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MOTIVATIONS FOR FOOD AND FARMING EDUCATION SELECTION DECISION: A WORD-OF-MOUTH CIRCULATION PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Food and farming education has a highly specialized curriculum. To successfully select the right course, students exchange information about food and farming education courses. Among the various sources of information available for course selection in food and farming education, word of mouth (WOM) is the most commonly used source. Although WOM is valuable, research on how students exchange information on electives related to food and farming education is limited. This study first conducted focus group interviews with 40 interviewees and explored the profile, motivation, and behavior of students participating in WOM for food and farming education courses. Subsequently, content analysis was used to examine the timing and the common channels and network of WOM communication. Accordingly, students' motivation for engaging in WOM regarding food and farming education course selection was summarized. Results revealed that students' motivation to disseminate information about electives through WOM can be summarized into the following six aspects: to benefit mutually, to support or retaliate against teachers, to improve social contact, to avoid being alone, and for altruism and self-enhancement. The classification following focus group interviews and findings from relevant literature were employed to create a questionnaire for quantifying and corroborating the qualitative research results. This study not only bridges the gaps in research on food and farming education but also provides scholars with recommendations for future research to examine food and farming education issues from different aspects.

Moreover, to keep up with the changing educational environment, school authorities should value students' views on food and farming education courses and faculty. They should improve the administrative system and communication between teachers and students by understanding how students participate in WOM for food and farming education courses in order to create a favorable food and farming education teaching environment and improve student satisfaction, thus facilitating agribusiness in the long term.

Keywords: Food and Farming Education, Word-of-Mouth, Decision-Making Motivation.

Introduction

From the perspective of education providers, schools are encountering increasingly fierce competition because educational options have diversified and students' learning channels have multiplied. To clearly understand and meet students' learning needs, school authorities at the management level and student organizations have invested substantial effort and resources into assisting students with their course selection for food and farming education. Research on Food and farming education course selection is significant for the education sector. Because of the uniqueness of the Taiwan educational environment, unlike companies that market products or services using diverse marketing strategies (e.g., TV commercials), schools and student associations cannot market specific courses and teachers to attract students and influence their Food and farming education course selection decisions. To enhance the efficiency of course selection decisions, students refer to informal course/teacher information circulated among classmates or from other channels, in addition to the Food and farming education course syllabi information provided by school authorities. For this study, we define informal information as "food and farming education course-related word-of-mouth" (FFEC - WOM). Previous studies showed that the use of FFEC - WOM in Food and farming education course selection behaviors was a commonly occurring phenomenon. For example, Kerin et al. (1975) found that 62% of the interviewed students agreed that WOM from friends was the most significant information source when selecting non-compulsory courses. Borgida and Nisbett (1977) indicated that brief and vivid course-related more significantly influenced students' course selection decisions compared to

abstract and incomprehensible teaching evaluation statistics.

Studies have verified that students select courses on the basis of WOM and that WOM is the most notable information source for course selection (Consiglio et al., 2018). Contemporary student publications comprising a collection of course-related information for the reference of other students (Babad et al., 1999) and teacher evaluation websites that post students' FFEC - WOM (Edwards et al., 2007; Edwards et al., 2009) have attracted research attention because they are widely read by students. However, very few studies have independently explored how students spread FFEC - WOM, and understandings of this phenomenon remain limited. Previous studies on WOM circulation focused primarily on for-profit applications and rarely explored WOM circulation behaviors in not-for-profit organizations. To compensate for the research and knowledge gap in this area, we conducted a qualitative study to investigate FFEC - WOM circulation situations and motivations for students at higher education institutes. We aimed to explore when, through what channels, to whom, and what FFEC - WOM college students spread, and their motivations for spreading FFEC - WOM. The results could then enhance current understandings of the information demands and flows of Food and farming education course selection, improve Food and farming education course selection efficiency, and enable school authorities to provide curriculum consulting services that better fulfill students' requirements.

Literature Review

Factors that Influence Food and Farming Education Course Selection Behavior

Students' behaviors in selecting food and farming education courses offered in higher education institutes have attracted research attention only in recent years. On campus, students collect all types of information regarding food and farming education courses to facilitate their course selection. The following characteristics are typical of Food and farming education course selection behaviors: (1) the Food and farming education course selection process occurs every semester, and students accumulate and develop experience during the repetition of this process (Babad et al., 1999); (2) Food and farming education course selection is not an isolated decision, but a decision made based on a combination of interactive influences as students arrange and select several courses (Babad, 2001); and (3) Food and farming education course selection decisions in-

clude periods of hesitation, because students choose courses before the semester starts but can add or drop food and farming education courses in the first few weeks of the semester (Cui et al., 2018). Previous studies have shown that past course evaluations and the academic difficulty of Food and farming education course introductions or descriptions were effective predictors of students' class-dropping behavior (Babad et al., 2008). The information students rely on when selecting Food and farming education courses can be classified into two types: formal and informal information sources.

Formal information sources comprise the schools themselves and other organizations on campus. School authorities provide information such as printed or online food and farming education course catalogs, course syllabi, and teacher descriptions; some schools even provide teacher evaluations by previous students (Oh & Ki, 2019). Coleman and Mckeachie (1981) examined the relationship between students' evaluations of teachers and Food and farming education courses and course selection behaviors. They found that Food and farming education courses with higher evaluation ratings had a higher likelihood of being selected by students despite the additional homework, indicating that evaluations by previous students significantly influenced students' Food and farming education course selection decisions. Formal information provided by other organizations on campus is typically course selection references and evaluations prepared and published by student associations, such as the *Princeton Course Guide* published by the student association at Princeton University (Babad et al., 1999). Babad et al. found that specific category information in the Food and farming education course guide positively correlated to students' Food and farming education course evaluations; information categories included teachers' teaching styles, sense of humor, and how interesting students found the Food and farming education course content and textbooks.

Numerous studies have discussed the relationship between Food and farming education course evaluation and Food and farming education course selection (Leventhal et al., 1975; Babad et al., 2003; Wang &Ren, 2018). However, only a few studies have investigated the influence that WOM, a type of informal information, had on students' Food and farming education course selection. For this study, we define informal sources of Food and farming education course selection information as FFEC - WOM, that is, students' shared or related Food and farming education class experiences, comments, or information regarding

course content, teaching styles, and grading systems, which are circulated through face-to-face interactions or online platforms (e.g., BBS, MSN, and e-mail).

FFEC - WOM

Seeking and circulating FFEC - WOM are crucial to students' food and farming education course selection behavior. Educational environments typically have the following characteristics: long-term use of educational services; information asymmetry between teachers and students; grouping of students with the same experience or needs, which increases the convenience of exchanging information (Shen & Sengupta, 2018); and lack of commercial interests or conflicts in information exchange. These characteristics render FFEC - WOM informative and beneficial, thus warranting focused discussions. Therefore, to further understand the process of food and farming education course selection, we investigated the situations and motivations of college students participating in FFEC - WOM (a specific behavior).

In the early 1970s, Kerin et al. published a study on students' course selection behavior that indicated that course-related WOM was the most significant information source for students at higher education institutes and substantially more important than formal information provided by school authorities. Kerin et al. (1975) investigated 100 students at the School of Business, Southern Methodist University. They found that students considered and discussed eight main factors in selecting courses, of which the three most discussed factors were personal interests (38%), course content (26%), and added value to the students' main areas of study or majors (22%). Leventhal et al. (1975) surveyed 1,188 students and found that for the same type of courses instructed by different teachers, the class time and reputation of the teachers most significantly influenced students' course selection decisions. The reputation of the teachers was mostly spread through FFEC - WOM from other students. In the 1980s, although a number of previous studies showed that course evaluations influenced course selection (Coleman & Mckeachie, 1981), Price and Feick (1984) found that students' FFEC - WOM was used more frequently than the formal information provided by school authorities.

In recent years, because students have valued and widely adopted online teacher evaluations, websites carrying faculty information such as RateMyProfessor.com, Professor Performance.com, and Reviewum.com have begun attracting academic attention

(Stojmenovic et al., 2019). Internet communication has substantially reduced the expenditure of WOM circulation. Students voluntarily post mostly anonymous comments and scores regarding certain teachers and their courses on Web sites, and these comments become online FFEC - WOM, which differs from face-to-face communication and transmission. Most scholars considered online FFEC - WOM an alternative Food and farming education course evaluation and compared them to traditional course evaluations (Coladarci & Kornfield, 2007). Scholars investigated online FFEC - WOM commentators' preferences, online FFEC - WOM comment content, and whether they reflected students' learning statuses (Silva et al., 2008). They also examined college students' motivations for reading online FFEC - WOM, what they cared most about regarding FFEC - WOM, and whether students' expectations of the courses and teachers developed from reading online FFEC - WOM influenced their subsequent learning statuses (Edwards et al., 2007; 2009). These studies showed that online FFEC - WOM affected students' views of teachers and expectations for course content and their learning attitudes. However, by conducting a focus group, Kindred and Mohammed (2005) found that online FFEC - WOM was only considered supplementary information, because it was posted anonymously. Additionally, students preferred to spread FFEC - WOM through face-to-face interaction with classmates, because they could interact with FFEC - WOM providers and obtain more detailed answers through conversations. Therefore, this study focuses on traditional FFEC - WOM circulation behaviors.

FFEC - WOM Circulation

Although FFEC - WOM is the most significant information source helping students' course selection decisions at higher education institutes, most previous studies have focused on only WOM activities at educational institutions in general (Alves & Raposo, 2007). Despite recognizing the significance of FFEC - WOM as the most crucial source of information, few studies have discussed how FFEC - WOM is circulated among students; instead, most have focused on how students' satisfaction levels affect FFEC - WOM circulation. To students, complaining to school authorities and teachers is extremely risky and difficult (Yu et al., 2019); therefore, dissatisfied students spread negative WOM to affect school authorities, and some students may even exhibit behaviors of transferring to other schools or terminating their schooling as a consequence (Chadwick & Ward, 1987; Thomas et al., 1996).

Davis and Swanson (2001) investigated the relationship between students' satisfaction levels toward courses or teachers and their subsequent behaviors. They found that satisfied students tended to spread positive FFEC - WOM among friends at other schools or families, whereas dissatisfied students tended to spread negative FFEC - WOM among other students, teachers, and school faculties; the two types of students spread FFEC - WOM among different receivers. Investigating 277 online MBA course students, Endres et al. (2009) used content analysis to determine that students' motivations for recommending courses, teachers, or schools to others could be predicted based on students' satisfaction levels. Students who were satisfied with specific teachers and teaching styles would recommend those teachers to other students, and students satisfied with the course content and interaction among students would recommend the courses to other people.

We can conclude that previous studies considered the behavior of FFEC - WOM circulation as a product of student satisfaction, without investigating its causes. In classical communication theories, Lasswell (1948) proposed the famous communication formula "Who says What in Which Channel to Whom with What Effect?" Communication can be formally defined as the following: communication messages influence other people's decision behaviors. We used the communication formula as a basis to investigate how students spread FFEC - WOM. We analyzed basic situations (i.e., when, where, to whom, and what did students spread) and motivations for circulation.

We employed the traditional WOM circulation motivations discussed in previous studies on customer behaviors as references, as summarized in Table 1. Customers' motivations for spreading WOM were classified into the following six types: Product involvement, where customers spread positive WOM to express their feelings after purchasing and using products (Dichter, 1966; Sundaram et al., 1998); self-involvement, where customers spread WOM to project an image of themselves as experts to increase their social status and gain the positive review of others (Dichter, 1966; Sundaram et al., 1998; Mazzarol et al., 2007); message involvement, where customers spread WOM to obtain suggestions on problems they encounter when purchasing and using the products (Dichter, 1966; Sundaram et al., 1998; Mao & Oppewal, 2010); other involvement, where customers spread WOM to establish amicable relationships (Dichter, 1966; Anderson, 1998); altruism, where customers spread WOM to help others

make better purchase decisions (Sundaram et al., 1998; Singh & Wilkes, 1996); and assisting or taking revenge on companies, where customers comment on the consumption experience provided by a certain enterprise to affect others' purchase decisions (Sundaram et al., 1998; Davis & Swanson, 2001). In this study, we discuss why students, the customers in the higher education sector (Guolla, 1999), spread FFEC - WOM, reclassifying and redefining motivations for spreading FFEC - WOM. We use focus group analyses to classify students' motivations for spreading FFEC - WOM into the following six types: altruism, social interactions, supporting or taking revenge on teachers, mutual benefits, self-expression, and avoiding isolation.

Table 1. Motivations for traditional WOM circulation

Attribution	**Connotation**	**Literature**
Product Involvement	To relieve intense feelings experienced after purchasing and using a product. For example, highly satisfied customers discuss or recommend the products to balance their emotions.	Dichter (1966) Sundram et al. (1998)
Self-Involvement	A type of self-confirmation. These customers spread WOM to satisfy specific emotional needs and goals, for example, to draw people's attention and to appear as market experts (market mavens). They feel similar to product pioneers and wish to establish their social status and superiority and seek the approval and confirmation of others.	Dichter (1966) Sundram et al. (1998) Mazzarol et al. (2007)
Message Involvement	Customers share experiences of using the products or product advertisements to discuss with others and acquire feedback infor-	Dichter (1966) Sundram et al. (1998) Mao & Oppwawl (2010)

	mation.	
Other Involvement	Customers spread WOM to share joy and communicate their care, love, and friendship with others.	Dichter (1966) Anderson (1998)
Altruism	Altruistic behaviors with no desire for repayment or returns. Customers spread positive WOM only to help others make satisfactory purchase decisions, or spread negative WOM (consumption complaints and negative experiences using products) only to warn and help others.	Sundram et al. (1998) Singh & Wilks (1996)
Helping or Revenging the Company	Customers spread positive WOM to recommend the products, or spread negative WOM to dissuade people from purchasing the products, to assist or take revenge on the companies that provided the products or consumption services.	Sundram et al. (1998) Davis & Swanson (2001)

Method

Qualitative studies are optimal for identifying the implications of human behaviors. We conducted this study to investigate the dissemination of FFEC - WOM through students, a communication activity that occurs daily in educational environments, and examine its causes and elements. A qualitative and inductive research design is suitable for the objective of this study. Through a focus group (FG), we explored how students spread FFEC - WOM. Additionally, we used content analysis to collect data and statistics to investigate the conditions and motivations for students spreading FFEC - WOM.

Focus Group

A professional researcher conducted small-group interviews with the participants of an FG. During the interviews, the researcher raised open-ended questions and stimulated discussions to obtain the participants' opinions and

experiences. Through this method, the participants debated with each other and shared experiences, enabling the researcher to better understand the participants' complex behaviors, motivations, and opinions regarding certain phenomena. These characteristics satisfied the research objectives of this study (Morgan, 1996). Previous studies have extensively employed FGs to explore students' attitudes and experience of certain phenomena (Kaase & Harshbarger, 1993).

We studied FGs between Nov. 30, 2019, and Jan. 30, 2020, until the participants no longer provided new information and data saturation was nearly achieved. We adopted the purposive sampling method to recruit undergraduate and graduate students from universities in Taiwan. The participants were selected from schools in various areas of Taiwan to ensure sample diversity. We primarily sampled traditional-age students, excluding gifted, international, and minority students (Justice & Dornan, 2001). To increase students' willingness to participate and to encourage lively discussions, we limited each interview group to a maximum of six participants (Morgan, 1996). Each FG volunteer was given a NT$100 convenience store coupon after the interview. We conducted eight FGs, with three to seven participants each. With an average of five participants per FG, we interviewed a total of 40 students from higher education institutes in Taiwan (18 male and 22 female; 25 undergraduates and 15 graduate students).

The interviews were conducted in laboratories without disturbances. First, the FG moderator explained the study procedures to the participants. Subsequently, after obtaining the participants' consent to be recorded, the FG moderator encouraged the participants to ask questions and informally discuss their experiences of participating in FFEC - WOM at schools. The FG moderator respected the expression of various ideas and ensured that the discussions were not dominated by a few participants. The FG lasted approximately 90 min. The FG moderator referred to a pre-designed interview guide to pose flexible questions and probe further at appropriate times, obtaining more in-depth information indirectly. We used Kruger's (1994) Tape-Based Analysis and Note-Based Analysis to collect data. In addition to live recordings, a research assistant took written notes of the participants' interactions. Subsequently, another research assistant transcribed the recordings into word documents, incorporating the written notes, then proofread the data, and deleted the participants' names. After conducting each FG, the researcher and the assistant immediately

discussed their impressions, identified the findings, summarized issues worthy of further discussion, and updated the interview guide for future use.

Data Analysis

Adopting Lincoln and Guba's (1985) suggestions, we initiated data analysis after the first FG to facilitate subsequent data collection. We used the inductive method to compare the FG results. First, two researchers separately reviewed the transcripts and interview notes and coded the information units. An information unit can be a sentence or a paragraph. Additionally, it must be reduced to the smallest information unit and still incorporate the research topic (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After coding the units, the two researchers separately compiled related information units into categories, before meeting with a third researcher to discuss the coding results and achieve a consensus (Sayre, 1992). Coding coordination was conducted to ensure coding consistency. New information collected from subsequent The FG results were decomposed into new information units and compared with the coded categories. FGs were conducted until the data failed to yield new and significant information categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, the data analysis concluded by compiling the relevant information categories as the pivotal structure of the research.

To increase research reliability, we obtained the participants' feedback on the research findings through participant verification. We conducted two participant verification meetings, which were attended by nine FG participants. The first meeting was conducted during the data collection process and attended by four participants; the second meeting was conducted after completing data collection and attended by five participants. To maintain the anonymity of participants, participants from the same FG were invited to attend the two verification meetings to avoid introducing new members. During the meetings, we distributed abstracts of crucial findings to the participants and asked for their opinions. After collecting data, we hosted a peer report conference, seeking opinions from approximately 10 scholars who had studied customers' WOM behaviors or were from the educational sector. The data collected at this conference were included in the following analysis.

Through the FGs, after eliminating unclear answers, we collected 40 accounts of participants' experiences of spreading FFEC - WOM. We conducted content analysis (Kassarjian, 1997) on the 40 accounts, dividing interview data into paragraphs or segments that represented different concepts. We recorded the number of oc-

currences of the 4Ws (when, where, whom, what) and discussed the motivations for spreading FFEC - WOM with two researchers from a business background. We also categorized opinions based on their similarity, summarizing their themes. Additionally, we used previous studies as the basis for categorization. To enhance the impartiality of this study, we discussed and re-categorized the data when the researchers' opinions differed, until finally reaching a consensus.

Result

Below we discuss the situations and motivations (when, where, whom, what) for students' spreading FFEC - WOM.

Students' Spreading FFEC - WOM

We classified the conditions of students' spreading FFEC - WOM into the following four categories: (1) When, that is, at what time do students normally spread FFEC - WOM; (2) where, that is, through what channels do students normally spread FFEC - WOM; (3) who, that is, to who do students normally spread FFEC - WOM; and (4) what, that is, what is the typical content of students' FFEC - WOM. We briefly present the research results for these four categories below.

When: We found that 82.5% of the students typically spread FFEC - WOM during the course selection period, indicating that students' FFEC - WOM spreading behaviors primarily occurred before attending courses. Education is a long-term service for students; the exchange of course selection information in the early stages enhances students' Food and farming education course selection decisions.

Where: We also found that 100% of the students preferred spreading FFEC - WOM through face-to-face interactions, indicating that the Internet was not as significant a medium in this field compared to that other service sectors. Considering that students are surrounded by their classmates with the same usage (course attendance) experience, and that the risks of spreading FFEC - WOM are higher than spreading WOM in other service sectors (e.g., because of a fear of resentment or punishment from the teachers or school authorities), students prefer to spread FFEC - WOM to their classmates, friends, and relatives through face-to-face interaction, fearing that online information may expose their identities.

Whom: We also found that 90% of the students spread FFEC - WOM to their classmates, indicating that FFEC - WOM receivers tend to be students in similar educational environments or

with similar study experience. Classmates can easily collect and discuss opinions. The strength of FFEC - WOM does not depend on emotional connections.

What: We found that 70% of the students primarily spread Food and farming education course-related FFEC - WOM, such as the domain of the course or the scope of lectures, indicating that FFEC - WOM contents were primarily objective information about the courses, instead of students' emotions or opinions. This suggests that colleges should improve their syllabus information and announcement channels.

Table 2. An Overview of FFEC - WOM Spreading by Students

Situation	f	%
when		
During course selection periods	33	82.5
During semesters	18	45
Other (e.g., after grades are received)	3	7.5
where		
face-to-face	40	100
Internet	2	5
whom		
Classmates	36	90
Lowerclassman	9	22.5
Other (e.g., roommates)	1	2.5
What		
Course content	28	70
Grading systems	18	45
Teachers' personal traits	18	45
Instruction methods and requirements	8	20
Course value	8	20
Course syllabi	2	5
Other (e.g., course prerequisites)	1	2.5

Motivations for Spreading FFEC - WOM

We learned that students primarily spread FFEC - WOM through face-to-face interaction. Based on previous studies of traditional WOM, we identified the following six motivations for spreading FFEC - WOM: (1) Altruism, (2) social interactions, (3) to support or obtain revenge on teachers, (4) mutual benefits, (5) self-expression, and (6) a fear of social exclusion. The first five motivations were developed from concepts found in previous studies (Dichter,1966; Sundaram et al.,1998). We provided new definitions and evidence from previous studies to identify the differences between students' FFEC - WOM spreading behavior in the educational sector and customers' WOM spreading behavior in normal business settings. Additionally, we identified a new motivation, that is, students spread FFEC - WOM to "avoid social exclusion." These students discuss course selection with other students to reduce academic pressure and lower risks. The results for the six motivations are presented below.

Table 3. Motivations for spreading FFEC - WOM

Motivation	**f**	**%**	**Content**	**Reference Definition**
Altruism	30	75	Students share Food and farming education course-related or teacher-related information to assist their classmates in making Food and farming education course selection decisions.	Altruism
Social Interactions	11	27.5	Students consider FFEC - WOM a topic of conversation that can strengthen their relationships with classmates.	Other Involvement
to Support or Obtain Revenge on Teachers	9	22.5	Students explicitly advise other students to select or avoid certain teachers or Food and farming education courses to express their satisfaction or dissatisfac-	

			tion.	
Mutual Benefits	7	17.5	Students spread FFEC - WOM to exchange information that benefits both parties' Food and farming education course selection decisions.	Helping or Revenging the Company
Self-Expression	5	12.5	Students spread FFEC - WOM to display their familiarity with certain courses or teachers or their superior academic performance.	Message Involvement
A Fear of Social Exclusion	11	27.5	Students spread FFEC - WOM to persuade other students to enroll on the same courses as them and thus reduce future academic stress.	Self-Involvement

1. Altruism

Students spread FFEC - WOM to assist their classmates in making Food and farming education course selection decisions or to inform others of issues they should improve or address. This is similar to the "altruism" proposed by Sundaram (1998), which contended that people spread positive WOM to help others form satisfactory purchase decisions, without expecting anything in return. Singh & Wilks (1996) examined the relationship between dissatisfied customers and complaints and found that, in addition to benefiting themselves and confirming the problems, customers spread WOM to influence the decisions of their friends and relatives, encouraging them to choose the products or services recognized by the customers to lower the risks or usage obstacles. From the 40 FFEC - WOM spreading experiences, we identified 30 cases (75%) of altruism, indicating that altruism was a major motivation for spreading FFEC - WOM.

2. Social Interactions

Students also consider FFEC - WOM a topic of conversation, spreading FFEC - WOM to enhance their relationships with their classmates. Similar to the concept of "other involvement" proposed by Dichter (1966), spreading positive WOM is a method for showing care and friendship. Investigating satisfied American customers, Anderson (1998) found that one of the

three motivations for spreading WOM was a social obligation to share information, such as upperclassmen's obligations to share Food and farming education course selection information with freshmen to bridge the gap between them.

3. To Support or Obtain Revenge on Teachers

Additionally, students spread FFEC - WOM to explicitly advise other students to select or avoid certain teachers or Food and farming education courses as an expression of their satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Similar to the concepts of "assisting companies" and "vengeance" proposed by Sundaram et al. (1998), these customers spread WOM to encourage or discourage others' from purchasing certain products. After studying students' dissatisfaction, Davis & Swanson (2001) indicated that 64.1% of the students would spread negative FFEC - WOM among classmates out of revenge because of their dissatisfaction with certain courses or teachers.

4. Mutual Benefits

Altruism refers to the situation where students spread FFEC - WOM to exchange information that benefits both parties' course selection decisions, which is similar to the notion of "information involvement" presented by Dichter et al. (1998). Davis & Sundaram (2001) proposed the concept of "seeking advice," which contends that customers spread WOM to seek advice and feedback from others. Using follow-up studies to examine how Australian students selected colleges, Mao found that to reduce cognitive dissonance, students spread WOM regarding certain teachers to encourage their classmates to share information regarding those teachers and their courses.

5. Self-Expression

Meanwhile, other students spread FFEC - WOM to display their familiarity with certain courses or teachers or discuss their superior academic performances. These students consider themselves opinion leaders, similar to the concept of "self-involvement" presented by Dichter (1966). Sundaram et al. (1998) proposed the notion of "self-enhancement," where customers spread WOM to address certain emotions, establish a professional image, or improve their social status. Examining the factors motivating customers' WOM in the service sector, Mazzarol et al. (2007) indicated that one of the two major motivating factors for spreading WOM was to obtain compliments from others, which boosted the customers' confidence and re-sharing intentions.

6. A Fear of Social Exclusion

Students also spread FFEC - WOM to persuade others to enroll on the same Food and farming education courses. These students hope to form study groups or work on reports together to reduce academic stress. Presently, many students encourage their friends to select the same courses. “Avoiding social exclusion” is also a significant motivation for spreading FFEC - WOM. Because previous studies on this topic were rare, we established it as a separate category for discussion.

Discussion

Conclusion

We found that students normally exchanged course-related FFEC - WOM (what) among classmates (whom) through face-to-face interactions (where) during the selection periods for food and farming education courses (when). Additionally, we identified six motivations for students to participate in FFEC - WOM: altruism, social interaction, supporting or retaliating against teachers, mutual benefits, self-expression, and avoiding social exclusion. Several recent studies recognized the correlation between FFEC - WOM and school performance. Dolinsky (1994) indicated that negative FFEC - WOM showed inadequate school administration and could affect student enrollment. Rust et al. (1995) stated that schools can reduce negative FFEC - WOM to improve student satisfaction. Long et al. (1999) proposed two major reasons for valuing the significance of FFEC - WOM: (a) steady tuition income for school authorities (preventing student drop-outs because of negative FFEC - WOM) and (b) because higher education institutes belong to the service sector, school authorities or internal agencies must understand students’ FFEC - WOM to improve their Food and farming education courses and fulfill students’ expectations. In the last decade, studies of FFEC - WOM focused on analyzing the differences between online FFEC - WOM and teaching evaluations and their effectiveness. A reputed FFEC - WOM Web site (RateMyProfessor.com) was established to provide sources for FFEC - WOM because the number of students using FFEC - WOM was increasing (Edwards et al., 2007). We investigated students’ FFEC - WOM spreading behavior to provide a reference for higher education institutes to improve their management effectiveness.

Management Implications

Schools have encountered challenges in diverse educational environ-

ments, necessitating the simultaneous development of student and teaching activities. Because of low birth rates and reforms to the education system, schools face increasingly severe competition (Guolla, 1999). Therefore, school authorities must improve the circulation of course selection information to effectively meet students' needs, in turn generating positive feedback in the long term. Teachers can improve their teaching techniques once they clearly understand students' FFEC - WOM practices, although their goal should not be limited to satisfying students (Perlman & McCann, 1998). The results of this study provide a reference for designing course selection information systems at higher education institutes and identify the reasons students' value and spread FFEC - WOM. For example, school authorities can host face-to-face (where) FFEC - WOM exchanges before the first Food and farming education course selection (when), providing Food and farming education course selection briefings for freshmen and transfer students. These briefings can provide lists of students who previously selected or have currently selected certain courses (whom) and achieved specific course grades, in addition to open discussions where students at different GPA levels simulate their future course performance and rapidly exchange WOM to facilitate their Food and farming education course selection decisions. The briefings can also provide students with previous lecture handouts or sample tests (what), enabling them to plan their course selections. The six motivations for FFEC - WOM can provide references for schools, teachers, and students. For example, "altruistic" students spread FFEC - WOM continually; based on the "social interaction" motivation, schools should host more cross-departmental activities to increase students' social circles to enable more information exchanges. Because students also spread FFEC - WOM to "support or take revenge on," teachers should improve their teaching methodologies and avoid favoritism. Based on "mutual benefits," schools can provide course grades and an open platform for student discussions. Because students spread FFEC - WOM for "self- expression," other students should verify the source and accuracy of FFEC - WOM. Finally, based on students' need to "avoid social exclusion," teachers should carefully consider the planning and integration of group tasks.

WOM has always been a crucial topic in customer behavior research. Student behaviors and the discussion on whether they are customers or educational coproducers have recently attracted scholars' attention. FFEC -

WOM is a promising topic. As indicated by Dolinsky (1994), organizations must establish effective communication platforms for customers to gather information, communicate, and increase their satisfaction levels. Similarly, in the field of academics, we should summarize how students disseminate FFEC - WOM, discuss student behaviors from various perspectives, and perform comprehensive studies on FFEC - WOM to compensate for the lack of information on WOM. Practically, we can understand the conditions of FFEC - WOM spread by students, which enables school authorities to design effective communicational platforms, enhances students' willingness to spread FFEC - WOM, enables the smooth flow of information when selecting courses, and reduces the complexity of administrative operations for adding or dropping courses to increase students' satisfaction of school authorities. In addition, we proposed six factors that motivate students to spread FFEC - WOM to provide a reference for educational sectors (e.g., cram schools) and enable them to better understand customer feelings and information flows.

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