Bell 2015](#)).

In total, 41 undergraduate students were interviewed face-to-face over a period of six months in 2015 with an average interview time of thirty-six minutes. They were asked to discuss their process of college selection and how they interpreted WOM to make decisions about that selection. These respondents were selected using a heterogeneous purposive sample of first year students pursuing business degrees in Dubai Academic City and Knowledge Village in United Arab Emirates (UAE) to ensure that the sample was representative. The majority of universities in Dubai are clustered in these two places. The list of questions was pre-designed but the researcher asked follow-up questions to clarify understanding or to probe further ([Roulston 2006](#)). The number of interviews was kept at forty-one to provide greater insights from a small number of respondents ([Bryman and Bell 2015](#)) and were audio recorded and transcribed giving around 43,000 words of text. Content analysis was adopted in order to understand the phenomenon.

The content analysis adopted constant comparisons and key words text search ([Leech and Onwuegbuzie 2011](#)). After establishing subject areas to be studied, the researcher read all the text, coded the themes, and compared the interpretations by creating a coding manual ([Krippendorff 2012](#)). At the first stage only five interviews were analysed to arrive at the coding manual which was then used for the remaining thirty-six interviews. This process was done using NVIVO software which was also used for analysis of key words by choosing synonyms of the constructs used in the study, such as *word of mouth, forums, trust, expertise, similarity*.

The text was analysed by coding each unit multiple times with the unit of analysis being responses from the participants. The responses were coded to three themes, sources of WOM in consumer decision making, expertise of WOM source, and homophily. These were then further classified into two mutually exclusive categorical variables. Each of the forty-one interviews was analysed for statements that corresponded to six categories with respondents allowed to express opinions in more than one category. A table of themes with number of statements in those themes was prepared (See Table 4.1)

4. Findings and Analysis

The findings from the interviews are classified under three themes spread over six categories with two categories in each of the three themes. Quotes from respondents provide further

insights in their own words identifying respondent number in parenthesis. A frequency table of statements are there in Table 4.1. Names of universities mentioned in those quotes have been changed to XYZ or ABC etc. to remove identification information.

4.1 WOM from several sources

4.1.1 Sources of WOM and its impact on attitude

Attitude impacts purchase behavior, but the process starts with a search for information. The level of involvement is critical in determining the extent of the search. An overwhelming majority of students (84%) mentioned that they were involved in the search process to the extent that they started looking for information as early as class nine and ten.

Respondents were then asked about sources of information about the university. Students elaborated several, including advertisements, seminars, and direct marketing. However, they affirmed that they trusted WOM more than marketer oriented advertisements. Respondents specifically mentioned that they normally avoided advertisements and did not pay attention to them (30% of respondents). One explained why the advertisement was not critical in the selection of college:

*“Advertising is important, but sometimes there are a lot of people who like to lie in their advertising. But still it is powerful but my decision was not based on the advertising”
(#20)*

However, some of the respondents (15% respondents) asserted that updates on social media pages of the universities played an important role in their enrolment decisions once they were anchored to a particular college by an opinion leader. One respondent explained thus:

“School guidance counsellor suggested me to join XYZ University and then I used social media and liked their webpage on Facebook and kept updating me on the things. Social media was one of the ways to know more about the university. They really attracted me with the various ways like funny pictures and quotes like how would it be to study in XYZ” (#14)

--- Table 1 here---

Family sources were considered as one of the most critical of the WOM sources, as 27% of the respondents indicated that their parents or their family members suggested a university. This

resulted in a further search of the university. One of the respondents indicated how the task of search was curtailed due to the WOM from family members:

I didn't really have to collect any information, a lot of my family members had gone to XYZ University, like my cousins, and it was like my cousin's had gone there so I want to go there as well, it's something like a legacy and also because I did not want to go abroad and I definitely, wasn't going to go back to India. So I thought that XYZ was the best option. My parents themselves wanted me to go to XYZ and they wanted me to stay here and I, myself wanted to stay here and I thought maybe this was the best choice for me. (# 33)

In many cases, the family members simply made the suggestion to search a particular university. This put the university in the consideration set of the alternatives considered by the student, in contrast with the above respondent, where the parents limited the search of the student and implied that this is was the preferred university.

However, the most available (readily accessible) source of WOM was friends, either on social media or in society. About 54% of the respondents indicated that they obtained information about universities from their friends. One of the respondents explaining the journey of college selection stated:

My main source of information was, of course, what I heard about the college from a lot of my friends. A lot of my friends had joined the college earlier. I knew a lot of people from other schools also who were interested in XYZ. So I also decided that something must be good about this college. So I took a chance and I went to the university and I spoke to lecturers, I walked around the campus and I really liked the ambience. I felt good about it and I could myself study over there. (#4)

This was the case with regards to friends in the online social media sphere where information from connections was found to be the starting point for college search. One of the respondents explained:

When you have four hundred friends on Facebook, it is easier to gain information since one or two at least go to different universities. And when they post pictures and statuses about events, you get to see their university life. And you eventually come across them

and when you look about them on their pages, you further on search on those university names. (#38)

From the above, it is clear that consumers rely on several sources of WOM and that WOM played a role in changing their attitudes. As a result of WOM, the attitudes did change as a result of a change in beliefs in the TRA model.

4.1.2 Influence of WOM on purchase decision making

Three sources of WOM, as outlined in 4.1.1 above were starting points in consumer search process--the identification of a college for higher studies. The next series of interview questions explored the role played by different sources of WOM in purchase decisions. Marketing oriented WOM, in the form of advertisements on social media networks and sponsored posts played a very limited role. Though respondents indicated they were exposed to social media, only 7% mentioned that it had a role to play and that they were influenced by posts on the social media pages of the college.

I used to read updates from various universities on Social Media and it did help when I was choosing universities. (#10)

Those who displayed independent decision-making based on social networking and internet searches, comprised 12% of the respondents. One explained the college selection process thus:

I think it is easier for me to do something on my own. I am really independent. I don't like asking for help, either it is my relatives or best friends. (#7)

The friends were the reference groups to whom the respondent referred and were quite influential in the decision making process of the students when they selected universities. About 44% of the respondents asserted that they were influenced by their friends and reference groups in the decision making process. Explaining this line of thinking, one of the respondent stated:

Another thing that shaped my decision was how many of my friends were going to join this university. As experience was an essential factor for me to go to university, having the same people who I had seen for the past 5 to 6 years would not be a new experience.

*How many people from my school are going to join the university that I am choosing?
(#35)*

Social media connections (unfamiliar friends) played a role in some sort of decision making in 10% of the respondents. However, the biggest influence in college choice was family members, contributing to more than half of the respondents at 54%. A substantial number of respondents (40%) mentioned that their decisions to join the college were based on recommendations from parents and sometimes even against their wishes.

Actually I wanted to be a lawyer. But my father gave me advice that it is not the future job for girls and that I should concentrate more on what girls do better or best. This is how I ended up studying for my current major in human resources. My father suggested the university and I ended up in XYZ. (#12)

Some respondents changed their attitude in response to WOM but still went ahead with suggestions from family.

Yeah, because my mom really wanted to study me in Dubai. We actually live in Sharjah and beside my dad's office is there, in Silicon Oasis. So, he drops me off in the morning, sometimes he picks me up and therefore I selected this university and not the one suggested by my friends (#13)

While some had to disregard the opinion of their friends as the parents were decision makers as explained by one of the respondents:

Yeah, I had friends in other universities here, they told it's good. It's fun. But my parents wanted me here (# 15)

From the above it's clear that external WOM played a substantial role in attitude formation but in many cases not in the purchase decision making. Because of their involvement with the product, WOM impacted their attitude and they processed information received by them conforming to the findings of [Petty et al. \(1995\)](#). However, due to high power distance in the Middle Eastern culture ([Ramdani et al. 2014](#)) consumers might tend to go with recommendations of parents even though their beliefs about the product would be different. Especially in credence product where risk is high, consumers tended to exhibit higher levels of uncertainty avoidance and went with suggestions of parents. This is in contrast to the findings of

[Pan and Chiou \(2011\)](#) wherein consumers made elaborate searches, were influenced by WOM, but avoided uncertainty and exhibited the high power distance typical of Middle Eastern cultures in which consumers did not purchase. Even though their attitude changed due to WOM from friends, they instead went with suggestions from family. During the search process the attitude changed due to WOM from friends but was not sustained till purchase decision. The findings here also confirmed the earlier findings of [Bruce et al. \(2012\)](#) who did mention that advertisement does play a role and supports WOM. Here also there were respondents who were anchored directly and indirectly by marketer oriented WOM on the social media sphere and that resulted in attitude change.

4.2 Expertise and Credibility of WOM source

4.2.1 Expertise of the WOM Source (Opinion Leadership)

The third theme concerned the role of expertise of WOM source in the decision making process where respondents indicated how they valued the expertise of opinion leaders when they selected the college. Here, three main aspects were discovered while analysing the interviews.

The first concerns trusting the ability of friends already in universities as credible WOM source for advice about the university. Of the 44% of the respondents who considered WOM from their friends, a minority (20%) relied on friends who were not only satisfied with universities but were academically strong. Further, some students (17%) considered their friends as expert and credible while others (7%) relied on their friends without considering their expertise. Some of the comments here were:

I have got lot suggestions from my friends who are very knowledgeable and are getting good grades, and I listen to their advices, I need to fulfill my career goal and XYZ university provides quality education and certificate recognized throughout the world (#20)

Other student commented thus:

I spoke to my seniors and friends who were already pursuing undergraduate courses at these universities. They helped me know about the environment, the activities held, the clubs, the teaching faculty and all other factors that were to influence my decision about joining a university (#9)

The second category of WOM sources involved families where 12% of the respondents felt their parents knew the university through connections who were construed to be expert. This comprised either people working in the office of their parents or through their social connections.

My father works with XYZ Company and they select students from ABC University every year; a good bunch of them. This is indication that university is good and my father's colleagues also send their children to this university. So that was something for me (#21)

There was a substantial number of respondents (29% from 56%) who felt that they trusted the WOM of parents while they were not able to justify why they trusted them (expertise or credibility etc.) For them, expertise was not the reason for trust. As explained by one student:

Actually it is much more my parent's decision, because I was born here in Dubai, and I have studied here since I was born and therefore selected what my parents suggested (#15).

About 15% out of 56% regarded their family members as able to judge, either due to their studies in the university which made them capable of giving suggestions or their being educated in same area and therefore able to offer judgements.

Yeah, I have really, really big family, so in my family everyone always has something to say about what you're doing. At the beginning, XYZ wasn't my decision; it was my parents' decision, because my sister was going there, so they thought I should go there too. And then ABC was my choice as my cousins used to go there so they kept saying "go there, go there", like you know "it will work out for you, your ...but I selected XYZ in the end" (#17)

4.2.2 Credibility of the WOM source

When it comes to the credibility of the WOM source, friends were considered to be more credible than family members who had no experience of going to university or those family members who had not gone to the university suggested by them. About a third of the respondents didn't express concern about the credibility of their friends but did express reservations about suggestions given by their family members as expressed by one of the respondent:

Well, till the last moment I was going to do science as my family insisted on that and then I finally confronted my father that I wanted to do finance as many of my friends were pursuing it due to high demand of finance professionals and then finally he agreed that I change the subject (# 39)

Some friends were considered to be more credible than others (13% of 44%) and they were trusted more than others. This was either due to their studies in the university or to the reference to whom the friend knew. As explained by one of the respondents:

I have a couple of friends who are studying in XYZ University and especially my brother he told me not to go to XYZ because he was a student there and he didn't approve of the study pattern there so he said choose ABC instead. And also my friends were going to ABC which was a better university as per them (# 10)

Even those students who chose independent decision making and relied on social media pages of the universities, said that they would rate friends as more credible than family members as they were expected to have first-hand experience of the university while the parent would not have such experience.

Some respondents (38%) consulted more than one source and believed in confirming and comparing the WOM received from both the sources and compared this to information received during career seminars, open houses and marketer oriented WOM. They often found that friends were a better source and provided more credible information. This changed the attitude, but due to high power distance and uncertainty avoidance with regards to credence products, relied on judgement of parents. In UAE, expatriates don't receive any grant or funding from government and their whole higher education is funded by parents who therefore have a greater say in decision making.

Even the key word search about friends resulted in a mention of 212 times, as compared to family, who were mentioned 184 times. This also provided credibility indication or how much students trusted their friends when they made a search process. However, they still relied on family members. On the other hand, advertisement was mentioned only 32 times indicating a lack of credibility of marketer oriented communications.

The above findings with regard to the role of expertise in credence products confirmed the findings of [Iyengar et al. \(2011\)](#) about medical prescriptions, though a substantial number trusted WOM from non-experts. Consumer decision making was based on availability heuristics

rather than on any rational evaluation as explained by [Pachur et al. \(2012\)](#). With reference to credibility, WOM from friends was regarded as more credible, pointing to subjective norms of TRA ([Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006](#); [Ladhari and Michaud 2015](#)).

4.3 Homophily and Tie Strength

4.3.1 Homophily with the WOM source and its impact on trust

Further probing of the respondents about the reasons of trusting their friends more than the family members yielded such answers as similar majors, similar interests, and universities. This indicated homophily. Another reason cited for the trust was that they better understood student life and academic requirements, in contrast to family members. This was explained by one of the respondents thus:

A friend of mine told me about this university, who was already attending the university and was doing a course there and told me about it. He liked the university and told me about it, he found it much better, I then took his word for it. My father wanted me to enroll in XYZ but I enrolled in ABC recommended by my friend. (#18)

Another thing that shaped my decision was how many of my friends were going to join this university. As experience was an essential factor for me to go to university, having the same people who I had seen for the past 5 to 6 years would not be a new experience (#35)

Speaking to seniors in the same school also evoked confidence in the WOM. Respondents explained that as seniors had first-hand experience of the university and were similar to them, giving them confidence.

I spoke to my seniors and friends who were already pursuing undergraduate courses at these universities. They helped me know about the environment, the activities held, the clubs, the teaching faculty and all other factors that were to influence my decision about joining a university (#9).

Some respondents (32%) did display a tendency to dismiss the WOM from people not similar to them, like parents, student counsellors, teachers, and university marketing staff.

My teachers and counselors did suggest universities to me. My parents also suggested universities but wanted me to go with advice of counsellors. They knew that since they (teachers and counselors) are in the profession and know more; rather than them. But, I

found out information from a few senior friends that were already enrolled and went with their suggestion as they made me understand the university life (#21).

Homophily was also discussed with regards to socio-economic background of the source of WOM. Respondents (10%) indicated that they would not like to enrol in universities where students from the elite class attended, as they would not like to suffer from an inferiority complex.

It does matter how many people from my school are going to join the university that I am choosing? The people, not the nationalities but the kind of people; I wanted to be with people who I can associate with. You don't want to be going to a university where majority drive a Lamborghini or a Ferrari. I also want to know what approach others have, the way they think, their behavioral characteristics etc. (#35)

However, some respondents did not display any influence on decision making due to homophily and in a similar way there was no evidence of homophily with regard to gender. Analysing the key word in the context, the word similarity was mentioned nine times. Recommendations from friends also indicated homophily and were mentioned thirty-two times. From the above, it is clear that the homophily does evoke trust in the recommendations and, as a result, WOM, but influence on purchase decisions was limited.

4.3.2 Tie Strength

Ties with people who are familiar are considered strong but weak with unfamiliar people. In the dataset, respondents (39%) indicated that they trusted WOM from people who are known or familiar to them like their friends, brothers, sisters, seniors etc.

Yes, the opinion of my family, of my relatives was very important to me and it's still important nowadays. Most of my relatives work in financial area and prestigious in my country. My grandmother used to be an accountant, she was really one of the best in our city and she really inspired me, and I chose my major as accounting. I am very pleased with my choice. I have some friends who were studying in XYZ University, they recommended this major as it has good program, and it has very qualified teachers and professors. I think it is one of the best financial schools in Dubai (#8).

Very few respondents (7%) mentioned that they were influenced by unfamiliar connections on social media. Connections with weak ties were not considered reliable and did not evoke trust. However, their WOM was considered as a starting point for further investigations.

Above findings does indicate homophily at both search and purchase stage but more at search stage. Trust in WOM from people with similar attributes did play a role in influencing the decisions but only in presence of strong ties. Findings suggested that students undertaking similar majors and considered like-minded, were considered more credible in line with the findings of [Park et al. \(2014\)](#) and [Sweeney et al. \(2014\)](#). On the other hand, unfamiliar connections on social media did not evoke trust. In a culture with high levels of uncertainty avoidance, consumers would not trust unfamiliar people or those with weak ties.

5. Revised model of Theory of Reasoned Action

Based on the above findings, the revised model of TRA is proposed in light of WOM in culture with higher uncertainty avoidance and power distance with regards to credence product (See Figure 2).

--- Figure 2 here---

6. Conclusion and Marketing implications

The above findings demonstrate that in the different context and culture of the Middle East with higher power distance and uncertainty avoidance, WOM plays a dominant role in shaping attitudes and consequently purchase decisions for credence products. WOM was effective in changing attitudes but had little impact on purchase decisions where tie-strength was weak. WOM was more effective at the search stage, as compared to the purchase stage. With regards to WOM source, the expertise of opinion leaders (Parents or Counsellor) was crucial, but homophily was more important at the search stage, when attitudes changed. Once the consumers trusted the expertise of the WOM source or had strong ties, then they made purchase decisions.

There are some implications for practice. The first has to do with opinion leaders. Marketers need to adopt two-step flow communications by first identifying opinion leaders who are construed to be expert and credible. For credence products, involving risk, the purchasers need to be targeted in addition to consumers. While selecting opinion leaders, marketers might select opinion leaders who are similar to the segments being targeted. These opinion leaders need to be current students of the university and can be recruited to act as ambassadors in their respective high schools. As respondents indicate that they trust the expertise of the opinion leaders, it would be prudent to

select students who have consistently demonstrated excellent academic performance.

Advertisements and social media activities can act to create awareness and act as an anchor in the search process. Some marketers might be motivated to use eWOM (Electronic Word of Mouth) but it might not be a substitute for WOM. However, consumers would trust WOM from people with stronger ties, rather than strangers on social media, as this is a credence product. Those who are involved in higher education marketing targeted towards undergraduates in UAE, would be better off if they included parents, as well, who played an instrumental role in decision making.

One of the limitations of the study is that the sample might not be large enough to generalize results. This was in line with the epistemology of providing insights in a different culture and builds a model for a specific culture. The results can be valid with regards to intersubjective scrutiny but not objective reality ([Bruce et al. 2012](#)). Key constructs of expertise, homophily, credibility and subjective norms have been consistently mentioned in all forty-one interviews, which would give the same results similar to a larger sample that matched previous studies on the subject. Further studies with a larger sample can verify the model in future.

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Fig 2: Revised Theory of Reasoned Action for credence product in high power distance and uncertainty culture

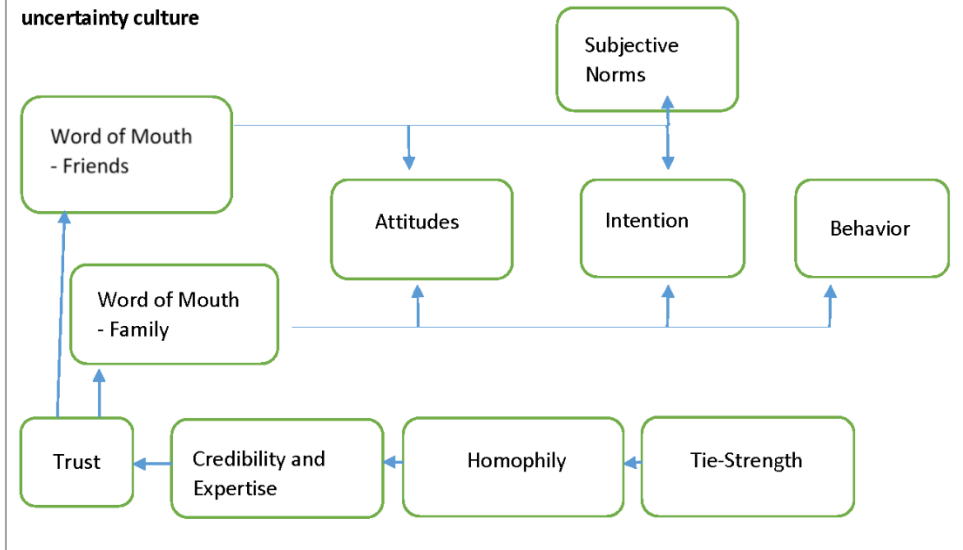


Table 4.1: Statements in interviews with their frequencies

		N	41	
			No	%
WOM from different Sources				
Sources of eWOM				
Friends	My friends indicated that the university is good	22	54	
Family	I first heard about the university from my family	11	27	
Marketer communication	Received WOM but no trust in marketer communication	12	29	
Use Social Media	Followed Social Media pages of university	6	15	
WOM influence in Decision Making				
Friends	My friends were instrumental in my selection of universities	18	44	
Family	Family played a predominant role in college selection	23	56	
Marketer communication	Had some role played in decision making	3	7	
Social Media Connections		4	10	
Independent	I make my own decisions and don't seek opinion of family or friends	5	12	
Homophily				
	They have taken the same major as mine	8	20	
	Seniors with good grades took admission in the university	11	27	
	Understand university life and academic requirements	12	29	
	Same socio-economic background	4	10	
	Dismiss WOM from people who are dissimilar	13	32	
Tie Strengths				
	Many of my connections on social media are not familiar	4	10	
	Would trust people whom I know	16	39	
	Information from unfamiliar connections were helpful	3	7	
Expertise				
	Connections on facebook know the university well	3	7	
	Connections are capable of making good decisions about the university	7	17	
	My connections are satisfied with the university as they are students with good grades	8	20	
	My family know about the university through their acquaintance	5	12	
	My family members are themselves knowledgeable about the university	6	15	
	Family members were trusted even though they don't know much about university	12	29	

