

## FOSTERING POSITIVE WORD OF MOUTH: FIRST IMPRESSIONS MATTER

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### Abstract

As Will Rogers famously said, "you don't get a second chance to make a first impression." First impressions form quickly and prove quite formidable. First impressions become an influential stimulant to belief formation regarding consumer perceptions of a good or service. Those beliefs are often transmitted through word of mouth (WOM). Influencers, bloggers, and content creators significantly influence the digital media space by leveraging WOM (Kastenholz, 2021). Social media delivery of positive electronic WOM (eWOM) can reach thousands with a click of a button. While face-to-face encounters and consultation with personal contacts still carry significant weight, eWOM is faster. Information is instantaneously transferred, received, and weighted through hits, clicks, likes, referrals, and follows. A digital searcher forms the first impression in a split-second (17-50 milliseconds) (Bargas-Avila, 2012). This quantitative study uses self-report responses from online higher education students regarding their satisfaction with six touchpoints (1. Website, 2. Admissions, 3. Registrar, 4. Business Affairs /Payment Office, 5. Library services, 6. Information Technology) and their resulting intentions to spread positive word of mouth. Of these six touchpoints, students' first impressions are most significantly formed by the interactions students have early in the search and application process: the school's website and the Office of Admissions. This study uses regression analysis to statistically link the student's satisfaction with the school's website and their encounters with the Office of Admissions as determinants of intentions for those students to spread positive word of mouth. This study can help organizations identify and optimize the quality and utility of first impression touchpoints to increase user propensity to spread positive word of mouth.

### Introduction

What students choose to say and to whom they say it matters significantly to universities. Word of mouth (WOM) is a potent promotional outcome resulting from a customer experience, encounter, idea, or perhaps a simple assumption. WOM is highly effective in creating and maintaining positive perceptions of the institution while not requiring direct expenses. Villanueva, Yoo & Hanssens (2008) highlight the effectiveness of WOM as they report that customers earned by word of mouth have more value long-term compared to customers from other marketer-controlled

promotional activities, such as advertising. In addition, East, Hammond, Lomax & Robinson (2005) suggest that WOM has a more significant impact on brand choice than traditional advertising or personal internet searches. References and recommendations can be made by consumers via WOM, shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors through belief formation and, ultimately, impacting their decision to purchase a good or service (Harahap, Hurriyati, Gaffar, Wibowo, & Amanah, 2018).

Superior interactions matter when recruiting prospective and retaining current students. It is interesting to note the number of quality assurance programs launched to assess the overall program, course, faculty, and student interaction quality: Institute for Higher Education Policy's Benchmarks for Success, Khan's Eight Dimensions of e-Learning Framework, and the Sloan Consortium's Five Pillars of Quality provide comprehensive online education quality assessment benchmarks (Shelton, 2011). In the current climate, high-touch universities often struggle to meet break-even enrollment numbers when exclusively offering live courses (Lederman, 2018). The result is a highly competitive higher education market comprised of more than 28,000 accredited online degree programs, with further growth expected over the next five years. Institutions are gearing up to meet the demand of the projected 20 million-plus degree-seeking students who will be enrolled by 2028 (Hussar & Bailey, 2020). Quality of faculty, instructional design, web design, and course presentation continually advance the quality benchmarks (Chao, Saj & Tessier, 2006; Parscal & Riemer, 2010).

Kilburn, Kilburn, and Hammond (2017), Ehlers (2004), and Frydenberg (2002) highlight the importance of categorizing the various quality dimensions of learning, given that learners are exposed to multiple quality touchpoints before, during, and after the completion of a program. The question becomes: what will students say about their educational experience? Some research points neither to technology nor classroom/faculty quality as direct determinants of student perceptions but to the university's policies, procedures, and informative communication habits (Frydenberg, 2002). Accordingly, this study examines whether student perceptions of satisfaction with the university's website and various administrative departments (Admissions, Registrar, Bursar, Library Services, and Information Technology Services) impact their propensity to spread positive word of mouth. Regression analysis supports a significant linkage between satisfaction with the website and early service encounters and a student's propensity to spread positive word of mouth. The results from the study suggest that universities should keenly focus on early-encounter opportunities with students when considering WOM. As Rogers stated: "You never get a second chance to make a first impression."

## **Literature Review/Hypothesis Development**

### **Learner Touchpoints**

Higher education is a relatively high-touch experience. It is highly involved, a significant financial investment, with long-term impacts on career and lifestyle. Lee, Srinivasan, Trail, Lewis, & Lopez (2011) find substantial linkages between instructional, peer, and technical support and student satisfaction in the learning environment. Conversely, information comparing learner choice is readily available. Under traditional brand marketing, first impressions are significant in brand attitude formation via beliefs.

Ghimire (2022) highlights the importance of the website in both search engine optimization and its efficacy in shaping quality beliefs.

Customers rely heavily upon digital information for its flexibility, ease of use, accessibility, and speed. When researching higher education institutions, students are primarily interested in speed: search, decision, and degree completion (Magda, Capranos & Aslanian, 2020). More specifically, Magda et al. (2020) find that 47% of students find, search and apply for online learning within a four-week window while working within a 1-2 brand consideration set. The speed of the information search stage for learners indicates that the website is critical in helping an institution make that relatively small consideration set. Generally, we know that the website is most often encountered early, most likely first in the information search stage—those first impressions through search and website exploration can be powerful (Ghimire, 2022). Searchers are estimated to form first impressions within 17-50 milliseconds of exposure; an average eye blink takes roughly twice that time (Bargas-Avila, 2012).

In conjunction with an organization's website, first impressions may be formed through face-to-face interactions across the application, enrollment, learning, and support processes. Student satisfaction with these touchpoints helps form perceptions regarding the institution. Baldrige National Quality Program (BNQP) has addressed quality in education and laid out six "key areas of organizational performance" as the foundation for their Education Criteria for Performance Excellence. The BNQP suggests that student perceptions of program and service characteristics should be routinely assessed as satisfaction indicators, among other outcomes (p.7, BNQP, 2005). Studies have shown that high levels of service quality positively influence customer satisfaction (Cronin & Taylor 1992; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry 1988; Rao, Goldsby, Griffis & Iyengar, 2011). The relationship between service quality and improved performance can provide a competitive advantage regarding repeat sales, customer loyalty, and competitive product differentiation (Brown & Swartz, 1989; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). High satisfaction levels are typically desirable for institutions competing for market share (Hallowell, 1996). While today's learners want to do so on the go, they still heavily rely on traditional offices for support throughout their college careers (Magda et al., 2020). As we know, satisfaction with those interactions is relevant to learners and influential in decision-making by recruits or students.

### **Word of Mouth**

Word of Mouth (WOM) is a very potent outcome of marketing efforts. It is a form of publicity that allows consumers to demonstrate and communicate their approval (or disapproval) of a product, service, or brand to those around them, virtually or physically. Through the WOM medium, consumers provide each other with perceptions of qualities they have encountered on a very personal basis. This medium can carry a high level of validity among recipients of such communication due to the very relatable unforced nature of information transmission (Sagynbekova, Ince, Ogunmokum, Olaoke, & Ekeje, 2021). Experiences, beliefs, insights, and ideas are shared among individuals through WOM (Balter & Butman, 2005). When expectations are met or exceeded, consumers can create a positive narrative for universities to provide customers with the desired experience throughout their college life. This narrative can lead to a chain reaction

promoting recommendations to potential future students stamping the institution with a valuable positive impression that cannot be purchased with an advertising budget. In higher education, potential students choose an institution through evaluation and careful comparison of options related to critical factors (Chapman, 1981; Paulsen, 1990; James, 2000; Germeijs & Verschueren, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Hoyt & Brown, 2003).

**eWOM.** Furthermore, in the traditional face-to-face and electronic formats, WOM is very potent in today's competitive landscape. Influencers, bloggers, and personal friends account for the lions-share of influence in the digital media space (Kastenholz, 2021). Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) is defined by Hennig-Thurau (2004) as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet" (p. 39). eWOM can be disseminated through social media, blogs, vlogs, YouTube, email, customer reviews, etc. As the internet has made information omnipresent, there is now a greater reliance on eWOM than on traditional advertising channels. This reliance could present an opportunity for institutions to open a window of opportunity for competitive advantage.

In 2018, Harahap et al. demonstrated that WOM significantly affected student decisions. For example, when selecting a university, potential students may rely on personal references and peer influence since they are more trustworthy than traditional advertising. Le, Dobele & Robinson (2019) found that family influence remains the most critical WOM source for higher education decisions. While the physical act of speaking in a face-to-face situation still carries a lot of weight among individuals, the modern eWOM speaks volumes (in terms of hits/likes/clicks). The power of social media is demonstrated through the ability to spread positive eWOM to thousands with just a click.

Furthermore, spreading positive eWOM can translate into a robust revenue-generating financial resource. Thus, while the goal is to create glowing customer awareness through a positive WOM, face-to-face or electronically, the institution needs to understand the key factors driving the powerful WOM vessel. Key questions should be: How impactful are student-organizational touchpoints in forming first impressions? Do some touchpoints impact WOM more if they are found earlier in the information-gathering process? Moreover, is there a statistically significant link between satisfaction with touchpoints (website, offices) and learners' propensity to spread positive word of mouth?

H1: Learner perceptions of web-based and face-to-face touchpoints will lead to greater intentions to spread positive word of mouth.

H2: Learner perceptions of website efficacy will lead to greater intentions to spread positive word of mouth.

H3: Learner satisfaction with the Admissions Office leads to a greater intention to spread positive word of mouth.

H4: Learner satisfaction with the Registrar's Office leads to a greater intention to spread positive word of mouth.

H5: Learner satisfaction with the Business Affairs (fee payment) Office leads to a greater intention to spread positive word of mouth.

H6: Learner satisfaction with Library Services leads to a greater intention to spread positive word of mouth.

H7: Learner satisfaction with Information Technology Services leads to a greater intention to spread positive word of mouth.

## **Study**

### **Data Collection**

Undergraduate and Graduate students currently enrolled in online courses completed a web-based self-report survey (n=131). The random sample was taken from all students enrolled in online classes. Participants were enrolled at a regionally accredited, 4-year university in the Southeastern United States. Over ten areas of study are represented by students who range in age from 23-47. Most respondents are upper division: 73.3% had Junior, Senior, or Graduate standing. Respondents indicated their perceptions of the organization's website efficacy (site availability, reliability, truthfulness, and ability to provide pertinent information relevant to the student search). The survey assessed individual measures of satisfaction (single-item, 5-point measure) with common touchpoints that students might have in university campus administrative departments (Admissions, Registrar, Business Affairs (fee payment), Library Services, Information Technology Services). WOM was operationalized through terms that indicated the intention to communicate with others online. Learners were asked to report the likelihood they would "say positive things about [the University] online to other people," "recommend [the University] online to someone who seeks your advice," "encourage friends and others to do business with [the University] online" using a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely).

### **Summary of Results**

Regression analysis reports the potential impact of learner touchpoints across both the website and five university administrative offices on their intentions to spread positive word of mouth (H1). Intent to recommend the university to another student, intent to say positive things about the university to other people, intent to endorse the university to someone asking your advice, and intent to encourage friends and others to do business with the university served as dependent variables in the regression. The satisfaction measures with various campus offices served as independent variables in the regression analysis. This study tests the statistical significance of all touchpoints that occur early in the process (H2, H3) instead of later (H4-7). Results were found to be significant for the model (H1), proposing that learner perceptions of both web-based and face-to-face touchpoints will lead to greater intentions to spread positive word of mouth (sig. .001,  $F=3.989$  (df=6)). The analysis also reveals that those first impression touchpoints of the website and the Office of Admissions (H2 and H3, respectively) have statistically significant impacts on the dependent variable of intentions to spread positive word of mouth (sig. .03, .004, respectively). Finally, the results indicate that face-to-face

interactions with offices that serve more support or maintenance roles for ongoing learners (H4-7) are not statistically influential on their propensity to spread positive word of mouth (Table 1). Alternatively, the student's satisfaction with the efficacy of the website and their Admissions experience, notably encountered early in their enrollment process, is significantly linked to their intentions to spread positive word of mouth (Table 1).

**Table 1**  
**Regression Results**

		R/FTR	$\beta$	t-value	Sig.
H2	Website	Reject null	.207	2.121	.036*
H3	Admissions	Reject null	.350	2.958	.004*
H4	Registrar	FTR null	-.070	-.442	.659
H5	Business Affairs	FTR null	.015	-.088	.930
H6	Library Services	FTR null	-.078	-.608	.545
H7	It Services	FTR null	.027	.210	.834

\*Significant at .05 level of significance

### Discussion

This study aimed to identify any differential impact of first impression determinants of word of mouth as distinct from posterior touchpoints. The findings of this study indicate that of the six touchpoints studied, two are significantly linked to positive WOM: 1. Website, 2. Admissions, while the remaining four did not show a significant linkage. Based on the findings of this research, institutions of higher learning would be well-served to pay close attention to early-encountered touch points, particularly to the website for those quick searches and the Office of Admissions function when attempting to promote positive eWOM for recruiting purposes. Ultimately, extra effort in making Admissions an exemplary process for students has the potential to provide excellent value to institutions in terms of marketing through positive eWOM.

Creating and maintaining positive customer perceptions is a primary focus in all businesses. This study's results suggest that those perceptions are shaped earlier as opposed to later in the highly competitive industry of higher education. Results provide practical guidance for university campuses that attempt to optimize expenditures included in communication and interactions with students. This study identifies the most impactful administrative touchpoints on student intentions to spread positive eWOM are those that occur early in the student experience. The lack of statistically significant findings for the other touchpoints that occur subsequently in the user experience (Registrar, Business Affairs, Library Services, and IT) highlights the relative importance of first impressions on eWOM intentions. The findings suggest that students are less reliant on their satisfaction with those posterior touchpoints when they share their

experiences with others. Institutions can benefit from this finding while budgeting, training personnel, and designing recruitment and enrollment content.

Fostering positive customer perceptions is key to the success or failure of universities. Moreover, universities can provide targeted customer experience training to their most influential administrative offices, such as Admissions, and expect to sustain or improve student satisfaction. Previous research established that quality perceptions are critical components of the perceived value assessment made by online students (Kilburn et al. 2017) and, more recently, that student perceptions of privacy are fundamental as they progress through campus touchpoints (Williams, Kilburn, Kilburn & Hammond 2019). This latest extension of this research helps illuminate the importance of a good set of transactions early-on in the student-university interface. Websites are the common first encounter a prospective student has with an institution. As they advance in their application consideration process and information generation, the Office of Admissions is critical to their intentions to spread positive word of mouth. Early, critical encounters reap the most formative impacts on positive recommendations to others. Therefore, getting it right early on is essential. Those first impressions do indeed matter.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

The data used in this study is self-report reflective measures, thus limiting its internal validity. While our regression analysis indicates a significant correlation between the independent (satisfaction with the website and Admissions), and the dependent variable (intentions to spread positive word of mouth), it did not test a causal linkage. Future studies should possibly utilize an experimental research design to examine a causal link between the variables. Next, there is a lack of external validity as this study used data from one university. Future studies could extrapolate these findings to other public and perhaps private universities, where there may be a different weight to the importance of first impressions. Similarly, examining risk (e.g., financial, social) and involvement could help illuminate the boundaries of any offices' direct linkage to eWOM.

Further, the study's results suggest it is potentially more influential in focusing on early intervention experiences (Admissions, overall website appeal), the only two first impression touchpoints examined. Future research could utilize more specific methods to isolate other first impression touchpoints (social media posts, YouTube content, recruitment fairs, etc.) to measure their impacts on intentions to spread the positive electronic word of mouth. As universities budget for their recruitment efforts, targeted spending on early touchpoints, as opposed to later touchpoints, could represent significant cost savings. Another interesting potential study could examine the chronological role of satisfaction with courses on intentions to spread positive word of mouth. Another extension of external validity in future research could determine whether courses taken early in the student's career are more influential on their overall impressions than those posterior courses.

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