

Student Preferences for Social Media Source Characteristics

Lavender (Mengya) Shu and Pierre Benckendorff

UQ Business School
The University of Queensland, Australia
mengya.shu@uqconnect.edu.au

Abstract

Within the burgeoning international education market, the Chinese market has performed exceptionally well and is now the largest source market of international students. This has generated substantial interest in understanding factors that influence overseas study decision-making. With the recent development of the Internet, social media has become a popular information source for students contemplating overseas study. To a large extent, information and other cues presented on these electronic word of mouth platforms influences how students perceive potential overseas study destinations. The purpose of this particular paper is to understand how the characteristics of the message source influences the usefulness of information used to evaluate study destinations. Twenty-two small group interviews (110 students) were conducted to investigate the most influential source characteristics. Key findings indicate that trustworthiness, credibility, author appearance and similarity are important factors that influence perceived usefulness of information used to evaluate study destinations.

Keywords: international higher education; study destination decision-making; electronic word of mouth; social media; source characteristics; Chinese outbound students

1 Introduction

In Australia international education is now the second biggest tourism earner after leisure travel, with students spending over AUD 7 billion in the year to March 2015 (Tourism Research Australia, 2015). Recent growth in international student mobility has resulted in increasing global competition for recruiting international students. In particular, the Chinese market has performed exceptionally well and has become the world's largest international student source market. Once at the destination international students typically participate in a wide range of tourist experiences. This has created substantial interest in understanding the factors influencing study destination choice, especially in the context of Chinese outbound students.

The selection of an overseas study destination is one of the most expensive decisions for an international student. The significant investment and potential risks involved make it a complex decision that requires high levels of scrutiny of choices (María Cubillo, Sánchez, & Cerviño, 2006). Hence, high quality information and effective communication become crucial when evaluating potential overseas study destinations. It is important to consider the mechanisms for information exchange during the information search process in order to understand study destination choice (María Cubillo et al., 2006).

Social media are becoming an increasingly important information source for students contemplating overseas study. The availability of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) platforms has increased accessibility to information and has empowered students who

have grown up with computers and the Internet. To a large extent, information presented on these platforms is perceived to be credible and may influence students' perceptions of potential study destinations (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011). However, the significant role of eWOM in disseminating information and facilitating the evaluation of study destinations has not been well researched.

Information exchange on social media can be examined as a communication process. The major elements of social communication theory (source, message, receiver and response) can be used to frame the study of factors that trigger effective social media (Hovland, 1948). The main focus of this particular paper is how student preferences for various source characteristics influence the perceived usefulness of information used to evaluate study destinations.

Source characteristics have been addressed extensively in traditional advertising but a full review of the literature is beyond the scope of this research note (M. Y. Cheung, Luo, Sia, & Chen, 2009). In this paper, three source characteristics (*source expertise*, *source trustworthiness* and *attractiveness*) are identified from previous literature. In contrast to traditional word-of-mouth (WOM), users in computer-mediated environments often exchange information with connections that have weak affiliations. This raises concerns about the credibility of online sources (i.e. the authors of the content). Sources perceived to be more credible possess good knowledge and awareness about the discussed object (expertise) and are motivated to provide accurate information (trustworthiness) (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007; Zhang & Watts, 2008). In addition, the 'attractiveness' of the source may contribute to perceived credibility (Kiecker & Cowles, 2002). Attractiveness represents the extent to which the information receiver identifies with the source.

People participate in eWOM communication because of the desire to establish social networks. Relationship variables are therefore another focal point for understanding social media communication. *Homophily* refers to the extent to which individuals are congruent or share similarities in attributes like age, gender and lifestyle (Thelwall, 2009). The purpose of this paper is to investigate how social media source characteristics (expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness and homophily) influence the usefulness of information used to evaluate study destinations.

2 Method

Qualitative data were collected to identify the most influential source characteristics for study destination selection. A total of 22 small group interviews (each with 4-6 participants) were conducted with newly arrived Chinese postgraduate students (maximum of six months stay) in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. The advantage of small group interviews is that they allow the researcher to observe and record interactions, which add value and richness to the empirical data (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Stimulus materials were used to examine how source characteristics – expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness and homophily – influenced the usefulness of information used to evaluate study destinations. The photo elicitation technique was used to explore whether the appearance of eWOM sources influenced perceptions about the usefulness of information. The stimulus materials included four photos with short background descriptions, a 23-year-old female overseas student, 22-year-old

male overseas student, 35-year-old education consultant with six years' experience, and a 52-year old education agent manager. Each respondent was given the same set of stimuli at the same time and was then asked to rank the four stimuli individually, based on their preference. An open-ended discussion was then conducted to reveal the ranking order and reasons. This ranking was based on the visual and textual cues derived from each stimuli. Transcripts of the discussion were analyzed using Leximancer (a concept mining tool to map themes, concepts and their associated relationships from a body of text) and a number of themes were identified. In addition to the Leximancer analysis, a manual content analysis was also carried out to confirm key themes and concepts in the transcripts (Leximancer, 2011).

3 Findings

Table 1 illustrates the ranked concept counts and relative importance generated by the Leximancer analysis of the interview transcripts. The top three concepts ("student", "manager", "agent") were mentioned often because they were part of the photo elicitation scenarios. The fourth concept – "appearance" was also mentioned often during the group interviews.

Table 1. Concept counts and importance – Sender

Concept	Count	Importance
Student	110	100%
Manager	82	75%
Agent	76	69%
Appearance (Looks)	44	40%
Experience	28	25%
Similar	26	24%
Trustworthy	20	18%
Education	18	16%
Age	16	15%
Details	12	11%

Complementing the concept counts table, a number of themes were identified and explained as below:

1. *Trustworthiness is more influential than expertise:* a majority of respondents ranked the student images more highly than the agent image because students were viewed as strangers with no attached commercial relationship. While they acknowledged the expertise of the education agent, many students were concerned about the impartiality of agents who receive commissions for recommending particular universities and courses. For example, one student commented "*I feel like **agents** are not as **trustworthy** as **students** as they try to get money from you. They tend to promote the institutions that pay the most commission.*" Another respondent said: "*The **students** are **trustworthy** because they are experiencing overseas life now, they will share realistic information about their personal experiences*".
2. *Credibility is important:* in the online environment, the absence of physical cues about the source can result in other factors, such as sender reputation and motives

for posting being more prominent. A number of interviewees commented that the reputation of agents was poor and students were considered to be more believable and reputable. This again links back to perceptions about the agent's impartiality when making recommendations that may lead to economic benefits for the agent. Respondents also questioned the sender's motives for posting the message. The following quote captures this concern: "*students post their personal experience online to share with others, with no intended purposes*". Interestingly, the so-called "personal experience" further reinforces perceptions that the information is genuine and accurate, as one respondent said "*there is no motive for students to share false information, it was all about sharing their real overseas life*".

3. *Appearance matters*: another interesting finding that emerged from the Leximancer map is that the appearance of the sender plays an important role in determining the credibility of the sender. For example, one student said: "*I rank them based on their **appearance**...the female student **looks** nice and friendly, she **looks** like a considerate and thoughtful person...The last is the manager, just because he **looks** like a profiteer*". This finding was especially common when interviewees believed both students were equally trustworthy (based on their background). Further probing to force respondents to choose between the two students' images resulted in physical appearance being used as a hermeneutic cue for determining trustworthiness. This cue would be most relevant when profile photos of senders are visible on social media platforms.
4. *Similarity makes a difference*: while most participants preferred the two student sources to other sources, a majority of respondents paid more attention to sources who shared the same gender. Some typical comments included: "*I trust the female students more because females have similar problems and it's easier for us to communicate*", and "*I rank the male student first, he wears sporting clothes which ... is very similar to me, I feel people who love sports would be quite open and straightforward, easy to communicate, and also, we have similar age*". In this example the interviewee used visual cues to infer the characteristics of the sender (Li & Bray, 2007) and these cues are then taken into consideration when evaluating the credibility of the source.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

Previous literature has identified sender expertise and trustworthiness as important determinants of information usefulness. Source credibility has been used to investigate whether people perceive the information to be believable and trustworthy (M. Cheung, Lee, & Rabjohn, 2008; M. Y. Cheung et al., 2009; Park & Kim, 2008; Zhang & Watts, 2008). In this study, further investigation was undertaken to examine the most influential sender characteristics in an overseas education context. Given the nature of decision-making in this context, participants expressed greater concern about the trustworthiness of the source. Information posted by students was perceived as having no commercial orientation, and was therefore perceived to be more trustworthy. Furthermore, respondents tended to prefer individuals that share more similarities with them, in this case, the same gender. Shared similarities create a common ground of understanding that facilitates online communication. This aligns with the existing literature outlining the important role of homophily in online

interactions. This exploratory study is one of the first attempts to identify the social media communication cues that influence students' perceptions of study destinations. The results indicate that social media source characteristics impact on the perceived usefulness of information used to evaluate study destinations. These findings suggest organizations to pay attention to online source cues that trigger higher perceived information usefulness and develop effective social media marketing strategies.

References

- Brown, J., Broderick, A. J., & Lee, N. (2007). Word of mouth communication within online communities: Conceptualizing the online social network. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 21(3), 2-20. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/dir.20082>
- Cheung, M., Lee, M. K., & Rabjohn, N. (2008). The impact of electronic word-of-mouth: The adoption of online opinions in online customer communities. *Internet Research*, 18(3), 229-247.
- Cheung, M. Y., Luo, C., Sia, C. L., & Chen, H. (2009). Credibility of electronic word-of-mouth: informational and normative determinants of on-line consumer recommendations. *International journal of electronic commerce*, 13(4), 9-38.
- Constantinides, E., & Zinck Stagno, M. C. (2011). Potential of the social media as instruments of higher education marketing: a segmentation study. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 21(1), 7-24.
- Hovland, C. I. (1948). Social communication. *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 92(5), 371-375.
- Kiecker, P., & Cowles, D. (2002). Interpersonal Communication and Personal Influence on the Internet: A Framework for Examining Online Word-of-Mouth. *Journal of Euromarketing*, 11(2), 71-88. doi:10.1300/J037v11n02_04
- Leximancer. (2011). Leximancer Manual, Version 4: University of Queensland Brisbane.
- Li, M., & Bray, M. (2007). Cross-border flows of students for higher education: Push-pull factors and motivations of mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong and Macau. *Higher Education*, 53(6), 791-818.
- María Cubillo, J., Sánchez, J., & Cerviño, J. (2006). International students' decision-making process. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 20(2), 101-115.
- Park, D. H., & Kim, S. (2008). The effects of consumer knowledge on message processing of electronic word-of-mouth via online consumer reviews. *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications*, 7(4), 399-410.
- Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2005). *Qualitative interviewing: the art of hearing data*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications.
- Thelwall, M. (2009). Homophily in MySpace. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 60(2), 219-231. doi:10.1002/asi.20978
- Zhang, W., & Watts, S. A. (2008). Capitalizing on content: Information adoption in two online communities. *Journal of the Association for Information Systems*, 9(2), 73-94.