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The Influence of Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) on College Search and Choice

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

THE INFLUENCE OF ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH (EWOM) ON COLLEGE
SEARCH AND CHOICE

By

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This study used an online questionnaire to survey 276 first-time, non-transfer undergraduate freshmen students at the University of Miami to determine the perceived influence of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on their college search and choice compared to that of traditional word-of-mouth (WOM). In addition, eWOM's influence was examined during the search and choice phases of the three-phased college choice process and when consumed across various form of social media. The results of this study suggested that traditional WOM had a greater perceived influence on students' college choice than eWOM. The results also suggested that eWOM had a greater perceived influence during the search phase than during the choice phase and a greater perceived influence when consumed on online reviews/forums than when consumed on social networking sites. A recommendation for further study is enclosed.

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and lastly, my late grandfather John Clarence Sessa, to whom I dedicate this work, for inspiring me to dream big, work hard, and never settle for anything less than extraordinary.

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Chapter I

Introduction

For more than half a century, researchers have studied the power that word-of-mouth conversations have in the marketplace. These informal conversations between friends, family, co-workers and neighbors have been found to have a significant impact on consumer choice and to be more effective than traditional marketing tools, as they are typically perceived as more credible and trustworthy than commercial sources (Allsop, Bassett, & Hoskins, 2007; Arndt, 1967a; Engel, Blackwell, & Keggerreis, 1969; Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2006; Katz & Lazarfeld, 1955; Keller, 2007; Liu, 2006; Whyte, 1954). "The reasons for WOM's power are evident: word of mouth is seen as more credible than marketer-initiated communications because it is perceived as having passed through the unbiased filter of 'people like me'" (Allsop et al., 2007, p. 398).

The advent of the Internet and its interactive capabilities introduced a new form of word-of-mouth, called electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), that exists online and allows consumers, who are typically strangers, to interact with one another and share their opinions about various goods and services through review sites, social networking sites, blogs, content-sharing sites and other forms of social media. This consumer-to-consumer communication has become increasingly influential in consumers' purchasing decisions and has shifted the power of influence from marketers to consumers, as today's consumers are no longer passive receivers of product-related information but rather active communicators who seek fellow consumers' opinions and offer their own (Chu & Choi, 2011). "So while WOM has always been important, its importance today is higher than ever. As the credibility of 'official' marketing messages is waning, the power of one

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consumer recommending a product to another — or to many — is waxing" (Keller, 2007, p. 449).

eWOM's influence in relation to consumer decisions has been examined across numerous industries, such as tech-electronics (e.g., DVD players and computers), high-touch retail (e.g., clothing, appliances and furniture), no-touch services (e.g., travel, vacations and financial services), household staples (e.g., beverages and pet supplies) and online entertainment (e.g., movies, music, games and television content available on the Web) (Riegner, 2007); eWOM is most likely to influence purchasing decisions for items that are more complex, expensive and highly coveted, such as technology and consumer electronics and less likely to influence low-involvement products, products mainly purchased in stores that buyers want to see, feel or try-on, such as clothes and furniture, and products that are personal or confidential in nature, such as financial services (Riegner, 2007). In addition, eWOM has also been found to have a strong influence on complex and high-risk purchasing decisions, such as travel (Hernández-Méndez, Muñoz-Leiva & Sánchez-Fernández, 2013).

These findings suggest that eWOM may have a similar effect on another type of complex, high-risk service purchase — the college choice — which has yet to be examined within an eWOM context. Examining the influence of eWOM on college choice is especially relevant in light of findings that Millennials, the generation comprising the largest cohort of college students in the United States, are increasingly basing their product evaluations on information consumed from online reviews; their generation is "a vital component in the evolution of social media becoming a source of product information" (Hartman & McCambrdige, 2011; Mangold & Smith, 2012, p. 141).

Dubbed the "always connected" generation, the Millennial generation is immersed in digital technology and social media, using them as a source of information (Pew Research Center, 2010, p. 1). Millennials both read and are influenced by online reviews and are more likely to talk about products and services online than the general population (eMarketer, 2011, Mangold & Smith, 2012).

Research on eWOM within an educational setting has been limited and left largely unexplored; existing studies have examined eWOM's effects on student learning, students' motives for using eWOM, perceptions of instructors, course expectations and teaching evaluations (Coladarci & Kornfield, 2007; Edwards, Edwards, Qing, & Wahl, 2007; Edwards, Edwards, Shaver, & Oaks, 2009; Felton, Mitchell & Stinson, 2004; Felton, Mitchell & Stinson, 2005; Kindred & Mohammed, 2005). Although no existing studies have specifically examined eWOM's influence on the college choice, there are limited studies that have examined the perceived influence of social media on the college choice process and found that social media is considered by prospective students to be the least important, least influential and least reliable source of information among college search and enrollment resources (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011; Noel-Levitz, 2014, Parrot and Tipton, 2010). Although insightful, as social media (e.g., product review sites, social networking sites, blogs, online forums and others) serve as the channel by which eWOM — the message — is delivered to prospective students, these findings should not be interpreted to mean that prospective students will also place low value on eWOM itself as an information resource.

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceived influence of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) on the college choice process and, specifically, how the perceived

influence of eWOM compares to that of traditional word of mouth. In addition, this study will examine eWOM's perceived influence during different phases of the college choice process (search versus choice) and when consumed across different types of social media (online review sites versus social networking sites) (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). This study will use Individual Media Dependency (IMD) Theory to explain why or why not prospective students are placing value on eWOM as a resource during the college choice process, proposing that prospective students' perceived influence of eWOM is related to the attainment of their goals during the process.

Chapter II

Literature Review

The influence of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on consumer decision-making has been examined across numerous industries, including electronics, retail, travel, financial services, household staples, online entertainment and others (Riegner, 2007). Research on eWOM's influence within a higher education context is limited, however, and there are no existing studies that specifically examine eWOM's influence on prospective students' college choice. This chapter will explore what is known about eWOM's influence on the consumer decision making process and how these findings may provide insight into eWOM's role within the three-phase college choice process.

Transition of Word-of-Mouth (WOM) to Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)

Word-of-mouth (WOM) dates back to the oral tradition, existing from the time that people began engaging in conversation (Kimmel & Kitchen, 2014). Defined as "oral, person-to-person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and a receiver concerning a brand, a product, or a service offered for sale," these informal conversations between consumers have been found to have a significant impact on consumer choice and to be more effective than traditional marketing tools (Arndt, 1967a, p. 190; Engel et al., 1969; Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2006; Katz & Lazarfeld, 1955).

The advent of the Internet introduced a new form of word-of-mouth, called electronic word-of-mouth, also known as eWOM, that exists online and allows consumers, who are typically strangers, to interact with one another and share their

opinions about various goods and services. eWOM is defined 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" (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, p. 39). This consumer-to-consumer communication has become increasingly influential in consumers' purchasing decisions and has shifted the power of influence from marketers to consumers, as today's consumers are no longer passive receivers of product-related information but rather active communicators who seek fellow consumers' opinions and offer their own (Chu & Choi, 2011). According to Kimmel & Kitchen (2014),

> Managers now recognize that their customers and prospects are more powerful and skeptical than ever before, with consumer-to-consumer influence at times taking precedence over purchasing and related behaviors previously shaped by the business-to-consumer marketing tools of advertising, public relations, promotion, direct mail, and personal selling (p. 5)

Existing eWOM literature has primarily focused on motives for consuming and creating eWOM, eWOM moderators, effects across various industries, and effects on consumer behavior (Aggarwal, Gopal, Gupta, & Singh, 2012; Bailey, 2005; Brooner & Hoog, 2010; Chatterjee, 2001; Chen, Dhanasobhn, & Smith, 2008; Cheung, Luo, & Sia, & Chen, 2009; Cheung & Lee, 2012; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Chintagunta, Gopinath, & Venkataraman, 2010; Chu & Choi, 2011; Chu & Kim, 2011; Cui, Lui & Guo, 2012; Dhar & Chang, 2009; Duan, Gu, & Whinston, 2008; Fong & Burton, 2008; Gauri, Bhatnagar, & Rao, 2008; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2006; Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Hernández-Méndez, Muñoz-Leiva, & Sánchez-Fernández, 2013; Hu & Li, 2011; Huang, Shen, Lin, & Chang, 2007; Huang, Hsiao, & Chen, 2012; Jalivand & Samiei, 2012; Khare, Labrecque, &

Asare, 2011; Kim & Gupta, 2012; Lai, He, Chou, & Zhou, 2013; Li & Hitt, 2008; Lee & Lee, 2009; Lee, Park & Han, 2008; Li & Zhan, 2011; Litvan, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008; Ludwig, Ruyter, Friedman, Brüggen, Wetzels, & Pfann, 2013; Moe & Schweidel, 2012; O'Reilly & Marx, 2011; Park, Lee, & Han, 2007; Park & Lee, 2009; Park & Kim, 2007; Phelps, Lewis, Mobilio, Perry, & Raman, 2004; Picazo-Vela, Chou, Melcher, & Pearson, 2010; Punj, 2013; Purnawirawan, Dens, & Pelsmacker, 2012; Qui, Pang, & Lim, 2012; Riegner, 2007; Sen & Lerman, 2007; Senecal & Nantel, 2004; Sohn, 2009; Sparks & Browning, 2011; Thorson & Rodgers, 2006; Yeh & Choi, 2011; Yoo, Sanders, & Moon, 2013; Zhu & Zhang, 2010).

Differentiating WOM & eWOM

eWOM is differentiated from traditional WOM in several ways. Traditional word-of-mouth involves spoken, person-to-person communication, whereas eWOM is not face-to-face communication but rather the passive reading of a computer screen or active writing of a message (Andreassen & Streukens, 2009; Arndt, 1967a; Rogers, 1995). Traditional WOM takes place privately and conversations are perishable; eWOM takes place publicly online, on platforms such as blogs, review sites and social networking sites, and, because it is written, is stored for future reference (Andreassen & Streukens, 2009; Chu & Choi, 2011). Because eWOM is defined as taking place publicly online and being delivered to a multitude of people via the Internet, it does not include one-on-one conversations that may take place online, for example, via email, Skype or instant message (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

> The most basic forms of internet-based communication, email and instant messaging (IM), are essentially one-on-one channels that exist separately from any related web-based content or information. Newer forms of internet communication facilitated by blogs, forums, and social networking sites depart from the email model

in two key ways: they provide a channel for one person to reach many (often anonymous) others, and they are increasingly associated with specific topics (Riegner, 2007, p. 437-438).

Another distinction between WOM and eWOM is the reach of the communication that occurs with eWOM, achieved through the Internet's low-cost, bidirectional communication capabilities (Dellarcoas, 2003). Various eWOM platforms, such as online discussion forums, blogs, review sites and social networking sites, allow for multi-way exchanges in an asynchronous mode, resulting in "unprecedented scalability and speed of diffusion" (Cheung & Lee, 2012, p. 219). "Conventional marketing wisdom has long held that a dissatisfied customer tells ten people. But that is out of date. In the new age of social media, he or she has the tools to tell 10 million" (Gillin, 2007, p. 4).

Although eWOM may create more influence than traditional WOM due to its viral nature and reach and because its online existence allows access to information whenever the user seeks it out, it is also significantly less personal than traditional WOM, which may lessen its impact (O'Reily & Marx, 2011). Unlike traditional WOM, which takes place between individuals familiar with each other, eWOM can include both identified and unidentified sources of information (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Chu & Choi, 2011; Flanagin & Metzger, 2007); most WOM involves individuals known and trusted by the receiver, such as family and friends, as well as perceived experts, whereas eWOM typically involves individuals who are strangers with no indication of expertise about the product category at hand (Gupta & Harris, 2010).

Despite the unprecedented volume and reach of eWOM, its effects have been found to be less influential than traditional word-of-mouth in decision-making for high-risk and complex purchases, such as travel (Hernández-Méndez , Muñoz-Leiva, & Sánchez-

Fernández, 2013). Word of mouth of friends, family and acquaintances affects tourist behavior to a larger degree than communication with other Internet users, whether these users are known to the tourist or not (Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2012; Murphy, Mascardo, & Benckendorff, 2007; Nielsen Company, 2009; Park, Lee, & Han, 2007). Frambach, Roest, and Krishnan (2007) reported a similar finding for mortgages, a complex service purchase, stating that consumers had a strong preference for offline communication compared to online communication during all stages of the buying process.

In terms of the college choice, existing research also suggests that traditional WOM will be perceived by prospective students as more influential than eWOM. Although no existing studies specifically examine eWOM's influence on the college choice, there are limited studies that have examined the perceived influence of social media on the college choice process and found that social media is considered by prospective students to be the least important, least influential and least reliable source of information among college search and enrollment resources; admissions counselors, friends, relatives and current students at the school of interest were all considered more influential than social media in terms of influencing the enrollment decision (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011; Noel-Levitz, 2014, Parrot and Tipton, 2010).

Social Media as a Channel for eWOM

The creation and exchange of electronic word-of-mouth is facilitated through social media, defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Social media

serve as the channel by which eWOM — the message — is delivered to consumers, providing platforms for people to express their opinions on products, companies and brands. Examples of eWOM platforms include product review websites, personal blogs, message boards and social networking sites (Lee & Youn, 2009). With these social media as a platform, eWOM can take the form of tweets, Facebook posts, blog posts and posts to product review sites, among others (Bronner & Hoog, 2014; Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; King, Racherla & Bush, 2014; Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Consumers use reviews posted on social media to make purchasing decisions (Mangold & Smith, 2012). Although eWOM literature states the different types of social media that eWOM exists on (e.g., blogs, review sites, e-mail, etc.), few studies have specifically examined the influence of eWOM when consumed across different social media platforms.

Chu and Choi (2011) singled out social networking sites (SNS) as a natural platform for eWOM to take place because of its inherent social aspect. "With its orientation toward social exchange and engagement, SNS have transformed the ways consumers interact with their peers, obtain product-related information, and make purchase decisions" (Chu & Choi, 2011, p. 263). Furthermore, because "friends" and other types of connections on social networking sites are embedded in consumers' personal networks, these connections tend to be perceived as more credible and trustworthy than marketers or unknown sources (Chu & Kim, 2011); this suggests that eWOM consumed on social networking sites may have more of an influence on consumer decisions than eWOM consumed on other types of social media, such as product review sites, where followers are typically not from personal networks. Trusov, Bucklin & Pauwels (2009) also examined the influence of eWOM on social networking

sites and found that eWOM referrals posted on social networking sites had a stronger impact on customer acquisition than that of traditional marketing vehicles. Millennials, specifically, have shown a penchant for posting and consuming online reviews on social networking sites (eMarketer, 2011, Mangold & Smith, 2012).

Lee & Youn (2009) examined how various eWOM platforms affected consumers' product judgment and found participants exposed to reviews on personal blogs were less likely to recommend the product to friends than those exposed to the review on the brand's website or on an independent product review website due to the fact that consumers were more likely to suspect certain circumstances, such as a vested interest on the reviewer's part, were behind the review when posted on a personal blog.

eWOM's Influence Across Industries

eWOM's influence in relation to consumer decisions has been examined across numerous industries, including tech-electronics (e.g., DVD players and computers), books, high-touch retail (e.g., clothing, appliances and furniture), no-touch services (e.g., travel, vacations and financial services), household staples (e.g., beverages and pet supplies) and online entertainment (e.g., movies, music, games and television content available on the Web) and for specific consumer products and services, such as video games, beauty products, box-office movies, music and mortgages; eWOM's effects have also been examined on television show ratings, online store ratings, hotel bookings, stock market performance and other performance-related areas (Aggarwal et al., 2012; Bronner & Hoog, 2010; Chen, Dhanasobhhon, & Smith, 2008; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Chintagunta, Gopinath, & Venkataraman, 2010; Cui, Lui, & Guo, 2012; Dellarocas, 2003; Dhar & Chang, 2009; Duan et al., 2008; Gauri, Bhatnagar, & Rao, 2008; Godes &

Mayzlin, 2004; Hu & Li, 2011; Hung & Li, 2007; Riegner, 2007; Sparks & Browning, 2011; Tirunillai & Tellis, 2012; Zhu & Zhang, 2010). Existing studies have found a positive relationship between online consumer reviews and product sales for books, movies, video games and electronics (Cui, Lui, & Guo, 2012; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Zhu & Zhang, 2010).

eWOM is most likely to influence purchasing decisions for items that are more complex, expensive and highly coveted, such as technology and consumer electronics, and less likely to influence low-involvement products, products mainly purchased in stores that buyers want to see, feel or try on, such as clothes and furniture, and products that are personal or confidential in nature, such as financial services (Riegner, 2007). According to Riegner (2007), the more expensive and valuable that an item is, the more time a consumer will spend researching the item and considering the views of others before purchasing it. Riegner (2007) also suggests that the need to physically evaluate a product (seeing it and touching it) may limit the potential for eWOM to influence the purchase of the product.

eWOM has also been found to have a strong influence on high-risk purchasing decisions, such as travel (Hernández-Méndez , Muñoz-Leiva & Sánchez-Fernández, 2013). The fact that travel products are intangible goods involving complex decisions associated with high costs leads consumers to seek a greater amount of information through a wide range of sources (Lin & Fang, 2006; Lin, Jones, & Westwood, 2009; Maser & Weiermair, 1998; Reza & Samiei, 2012).

eWOM's Influence on Higher Education

Although there are no existing studies that examine the influence of eWOM on college choice, there are limited studies that explore eWOM within an educational context, examining eWOM's effects on student learning, students' motives for using eWOM, perceptions of instructors, course expectations and teaching evaluations (Coladarci & Kornfield, 2007; Edwards et al., 2007; Edwards et al., 2009; Felton, Mitchell & Stinson, 2004; Felton, Mitchell & Stinson, 2005; Kindred & Mohammed, 2005). Although eWOM's specific role in the college choice has yet to be explored, researchers have examined the role of social media in the college choice process, mainly addressing if and how higher education institutions are using social media to market to and recruit prospective students (Alexa, Alexa & Stoica, 2012; Barnes and Lescault, 2010; Barnes and Lescault, 2011; Davis, 2012; Merrill, 2011; Reuben, 2008; Sessa, 2014; Violino, 2009; Wandel, 2008).

A small number of studies have also examined the perceived influence of social media on the college choice process and found that social media is considered by prospective students to be the least important, least influential and least reliable source of information among college search and enrollment resources, such as family and friends, admissions counselors, official college websites, campus visits, college brochures, email from colleges and other sources of information (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011; Noel-Levitz, 2014, Parrot and Tipton, 2010). Although insightful, as social media (e.g., product review sites, social networking sites, blogs, online forums and others) serve as the channel by which eWOM is delivered to prospective students, these findings should not be interpreted to mean that prospective students will also place low value on eWOM

— the message — as a college search and enrollment resource, especially in light of findings that eWOM has the strongest influence on decision-making for complex, high-involvement purchases, which suggests eWOM may have a similar effect on college-choice decision making (Hernández-Méndez , Muñoz-Leiva & Sánchez-Fernández, 2013; Riegner, 2007).

eWOM's influence has also been examined within the Millennial Generation — the generation that comprises college-bound students. Also referred to as Generation Y, Nexters, Echo Boomers, Generation Tech, Generation Next, Generation 2000 and Generation Dot Com (Behrens, 2009; Howe and Strauss, 2000), the Millennial Generation consists of people born in or after 1980 (Ng, Schweitzer and Lyons, 2010), depending on whom you ask, and follow Generation X (1965-1980), the Baby Boomers (1946-1964) and the Silent Generation (1928-1945) (Pew Research Center, 2010). With 1.8 billion members worldwide and more than 75 million members in the U.S., the Millennial Generation has surpassed the Baby Boomer generation as the nation's largest living generation (Fry, 2015; Petronzio, 2014). Millennials also comprise the largest cohort of college students in the United States (Hartman & McCambridge, 2011) and are on track to become the most educated generation in American history (Pew Research Center, 2010).

Millennials are increasingly basing their product evaluations on information consumed from online reviews and are "a vital component in the evolution of social media becoming a source of product information" (Mangold & Smith, 2012, p. 141). Dubbed the "always connected" generation, the Millennial Generation is immersed in digital technology and social media, using them as a source of information (Pew

Research Center, 2010, p. 1). Millennials both read and are influenced by online reviews and have shown a preference for consuming online reviews on social networking sites (eMarketer, 2011, Mangold & Smith, 2012). In addition, Millennials are more likely to talk about products and services online than the general population (eMarketer, 2011). The product categories that Millennials are most likely to post online reviews about include electronics, books, movies, computers, music and clothing/shoes. Male Millennials post online reviews more often than female Millennials, although both male and female Millennials post positive online reviews more often than negative online reviews. In posting online reviews, Millennials have shown a preference for voicing their opinions on Facebook and on company websites (Mangold & Smith, 2012).

eWOM and the College Choice Process

Although there are no existing studies that examine eWOM's influence on the college choice process, studies examining eWOM's influence on the various stages of the consumer decision process can provide some insight as to how eWOM may influence prospective students during the various stages of the college choice process. Jang, Prasad, and Ratchford (2012) found that consumers use product reviews more in the consideration stage, the stage in which consumers evaluate products for inclusion in the consideration set, than in the choice stage, the stage in which the consideration set is further evaluated and a purchase decision is made. In addition, in defining the three phases of the college choice process (pre-disposition, search and choice), Hossler and Gallagher (1987) identified the search phase as the phase in which higher education institutions can exert the most influence. These findings suggest that eWOM may have a larger impact during the search phase of the college choice process, when prospective

students are forming their "choice set" of institutions they will to apply to, than during

the choice phase, when they are choosing which institution to attend (Hossler &

Gallagher, 1987; Jackson, 1982, p. 239). Frambach, Roest, & Krishnan (2012) reported a

similar finding for the pre-purchase stage, the stage in which consumers seek information

about the product being considered for purchase, reporting that consumers with a

favorable Internet experience were more likely to consult the Internet during this phase

than the actual purchase phase. Considering the Millennial generation's immersion in the

Internet and social media (Pew Research Center, 2010), this finding would also suggest

that college-bound students of this generation would be more likely to consult the

Internet, and eWOM, during the search phase of the college choice process than the

choice phase (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Jackson, 1982).

Media System Dependency (MSD) Theory

Examining Media System Dependency (MSD) theory within the context of the

college choice process may help to explain eWOM's influence on the college search and

choice. MSD theory suggests that the media is an integral component of a tripartite

audience-media-society relationship (Ball-Rokeach, 1985; Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur,

1976; DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989; Skumanich & Kintsfather, 1998). In order for

individuals, groups and social systems to achieve personal and collective goals, they

require the resources of other individuals, groups and systems. While society's media

system serves as an important channel for social systems such as politics, economics and

recreation, the media system is also dependent upon the audience and social systems for

resources pertaining to programming content and revenues. Therefore, the media cannot

be thought of as a "disembodied franchise but as a linking force in the communication process" (Skumanich & Kintsfather, 1998, p. 203).

Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976) define dependency as "a relationship in which the satisfaction of needs or the attainment of goals by one party is contingent upon the resources of another party" and, specific to media, note that "dependency on media information resources is an ubiquitous condition in modern society" (p. 6). "One finds this condition in many settings, ranging from the need to find the best buys at the supermarket to more general or pervasive needs such as obtaining the kinds of information that will help to maintain a sense of connectedness and familiarity with the social world outside one's neighborhood" (p. 6). Skumanich & Kintsfather (1998) similarly define MSD as "the extent to which the media system's informational resources are perceived by an entity to be helpful in the pursuit of that entity's goals" (p. 202).

The media have several unique information functions, which grow in number "as societies become more complex, and as the quality of media technology improves" (Ball-Rokeach, 1976, p. 6). These functions include information gathering, processing and delivery. In the United States, for example, the media have several unique functions: gathering and delivering information about the actions of government; serving as the primary signaling system in the event of emergencies; serving as the primary source of citizens' conceptions of national world events; and providing entertainment for fantasy-escape (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). Some media information functions are considered more socially central, or essential for societal and individual well-being, than others, with centrality varying over time, situation and unit of analysis. Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976) hypothesized that "the greater the number and centrality of the specific

information-delivery functions served by a medium, the greater the audience and societal

dependence on that medium (p. 7). In addition, dependency is heightened when a

relatively high degree of change *and* conflict exists in a society, which typically involves

challenges to established institutions, beliefs or practices.

Individual Media Dependency

Whereas the macro-level view of Media System Dependency (MSD) theory

examines the interdependencies of the media with various societal institutions (e.g.,

political, economic, family, religion, education) in pursuing organizational goals, the

micro-level view or microcomponent of MSD, called Individual Media Dependency

(IMD), is "the perceived importance of the media by the individual in satisfying

fundamental human goals" (Skumanich & Kintsfather, 1998, p. 203). These goals are

classified into three exhaustive, although not mutually exclusive, categories:

understanding (the need for individuals to have a basic understanding of themselves and

the world around them); *orientation* (the need for individuals to have direction in

behaving and interacting with others) and *play* (learning societal roles, norms and values

through activities like sport, dance and celebration and providing coping mechanisms like

tension release and escape) (Ball-Rokeach, 1985; DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989;

Skumanich & Kintsfather, 1998). "Goals are, thus, the key dimension of individual

motivation said to underlie individuals' media-system dependencies" (Ball-Rokeach,

1985, p. 494).

These goals are further divided into personal and social dimensions, for a total of

six conceptually distinct types of individual-level media dependency relations: *self*

understanding (using the media to understand one's self); *social understanding* (using the

media to understand the social environment); *action orientation* (using the media to make behavior-related decisions); *interaction orientation* (using the media to obtain guidance on how to interact with others); *solitary play* (using the media for aesthetic or pleasure value; and *social play* (using the media to pursue or attain social recreation-related goals). Although each of the six types is conceptually different, they are often correlated, and a person may rely on the media for more than one type of dependency (Grant, Kendall Guthrie, & Ball-Rokeach, 1991).

IMD offers a means for assessing media impact, as the intensity of a media dependency relationship can predict the likelihood that a message will have an effect (Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach, & Grube, 1984; Grant & Ball-Rokeach, 1989; Skumanich & Kintsfather, 1998). IMD research has been compared to uses and gratifications (U&G) research because both focus on the question, "What do people do with media?" The two are conceptually different, however, in that U&G asks the question, "Where do I go to gratify my needs?" and IMD focuses on the question, "Why do I go to this medium to fulfill this goal?" (Grant, Kendall Guthrie, & Ball-Rokeach, 1991). The primary emphasis in IMD research has focused on the individual level of analysis in which dependency is examined as an independent variable for explaining media effects (Ball-Rokeach, 1985). Existing IMD studies have examined the effects of dependency relationships within the context of television home shopping, political behaviors and beliefs, crises and threats in the environment, among others (Grant, Kendall Guthrie, & Ball-Rokeach, 1991; Loges, 1994; Lowrey, 2004; Skumanich & Kintsfather, 1998).

An individual's dependency on the media is a direct outcome of the perceived utility of media resources for the individual's goal attainment (Ball-Rokeach, 1985);

when achieving a particular goal becomes more important, an individual's dependency on media is likely to be stronger (Jung, 2012). That said, if a specific medium is not perceived as useful in helping an individual attain a goal, that individual will depend less upon on the medium, and therefore, place less value on the medium.

MSD and IMD research specifically examining dependency on social media as a medium is limited, especially in relation to college students. Jung (2012) examined the ways in which college students used different types of social media to cope in the aftermath of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and found that despite the fact that 81% of college students used social media on the day of the earthquake, the relative importance of social media among 10 other forms of media was not high. Television, online news, face-to-face communication and print newspapers ranked higher than social media in terms of helpfulness in understanding the incident. "Particularly, the fact that this study was done among college students, who are usually the lowest television connectors (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2011), reinforces the idea that although social media have become an important form of media for obtaining information, they do not yet dominate the existing forms of mass media" (Jung, 2012, pp. 11-12). Jung (2012) also reported that different goals were associated with different types of social media, as Facebook and Mixi were mainly used to communicate with friends and family and check on their safety following the earthquake and Twitter was mainly used to acquire information about the earthquake and subsequent events.

These findings can provide insight as to how prospective students may or may not depend on social media and eWOM within a college choice context. The individual-level goals defined by IMD (understanding, orientation and play) can be applied to the stages

of the college choice process (predisposition, search and choice) (Ball-Rokeach, 1985; DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989; Hossler and Gallagher, 1987; Skumanich & Kintsfather, 1998). During the predisposition phase, students determine whether or not they want to continue their education past high school; this goal can be categorized as *self understanding*, using the media to understand one's self and desire to pursue or not pursue a college education. In determining whether or not to attend college, students may use social media sites such as College Confidential, the world's largest college forum, to obtain information on financial aid, admissions and other college-related topics. During the search phase and the choice phase of the college choice process — when students form a "choice set" of institutions to apply to and then decide which college or university to actually attend — goals can be characterized as *action orientation,* using the media to make behavior-related decisions, specifically, application- and enrollment-related decisions (Grant, Kendall Guthrie, & Ball-Rokeach, 1991). During these phases, prospective students may use social media to learn more about a specific institution, for example, visiting an institution's official Facebook page to obtain more information, view photos or videos, or interact with college officials and current students of the institution.

If social media and eWOM are not fulfilling these understanding- and behavior-related goals pertaining to the college search and choice, prospective students will place little value on them as information resources, according to IMD theory. This could help to explain why prospective students have reported social media as the least important, least influential and least reliable source of information among college search and enrollment resources (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011; Noel-Levitz, 2014, Parrot

and Tipton, 2010). Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2011) also suggested that a lack of relevant content of higher education social media sites and a lack of platforms to allow for the creation and exchange of college-related eWOM, such as online communities, blogs, forums and bulletin boards, could be possible explanations for the low importance prospective students are placing on social media as a source of influence.

Summary and Unanswered Questions

eWOM is most likely to influence purchasing decisions for items that are complex, expensive, high-risk and highly coveted, such as travel and technology, and less likely to influence low-involvement products, such as clothes and furniture, and products that are personal or confidential in nature, such as financial services (Riegner, 2007). These findings suggest that eWOM may have a similar influence on the college choice — a type of complex purchase that has yet to be explored within an eWOM context. Despite its limitless volume and reach, eWOM's effects have been found to be less influential than that of traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) in decision-making for high-risk and complex purchases, such as travel, which suggests that eWOM will also be less influential than WOM in college enrollment decision-making (Hernández-Méndez , Muñoz-Leiva, & Sánchez-Fernández, 2013).

Jang, Prasad, and Ratchford's (2012) finding that consumers use product reviews more in the consideration stage (the stage in which consumers evaluate products for inclusion in the consideration set) than in the choice stage (the stage in which the consideration set is further evaluated and a purchase decision is made) suggests that eWOM will have more of an influence on the search phase of the college choice process (the phase in which prospective students form their "choice set" of institutions to apply

to) than on the choice phase (the phase in which they choose which institution to attend) (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Jackson, 1982, p. 239).

Literature examining eWOM's perceived influence when consumed across different types of social media suggests that eWOM may have more of an influence when consumed on social networking sites, such as Facebook and LinkedIn, which involve "friends" and other types of connections embedded in consumers' personal networks. These connections tend to be perceived as more credible and trustworthy than unknown sources, who are typically the authors of eWOM posted on online review sites (Chu & Kim, 2011). Millennials, specifically, have shown a preference for consuming online reviews on social networking sites over online review/rating sites and other types of social media, which suggests that eWOM will have more of an influence on the college choice when consumed on social networking sites than when consumed on online review sites (eMarketer, 2011, Mangold & Smith, 2012).

The following chapter will explore these hypotheses in greater detail.

Chapter III

Rationale

People use social media in their daily lives in a variety of ways for different purposes. One may use Facebook to connect with a former classmate, LinkedIn to network and search for jobs, Pinterest to gather ideas for a home renovation, Twitter to keep up with the news, YouTube to learn how to play the guitar, or Instagram to showcase photos from a recent trip. According to Kerpen (2011), "Each person uses social media and social networks in different ways — we all have our own specific social DNA" (p. 227). People also use to social media to search for information and make decisions, such as purchasing choices (King, Racherla & Bush, 2014). In the past, consumers seeking information were forced to rely on marketer-generated sources, third-party certifications and conversations with friends and family; however, with the emergence of Web 2.0 and the Internet evolving to a medium that encourages participation and the sharing of information between users, consumers can take matters into their own hands, using computer-mediated conversations to interact with one another, exchange product-related information and make informed purchasing decisions (King, Racherla & Bush, 2014). "The social media revolution has given consumers around the world the most powerful voice they've ever had … word-of-mouth marketing has always been considered the purest and best form of marketing, and social media has continued to prove this fact in many ways" (Kerpen, 2011, p. 4).

With the ability to easily solicit and share information with each other on everything from what doctor to use to what type of laundry detergent to buy, consumers are putting less trust in experts and are increasingly basing their purchasing decisions on the

recommendations of their peers obtained mainly through the Web and social media —

also known as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) or consumer-generated media (CGM)

(Bronner & Hoog, 2012; Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011; eMarketer, 2007; King,

Racherla & Bush, 2014; Mangold & Faulds, 2009)**.** Online reviews and comments are

perceived by consumers as the "most trusted source of information available" and, in

some instances, are the preferred form of communication (Bronner & Hoog, 2012; King,

Racherla & Bush, 2014).

Although eWOM is considered an extension of traditional word-of-mouth

communication, its primary distinction is the reach of the communication. "Conventional

marketing wisdom has long held that a dissatisfied customer tells ten people. But that is

out of date. In the new age of social media, he or she has the tools to tell 10 million"

(Gillin, 2007, p. 4). Despite the unprecedented volume and reach of eWOM, it has been

found to be less influential than traditional word-of-mouth in decision-making for high-

risk purchases such as travel (Hernández-Méndez , Muñoz-Leiva & Sánchez-Fernández,

2013). Word-of-mouth of friends, family and acquaintances have been found to affect

tourist behavior to a larger degree than communication with other Internet users, whether

these users are known to the tourist or not.

Similar findings have also been reported for the college choice process, with parents,

admissions counselors, friends, relatives and other significant persons perceived as more

influential information sources than social media in the enrollment decision (Noel-Levitz,

2014). Although not traditionally thought of as something one would shop for, the

college choice can certainly be likened to a high-risk purchase in that, similar to travel, it

is an intangible product that is difficult to evaluate prior to consumption and involves

complex decisions associated with high costs (Hernández-Méndez , Muñoz-Leiva & Sánchez-Fernández, 2013; Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008).

College choice decision-making has been of great interest to higher education professionals for nearly three decades, originating from Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model, and continues to be explored today against a Web 2.0 landscape. "An important issue for research is to understand how potential students use social media and what their role is in the decision making process of choosing a program of study, a University, or College" (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011, p. 7). Existing research suggests that its role is minimal, with students reporting social media as the least important, least influential and least reliable source of information among college search and enrollment resources (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011; Noel-Levitz, 2014, Parrot and Tipton, 2010).

Although these findings suggest that prospective students are placing low value on social media — the channel — they should not necessarily be interpreted to mean that they are also placing low value on eWOM — the message. For example, if one were to post a comment about a college or university on Facebook, the comment itself, not Facebook, would constitute as eWOM; Facebook is simply the social platform that person has chosen to use to share his or her eWOM with other consumers online. This study attempts to fill this gap in the literature by examining eWOM's role in the college choice process. This will be accomplished by first comparing eWOM's perceived influence to that of traditional word of mouth. In addition, this study will examine the perceived influence of eWOM when consumed during different phases of the college choice process and when consumed across different types of social media.

Although few studies have examined the influence of eWOM compared to the influence of traditional word of mouth, research on consumer purchasing decisions for travel, a type of high-risk purchase, has suggested that traditional word of mouth is more influential than eWOM. In order to make a reasonable assumption that traditional word of mouth would have the same effect on college choice decision-making, one must establish the college choice as a purchasing decision, and more specifically, as a high-risk purchasing decision. The college choice can be considered a high-risk purchase in that it the meets the criteria that are characteristic of high-risk purchases: it is as an intangible product/service that involves complex decisions associated with high costs.

Education is an intangible good by nature, as, similar to travel, it is a type of service, according to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (Educational Services, 2015). In fact, the name of the U.S. sector that comprises schools, colleges, universities and training centers is Educational Services. "Educational services are usually delivered by teachers or instructors that explain, tell, demonstrate, supervise, and direct learning" (Educational Services, 2015, para. 2). Selecting which college or university to attend is also a complex decision, as evidenced by the college choice model, which involves three distinct stages (pre-disposition, search and choice) and holds that a student's choice of where to attend college is influenced by a number of factors, including student characteristics (socioeconomic status, aptitude, high school performance and level of educational aspiration) and external influences, such as significant persons (friends, parents and high school personnel), fixed college characteristics (cost, location and availability of program), and college efforts to reach students (e.g., written materials, campus tours, admissions/recruiting and social media) (Chapman, 1981; Hossler and

Gallagher, 1987). Finally, the college choice is associated with high costs, as the average combined cost of tuition and fees for a student attending college in 2014-2015 was estimated to range anywhere from $9,139 to $31,231 annually, depending on whether the student is enrolled at a public or private institution and whether the student is an in-state or out-of-state resident (The College Board, 2014).

When characterizing the college choice as a high-risk purchase, one would expect traditional word of mouth to have a similar effect on decision-making in the college choice that it has on travel decisions — that is, having a larger influence on college choice decision-making than eWOM — especially in light of recent findings that admissions counselors, friends, relatives and current students at the school of interest were all considered more influential than social media in terms of influencing the enrollment decision (Noel-Levitz, 2014).

A first hypothesis is offered:

H1. First-year undergraduate students' perceived influence of traditional word of mouth (WOM) on their college choice will be significantly greater than their perceived influence of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) on their college choice.

Although traditional word of mouth may influence college choice more than eWOM, eWOM may still play an important role in the college choice process — specifically, during a particular phase of the three-phased model (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987). Jang, Prasad, and Ratchford (2012) found that consumers use product reviews in the consideration stage more than in the choice stage. In addition, in defining the three phases of the college choice process (pre-disposition, search and choice), Hossler and Gallagher (1987) identified the search phase as the phase in which higher education

institutions can exert a modest influence; during the choice phase, however, most colleges and universities can only have a minor impact. In applying this knowledge about the consumer choice process and the college choice process, it would be expected that prospective students would perceive eWOM as more influential during the search phase of the college choice process — the stage during which a student gathers information and forms a "choice set" of institutions to apply to — than the choice phase — the stage in which they decide where to enroll (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987).

A second hypothesis is offered:

H2. First-year undergraduate students' perceived influence of eWOM will be significantly greater during the search phase of the college choice process than during the choice phase of the college choice process.

Due to the fact that eWOM is shared largely through social media, it is also important to determine whether the type of social media used to share eWOM affects eWOM's influence on the college choice process. For example, does eWOM shared on a college review site, such as College Confidential, have more influence than eWOM shared on a social network, such as Facebook? Considering that "friends" or "connections" on social networks are typically people one knows, such as a friends, family, co-workers, neighbors and the like, it would be more expected that their opinions, or eWOM, would be considered more influential by prospective students than eWOM shared largely by strangers on review sites. Furthermore, Millennials use social networking sites, like Facebook, more often than online review/rating sites and other types of social media for posting and consuming online reviews (eMarketer, 2011; Mangold & Smith, 2012). A third and final hypothesis is offered:

H3. First-year undergraduate students' perceived influence of eWOM will be significantly greater when consumed on social networking sites than when consumed on online forums/review sites.

Chapter IV

Methods and Procedures

Existing research has examined the influence of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) across various industries, however, research exploring eWOM's role within higher education is limited and has not examined the perceived influence of eWOM on the college search and choice. This study examined the perceived influence of eWOM on the college search and choice to determine how eWOM's perceived influence compared to that of traditional word of mouth. In addition, this study examined the perceived influence of eWOM during the search and choice phases of the three-phased college choice process and when consumed across different types of social media.

Sample

The sample included 276 first-time, non-transfer undergraduate freshmen students enrolled at the University of Miami who were born between 1985 and 1996 — a range that was chosen to be inclusive of all proposed age ranges for Millennials in the literature that would also confirm that participants were adults and at least 18 years old. Fifty-five percent of the subjects were female and forty-five percent of the subjects were male. Ninety-two percent of the subjects were United States citizens and eight percent were non- United States citizens. Sixty-four percent of the subjects were 18 years old, thirty-five percent were 19 years old, less than one percent were 20 years old, and less than one percent were 21 years old and older. The population of 2,076 first-time, non-transfer undergraduate freshmen students at the University of Miami born between 1985 and 1996 is fifty-one percent female and forty-nine percent male; eighty-three percent were United States citizens and seventeen percent were non-United States citizens; sixty-five percent

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were 18 years old, thirty-three percent were 19 years old, two percent were 20 years old and less than one percent were 21 years old and older.

The online questionnaires were screened to ensure that all participants were born between 1985 and 1996. Seven completed questionnaires were removed from the sample, which originally had 283 subjects, because the subjects were younger than 18 years old or because they entered an invalid birth year.

Operationalizations

Independent Variables

Three independent variables were used in the present study. Each is defined below.

Type of Word-of-Mouth

The two types of word-of-mouth that were examined in this study included traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) & eWOM (electronic word-of-mouth). Traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) was defined earlier as "oral, person-to-person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and a receiver concerning a brand, a product, or a service offered for sale," (Arndt, 1967a, p. 190). WOM typically takes place in a face-to-face/one-on-one context in which participants are in close proximity and can draw from social and contextual clues; many times, these conversations are private (King, Racherla and Bush, 2014). Most WOM involves individuals known and trusted by the receiver, such as family and friends, as well as perceived experts (Gupta & Harris, 2010). For this study, one item was used to represent WOM: "In-person conversations with family, friends, guidance counselors, college officials and others."

The spread of the Internet introduced a more pervasive form of WOM, called eWOM (electronic word of mouth), which is defined 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" (Hennig-Thurau et. al, 2014, p. 39). Whereas traditional WOM typically takes place in a private, face-to-face context, eWOM takes place in a computer-mediated context in which conversations happen in online communities and are more visible. Participants typically do not know one another and connect in online communities formed around shared mutual interests regarding specific products or services or a topic/activity (King, Racherla and Bush, 2014). One item was used to represent eWOM in this study: "Online reviews/comments in general," representing eWOM as an entire category, consumed across all types of social media.

Phase of the College Choice Process

The college choice process includes three distinct phases: pre-disposition, search and choice (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987). This study specifically focused on the search and choice phases, as colleges and universities have little direct impact on student college choice during the pre-disposition phase (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987). The search phase is defined as the time during which a prospective college student gathers information necessary to form a "choice set," the group of institutions to which a student will actually apply (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The following prompt was used in this study to represent the search phase: "The following sources of information influenced my decision to apply to specific colleges/universities."

The choice phase is defined as the time during which a student evaluates his or her choice set and selects an institution to enter (Hossler and Gallager, 1987). The following prompt was used in this study to represent the choice phase: "The following sources of information influenced my final decision to attend one of the universities to which I was accepted."

Type of Social Media

eWOM — the message — is posted on and shared via various types of social media — the channel — such as online review/forum sites (e.g., College Confidential, Cappex, Zinch, College Prowler) social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Google+, LinkedIn) and content-sharing sites (e.g., Instagram, YouTube, Tumbler, Pinterest, Vine), (Bronner & Hoog, 2012; Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; King, Racherla & Bush, 2014; Mangold & Faulds, 2009). The types/categories of social media in existence today are vast and vary depending on whom you ask.

For the purposes of this study, the following categories/types of social media were examined in relation to consuming eWOM: online review/forum sites (e.g., College Confidential, Zinch and Cappex), "where participants can share ideas, debate topics and get help with everything from how to roast a turkey to how to take apart a laptop;" and social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Google+ and LinkedIn), which are communities formed around common interests in which users share general updates and other content (The Associated Press, 2014, p. 368).

For the purposes of this study, the following two items were used to represent eWOM consumed across two different types of social media mentioned above: "Online reviews/comments posted to college-specific review/forum-type websites (e.g., College

Confidential, Zinch, Cappex, College Prowler),” representing eWOM consumed on online review/forum sites; and “Online reviews/comments posted on Facebook, LinkedIn or Google+,” representing eWOM consumed on social networking sites.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable used in this study was the self-perceived influence on a student's college search and choice as measured by Likert-type scales (i.e., a 5-point scale using “strongly agree,” “agree,” “neither agree nor disagree,” “disagree,” and “strongly disagree”).

Procedures

An online survey was developed and administered using Qualtrics software, Version 37,892 of the Qualtrics Research Suite (Qualtrics, Provo, UT). The questionnaire included the following types of questions: multiple response, Likert-type scales and text entry (See Appendix “A” for an actual copy of the questionnaire employed in this study.).

The online survey was cross-sectional, allowing each participant to complete the survey one time during a 14-day period that the survey was open (Monday, February 2, 2015 through Sunday, February, 15, 2015). E-mails of first-year, non-transfer undergraduate students (both domestic and international) were provided by the University of Miami's Division of Enrollment Management and were input into Qualtrics. On the day of the survey launch (Monday, February 2, 2015), Qualtrics sent an e-mail invitation to each student's e-mail address containing the informed consent and a personalized link to the online survey (See Appendix “B” for the email invitation script and Appendix “C” for the informed consent letter employed in this study).

Four reminder e-mails were sent over the course of the 14-day period, using a schedule counting down to the close of the survey; reminders were sent at the 10-day mark (Friday, February 6), the 7-day mark (Monday, February 9), the 3-day mark (Friday, February 13) and the 1-day mark (Sunday, February 15). Qualtrics was programmed to only send reminder e-mails to students who had not yet completed the survey, including students who had started the survey but had not completed it. Originally, one incentive was used for this study, which was the chance to win one of several 8.5" x 11" black University of Miami leather padfolios provided by the University of Miami's Division of Enrollment Management. The subject line of each reminder e-mail was worded differently in order to increase the odds of a response (Sauermann & Roach, 2013). The following subject lines were used: "Take survey for chance to win a UM leather padfolio" (Friday, February 6); "Win a UM leather padfolio" (Monday, February 9); "Win $100 Visa gift card or UM leather padfolio" (Friday, February 13); and "Last chance! Win $100 Visa gift card or UM leather padfolio" (Sunday, February 15).

Due to a low response rate during the first week of the survey launch, an additional incentive, approved by the university's Institutional Review Board, was introduced with the third e-mail reminder on Friday, February 13: the chance for one first-prize winner to win a $100 pre-paid Visa gift card (three to four second-prize winners would still be receiving the leather padfolios). This new incentive was chosen based on previous research suggesting that lottery incentives, specifically those with a high payoff and low chance of winning, increase the odds of responding, specifically for college students (Laguilles, Williams, & Saunders, 2011; Sauermann & Roach, 2013).

Although the reminder was only sent to participants who had not yet completed the questionnaire, all participants who completed the questionnaire were also eligible to be randomly selected for the new incentive.

The online questionnaire closed on Sunday, February 15, with 283 completed questionnaires. Although seven questionnaires were ultimately removed due to the fact that the participants were younger than 18 years or because they entered invalid birth years, all 283 participants were eligible to be randomly chosen as a first-prize or second-prize winner. The week following the close of the survey, five random winners were selected from the sample using an online random number generator (https://www.random.org) and an unordered list of the participants. The first random winner selected was the first-prize winner selected to win the $100 Visa gift card and the next four winners were the second-prize winners selected to each win a University of Miami leather padfolio. Winners were notified on Sunday, February 22, 2015, via e-mail and were asked to provide a local address where their corresponding prizes could be mailed.

Chapter V

Results

The purpose of this study was to examine the specific influence of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on the college search and choice compared to that of traditional word-of-mouth. In addition, this study examined the perceived influence of eWOM during the search and choice phases of the three-phased college choice process and when consumed across different types of social media.

This chapter will include: a check on randomization procedures, a discussion of the analytical procedures used and the results of the study.

Check on Randomization

To check the success of procedure randomization, the sample of first-time, non-transfer, undergraduate freshmen students at the University of Miami born between 1985 and 1996 was compared to the population of all 2,076 first-time, non-transfer, undergraduate freshmen students at the University of Miami born between 1985 and 1996 on three demographic variables: gender, age and citizenship. A chi-square was computed to test for differences on each of the three demographic variables to determine whether or not the sample was significantly different from the population. No significant differences were found for the variables of gender or age. A significant difference was found for the variable of citizenship, ($X^2 = 15.92$, df = 1, $p < .05$). Whereas 92% of the sample was U.S. citizens, 83% of the population was U.S. citizens.

Analytical Procedures and Results

The independent variables for this study included type of word-of-mouth (traditional word-of-mouth versus electronic word-of-mouth), phase of the college choice

process (search versus choice), and type of social media (online review sites versus social networking sites). One dependent variable was used, the self-perceived influence on a student's college search and choice, as measured by Likert-type scales (i.e., a 5-point scale using "strongly agree," "agree," "neither agree nor disagree," "disagree," and "strongly disagree"). After subjects completed the Likert-type scales, data were then collapsed into three categories: "agree," which included "strongly agree" and "agree"; "neither agree nor disagree," which remained the same; and "disagree," which included "strongly disagree" and "disagree." The original "agree" and "disagree" categories were collapsed because this study sought to determine whether or not a specific information resource influenced the college choice process, which was best determined by collapsing the categories into overall "agree" and "disagree" categories; this study did not intend to examine differences in "agree" ("strongly agree" versus "agree) or differences in "disagree" ("strongly disagree" versus "disagree").

To test the three hypotheses of this study, a chi-square test was used to see if any significant differences existed in perceived influence between items representing the independent variables: type of word-of-mouth, phase of the college choice process, and type of social media.

First Hypothesis

To test the first hypothesis that traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) would have a significantly greater perceived influence on college choice than electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), a chi-square test was performed on respondents' answers to the item "In-person conversations with family, friends, guidance counselors, college officials and others," representing traditional WOM during the choice process, and their answers to the

item "Online reviews/comments in general," representing eWOM during the choice

process. The results of the chi-square demonstrated a significant difference in the

predicted direction, (X^2 = 6.49, df = 1, p < .05). The data suggest that traditional word-

of-mouth has a greater perceived influence on college choice than that of eWOM (See

Table 1). Thus, the first hypothesis was supported.

Table 1

*Results of Chi-Square Test Comparing Perceived Influence of Word-of-Mouth (WOM) to
Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) on College Choice*

Item	Agree	Disagree	Total
In-person conversations with family, friends, guidance counselors, college officials and/or others	67.5% (N = 179)	32.5% (N = 86)	100% (N = 265)
Online reviews/comments in general	55.7% (N = 117)	44.3% (N = 93)	100% (N = 210)

Note. This table reflects respondents that either agreed ("strongly agree" and "agree") or
disagreed ("strongly disagree" and "disagree"). Respondents that chose "neither agree
nor disagree" were omitted.

Second Hypothesis

To test the second hypothesis that the perceived influence of eWOM would be

significantly greater during the search phase than the choice phase, a chi-square test was

performed on respondents' answers to the item "Online reviews/comments in general,"

representing eWOM during the search phase, and their answers to the item "Online

reviews/comments in general," representing eWOM during the choice phase. The

following prompts were used to distinguish the two items: "The following sources of

information influenced my decision to apply to specific colleges/universities"

(representing the search phase) and "The following sources of information influenced my

final decision to attend one of the universities to which I was accepted" (representing the

choice phase). The results of the chi-square demonstrated a significant difference in the

predicted direction, ($X^2 = 36.07$, df $= 1$, $p < .05$). The data suggest that eWOM has a

greater perceived influenced during the search phase than the choice phase (See Table 2).

Thus, the second hypothesis was supported.

Table 2

Results of Chi-Square Test Comparing Perceived Influence of Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) during the Search and Choice Phases

Item	Agree	Disagree	Total
Online review/comments in general (During the Search Phase)	82.7% (N = 186)	17.3% (N = 39)	100% (N = 225)
Online reviews/comments in general (During the Choice Phase)	55.7% (N = 117)	44.3% (N = 93)	100% (N = 210)

Note. This table reflects respondents that either agreed ("strongly agree" and "agree") or disagreed ("strongly disagree" and "disagree"). Respondents that chose "neither agree nor disagree" were omitted.

Third Hypothesis

To test the third hypothesis that the perceived influence of eWOM would be

significantly greater when consumed on social networking sites than on online

review/forums, two different chi-squares tests were performed. The first test was

performed on respondents' answers to the item "Online reviews/comments posted to

college-specific review/forum-type websites (e.g., College Confidential, Zinch, Cappex, College Prowler)," representing eWOM consumed on online reviews/forums during the search phase, and their answers to the item "Online reviews/comments posted on Facebook, LinkedIn and Google+" representing eWOM consumed on social networking sites during the search phase. The second test was performed on respondents' answers to the item "Online reviews/comments posted to college-specific review/forum-type websites (e.g., College Confidential, Zinch, Cappex, College Prowler)," representing eWOM consumed on online reviews/forums during the choice phase, and their answers to the item "Online reviews/comments posted on Facebook, LinkedIn and Google+" representing eWOM consumed on social networking sites during the choice phase.

The results of the first comparison demonstrated that there was a significant difference ($X^2 = 108.50$, df $= 1$, $p < .05$). However, as can be seen in Table 3 and Table 4, the difference was not in the predicted direction. The results of the second comparison also demonstrated that there was a significant difference ($X^2 = 14.20$, df $= 1$, $p < .05$) but, again, not in the predicted direction. The data suggest that eWOM had a greater perceived influence when consumed on online reviews/forums than when consumed on social networking sites. Therefore, the third hypothesis was not supported.

Table 3

Results of Chi-Square Test Comparing Perceived Influence of Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) Consumed on Online Review Sites to Social Networking Sites (Search Phase)

Item	Agree	Disagree	Total
Online review/comments posted to college-specific review/forum-type websites (e.g., College Confidential, Zinch, Cappex, College Prowler)	79.8% (N = 182)	20.2% (N = 46)	100% (N = 228)
Online reviews/comments posted On Facebook, LinkedIn or Google+	30.3% (N = 61)	69.7% (N = 140)	100% (N = 201)

Note. This table reflects respondents that either agreed ("strongly agree" and "agree") or disagreed ("strongly disagree" and "disagree"). Respondents that chose "neither agree nor disagree" were omitted.

Table 4

Results of Chi-Square Test Comparing Perceived Influence of Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) Consumed on Online Review Sites to Social Networking Sites (Choice Phase)

Item	Agree	Disagree	Total
Online review/comments posted to college-specific review/forum-type websites (e.g., College Confidential, Zinch, Cappex, College Prowler)	51.6% (N = 112)	48.4% (N = 105)	100% (N = 217)
Online reviews/comments posted on Facebook, LinkedIn or Google+	33.5% (N = 63)	66.5% (N = 125)	100% (N = 188)

Note. This table reflects respondents that either agreed ("strongly agree" and "agree") or disagreed ("strongly disagree" and "disagree"). Respondents that chose "neither agree nor disagree" were omitted.

Chapter VI

Conclusions

Summary of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceived influence of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on the college choice process, comparing it to that of traditional word-of-mouth, during the search and choice phases, and when consumed across different types of social media.

An online survey was administered through Qualtrics to a sample of 276 first-time, non-transfer undergraduate freshmen students at the University of Miami. Student e-mails were provided by the University of Miami's Division of Enrollment Management and were input into Qualtrics.

Chi-squares tests were used to test the three hypotheses. The first hypothesis, which predicted that traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) would have a greater perceived influence on college choice than eWOM, was supported. The second hypothesis, which predicted that eWOM would a greater perceived influence during the search phase than the choice phase of the college choice process, was also supported.

The third hypothesis, which predicted that eWOM would have a greater perceived influence when consumed on social networking sites than when consumed on online review/forums, was not supported, as the data suggested the opposite might be the case, with eWOM having a greater perceived influence when consumed on college-specific online reviews/forums. This is possibly due to the fact that eWOM regarding the college search and choice is more abundant on college-specific online review/forum sites, such as College Confidential, than on social networking sites, such as Facebook,

therefore making it more accessible to prospective students who are seeking it. Whereas the primary purpose of online reviews/forums sites is to facilitate the exchange of eWOM among users, the primary purpose of social networking sites is to allow users to make social or professional connections, which suggests that the creation and exchange of eWOM will naturally occur more often on online review/forum sites. Furthermore, online reviews/forum sites typically involve eWOM written and consumed by strangers connected by the Internet, forming a potentially global audience, whereas social networking sites typically involve eWOM written and consumed by people who know one another, which limits the audience and the number of people posting and consuming eWOM.

Limitations of the Study

The major limitation of this study is potentially external validity in regards to generalizability. The sample for this study consisted of students from a private, four-year university whose attitudes may not represent students' attitudes from other types of higher education institutions, such as public universities, community colleges and institutions offering online degrees.

Another limitation pertains to the recall of students taking this survey. Due to the fact that this study was conducted during the spring semester of their freshman year, the participants of this study were a year removed from the college search and choice phases that typically takes place during the spring of senior year of high school. Therefore, their recall regarding the perceived influence of traditional WOM and eWOM on the college search and choice may have been impaired.

A third limitation pertains to the fact that the sample was found to be significantly different from the population for the demographic variable of citizenship, with the sample containing a larger percentage of United States citizens (92%) than the population (83%). This discrepancy affects the results of this study in the sense that its findings may not be representative of first-time, undergraduate freshmen non-citizens at UM.

A fourth limitation pertains to the operationalizations of traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). For the purposes of this study, traditional WOM was defined as "oral, person-to-person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and a receiver concerning a brand, a product, or a service offered for sale," (Arndt, 1967, p. 190) and was operationalized as "In-person conversations with family, friends, guidance counselors, college officials and/or others." Although word-of-mouth typically takes place in a face-to-face context, this operationalization did not include word-of-mouth conversations that may have taken place on the phone, by text message, by instant message, by Skype or other types of video chat, or by e-mail, which may have limited the amount of perceived influence that participants attributed to word-of-mouth in this study.

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) was defined 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" (Hennig-Thurau et. al, 2014, p. 39) and was operationalized as "Online reviews/comments in general," representing eWOM consumed across all types of social media, and with five additional items to represent eWOM consumed on specific types of social media, for example, "Online reviews/comments posted on Facebook, LinkedIn or

Google+," representing eWOM consumed on social networking sites. Although these five additional items served to represent eWOM consumed on specific types of social media (e.g., online review sites, social networking sites, content-sharing sites, blogs and micro-blogs), as defined by social media experts, participants may not have made the same distinctions among the various items.

A potential fifth limitation is that the participants who responded to the additional incentive may have been have been different from the participants who responded to original incentive.

Theoretical Implications

Individual Media Dependency (IMD) theory holds that an individual depends on a medium, or perceives a medium to be important, to the extent that the medium helps an individual satisfy a particular goal (Skumanich & Kintsfather, 1998). Previous research has found that college-bound students consider social media to be the least important, least influential and least reliable source of information among college search and enrollment resources, which suggests that social media is not fulfilling prospective students' goals pertaining to the search and choice phases (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011; Noel-Levitz, 2014, Parrot and Tipton, 2010).

Although social media serve as the channel by which electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is shared among consumers, these findings do not necessarily apply to eWOM — the message. This study sought to examine the specific influence of eWOM on the college search and choice. Although traditional word-of-mouth was found to have a significantly greater perceived influence on college choice than eWOM, as predicted, findings suggest that eWOM still plays a role in the college search and choice — a role

that is distinct from that of social media. Forty-one percent of students reported using online reviews/comments as a source of information when deciding which colleges/universities to apply to, whereas 25% reported using social media when deciding where to apply. Similarly, thirty-two percent of students reported using online reviews/comments when deciding where to enroll among acceptances, and 18% reported using social media when deciding where to enroll. These numbers suggest that students depend more upon eWOM than social media in satisfying behavior-related goals during the college search and choice, and that the two sources of information are, in fact, distinct in terms of their perceived influence on the college choice process.

Practical Implications

Previous research examining social media's role in the college choice process has suggested that social media has little influence on a prospective student's enrollment decision compared to that of parents, admissions counselors, friends, relatives, high school counselors and current students at the institution of interest (Noel-Levitz, 2014). This study supports these findings, with students reporting that word-of-mouth, college websites, college planning/ranking websites, online reviews/comments (eWOM), campus tours and college e-mail were more influential sources of information than social media when making an enrollment decision. This study also suggests that students' perceived influence of eWOM on the college search and choice is distinct from that of social media, with eWOM having a greater perceived influence.

These findings should not be taken to mean, however, that social media do not play a role in the college choice process or that marketing and recruitment officials should stop creating and maintaining official college social media. A third of students

reported that they used eWOM when making an application decision, and a fourth of students reported that they used eWOM when making an enrollment decision — findings that suggest that although students may not be placing much value on social media — the channel — they are placing some importance on eWOM — the message. Because eWOM would not exist without social media like Facebook, College Confidential and Instagram that deliver it to the masses, social media does play a role in the process as the channel by which consumers share and consume eWOM.

In the past, colleges and universities have been criticized for using social media to shout information at users in a one-way dialogue rather than for the interactive, conversational purposes that social media is intended (Constantinides and Zinck Stagno, 2011). The findings of this study suggest that higher education officials can be more strategic in their social media efforts by fostering the creation and exchange of eWOM on their official social media presences, specifically, eWOM pertaining to the college search. Furthermore, because this study suggests that eWOM has the greatest perceived influence on the college search and choice when consumed on online review/forums sites, higher education officials should encourage the creation and exchange of eWOM on these sites. Although most online review/forum sites are not operated by the colleges or universities themselves, colleges and universities can still do their part by asking parents and students to rate their institutions and share their thoughts on third-party review sites, such as College Confidential.

Until colleges and universities offer prospective students the opportunity to connect and engage with others on social media, students will most likely continue to

place low value on social media as an information resource during the college search and choice.

Future Research

Suggestions for future research include administering the online survey to students from other types of higher education institutions, including public universities, community colleges and institutions offering online degree programs. In addition, this study should also be repeated to examine any potential differences that may exist between domestic and international students regarding their perceived influence of eWOM in the college choice process. Furthermore, this study should be repeated with first-time undergraduate students who are in their first semester or who have just submitted an acceptance, so that recall of their college search and choice is as accurate as possible. If possible, this study should also be repeated with high school seniors who are actually in the midst of the college choice process.

Other suggestions for future research include differentiating between eWOM from known users and eWOM from unknown users to determine whether the source of eWOM affects the perceived influence that eWOM has on the college search and choice.

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APPENDIX A

QUALTRICS QUESTIONNAIRE

Qualtrics Questionnaire

This study will examine how prospective students are using various sources of information during the college application and enrollment processes, with a specific focus on electronic sources of information, such as social media.

Which sources of information did you use when researching colleges/universities prior to deciding where **to apply**? (Please check all that apply)

- Conversations with Friends/Family/Peers/Guidance Counselors/College Officials/Others
- Official College Websites (e.g., www.miami.edu)
- Official College Social Media (e.g., The Official University of Miami Facebook page, the Official University of Miami Twitter
- account, etc.)
- College Planning/Ranking Websites (e.g., Studentaid.ed.gov, U.S. News and World Report)
- Online Reviews/Comments (e.g., posts to College Confidential, comments on Facebook, Tweets, blog posts, etc.)
- Email from Colleges/Universities
- Texts from Colleges/Universities
- Official College Mobile Apps
- Third-Party Mobile Apps
- Campus Tours
- Other (Please specify): _____
- None of the Above

After receiving an acceptance notification, which sources of information did you use when making your **final decision of where to enroll** among the colleges/universities you were accepted to? (Please check all that apply)

- Conversations with Friends/Family/Peers/Guidance Counselors/College Officials/Others
- Official College Websites (e.g., www.miami.edu)
- Official College Social Media (e.g., The Official University of Miami Facebook page, the Official University of Miami Twitter
- account, etc.)
- College Planning/Ranking Websites (e.g., Studentaid.ed.gov, U.S. News and World Report)
- Online Reviews/Comments (e.g., posts to College Confidential, comments on Facebook, Tweets, blog posts, etc.)
- Email from Colleges/Universities
- Texts from Colleges/Universities
- Official College Mobile Apps
- Third-Party Mobile App
- Campus Tours

- Other (Please specify): _____
- None of the Above

Which social media sites did you use when researching colleges/universities prior to deciding where **to apply**? (Please check all that apply)

- Facebook
- Twitter
- YouTube
- LinkedIn
- Google+
- Pinterest
- Instagram
- Tumblr
- Vine
- Snapchat
- iFunny
- Reddit
- Blogs
- College Confidential
- Other (Please specify): _____
- None of the Above

After receiving an acceptance notification, which social media sites did you use when making your **final decision of where to enroll** among the colleges/universities you were accepted to? (Please check all that apply)

- Facebook
- Twitter
- YouTube
- LinkedIn
- Google+
- Pinterest
- Instagram
- Tumblr
- Vine
- Snapchat
- iFunny
- Reddit
- Blogs
- College Confidential
- Other (Please specify): _____
- None of the Above

Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

The following sources of information influenced my decision **to apply** to specific colleges/universities.

- o Strongly Agree
- o Agree
- o Neither Agree nor Disagree
- o Disagree
- o Strongly Disagree

In-person conversations with family, friends, guidance counselors, college officials and/or others

- o Strongly Agree
- o Agree
- o Neither Agree nor Disagree
- o Disagree
- o Strongly Disagree

Online reviews/comments in general

- o Strongly Agree
- o Agree
- o Neither Agree nor Disagree
- o Disagree
- o Strongly Disagree

Online reviews/comments posted to college-specific review/forum-type websites (e.g., College Confidential, Zinch, Cappex, College Prowler)

- o Strongly Agree
- o Agree
- o Neither Agree nor Disagree
- o Disagree
- o Strongly Disagree

Online reviews/comments posted on Facebook, LinkedIn or Google+

- o Strongly Agree
- o Agree
- o Neither Agree nor Disagree
- o Disagree
- o Strongly Disagree

Online reviews/comments posted to Instagram, YouTube, Tumbler, Pinterest, Vine or Snapchat

- o Strongly Agree
- o Agree
- o Neither Agree nor Disagree
- o Disagree
- o Strongly Disagree

Online reviews/comments posted on blogs

- o Strongly Agree
- o Agree
- o Neither Agree nor Disagree
- o Disagree
- o Strongly Disagree

Online reviews/comments posted on micro-blogs (e.g., Twitter)

- o Strongly Agree
- o Agree
- o Neither Agree nor Disagree
- o Disagree
- o Strongly Disagree

The following sources of information influenced my final decision **to attend** one of the universities to which I was accepted.

In-person conversations with family, friends, guidance counselors, college officials and/or others

- o Strongly Agree
- o Agree
- o Neither Agree nor Disagree
- o Disagree
- o Strongly Disagree

Online reviews/comments in general

- o Strongly Agree
- o Agree
- o Neither Agree nor Disagree
- o Disagree
- o Strongly Disagree

Online reviews/comments posted to college-specific review/forum-type websites (e.g., College Confidential, Zinch, Cappex, College Prowler)

- o Strongly Agree
- o Agree
- o Neither Agree nor Disagree
- o Disagree
- o Strongly Disagree

Online reviews/comments posted on Facebook, LinkedIn or Google+

- o Strongly Agree
- o Agree
- o Neither Agree nor Disagree
- o Disagree
- o Strongly Disagree

Online reviews/comments posted to Instagram, YouTube, Tumbler, Pinterest, Vine or Snapchat

- o Strongly Agree
- o Agree
- o Neither Agree nor Disagree
- o Disagree
- o Strongly Disagree

Online reviews/comments posted on blogs

- o Strongly Agree
- o Agree
- o Neither Agree nor Disagree
- o Disagree
- o Strongly Disagree

Online reviews/comments posted on micro-blogs (e.g., Twitter)

- o Strongly Agree
- o Agree
- o Neither Agree nor Disagree
- o Disagree
- o Strongly Disagree

The following factors influenced my final decision **to attend** one of the universities to which I was accepted.

Cost of attending the college/university (e.g., tuition, books, room and board, etc.

- o Strongly Agree
- o Agree
- o Neither Agree nor Disagree
- o Disagree
- o Strongly Disagree

The financial aid package offered by the college/university

- o Strongly Agree
- o Agree
- o Neither Agree nor Disagree
- o Disagree
- o Strongly Disagree

The academic reputation of the college/university in general

- o Strongly Agree
- o Agree
- o Neither Agree nor Disagree
- o Disagree
- o Strongly Disagree

The academic reputation of my program/major of interest

- o Strongly Agree
- o Agree
- o Neither Agree nor Disagree
- o Disagree
- o Strongly Disagree

The athletic reputation of the college/university

- o Strongly Agree
- o Agree
- o Neither Agree nor Disagree
- o Disagree
- o Strongly Disagree

The size of the institution

- o Strongly Agree
- o Agree
- o Neither Agree nor Disagree
- o Disagree
- o Strongly Disagree

Family recommendations (from either immediate or extended family members)

- o Strongly Agree
- o Agree
- o Neither Agree nor Disagree
- o Disagree
- o Strongly Disagree

My friends' decisions of where to attend college

- o Strongly Agree
- o Agree
- o Neither Agree nor Disagree
- o Disagree
- o Strongly Disagree

Geographic setting

- o Strongly Agree
- o Agree
- o Neither Agree nor Disagree
- o Disagree
- o Strongly Disagree

Campus appearance

- o Strongly Agree
- o Agree
- o Neither Agree nor Disagree
- o Disagree
- o Strongly Disagree

Personalized attention by the college/university prior to enrollment

- o Strongly Agree
- o Agree
- o Neither Agree nor Disagree
- o Disagree
- o Strongly Disagree

My acceptance letter/package that came to me in the mail

- o Strongly Agree
- o Agree
- o Neither Agree nor Disagree
- o Disagree

o   Strongly Disagree

Year born (Please enter your four-digit birth year): _____

Gender:

o   Male
o   Female

Race (Please select all that apply):

▪   White
▪   Black or African American
▪   American Indian or Alaska Native
▪   Asian
▪   Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

Ethnicity:

o   Hispanic or Latino
o   Not Hispanic or Latino

In which school are you currently enrolled at UM?

o   School of Architecture
o   College of Arts and Sciences
o   School of Business Administration
o   School of Communication
o   School of Education and Human Development
o   College of Engineering
o   Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science
o   Frost School of Music
o   School of Nursing and Health Studies
o   Division of Continuing & International Education

Citizenship:

o   U.S. Citizen
o   Non-U.S. Citizen

What region does your country of citizenship fall into?

o   Africa (sub-Sahara)
o   East Asia and the Pacific
o   Europe and Eurasia
o   North Africa and the Middle East

- o South and Central Asia
- o Western Hemisphere (Canada, Central and South America, the Caribbean)

To how many colleges/universities did you apply? (Please enter a number): _____

Were you accepted to any other colleges/universities other than the University of Miami?

- o Yes
- o No

How many? (Please enter a number): _____

Do you have a family member (either immediate or extended) who attended the University of Miami?

- o Yes
- o No

APPENDIX B

INVITATION E-MAIL SCRIPT

Invitation E-mail Script

Greetings,

My name is Whitney Sessa Lehmann, and I am a doctoral student at the University of Miami working on a study examining various factors influencing the college application and enrollment processes; this study has been approved by UM's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Please note that your email has been provided to me by UM's Division of Enrollment Management, and should you decide to participate in this voluntary study, your participation will be anonymous. No individual data will be reported in the results of this study; only aggregate data will be reported.

The online questionnaire will take approximately 5 to 10 minutes to complete. **Those who complete the survey will be automatically entered into a random drawing to win one $100 pre-paid Visa gift card or several second prize winners will receive 8.5x11 black University of Miami leather padfolios.**

The consent form below describes this study in further detail. Should you have any questions, however, please feel free to contact me by responding to this e-mail or via any of my contact information listed below. To indicate your agreement and to participate in the study, please click the link that directly follows the consent form.

Thank you, in advance, for your help.

Best wishes,
Whitney Sessa Lehmann

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT

Informed Consent

<div align="center">

University of Miami
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY
(The Influence of Electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM) on College Choice)

</div>

The following information describes the research study in which you are being asked to participate. Please read the information carefully. At the end, you will be asked to click the link to the online survey if you agree to participate.

PURPOSE OF STUDY:

You are being asked to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to look at how students use various sources of information during the college application and enrollment processes, specifically electronic sources of information, such as social media.

PROCEDURES:

The researcher has selected you, along with approximately 2,500 other first-time, undergraduate students at the University of Miami, to participate in this study. The University of Miami's Division of Enrollment Management supplied us with your email.

The online questionnaire developed for this study includes questions relating to your use of various sources of information during the college application and enrollment processes. All questions will require an answer, as the questionnaire will automatically direct you to different sets of questions depending on your answers to previous ones.

The questionnaire should take approximately 5 to 10 minutes to complete.

RISKS AND/OR DISCOMFORTS:

We do not anticipate you will experience any personal risk or discomfort from taking part in this study.

BENEFITS:

No benefit can be promised to you from your participation in this study. The study is expected to benefit higher education institutions by shedding light on the factors influencing college choice and the information preferences of prospective students during the college application and enrollment processes.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

Your participation in this study is anonymous. Only the Investigator and her research collaborators will have access to the data you provide, which will be secured via the

Investigator's password-protected online survey software.

COMPENSATION:

Once the survey period has closed, three to four participants who fully completed the online questionnaire will be randomly selected to receive either a $100 pre-paid Visa gift card (first prize); several second-place winners will each receive a black, leather UM padfolio provided by the Division of Enrollment Management. Participants selected to win the prizes will be notified by the Investigator via their UM email addresses. The odds of winning depends on the final number who complete the questionnaire; however, it is expected to be 4/2500. The drawing will take place the week after the survey closes. The padfolios are being provided by UM's Division of Enrollment Management.

RIGHT TO DECLINE OR WITHDRAW:

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to refuse to participate in the study or withdraw your consent at any time during the study.

Your desire not to participate in this study or request to withdraw will not adversely affect your status grades at the University of Miami.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Whitney Sessa, under the supervision of Diane Millette, Ed.D, department chair for UM's School of Communication, will gladly answer any questions you may have concerning the purpose, procedures and outcome of this project and can be reached at w.sessa@umiami.edu or at 954-560-5132. If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact Human Subjects Research Office at the University of Miami, at (305) 243-3195.

PARTICIPANT AGREEMENT:

I have read the information in this consent form and agree to participate in this study. I have had the chance to ask any questions I have about this study, and they have been answered for me. Please print a copy of this consent for your personal records.

By clicking the link below, I indicate my agreement to participate in this study.

[   ] YES I agree to participate

If you do not wish to participate, please close this email.