



DOCTORATE in BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

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**THE INFLUENCE OF OFFLINE WOM AND ONLINE WOM IN
SOCIAL MEDIA ON CHINESE STUDENT CUSTOMERS' BUY
DECISION-MAKING PROCESS**

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SPECIAL MENTION

The Business Science Institute and the iaelyon School of Management do not approve or disapprove of the opinions expressed in this thesis. These opinions are to be considered as those of the author.

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ABSTRACT

Social media and WOM play essential roles in Chinese University student customers' lives and daily consumptions. As a decision-maker of the international education business and an education recruiter of Chinese students, we have been trying to understand the impact of social media and WOM on the buy decision-making process of Chinese student consumers. The results of this study will provide applied knowledge and insight for optimizing the marketing strategies of international education companies and institutions. This research proposed three papers, each paper to answer one research question. Paper one, exploratory research, conducted an in-depth interview with 10 Chinese University students to explore the importance and influence of social media on the Chinese student customers' buy decision-makings process. Paper two, qualitative research, conducted an in-depth interview with 25 Chinese University students, aims at exploring the importance of offline WOM and its relationship with online WOM on the buy decision-making process. Paper three, quantitative research, conducted an online survey with 101 Chinese University students. Paper three refers to Information Adoption Model (IAM) to propose a conceptual model to test the extent to which online WOM and offline WOM influence Chinese student customers' buy decision-making. The main contribution of paper three is to show the extent to which both Online WOM and Offline WOM influence Chinese student customers' Intention to Buy. This research improves understanding of how online WOM in social media and offline WOM interact to influence Chinese student customers' buy decision-making process. Importantly, this research provides applied knowledge and managerial recommendations for international companies and institutions which can use online WOM in social media along with offline WOM to influence the Chinese student customers' buy decision-making process. Our findings hold the key for international education institutions and companies to develop effective marketing strategies targeting Chinese student consumers.

Keywords: Social media, Online WOM, Offline WOM, Information source credibility, Chinese student customer, Buy decision-making process

RÉSUMÉ

Les médias sociaux et le WOM jouent un rôle essentiel dans la vie et la consommation quotidienne des étudiants chinois. En tant que décideur dans le domaine de l'éducation internationale et recruteur d'étudiants chinois, nous avons essayé de comprendre l'impact des médias sociaux et du WOM sur le processus de décision d'achat des consommateurs étudiants chinois. Les résultats de cette étude fourniront des connaissances appliquées et un aperçu pour optimiser les stratégies de marketing des entreprises et des institutions d'éducation internationale. Cette recherche propose trois articles, chacun répondant à une question de recherche. Le premier article, une recherche exploratoire, a mené un entretien approfondi avec 10 étudiants d'universités chinoises pour explorer l'importance et l'influence des médias sociaux sur les décisions d'achat. Le deuxième article, une recherche qualitative, a mené un entretien approfondi avec 25 étudiants de l'université chinoise, afin d'explorer l'importance de la publicité hors ligne et sa relation d'interaction avec la publicité en ligne dans le processus de décision d'achat. Le troisième article, une recherche quantitative, a mené une enquête en ligne auprès de 101 étudiants universitaires chinois. Le troisième article se réfère au modèle d'adoption de l'information (IAM) pour proposer un modèle conceptuel permettant de vérifier dans quelle mesure le WOM en ligne et le WOM hors ligne influencent la décision d'achat des clients. La principale contribution du troisième article est de montrer dans quelle mesure la WOM en ligne et la WOM hors ligne influencent l'intention d'achat des étudiants chinois. Cette recherche améliore la compréhension de la façon dont le WOM en ligne dans les médias sociaux et le WOM hors ligne interagissent pour influencer le processus de décision d'achat des étudiants chinois. Il est important de noter que cette recherche fournit des connaissances appliquées et des recommandations de gestion pour les entreprises et les institutions internationales qui peuvent utiliser le WOM en ligne dans les médias sociaux ainsi que le WOM hors ligne pour influencer le processus de décision d'achat des étudiants chinois. Nos résultats sont la clé pour les institutions et les entreprises internationales d'éducation pour développer des stratégies de marketing efficaces ciblant les consommateurs étudiants chinois.

Mots-clés: Médias sociaux, WOM en ligne, WOM hors ligne, Crédibilité de la source d'information, Client étudiant chinois, Processus de décision d'achat.

INTRODUCTION

The development of information and technology (IT) has led to changes in the decision-making behaviour of individuals, groups, and organizations. Social media is a significant information source for consumers (Shawky et al., 2020) and plays an essential role in University students' lives and daily consumptions. One of the challenges facing study abroad education companies in Australia, is to succeed in the overseas market through international student recruitment and marketing activities. To do this, international study abroad companies should develop relative online and offline activities to attract potential student customers (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). Besides, research suggests that companies need to be aware in their plans to incorporate social media as marketing strategies that social media is changing the customer's buy decision-making process while changing traditional marketing and communication methods (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008). Educational institutions and companies are beginning to use social media to recruit students (Galan et al., 2015). It is imperative for international educational companies that have previously focused on offline recruitment to be aware of the importance of online WOM in social media and its interaction relationship with offline WOM on the Chinese student customers' buy decision-making process.

In addition, international students, particularly from mainland China, have a significant impact on Australia's higher education institutions. International education industry was worth A\$37.6 billion to the Australian economy in 2019, and the growth in international student enrolment has boosted education, making the international education industry Australia's fourth largest export in 2019 (DESE, 2020). In recent years, Australia has seen strong growth in higher education enrolments of overseas students and enrolments in new courses. International students from China and India are the main contributors to growth, with the two countries together accounting for 58% of overseas student enrolments in higher education in 2019 (DESE, 2020). University financial data reported by the Australian Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESE) shows that “fees from overseas student enrolments accounted for 26% (approximately \$8.8 billion) of university revenue in the 2019 academic year”. Australia as a whole sees more value in education-related personal travel than other personal and business travel. “Education-related visitors account for over 38% of total tourism spending in Australia and 57% of tourism exports, spending on average 8.5 times more than other visitors. And of these, Chinese education visitors spend more in Australia than all visitors from the US and UK combined” (Austrade, 2020).

Companies are beginning to realize the importance of social media and WOM marketing. However, there seems to be little understanding of the impact of social media, the relationship between online WOM in social media and offline WOM, and their impact on Chinese student customers' buy decision-making journey in the international education industry. Indeed, most prior research on social media has studied general customers, but little study on Chinese student customers in the international education industry. In addition, previous research has identified the impact of online WOM on consumer behaviour and decision-making processes. However, previous studies have not covered much about the critical offline WOM in the social media shopping environment and its interaction relationship with online WOM on Chinese student customers' buying decision-making process. Besides, research on WOM, either investigated online WOM (Moliner-Velázquez, et al., 2021; Cheung et al., 2012; Cheung et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2008) or offline WOM (Hernández-Méndez, 2015; De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008; Rogers, 1995). Existing research has limited understanding of the relationship between online WOM in social media and offline WOM and the extent to which they influence the decision-making process.

This thesis consists of three papers and each paper try to answer one research question. Paper one and paper two (Chapter one and two) are qualitative studies, and paper (Chapter three) is a quantitative study. Depending on the research methods, we adopted the research philosophies of Interpretivism and Positivism, respectively. In Chapter one and two, we applied an interpretivism approach to help us to reveal and discover hidden knowledge through an interactive dialogue with the interviewed group of University students in China. The interpretivism approach also help us to understand and to investigate the respondents' behaviour and attitude toward social media, online WOM and offline WOM and Decision making. For this reason, in Chapters one and two, we adopt the interpretive inductive and interpretivism approach. In Chapter Three, we adopt a quantitative research approach to develop theoretical, conceptual models and test hypotheses, exploring the extent to which online WOM and offline WOM influence the purchase decision process of Chinese students. In Chapter Three, we adopt a positivist quantitative research approach to investigate the relationship between the variables. The quantitative and deductive approach uses the existing literature to build appropriate theories and appropriate hypotheses. Positivism assumes that numerical data are collected to investigate and understand human behaviour (Saunders et al., 2009).

Research Questions and Objectives

Therefore, our research questions are:

- What is the relationship between social media and Chinese student customers' buy decision-making?
- How offline WOM and online WOM impact each other during Chinese student customers' buy decision-making process?
- The extent to which offline WOM and online WOM impact Chinese students' buy decision-making process?

The objective of our research is listed as follows:

- To explore the importance of social media and its impact on Chinese student consumers' buy decision-making process when choosing a school overseas.
- To explore the importance of offline WOM and its relationship with online WOM on Chinese customers' buy decision-making process.
- To examine the extent to which online WOM and offline WOM influence Chinese customers' buy decision-making process.
- To provide applied knowledge and managerial recommendations for international companies and institutions to develop effective marketing strategies targeting Chinese student consumers by using online WOM in social media along with offline WOM to influence the Chinese student customers' buy decision-making process.

The Structure of Dissertation

This research proposed three papers, each paper to answer one research question.

Paper 1: This paper focuses on the relationship between Chinese students' social media usage and their buy decision-making process and highlights the importance of social media in the Chinese student customers' buy decision-making process. The secondary research question of paper one is what social media do Chinese students use to search for information before purchase?

Paper one explored the relationship between student customers' social media usage and their buy decision-making process and tried to investigate what social media Chinese students use

to search for information before purchase? This study provides direction for subsequent in-depth research. Paper one begins with reviewing the literature on Social Media and Buy Decisions, Online WOM, and then Gaps in the literature to make a better sense of social media and its impact on the buy decision-making process. The study explores social media's role in Chinese students' educational buy decision-making process by adopted an exploratory qualitative approach. We conducted an in-depth interview with 10 Chinese University students in Guangdong, mainland China. The study yielded the following key findings: Chinese students use social media in their study abroad search. Chinese students use social media to obtain information about school overseas reputations and read online WOM in social media from former students. WeChat and Weibo are the main social media they used. Online WOM influences the information search and option evaluation stage and affects their intention to buy. We also highlight that offline WOM from parents or friends, or acquaintances play a crucial role in Chinese students' final buy decision-making.

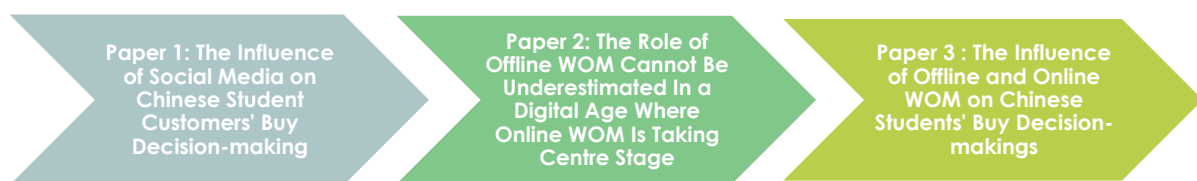
Paper 2: Paper two focuses on the importance of offline WOM and its interaction relationship with online WOM on Chinese customers' buy decision-making process.

Paper two explores the relationship between online WOM and offline WOM and aims to determine the relationship between online WOM and offline WOM in the Chinese student customers' buy decision-making process. This study highlights the importance of offline WOM on Chinese students' buy decision-making process. Paper two conducted exploratory qualitative research to make sense of our context better. The purpose of this exploratory study is further to understand the buy decision-making process of Chinese students and to propose relevant research propositions. We conducted an exploratory study where we interviewed 25 University students in mainland China to explore the importance of offline WOM and its interaction relationship with online WOM on the buy decision-making process. Our study yielded the following essential findings: In the buy decision-making process, Chinese students mainly rely on offline WOM (parents and friends), which is confirmed through online WOM. Trust in information sources positively impacts Chinese students' buy decision-making. Our respondents highlighted the extent to which offline WOM influences the buy decision-making process through online WOM and trust in information sources.

Paper 3: Paper three focuses on the extent to which offline and online WOM impact Chinese students' buy decision-making process when choosing a school overseas.

Paper three aims to investigate the determinants of offline WOM and online WOM information that influence Chinese student consumers' buy intention and explore the relationship between offline WOM and online WOM and their influence on buy decisions. Our quantitative study survey was created using Questionnaire Star online survey software to collect data. Data were collected from 101 University students in China from 2 January 2021 to 25 January 2021. The questionnaire was conducted with University students in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong, and Changsha, in mainland China where they can access social media in their region. In the Paper Three, a conceptual model is proposed to test the influence of online and offline WOM on the buy decisions of Chinese student consumers. Our research yielded the following findings: Positive Online WOM significantly and positively influences Online WOM. Online WOM significantly influences Chinese students' Intention to Buy. Information Source Credibility plays a mediating role between Offline WOM and Online WOM. The main contribution of this paper is to demonstrate the extent to which Online WOM and Offline WOM influence the Intention to Buy of Chinese student consumers. More specifically, this study finds that Offline WOM indirectly affects Intention to Buy through two mediators: Information Source Credibility and Online WOM.

Link Between the Three Papers



	Paper 1	Paper 2	Paper 3
Link	Explore the Influence and Importance of Social Media on Buy Decisions	Explore the Importance of Offline WOM and Its Interaction Relationship with Online WOM on Buy Decision-making	Examine the Extent to Which Online and Offline WOM influences Buy Decisions
Research Approach	Exploratory Research	Qualitative Research	Quantitative Research
Data Collection	10 Students' In-depth Interview	25 Students' Group interview	101 Students' Questionnaire Survey
Research Questions	What is the relationship between social media and Chinese students' buy decisions?	How offline and online WOM impact each other during Chinese students' buy decision-making process? Moreover, why offline WOM is important?	The extent to which offline and online WOM impact Chinese students' buy decision-making process?
Main Findings	Chinese students use social media in their study abroad search.	Chinese students mainly rely on Offline WOM which	The main contribution of this paper is to

	<p>WeChat and Weibo are the main social media they used. Chinese students use social media to find information about school reputation overseas and read reviews from former students. Online WOM influences the information search and option evaluation stage. Online WOM affects their intention to buy. We also highlight the important of Offline WOM.</p>	<p>is confirmed through Online WOM. Trust in Information Sources positively impacts Chinese students' buy decision-making.</p>	<p>demonstrate the extent to which Online WOM and Offline WOM influence the Intention to Buy of Chinese student consumers. More specifically, this study finds that Offline WOM has an indirect effect on Intention to Buy through two mediators: Information Source Credibility and Online WOM.</p>
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Summary of the Introduction

Social media, online WOM and offline WOM play an essential role in Chinese student consumers' buy decision- makings. For international education companies and institutions that have previously focused on offline recruitment, understanding the importance of social media, online WOM in social media and the extent to which online and offline WOM influence Chinese students' buy decision-making process is critical. In this research, three papers were presented to answer the research questions. The first paper mainly studies the influence of social media on the buy decision-making of Chinese students, trying to explore the importance of social media and its influence on the buy decision-making process. The second paper discusses the importance of offline WOM and interaction between offline and online WOM in the buy decision-making process of Chinese student consumers. Paper three examines the extent to which online WOM and offline WOM influence Chinese customers' buy decision-making process.

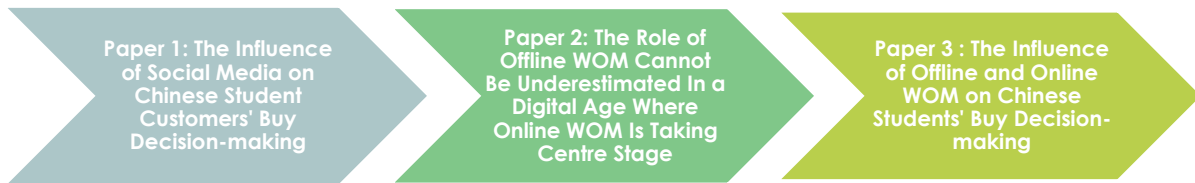
Moreover. The author of this study, Xiaolie Qi, has worked in the field of international education for over 15 years and is responsible for international student recruitment and marketing in the international offices of several Australian and American universities. The results of this study will provide applied knowledge and managerial recommendations to the higher education institutions and international education industry in which the author works.

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Link Between the Three Papers



	Paper 1	Paper 2	Paper 3
<i>Link</i>	Explore the Influence and Importance of Social Media on Buy Decision-making	Explore the Importance of Offline WOM and Its Interaction Relationship with Online WOM on Buy Decision-making	Examine the Extent to Which Online and Offline WOM influences Buy Decision-making
<i>Research Approach</i>	Exploratory Research	Qualitative Research	Quantitative Research
<i>Data Collection</i>	10 Students' In-depth Interview	25 Students' Group Interview	101 Students' Questionnaire Survey
<i>Research Questions</i>	What Is the Relationship Between Social Media and Chinese Students' Buy Decision-making?	How Offline and Online WOM Impact Each Other During Chinese Students' Buy Decision-making Process? And Why Offline WOM Is Important.	The Extent to Which Offline and Online WOM Impact Chinese Students' Buy Decision-making Process?

CHAPTER 1: PAPER ONE: THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON CHINESE STUDENT CUSTOMERS' BUY DECISION-MAKING

A shorter version of this paper has been published on IEMID 2020 Conference Proceeding, EI

Abstract: Social media influence Chinese student consumers' buy decision-making. This study uses an exploratory approach to explore the influence of social media on the buy decision-making process of Chinese students. We conducted an in-depth interview with 10 Chinese University students. The research obtained the following main results: Chinese student customers use social media in the study abroad search. WeChat and Weibo are the main social media they used. Chinese students use social media to seek online WOM information from former students about school overseas. Online WOM influences the information search and option evaluation stage. Online WOM affects their intention to buy. We also highlight that offline WOM from parents or friends, or acquaintances play a crucial role in Chinese students' final buy decision-making. The findings of this study provides applied knowledge and managerial recommendations for international education companies and institutions, which can use social media to influence Chinese student customer' buy decision-making process.

Keywords: Social Media, Chinese Student Customers, Buy Decisions, Online WOM,

Introduction

Social media and smartphones have changed the way people communicate and access information in China (Wang, 2015). Social media is a significant information source for consumers (Shawky et al., 2020) and plays an essential role in University students' lives and daily consumptions. As an international educational business decision-maker and Chinese student recruiter, we are always trying to use social media to recruit student consumers. To do this, international study abroad institutions must develop proper marketing activities to attract prospective students (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). Besides, research suggests that companies need to be aware in their plans to incorporate social media marketing strategies that social media affects the customer's buy decision-making process while changing traditional marketing and communication methods (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008). Social media is one of the new media used in student recruitment (Mianda et al.,2015). It is imperative for

educational companies that have previously focused on offline recruitment to understand the importance of social media and online WOM. However, previous studies have not covered much about the critical role that social media plays in Chinese student customers' buy decision-making process in the international education industry. Therefore, this paper, through an exploratory study, explores the relationship between social media use and buy decision-making process of Chinese students.

We conducted exploratory qualitative research with 10 Chinese University students. The research obtained the following main results: Chinese students use social media to gather information about school overseas. WeChat and Weibo are the main social media they used to find overseas schools' reputations and read online WOM from former students. Online WOM affects their intention to buy. This study highlights that offline WOM from parents or friends, or acquaintances play a crucial role in Chinese students' final buy decisions. This exploratory study provides applied knowledge into the decision-making process of potential Chinese student consumers when choosing an overseas school. The study results could also provide a good source of information for marketers of international education companies to use social media to influence the buy decision-making process of Chinese students.

Our research begins with the Introduction, which briefly expounds on the research background, motivation, research gap, research methods, and contributions. The rest of this paper is structured as follows: The Theoretical Lens section presents the relevant literature review on this study. This section explicitly discusses social media and its impact on buy decisions and online WOM in social media. The literature part concludes with the gap of the existing research. Next is the Research Method section, which discusses the research method of this paper in detail. Then the Result section presents the results and findings through an in-depth interview of the study conducted in this research. The Discussion section discusses the main findings of the research. In addition, this section also proposes the implications, limitations, managerial recommendations and future research directions. Finally, the Conclusion part summarizes this research.

Theoretical Lenses

Literature on Social Media

Social media is "a technological software built on Web 2.0 that supports users to create content and communicate with each other" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p61). Social media continues

to evolve, and it plays an increasingly important role in the marketing communications of individuals (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Social media platforms have emerged as essential information sources (Head and Eisenberg, 2010). Social media provides new opportunities to access information (Kim and Yoo-Lee, 2014). The rapid development of online communication through social media has led to increasing scholars' interest in online WOM communication (Hussain et al., 2017; Confente et al., 2020; Moliner-Velázquez et al., 2021).

Social media is an Internet environment in which people can create their profiles and networks (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). "People want to achieve a sense of belonging through connection with others. After acquiring physiological and security needs, people strive to achieve Maslow's third category of needs: Belongingness" (Maslow, 1954). Social media is a major platform for customers to obtain information, knowledge, and different opinions (Sawyer et al., 2012). Compared to traditional media, social media messages have greater diffusion and flexibility (Rohm and Crittenden, 2011).

The development of Web 2.0 technologies has facilitated social media development and is the basis for its operation and growth (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Social media, along with social effects and enabling information, are the key elements of Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005). Research shows that social media platforms are essential for student consumers to access information (Head and Eisenberg, 2010; Holliday and Li, 2004). Besides, consumers on social media become friends, build up a possible trust source, which can significantly influence users' buy intentions (Gefen, 2002). Social media have an influence on buy decisions in personal marketing communications (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

Buy Decisions and Social Media

Social media influences consumer buy decisions (Werenowska and Rzepka, 2020). Customers search online WOM in social media to support buy decisions by gaining advice from online WOM in social media, helping to compare different options (Parker, 2011). Consumers evaluate a couple of options and made final decisions (Cubillo et al., 2006; Castronovo and Huang, 2012). "Moreover, consumers can use positive or negative information disseminated on social media to judge the quality of a company's products or services and thus influence their buying decisions" (Qi, 2020). The impact of social media on consumer behavior is an ecological cycle. For example, Social media can influence consumer behavior; Consumer behavior, in turn, is influenced by the opinions of others on social media; After shopping,

consumers use social media to share their post-purchase experiences to create a new WOM (Qi, 2020).

Social Media and Online WOM

Online WOM is closely related to social media. Online WOM is "any positive or negative statement about a product or company made by a potential, actual, or former customer and made available to a wide range of people and organizations via the Internet" (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39). On social media, consumers can share positive and negative online WOM (Jaffe, 2010). Consumers prefer to listen to and trust their close ties network, and their buy decisions being influenced by friends' WOM (East et al., 2007). Consumer post-purchase online WOM provides organizations with the opportunity to address online WOM (negative and positive) that may influence consumers' buy decision-making. Positive WOM is a free and compelling advertisement for organizations (Hudson and Thal, 2013, p. 157). Online users post comments and online WOM in social media through social networking platforms and forums, providing an important opportunity for firms to predict consumer buy decisions (Mulhern, 2009).

Literature Gap: Social Media and International Student Recruitment

Most research on social media focused on social media's impact on human behavior, its adaptability as an educational environment, and its potential as a marketing tool. There is growing interest in social media as part of a marketing tool in international higher education student recruitment. Some existing studies investigated the impact of social media on international higher education student recruitment in the context of European students (Barker, 2009; Kabilan et al., 2010; Spaulding, 2010; Constantinides and Stagno, 2011; Galan et al., 2015). However, there is limited research on social media's impact on students' international educational decision-making process in the context of Chinese students. Student users in China have been active in adopting local social media platforms. These local Chinese social media platforms are different from Western platforms in many ways (Shu and Scott, 2014). Therefore, it still makes sense to understand how Chinese University student consumers use social media and how Chinese social media influences Chinese students' decisions.

Research Method

Due to the limited available research, our study adopted exploratory research approach. Qualitative research techniques of in-depth interviews were used to understand the research

subjects' perspectives. Also, qualitative research methods are best suited to answer the "what" and "how" questions (Hennink et al., 2011).

“As an exploratory qualitative study, we interviewed ten University students in Guangdong province, China. The interviews lasted average of 2 weeks. The age of the interviewees ranged from 20 to 23 years old. We conducted the interviews via WeChat and Tencent meetings, each lasting 45 to 60 minutes. The study focused on social media's influence on Chinese University student consumers’ buy decision-makings. All participants had used social media to support their daily buy decision-making. We used the same criteria and semi-open-ended questions for all interviewees” (Qi, 2020). An interview guide was adopted in lieu of a structured questionnaire to facilitate discussion (see Appendix I).

We conducted interviews to explore how social media influences the buy decisions of Chinese student consumers. The first impression from the interview is that Chinese University students rely on social media platforms to obtain information in the buy decision-making process.

Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Table 1: Demographic Profile

Number of Respondents	Age range	Region	Occupation	Information Source
10	20-23	Mainland, China	University Students	WeChat

Table 2: Gender and Education of the Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	4	40%
Female	6	60%
Education	Frequency	Percentage
Higher Education: Undergraduate	10	100%

Our interviewees were more female than male (60% female and 40% male), with six female respondents and four male respondents, respectively. The interviewees were between the ages of 20 and 23, and all came from the Chinese mainland. All participants in the study had experience with various social media in their daily lives. Our research explores how and why Chinese students use social media to choose a school overseas and find patterns among respondents in subsequent analysis.

Results

Five main categories emerged from this exploratory study, as the most important findings and presented as follows. 1. Chinese students use social media in their study abroad search. 2. WeChat and Weibo are the main social media they used. 3. Chinese students use social media to seek information on school overseas reputations and read online WOM from former students. 4. Online WOM influences the information search and option evaluation stage. 5. Online WOM affects their intention to buy. We also highlight that offline WOM from parents or friends, or acquaintances play a crucial role in Chinese students' final buy decisions.

Social Media Usage

Respondents were asked about social media usage during the school overseas search period. The typical social media they used as WeChat and Weibo. All the respondents used WeChat, and 80% used Weibo (8 out of 10). Only 1 out of 10 students used western social media, Facebook and Twitter. This finding suggested that WeChat has a substantial degree of use when searching for information about study overseas.

“I use WeChat every day; I read news on WeChat but also communication with my family, friends, and other people.” S1

“I joint study overseas WeChat group to hear opinions and get advice.” S3

“When I have no idea about the school overseas, Weibo is a good place to get information. I can use Weibo to ask people who have done something similar.” S10

Why Chinese Students Use Social Media

The interviewees were asked the reasons for using social media. All respondents reported using social media several times a day. The majority of respondents (90 percent of students) said social media was their main source of news and information. They found out information about overseas school's reputation as the leading reason for the majority (90%) of the students.

“Social media is my main channel for communicating with my family, friends, and other people.” S2

“Social media is the main source for getting information for me.” S9

“Respondents spent anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours a day on social media. Most respondents use their mobile phones to log on to social media to browse information, and they

find it easier to log on to social media platforms with their smartphones. When asked about the primary purpose of using social media, 70% of the participants answered that using social media makes it easier to communicate with others and access information. They also believed that social media helped them to learn and understand unfamiliar quickly. Besides, they used social media to share information, news, photos, and links. Respondents showed that social media played a prominent role in helping them to access information. Besides, post-buy reviews from other buyers it is their primary source of information for buy decisions” (Qi, 2020).

The following quotes show the extent to which social media influence students’ buy decisions.

“I search social media information before making a buy decision.” S8

“I will refer to reviews on social media.” S7

“I will compare with online reviews with offline WOM.” S4

Our result shows that WOM in social media affect Chinese students’ buy decisions.

Social Media Affect Chinese Student Customers’ Decision-making Process.

By asking interviewees when social media was helpful when choosing school overseas, we try to explore the influence of social media on Chinese students' buy decision-making. 90% of students (9 out of 10) indicated that social media was used at the information search period.

“I prefer asking other people about the information I need.” S4

“I use social media to collect information, but I also prefer to talk with my friends who have had a similar experience before.” S6

All students indicated that social media help them to get information and communicate with others effectively.

Intention to Buy

Social media also influences the stage of evaluation of different options. With social media, students compare and evaluate different options they gained from the information search stage. A number of respondents stated that positive and negative online WOM would affect their intention to buy.

“Positive WOM on social media will increase the opportunity to choose the school overseas.”

S5

“If there is too much negative information about a product on social media, it will affect my buying decision.” S3

“Positive information and a few negative information on social media platforms increase the trust of information.” S1

Meanwhile, online WOM in social media from former students significantly influenced Chinese students’ intention to buy.

“My talk with friends on social media has a big influence on my choice of school overseas.”

S10

“I trust on friends more, and there is fake news on social media now.” S9

Buy Decisions

Chinese students are more likely to listen to offline WOM advice from parents or friends during the buy decision-making stage. More than 60% of the respondents (six out of ten students) do not trust online WOM in social media from people they do not know.

“Many social media write fake positive information about their products or services on the platform.” S6

“Many fake reviews on social media nowadays.” S4

“I will follow my parents’ advice when making final buy decisions on school overseas.” S8

“Face-to-face meetings with my parents or friends have a greater impact on my final decision, and I rarely make a final decision just by referring to advice on social media.” S6

Thus, the results suggest that Chinese students’ buy decisions are also influenced by offline WOM from parents and friends. Online WOM from social media and offline WOM from family and friends interact and influence buy decisions in students’ final buy decisions.

Discussion

The study provides valuable practical insights into how and why potential Chinese student consumers use social media in the buy decision-making process of choosing school overseas.

First, our study identifies the social media networks that Chinese students use when considering making overseas school choices. This study finding is consistent with the existing literature, where social media such as WeChat is considered the most common social network used by Chinese students (Gao and Zhang, 2013). A key finding of the study was that, in addition to WeChat, Chinese students also used Weibo for their overseas school selection searches. This finding further confirmed the study of Zhu (2019), who concluded that students also use Weibo as a "source of information." In terms of social media in China, researchers have identified the importance of using WeChat to communicate with Chinese customers. "Western social media such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are blocked in China, so WeChat is one social media that education companies can use to communicate directly with Chinese consumers" (Lien and Cao, 2014). Moreover, Weibo influences students' buy decision-making process, as Weibo allows the spread of information from strangers and personal opinions and influences their online members (Kempe et al., 2003). Hence, Chinese social media will affect student customers' buy decisions. This finding is consistent with previous studies that when students meet on social media and interact with each other, it will affect their buy behaviour (Heinrichs et al., 2011).

Second, the study investigates the types of information Chinese students seek when applying social media to find schools overseas. The two main reasons for using social media are to find information about overseas schools and online WOM from former students. The findings suggest that students use social media to obtain information about school overseas and make comparisons to support their buy decision-making. This finding is consistent with previous studies' findings that customers turn to various social media to do information search and compare the different options (Vollmer and Precourt, 2008).

Third, the study found that social media was primarily used in the information search and choice evaluation stage of the buy decision-making of Chinese student consumers that is consistent with the findings of previous studies (Yang, 2017; Daugherty and Hoffman, 2014) which suggests online WOM information mainly affects consumers' buy decision-making process (pre-purchase and post-purchase behaviour).

Fourth, this study indicated that positive and negative online WOM would affect Chinese student customers' intention to buy. We also highlight those Chinese students have greater trust in offline WOM and offline WOM from parents or friends, or acquaintances, plays a crucial role in Chinese students' final buy decisions.

Conclusion

This exploratory study provides exciting insights into the buy decision-making process of potential Chinese student consumers when choosing overseas schools and provides a basis for further research. It is reasonable to believe that the development and application of social media in the international education industry can further promote the marketing strategies of educational institutions and companies in the future.

The limitations of this study are mainly reflected in the relatively narrow research scope. Our exploratory study conducted in-depth interviews with ten college students from Guangdong Province, China. The number of students involved in the study was limited, and the results could be related to the background of a particular population. Therefore, future research should further expand the scope and number of samples to better understand the influence of social media and online WOM on Chinese students' buy decisions.

This study has some management implications for international educational institutions and companies. The study results could provide valuable information for marketers at international education institutions who need to be more active in social media. The study shows that Chinese students use social media to research learning opportunities and seek online WOM information in social media. Therefore, international education institutions and companies should use WeChat and Weibo, the Chinese social media interaction channels as platforms for future communication with prospective Chinese students and effectively solve students' problems and provide them with the real-time information they need.

Besides, there are differences between the Chinese and Western web ecosystems. Search engines and social media platforms are so different that direct comparisons do not apply. International education institutions and companies need to apply and develop local Chinese social media platforms to communicate with Chinese student consumers. Facebook and Twitter, which are typical applications in the West, are not available in China. Instead, they are replaced by WeChat and Weibo, the most popular and influential local social sharing platforms in China.

For international education institutions and companies looking to reach Chinese student consumers, they can use WeChat to integrate e-commerce into their company or WeChat public accounts to spread the WOM about their services and integrate with their mobile websites for mobile commerce. WeChat can help international education companies target and segment their users efficiently. Businesses can also use semi-private WeChat groups of 50 to 100 people

to pull in friends and friends of friends to showcase services, communicate with customers, and answer their questions about colleges and life abroad. Through WeChat, international education institutions and companies can cultivate and meet the needs of their Chinese student customers and develop their brand loyalty by posting long-form and quality articles that provide authoritative and educational online information and WOM to their target customers. International education institutions and companies can use WeChat to recognized opportunities by providing informative customer service through an in-built automated messaging system.

Weibo works more like Facebook in that it includes features that are consistent with Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram. Weibo can help international education institutions and companies with slighter brand awareness build and develop their brands. International education institutions and companies can use Weibo to create marketing campaigns based on current hot topics to quickly reach a wide range of student customers and quickly increase their new brand or service awareness. The advantage of Weibo is that it can bring traffic, and combined with celebrities or internet celebrities, the corporate brand will be spread quickly. International education companies can also use Chinese Weibo to research parents and students. Local Chinese social media platforms like WeChat and Weibo have a significant influence on Chinese student consumers. It is mainly because the Chinese value personal WOM recommendations and trust in the source of information, whether it be friends or celebrities.

This study conducted a preliminary study of Chinese students' use of social media in the buy decision-making process of studying abroad. This study explores the role of social media in the study abroad choices of Chinese students. Our findings provide a basis for international educational institutions and companies to develop effective marketing strategies targeting Chinese student consumers. Future research that considers offline WOM will help us better understand the influence of different types of WOM on the buy decision-making process of Chinese student consumers. Our subsequent research plans to conduct an in-depth qualitative interview with 25 Chinese students to explore the relationship between online WOM and offline WOM and the extent to which they influence the buy decision-making of Chinese student consumers.

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APPENDIX

Appendix I

The Semi- Structured Interview Guide

The influence of social media and online WOM on Chinese students' buy decision process:
Semi-structured interview.

Interviewee General Information

M/F

Age

Region/city

Participants Background Briefing:

1. Introduction

Length: 5 minutes

Primary goal: To find out variables from the interview and the Chinese University Students' view towards Social media, Online WOM, Trust and buy decision-making process when choosing school overseas. The interview is more like a conversation focusing on participants' experience, opinions on the selected topics.

2. Verbal Consent

Would you like to participate in this interview?

Verbal Consent was obtained from the study participant.

Verbal Consent was NOT obtained from the study participant.

3. Purpose of the Research

The research conducts a qualitative research on the influence of social media and online WOM on Chinese student customers' buy decision-making process.

Participation eligibility

Criteria to be eligible for participation the interview:

Have/ having using social media.

Have/having online buying experience.

Chinese resident

Have/ having study aboard experience.

4. Procedures

You will be asked to answer questions regarding your experience with using social media, online WOM, online buying experience to help us understand your buy decision-making process.

5. Research Questions

Interview Questions (40-60 minutes)

Section 1: Background information

1. Tell me about yourself, and where are you from?

Section 2: Social media usage

1. What social media do you use?

2. What are the main purpose/reason uses of social media?

3. How did you find online word of mouth on social media?

4. How long do you spend on social media each day?

Section 3: Social Media and Buy decision-making process.

1. What and how do you use social media for?

2. What and how do you use online WOM for?

3. What do you want to find out from social media and online WOM?

4. Is social media useful for you when choosing a school overseas?

5. How do online WOM and social media affect your buy decision process?

Section 4: Trust

1. Tell me about how the buying decision-making got made?
2. Do you trust information that you read on social media?
3. What type of advice/WOM are more likely to listen to?
4. If you read a positive/negative review toward to a product online, what is your reaction?
5. How does positive/negative WOM affect your buy decision process?

CONCLUSION OF INTERVIEW

1. Is there anything else you would like to say about social media, online WOM and Trust in WOM, or your online purchase experience?

Thank you!

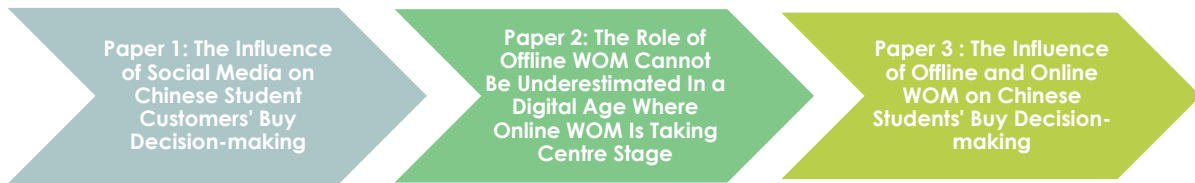
Appendix II

List Of Codes Used

Code	Sub-codes	Example of Quotes	Sources
Social Media Usage	Searching for information.	'Social media is my main channel for communicating with family, friends, and other people.' 'Social media is the main source for getting information.'S9	Heinrichs et al., 2011
	Support school choice.	'I joint study overseas WeChat group to hear opinions and get advice." S3 "When I have no idea about the school overseas, Weibo is a good place to get information. I can use Weibo to ask people who have done something similar.'S10	Emergent
	Use WeChat and Weibo as main social media platform.	'WeChat and Weibo are the main social media platform that student use in China to obtain Information and news'.	Gao and Zhang, 2013; Zhu, 2019
Social Media Influence	Positive online WOM would positively affect students' intention to buy.	"Positive WOM on social media will increase the opportunity to choose the school overseas." S5 "Positive information on social media platforms increase the trust of information."S1	Emergent

	Negative online WOM would negatively affect students' intention to buy.	"If there is too much negative information about a product on social media, it will affect my buying decision." S3	Emergent
	Online WOM in social media from former students significantly influenced Chinese students' decision to buy.	"I use social media to collect information, but I also prefer to talk with my friends who have had a similar experience before. Their WOM will help me to make decision" S6	Emergent
Offline WOM Influence	Chinese students' purchase decisions are also influenced by offline WOM from parents and friends.	"I will follow my parents' advice when making final buy decisions on school overseas." "Face-to-face meetings with my parents or friends have a greater impact on my final decision, and I rarely make a final decision just by referring to advice on social media."	Emergent
Online WOM Influence	Online WOM from social media and offline WOM from family and friends interact and influence purchase decisions in students' final purchase decisions.	"Buy decisions are influenced by offline WOM. Online WOM from social media and offline WOM from family and friends interact and influence purchase decisions in students' final purchase decisions."	Emergent

Link Between the Three Papers



	Paper 1	Paper 2	Paper 3
Link	Explore the Influence and Importance of Social Media on Buy Decision	Explore the Importance of Offline WOM and Its Interaction Relationship with Online WOM on Buy Decision-making	Examine the Extent to Which Online and Offline WOM influences Buy Decision
Research Approach	Exploratory Research	Qualitative Research	Quantitative Research
Data Collection	10 Students' In-depth Interview	25 Students' Group Interview	101 Students' Questionnaire Survey
Research Questions	What Is the Relationship Between Social Media and Chinese Students' Buy Decisions?	How Offline and Online WOM Impact Each Other During Chinese Students' Buy Decision-making Process? And Why Offline WOM Is Important.	The Extent to Which Offline and Online WOM Impact Chinese Students' Buy Decision-making Process?

CHAPTER 2: PAPER TWO: THE ROLE OF OFFLINE WOM CANNOT BE UNDERESTIMATED IN A DIGITAL AGE WHERE ONLINE WOM IS TAKING CENTRE STAGE

Abstract: This study explores the importance of offline WOM and its relationship with online WOM on the Chinese student customers' buy decision-making process. The article highlights the critical role of offline WOM in the Chinese student consumers' buy decision-making process. Our study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach. We conducted an in-depth interview with 25 Chinese University students. Our study yielded the following important findings: In the buy decision-making process, Chinese students mainly rely on offline WOM (parents and friends), which is then confirmed through online WOM. Trust in information sources positively impacts Chinese students' buy decision-making. Our interviewees highlighted the extent to which offline WOM can influence the buy decision-making process through online WOM and the trust in information sources. This study provides applied knowledge and managerial recommendations for marketers of international education institutions and companies who need to be more actively involved in WOM marketing by including online and offline WOM interactively. International educational institutions and companies should take specific actions to trigger communication among students, such as online communication platforms and offline veteran student sharing sessions where past and prospective students can share their experiences and advice.

Key words: Online WOM, Offline WOM, Buy Decision-making, Information Source Credibility

Introduction

Social media use has gained momentum and has become a popular tool widely spread. For instance, the impact and dominance of Chinese social media are undeniable. The 43rd China Internet Report shows that as of Jan. 2019, "the Chinese Internet user number reached 829 million, with 56.53 million net users added in the whole year. The Internet penetration rate was 59.6 percent, up 3.8 percentage points from the end of 2017. The scale of mobile Internet users reached 817 million, and the proportion of Internet users using mobile phones reached 98.6%, which further consolidated China's position as the most extensive network terminal country" (CNNIC, 2019).

Social media platforms provide new opportunities to access information (Head and Eisenberg, 2010; Kim and Yoo-Lee, 2014). WOM communication is defined as “all informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage or characteristics of particular goods or their sellers” (Westbrook, 1987). Online WOM can reach unprecedented numbers of people (Hennig et al., 2004). Online WOM in social media as a platform was composed of friends and other acquaintances, making online WOM a part of consumers' buy decision-making journey (Vollmer and Precourt, 2008; Moore and Lafreniere, 2020). Online WOM plays an essential role in the evaluation process by providing organizations with the opportunity to deal with negative and positive comments that may affect consumers' buy decision-making. At the same time, positive comments for enterprises can bring sound advertising effects (Hudson and Thal, 2013). Online WOM has significantly influence on consumer buy decisions (Dviso, 2010). Research also indicated that University student users use social media to access information (Holliday and Li, 2004).

Most existing research has acknowledged the influence of online WOM on consumer behavior. However, little is known about the importance of offline WOM in the social media and Web 2.0 environment and its interaction relationship with online WOM on the buy decision-making process. Research on WOM either investigated online WOM (Moore and Lafreniere, 2020; Cheung and Thadani, 2012; Cheung et al., 2008) or offline WOM (Hernández-Méndez, 2015; De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008; Rogers, 1995). This study explores the importance of offline WOM and its interaction relationship with online WOM in Chinese student customers' buy decision-making process to fill this gap.

Thus, our research question is: What is the relationship between online WOM and offline WOM and their impact on Chinese student consumers' buy decisions?

To answer this research question, we investigated the specific context of Chinese students. This context is particularly relevant for our investigation since Asian students, especially Chinese students, work very hard to meet their parents' advice and expectations (Zhang and Carrasquillo, 1995). Moreover, Sue and Okazaki (1990) also reported that Chinese families emphasize educational achievements, and parents have high expectations of student's achievements. Chinese parents have more control and influence over students' behaviors and decisions. In Chinese culture, young people are taught to respect their elders and follow their advice (Sue and Okazaki, 1990). The relationships among family members are essential. The existing model may not apply. Moreover, Chinese students are a promising market. The

Chinese mainland's higher education market is enormous (Bodycott, 2009). Understanding the decision process of the specific case of Chinese students is relevant.

We conducted an exploratory qualitative study where we interviewed 25 University students in mainland China to explain the influence of offline WOM and online WOM on Chinese student consumers' buy decision-making process.

Literature Review

WOM influences student customers' buy decision-making process (Harahap et al., 2017). The long-term value of WOM is more significant than that gained through advertising (Villanueva et al., 2008). Constantinides and Stagno (2012) have indicated that online WOM impacts a University search, selection, and decision-making. Other scholars consider offline WOM a person-to-person communication tool between the disseminator and the receiver of information (Arndt, 1967). Offline WOM has a more significant impact on buy decisions than advertising (Feldman and Spencer, 1965).

With the rise of social media use, online WOM has gained momentum. Social media presents new features to make it easier to share comments and online WOM between different users. Social media have significantly impacted students' buy decision-making processes (Daniel and Phillips-Wren, 2011). Scholars have illustrated how online WOM influences customers' choice of products (Senecal and Nantel, 2004). Moreover, studies indicated that online WOM has a more significant influence on the consumer decision process for services, education, and other intangible products (Sirakaya and Woodside, 2005; Moore and Lafreniere, 2020). In online WOM and online information sharing, information affects each person differently. The same information may produce very different results for different information receivers due to their different prior experiences, beliefs, and perceptions (Chaiken and Eagly, 1976). Sources with higher credibility are perceived as reliable, valuable, and reliable (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993; Ko et al., 2005; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). Online users browse opinions and comments posted by other users online before making a buy decision (Pitta and Fowler, 2005). Similarly, when online users have questions, they seek help from other members online by posting questions online (Sussman and Siegal, 2003). However, because online WOM occurs in an online environment where the recipient and the publisher often do not know each other, the source's credibility becomes critical to the recipient (Cheung and Thadani, 2012).

Online WOM differs from offline WOM in its unprecedented scalability and speed of spread. Offline WOM information sharing is carried out among small groups of individuals (Sánchez-Fernández, 2015). Offline WOM is often exchanged face to face, making it difficult to convey information to individuals who are not in the same space and time. On the contrary, online WOM can quickly realize the dissemination of information regardless of time and space (Cheung and Thadani, 2012). Online WOM's information is more persistent and easier to access. Most online WOM is archived online and thus be able to use for an indefinite period (Hennig et al., 2004). Moreover, online WOM is more accessible to measure than offline WOM (Lee et al., 2008). Cheung and Thadani (2012) addressed that “Online WOM has undoubtedly been a powerful marketing force.” Hennig (2004) defined online WOM as positive or negative reviews created by customers on a product/service via the Internet. Some scholars also believe that online WOM is an extension of traditional interpersonal communication in the digital age to influence consumption decisions. (Cheung et al., 2008). Online WOM can reach a wider audience which is one of the main differences with offline WOM, but also the source of the statement of online WOM is from other online users, not from relatives and friends (Black and Kelley, 2009). The role of WOM in the decision-making process is enhanced by high involvement services or products (Doh and Hwang, 2009). Online WOM affects buy decision-making and post-buy evaluation (Litvin, 2008). Moreover, “Online WOM influences attitudes and the decision-making of communicators with strong social ties” (Luo and Zhong, 2015).

Previous studies on WOM on consumer buy decisions have shown that consumer buy behavior is influenced by different media messages, with offline WOM having a more substantial impact on buy decisions (Trusov et al., 2009; Wangenheim and Bayón, 2004). WOM affects the consumers buy decision process and can change the consumers buy decisions (Wangenheim and Bayón, 2004). Comparatively, research indicated online WOM's influence on consumers' buy intention (Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Kumar and Benbasat, 2006; Park et al., 2007; Zhang et al., 2010; Chan and Ngai, 2011). Furthermore, research indicated that offline WOM is still having a solid impact on online shopping for University students. The effect of online WOM on the buy decision process is not as strong as expected (Hu and Ha, 2015).

Methodology

Research Context

With the rapid development of local social media in China, social network channels such as WeChat and Weibo have penetrated every aspect of Chinese people's lives. Research shows

that the scale of Chinese social media is enormous, and the participation of the whole people in social media is very high (Chiu and Silverman, 2012). Chinese University students are the primary users of social media in China (Chiu and Silverman, 2012). In a world dominated by online WOM, it is worth studying and discovering what role offline WOM plays in the buy decision-making process of Chinese student consumers. Therefore, The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of offline WOM on the buy decision-making process of Chinese student consumers and its relationship with online WOM.

Data Collection and Analysis

We conducted exploratory qualitative research to make sense of our context better. Most of the research investigated buy decision-making for the specific case of students are conducted in the western context. However, as we previously explained, Chinese culture is different because parents and friends play a significant role in a Chinese student’s buy decision-making. The purpose of this exploratory study is to further understand the factors that influence the buy decision-making process of Chinese students, and to put forward relevant propositions considering the characteristics of Chinese students.

Table 1. Student Interviewee Information Overview:

No.	Name	Age	Interview Duration	University
1.	LCY	20	45 minutes	Undergraduate Student in Guangdong, China
2.	WJH	20	45 minutes	Undergraduate Student in Guangdong, China
3.	DY	20	45 minutes	Undergraduate Student in Guangdong, China
4.	LYQ	20	45 minutes	Undergraduate Student in Guangdong, China
5.	QXJ	21	45 minutes	Undergraduate Student in Guangdong, China

6.	LIY	20	45 minutes	Undergraduate Student in Guangdong, China
7.	ZZY	20	45 minutes	Undergraduate Student in Guangdong, China
8.	XYN	20	45 minutes	Undergraduate Student in Guangdong, China
9.	WSY	20	45 minutes	Undergraduate Student in Guangdong, China
10.	SLS	20	45 minutes	Undergraduate Student in Guangdong, China
11.	LWY	20	45 minutes	Undergraduate Student in Guangdong, China
12.	LYD	20	45 minutes	Undergraduate Student in Guangdong, China
13.	CHY	21	45 minutes	Undergraduate Student in Guangdong, China
14.	CJH	20	45 minutes	Undergraduate Student in Guangdong, China
15.	LYS	20	45 minutes	Undergraduate Student in Guangdong, China
16.	LMZ	20	45 minutes	Undergraduate Student in Guangdong, China
17.	HYK	20	45 minutes	Undergraduate Student in Guangdong, China
18.	CPR	20	45 minutes	Undergraduate Student in Guangdong, China

19.	WLY	20	45 minutes	Undergraduate Student in Guangdong, China
20.	HLL	20	45 minutes	Undergraduate Student in Guangdong, China
21.	LH	21	45 minutes	Undergraduate Student in Guangdong, China
22.	QZX	20	45 minutes	Undergraduate Student in Guangdong, China
23.	WJQ	20	45 minutes	Undergraduate Student in Guangdong, China
24.	XHL	20	45 minutes	Undergraduate Student in Guangdong, China
25.	ST	20	45 minutes	Undergraduate Student in Guangdong, China

We carried WeChat semi-interviews with 25 Chinese mainland University students in Guangzhou, China. The interviews lasted on average 45 minutes. Respondents' ages ranged between 20 and 21 years old. There were more female participants than male participants (68% female vs. 32% male), 17 female and 8 male participants. We focused in this research on the buy decision-making in which students are involved. Generation Z has been described as those people born from 1997 onward (Berkup, 2014). China's generation Z grew up in China's mobile Internet era. They have a broad vision and ideals, and generation Z is more profoundly influenced by foreign cultures, presenting diverse cultural identities and creativity. "When the generation Z students entered University, computers may not be necessary, but smartphones must be their daily necessities" (Zhang et al., 2017). All the participants used WOM in their daily buy decision-making. Respondents were asked about the type of WOM they used when purchasing a service or a product. We used the same interview guide for the interviewees. We asked questions on how their buy decision-making is influenced by online WOM and offline WOM. The research highlighted the extent to which trust in information sources can affect the buy decision-making process (Kim et al., 2008). We also asked our interviewees about the

extent to which trust in information sources can be influenced by offline WOM and online WOM.

Results

For each interview, a summary has been written to make sense of students' behaviors and motivations and the extent to which their buying decisions can be influenced by WOM (online or offline). The research used thematic analysis. A different iteration has been made between the existing literature and the empirical data to develop themes (codes) to be analyzed. Some of the codes are emergent and, others are from the literature. There are five codes (one is emergent from our study and five are from the literature). Following the recommendation of Miles and Huberman (2002), I used matrix tables with the different identified themes to facilitate the comparison between the different students' behaviors. A code list as show in Appendix II.

The two main important findings of this exploratory study presented as follows:

- Chinese students mainly rely on offline WOM (parents and friends), which is confirmed through online WOM.
- Trust in information sources positively impacts Chinese student customers' buy decision-making.

Offline WOM and Online WOM

Our results show the extent to which online WOM can impact the buy decision-making process and offline WOM.

Students explained that they use online WOM information in social media to support their buy decision to buy. Online WOM is motivated by finding out information to double confirm the information received from parents and friends (23 out of 25 students). Our interviews show that this is the main reason for online WOM use advocated by almost all the students we interviewed.

“Online reviews will affect my purchase decision; If I saw negative online reviews, I will look at other reviews to make a decision.” LCY

“I will make a comprehensive analysis of the actual situation before deciding when I saw a negative online review.” QXZ

“I use online information search before purchase.” WJH

“I use online reviews to confirm double recommend from parents and friends, will also consider the reviews on the internet.” LJY

“I will combine online reviews to determine if it is right for me.” SLS

“Will compare that to online reviews. will also refer to the reviews on the internet.” XYN

“Negative online review will make me hesitate to buy. I will reconsider in light of my situation. It will impact on previous recommendations from family and friends.” XYN

“The likelihood of not buying is much higher if I saw negative online reviews. Will impact on previous recommendations from family and friends. However, If the negative review is not about the product or service itself, such as the delivery speed, it will not affect the previous recommendation from parents and friends.” ZZY

Trust in Information Sources and Buy Decision-Making

Trust in information sources positively impacts the buy decision-making process. Our interviewees highlighted the extent to which trust in information sources can influence the buy decision-making process.

Our results highlight the extent to which Chinese students rely on offline WOM to make a buy decision. Our interviewees pointed out that they are likely to trust information from parents and friends (offline WOM) more than the reviewers or comments received online from strangers, as the following quotes show:

“Recommendations from friends and family are more powerful than online reviews.” LIY

“Sometimes, a friend's recommendation makes it easier for me to make a purchase.”

“Merchants sometimes will hire fake customers to give positive reviews on the internet to attract customers.” LYS

“I will listen to advice and comments from parents and friends when purchase.” QZX

In line with previous research, all 25 students deem the trust in information sources positively affecting their buy decision-making.

“Friends and family recommendations are more credible. I trust family and friends more than online reviews.” HLL

“Information from family and friends is reliable. At least my family and friends will not lie to me. Sometimes a friend's recommendation makes it easier for me to make a purchase.” HYK

“Recommendations from family and friends make me feel reliable, will increase my opportunity to buy.” WJH

“Recommendations from family and friends make me feel reliable and more secure when buying.” XYN

Our results also showed that family and friends' recommendations would increase the trust in information source credibility (24 out of 25 students). 52% of participants reported recommendations from online WOM would increase their trust in information source credibility (13 out of 25 students). Students trust information from online WOM much less than offline WOM.

“Online reviews somehow will also increase trust, but it depends on if the online information source is reliable.” LCY

“I am not that much trust online reviews; Sometimes online reviews are lie, Parents and friends at least do not lie to me.” WSY

Our result shows that offline WOM has an impact on the information source credibility.

Discussion

This study puts forward some valuable practical insights based on three propositions and discusses the importance of offline WOM and its interactive relationship with online WOM in the buy decision-making process.

Online comments have become an essential source of information (Stuart et al., 2014). People exchange ideas and relatives post-buy information on social media (Chu and Kim, 2011). Our research findings align with previous research highlighting the strength of ties (family and friends) over weak ties (strangers) in influencing the buy decision-making process. Offline WOM, such as parents' and friends' advice, influenced customers to a greater extent than online WOM, such as other online users' WOM (Hernández-Méndez et al., 2015). Tie strength influences WOM communications significantly (Arnaund et al., 2008). Offline WOM from parents and friends, the strong-tie sources, were perceived as more influential than weak-tie sources (Brown and Reingen, 1987). Sources of information with solid relationships are characterized by greater credibility and trustworthiness (Rogers, 1995). We thus argue that

offline WOM from family and friends are likely to influence the buy decision-making process. However, our data analysis shows that online WOM will affect students' buy intentions (16/25 students). Some students emphasized the extent to which negative online WOM influences their previous family and friends (offline WOM) recommendations for buy intentions.

Our exploratory qualitative study posits that online WOM influences offline WOM impacts buy decision-making. This online WOM is critical in checking offline WOM recommendations received from the offline network. We thus proposed:

Proposition 1: Online WOM moderates the relationship between Offline WOM and Buy Decision-making.

Research shows that trust is important for purchasing because consumers are more willing to buy from sellers they trust (Kim et al., 2005; Lăzăroiu et al., 2020). Consumers' trust is essential in "online" purchases (Kim et al., 2008). The increase of trust makes the risk of consumers' perception more minor than the loss of trust. Trust has a positive effect on consumers' buy intention (Kim et al., 2008). Trust is an essential factor to be concerned about in the online shopping environment (Hoffman et al., 1999). Consumers who engage in interactive communication and interaction conversations will develop greater trust (Dabholkar and Sheng, 2012). Research also shows that trust is an essential determinant of consumers' online buy intentions (Hoffman et al., 1999; Liao et al., 2019).

We thus argue that trust in information sources plays an essential role in Chinese students' buy decision-making process, and offline WOM is more likely to influence buy decisions when improving information source credibility. We thus proposed that:

Proposition 2: Offline WOM positively affect Buy Decision-making through the mediator of Trust in Information Source.

Proposition 3: Offline WOM positively impacts Information Source Credibility.

Our exploratory qualitative research aims to explain how offline WOM and online WOM interact to affect the Chinese students' buy decision-making process. Our research highlights the importance of offline WOM and trust in information sources in affecting the buy decision-making process in the specific case of Chinese student customers. The result of our research shed light on the extent to which online WOM and the information source credibility affect the relationships between offline WOM and buy decision-making.

To the best of our knowledge, most research studied online or offline WOM separately to explain the influence of online and offline WOM on the buy decision-making process (Berger 2011). This research improves our understanding of how offline WOM and online WOM interact to impact the buy decision-making process. This study also emphasizes the critical role that offline WOM plays in this buy decision-making process.

First, the study proposed that online WOM moderates the relationship between offline WOM and buy decision-making. The study is consistent with the existing literature where offline WOM is considered the most important information source in the consumer buy decision-making process (Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012). Moreover, consumers use online WOM more for risk reduction when making buy decisions (Hussain et al., 2017). An important finding of our study is that Chinese students use online WOM to double confirm the offline WOM received from parents and friends. One possible explanation for the lower trust of online information is that the online WOM sender and receiver usually do not know each other. However, the information source credibility also impacts online WOM (Senecal and Nantel, 2004).

Second, the study proposed that offline WOM positively affects buy decision-making through the mediator of trust in the information source. This view is consistent with Lau and Ng's (2001) research showing that offline WOM is the source of information that most consumers trust in influencing their buy intentions and preferences. Studies show a more substantial influence of offline WOM on consumer buy decisions (Day, 1971; Trusov et al., 2009).

Third, this study proposed that offline WOM positively impacts information source credibility. Traditional offline WOM is a person-to-person communication between two parties who know each other, and trust is more likely to be based on familiarity. Therefore, the information conveyed is more likely to influence buy decisions. Previous studies have shown that consumers perceive offline WOM as a reliable medium, influencing information receivers (Lau and Ng, 2001; Cheung and Thadani, 2012). Offline WOM is the influence of products and services far greater than other sources of information (Lee and Young, 2009). A similar view is expressed in Swarbrooke and Horner's (2007, p. 416) study, where "offline WOM is the process by which consumers, after experienced a product or service, transmit their positive or negative perceptions of a product or service to others." Offline WOM is highly credible, thus making it play a decisive role in influencing buy decisions through high credibility of information sources.

Besides its theoretical contribution, our research is expected to provide further insights to understand how Chinese student customers are influenced in their buy decision-making process. Highlighting the important role of offline WOM impact this decision-making process and the interaction relationship with online WOM can be helpful for employees involved in formulating social media strategies. Indeed, as we previously explained, Chinese culture is different because parents and offline networks play an essential role in young decision-making, especially in education. Chinese parents and offline WOM from strong-tie relationships have more control and influence over Chinese students' behaviors and buy decisions (Sue and Okazaki 1990). It provides inputs for those who target young Chinese customers about the importance of offline WOM.

Conclusion

Using an exploratory approach, our study explains the importance of offline WOM in influencing Chinese student customers' buy decision-making process and its relationship with online WOM and information source credibility. Our study yielded the following propositions: Online WOM moderates the relationship between Offline WOM and Buy Decision-making; Offline WOM positively affects Buy Decision-making through the mediator of Trust in Information sources; Offline WOM positively impacts Information Source Credibility.

This exploratory qualitative study provides applied knowledge to potential Chinese student consumers' decision-making process in selecting overseas schools. We assume that online WOM in social media development in international student recruitment could take marketing strategies in the education industry a step further in the future.

The limitations of my research are mainly reflected in the following aspects. Our exploratory qualitative study conducted interviews with 25 Chinese students from Guangzhou, mainland China. The interview sample came from a single channel. Subsequent studies could expand the sample of students from a different region of the Greater China area interviewed to understand better the impact of offline WOM and online WOM on Chinese students' buy decision-makings.

The study results could be a good source of information for marketers of international education institutions and companies who need to be more actively involved in WOM marketing. This study shows that the important role of offline WOM impacts this decision-making process and its interaction relationship with online WOM and information source

credibility during the Chinese student customers' buy decision-making process. Therefore, it would be beneficial for international education institutions and companies to include online and offline WOM interactively. International educational institutions and companies should take specific actions to trigger communication among students, such as online and offline communication platforms and offline veteran student sharing sessions where past and prospective students can share their experiences and advice. International educational institutions can take specific actions to trigger communication among students, such as online WOM communication platforms and offline veteran student sharing sessions, offline education exhibitions where past and prospective students can share their experiences and advice. They can use WeChat to integrate e-commerce into their company or WeChat public accounts to spread the WOM about their services and integrate with their mobile websites for mobile commerce. WeChat can help international education companies target and segment their users efficiently. Businesses can also use semi-private WeChat groups of 50 to 100 people to pull in friends and friends of friends to showcase services, communicate with customers, and answer their questions about colleges and life abroad.

Our subsequent research plans to conduct a quantitative online survey with 100 Chinese students to explore the extent to which online WOM and offline WOM influence the buy decision-making of Chinese student consumers.

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APPENDIX

Appendix I

The Semi- Structured Interview Guide

The influence of offline WOM and online WOM on Chinese students' buy decision process:
Semi-structured interview.

Interviewee General Information

M/F

Age

Region/city

Participants Background Briefing

1. Introduction

Length: 5 minutes

Primary goal: To find out variables from the interview and the Chinese University Students' view towards Offline WOM, Online WOM, Trust in information source and buy decision-making process when choosing school overseas. The interview is more like a conversation focusing on participants' experience, opinions on the selected topics.

2. Verbal Consent

Would you like to participate in this interview?

Verbal Consent was obtained from the study participant.

Verbal Consent was NOT obtained from the study participant.

3. Purpose of the Research

The research conducts a qualitative research on the influence of offline WOM and online WOM on Chinese student customers' buy decision-making process.

Participation eligibility

Criteria to be eligible for participation the interview:

Have/ having using online and offline WOM.

Chinese resident

Have/ having study abroad experience.

4. Procedures

You will be asked to answer questions regarding your experience with using social media, online WOM, offline WOM, study abroad experience to help us understand your buy decision-making process.

5. Research Questions

Interview Questions (40-60 minutes)

Section 1: Background information

1. Tell me about yourself, and where are you from?
2. Your age?
3. Your study abroad plan and experience?

Section 2: Offline WOM: Parents and Friends

1. Tell me about how do you made the decision to study abroad?
2. Who did you talk to about this idea? (Family? Friends?)
3. Who do you think had the most influence on your decision to go abroad? ,

Section 3: Online WOM

1. What forms of online Word of Mouth have the greatest influence? (e.g. 3rd party reviews platforms; reviews on a company's website; social networks)
2. What is your reaction to Positive and Negative reviews regarding a school overseas?
3. What do you use online WOM for?
4. What information sources do you use when chose a University overseas?

5. Do you use online WOM if you have already had recommending of school overseas from parents and friends before?
6. What do you want to find out from the online WOM of the school overseas?
7. Is your choice of that school overseas influenced by the content you have seen on the social networking site?
8. What social media platform do you use to obtain information?

Section 4: Decision to buy and Trust

1. Tell me about how the decision got made to choose a school overseas.
2. How did you learn about school overseas?
3. Are there particular sources of WOM that you place more trust in the others and why?
4. Do you place more trust in the recommendation received from Parents and friends, and why?
5. What do you feel are the key elements of a credible information source?
6. If you read a positive/ negative review toward to a school overseas, what is your reaction? How does this effect your intention to purchase?
7. When you make choice of a school overseas, do you consult your family first or search information online first?
8. When it comes to choosing a school overseas, your family's advice or online WOM have more impact on your final choice?

CONCLUSION OF INTERVIEW

1. Is there anything else you would like to say about offline WOM, online WOM and Trust in WOM, or your decision-making of a school overseas?

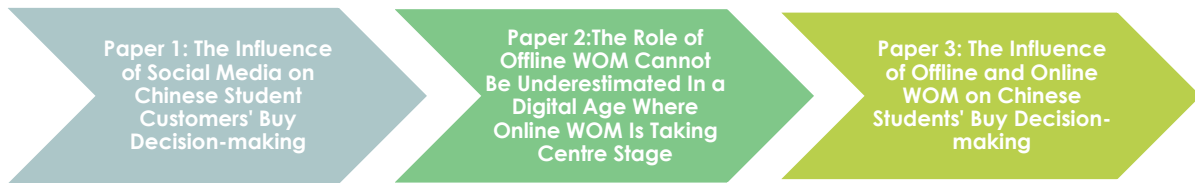
Thank you!

Appendix II

List Of Codes Used

Code	Sub-codes	Example of quotes	Source
Purpose of Using Online WOM	Double confirm the information received from parents and friends.	<p>“I use online reviews to confirm double recommend from parents and friends, will also consider the reviews on the internet.” LJY</p> <p>“Negative online review will make me hesitate to buy. I will reconsider in light of my situation. It will impact on previous recommendations from family and friends.” XYN</p> <p>“The likelihood of not buying is much higher if I saw negative online reviews. Will impact on previous recommendations from family and friends. However, If the negative review is not about the product or service itself, such as the delivery speed, it will not affect the previous recommendation from parents and friends.” ZZY</p>	Emergent
Trust in Information Sources	Trust Positively impacts the buying decision-making.	‘Trust is important for purchasing because consumers are more willing to buy from sellers they trust’.	Kim et al., 2005; Lăzăroiu et al., 2020).
	Trust Positively impacts intention to buy.	‘Trust in information source has positive influence on purchase intention.’	Liao et al., 2019
Offline WOM Influence	Offline WOM influence Impact the trust in information source credibility.	‘Offline WOM is highly credible, thus making it play a decisive role in influencing buy decisions through high credibility of information sources.’	Cheung and Thadani, 2012
	Offline WOM Influence Impact buy decision-making.	‘Traditional offline WOM is a person-to-person communication between two parties who know each other, and trust is more likely to be based on familiarity. Therefore, the information conveyed is more likely to influence buy decisions.’	Hernández-Méndez et al., 2015; Trusov et al., 2009

Link Between the Three Papers



	Paper 1	Paper 2	Paper 3
Link	Explore the Importance and influence of Social Media on Chinese Student customers' Buy Decision-making	Explore the Importance of Offline WOM and Its Interaction Relationship with Online WOM on Buy Decision-making	Examine the Extent to Which Online and Offline WOM influences Buy Decision-making
Research Approach	Exploratory Research	Qualitative Research	Quantitative Research
Data Collection	10 Students' In-depth Interview	25 Students' Group Interview	101 Students' Questionnaire Survey
Research Questions	What Is the Relationship Between Social Media Usage and Students' Their Buy Decision-making?	How Offline and Online WOM Impact Each Other During Chinese Students' Buy Decision-making Process? And Why Offline WOM Is Important.	The Extent to Which Offline and Online WOM Impact Chinese Students' Buy Decision-making Process?

CHAPTER 3: PAPER THREE: THE INFLUENCE OF OFFLINE AND ONLINE WOM ON CHINESE STUDENTS' BUY DECISION-MAKING

Abstract: Offline WOM and online WOM play an essential role in affecting student consumers' buy behavior and changing their attitudes toward products or services. Most prior research has responded to the importance of offline or online WOM on consumer behaviour and the decision-making process, respectively. However, little is known about the relationships between online WOM and offline WOM and the extent to which they can contribute to the buy decision-making process. This paper refers to Information Adoption Model (IAM) to propose a conceptual model to test the extent to which online WOM and offline WOM influence student customers' buy decision-making. The model is tested in the specific context of Chinese students' decision-making process. Our study examines the extent to which online and offline WOM influence the buy decision-making process by adopting a quantitative approach. We conducted an online survey with 101 Chinese University students. Our research yielded the following findings: Positive Online WOM significantly and positively influences Online WOM. Online WOM significantly influences Chinese students' Intention to Buy. Information Source Credibility mediated the relationship between Offline WOM and Online WOM. The main contribution of this paper is to show the extent to which both Online WOM and Offline WOM influence Chinese student customers' Intention to Buy. More specifically, this study shows that Offline WOM has an indirect effect on Intention to Buy through double mediators of Information Source Credibility and Online WOM. The research provides applied knowledge and managerial recommendations for international education institutions and companies.

Keywords: Online WOM; Offline WOM; Chinese Student Customers; Intention to Buy; Information Source Credibility

Introduction

Offline WOM is one of the oldest forms of messaging (Dellarocas, 2003), between consumers to play “a fundamental role in shaping consumer behavior and changing consumer attitudes toward products and services” (Lazarsfeld, 1966). In contrast, research also indicated that University students often use social media to get online WOM (Holliday and Li, 2004). Online WOM is referred to as e-WOM or electronic WOM (Yang, 2017). The Web has created platforms for “online WOM to spread through electronic media, such as online forums,

electronic bulletin board systems, newsgroups, blogs, review sites, and social media” (Goldsmith, 2006). With the emergence of social media platforms, “online WOM has taken on particular importance, making it one of the most influential sources of information on the web” (Abubakar and Ilkan, 2016). Online WOM can reach unprecedented numbers of people at once (Hennig et al. 2004). Online WOM has become a part of consumers' buy decision-making journey (Vollmer and Precourt, 2008).

Previous research on WOM either investigated online WOM (Moore and Lafreniere, 2020; Cheung and Thadani, 2012; Cheung et al., 2008) or offline WOM (Sánchez-Fernández, 2015; De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008; Rogers, 1995). There is a lack of study regarding the relationship between offline WOM and online WOM and the extent to which they impact customers' buy intention. While consumers' trust used to come mainly from offline WOM from friends and family, today, consumers expect to obtain information about products or services through online WOM (Nieto et al., 2014; Tien, 2019). Online and offline WOM has become the most influential source of information on consumers' buy decision-makings (Ishida et al., 2016). Therefore, our study emphasizes the gap and develops a conceptual model that tests the extent to which online WOM and offline WOM may influence customers' buy decision-making. The model is tested in the specific context of Chinese students' buy decision-making process.

Thus, our research question is: The extent to which offline WOM and online WOM impact Chinese students' buy decision-making process?

To answer our research question, we investigated the specific context of Chinese students. Our quantitative study survey was created using Questionnaire Star (QS) online survey software to collect data. Data were collected from 101 Chinese University students from Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong, and Changsha, in mainland China.

Our study examines the extent to which online and offline WOM influence the Chinese students' buy decision-making process by adopting a quantitative approach. The main contribution of this paper is to show the extent to which Online WOM and Offline WOM influence Chinese student customers' Intention to Buy. More specifically, this study shows that Offline WOM has an indirect effect on the Intention to Buy through double mediators of Information Source Credibility and Online WOM.

We first start with the Introduction. This part briefs the background of the research, research gap, research question, methodology, and contributions. The remainder of this paper is structured as: Theoretical Lenses and Hypothesis Development section presents literature

review regarding this study and the Hypothesis Development. The Research Method section discusses the research methodology in detail. Data collection methods and questionnaire development are introduced in this section. Next, The Data Analysis section presents the analysis and results of quantitative studies conducted in this research. Then, The Discussion section discusses the main research results. The theoretical and managerial implications, limitations, recommendations and future research directions are also presented in this section. Finally, The Conclusion section provides the conclusion of this research.

Theoretical Lenses

Information Adoption Model (IAM)

The impact of WOM conversational messages on consumers may vary from persons, and the same message can elicit different effects for different people (Chaiken and Eagly, 1976; Cheung et al., 2008). Our study adopt information adoption model to help understand how consumers will process the information they receive. Based on ELM (Elaboration Likelihood Model), researchers added a dual-process theory and proposed IAM (Information Adoption Model) to explain how people are influenced by online information. “The IAM has based on the proposition that argument quality has a central influence in information adoption, while source credibility is a peripheral cue to information adoption” (Sussman and Siegal, 2003). Source credibility refers to the extent to which the information is perceived as credible by the recipient of the information and the extent to which the content is perceived as trustworthy and competent (Chaiken, 1980). Information from higher credibility is perceived as reliable and useful, contributing to better information adoption (Ko et al., 2005; Cacioppo, 1986). “Quality and source credibility are the main determinants of information adoption” (Hong, 2006) and can be divided into "strong" and "weak" categories." Weak" investigates how “WOM in social media can influence perceived purchase attractiveness” (Hong, 2006). This Chapter (paper 3) refers to Information Adoption Model (IAM) to help us developed a conceptual model to test the extent to which online WOM and offline WOM influence student customers’ buy decision-making. Hence, the IAM is the theory that fits our research question and objective best.

Offline WOM

Offline WOM plays an essential role in students' buy decision-making when choosing or purchasing items (Harahap et al., 2017). Offline WOM's long-term value is more significant than gained advertising (Villanueva et al., 2008). WOM has a more significant impact on brand

choice than Internet searches for information (East et al., 2005). Some scholars define offline WOM communication as "all informal communication by consumers about specific goods or services, uses or characteristics" (Westbrook, 1987). Offline WOM is widely considered "one of the most influential factors affecting consumer behavior" (Daugherty and Hoffman, 2014). This influence is significant for intangible products that are difficult to assess before consumption. Therefore, offline WOM is considered an essential source of information in consumer buy decisions and buy intention behaviors (Jalilvand, 2012). Offline WOM is considered "one of the most influential information sources about products and services" (Lee and Young, 2009). Offline WOM can "influence many message recipients" (Lau and Ng, 2001) and is seen as "a consumer-led marketing channel in which message senders are independent of the market, which gives them credibility" (Brown et al., 2007).

Online WOM

The rise of advances in information technology, creating online WOM which has led to changes in buy behavior (Gómez-Suárez et al., 2017). The emergence of social media has enabled consumers to exert influence by obtaining or sharing information about a company, product, or brand (Gómez-Suárez et al., 2017). Social media presents new features to make it easier to share online WOM between different users. Researcher described online WOM as all informal communication related to the use or characteristics of a good or service via the Internet (Litvin et al. 2008). The advantage of such communication is that it is open to all consumers and that consumers can use social media to share post-buy online WOM with other users. While consumer trust comes mainly from offline WOM from friends and family, today, consumers obtain information about products or services through online WOM (Nieto et al., 2014; Tien et al., 2019). Online WOM also offers advantages to companies compared to traditional offline WOM. Online WOM provides companies with the opportunity to manage customers' opinions online while helping companies measure the impact of these online WOM on other consumers (Cantallop and Salvi, 2014). However, there are also factors beyond the control of online WOM that consumers share about products or services using the Internet, which can be challenging for companies (Yang, 2017).

Offline WOM vs Online WOM

While traditional offline WOM and online WOM share fundamental similarities in purpose, there are also significant differences. "Offline WOM is an immediate, intimate conversation, whereas online WOM is typically an asynchronous process in which the message's sender and

receiver are separated by space and time” (Steffes and Burgee, 2009). Unlike offline WOM, online WOM has unprecedented scalability and propagation speed. Offline WOM information sharing is carried out among small groups of individuals. Offline WOM is often exchanged in private conversations or face to face, making it difficult to convey information to individuals who are not in the same space and time.

On the contrary, online WOM can quickly realize disseminating information regardless of time and space (Cheung and Thadani, 2012). Online WOM's information is more persistent and more comfortable to access. Most online WOM can be used indefinitely (Hennig et al., 2004).

Moreover, “online WOM communications are more measurable than offline WOM” (Lee et al., 2008). Cheung and Thadani (2012) addressed that "online WOM has undoubtedly been a powerful marketing force." Hennig (2004) defined online WOM as positive or negative reviews made by customers on a product or service via the Internet. Online WOM is the extension of the traditional person-to-person WOM into the new generation of digital form and can influence consumption (Cheung et al., 2008). Online WOM can reach a wider audience, which is one of the main differences with offline WOM, but also, the source of the statement of online WOM is from other online users, not from relatives and friends (Black and Kelley, 2009). Doh and Hwang (2009) found that online WOM's role in a decision-making process raises high involvement services or products. Online WOM affects buy decision-making and post-buy evaluation (Litvin, 2008; Moore and Lafreniere, 2020). Online WOM takes advantage of the two-way communication nature and unlimited Internet reach (Dellarocas, 2003). For traditional offline WOM, The information receiver knows the information sender, so that the receiver of the message knows the sender of the message and the credibility of the message's content. It has been suggested that online information anonymity may hurt its credibility (Luo, 2013). Conversely, other studies have argued that consumers use online WOM more for risk reduction when making decisions (Hussain et al., 2017).

Intention to Buy

Previous research has shown that the intention to buy is critical to understanding the impact of online and offline WOM (Wang et al., 2012; Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Bickart and Schinder, 2001; Prendergast, 2010). Customers rely on online WOM to reduce risk (Liu and Park, 2015). Buy intention refers to consumers' buying behavior and physiological actions towards a product (Lin and Lu, 2010). Intentions are assumed to indicate the extent to which people are willing to approach a specific behavior. In light of IAM theory, buy intention

depends on how much trust consumers place in the source of WOM information (Sussman and Siegal, 2003). The more credible the source of information, the more likely the customer will be to buy. Therefore, this study uses Intention to Buy as the dependent variable of the study. Along this vein, this section discusses the relationship between Online WOM and Offline WOM and Intention to Buy.

Hypothesis Development

This research refers to the information adoption model (IAM) develops a theoretical model to identify the extent to which offline WOM and online WOM impact Chinese student customers' buy decision-making process when choosing a school overseas. The model shows that Chinese student consumers' Intention to Buy is directly influenced by Online WOM and indirectly influenced by Offline WOM. Offline WOM has an indirect effect on Intention to Buy through double mediators of Information Source Credibility and Online WOM.

The IAM model suggests that people can be influenced by information through central and peripheral pathways (Shen et al., 2013). The central route refers to “the essence of the message, and the peripheral route refers to issues indirectly related to the essence of the message” (Cheung et al., 2008). The IAM model helps us understand and explain how consumers are influenced by the messages on social media communication platforms. The credibility of information is critical for online WOM (Xu, 2014). As noted by the IAM model, information credibility is one of the critical determinants of consumers' decisions about the usefulness of the information. It has an indirect effect on consumers' information choices. The IAM model has also been widely used in online discussion forums in social media (Shu and Scott, 2014). This study focuses on online WOM in social media, and the reference to the IAM model is appropriate for this study. Components of the IAM model are applied in this study as information source credibility and information adoption.

Figure 1 provides an overview of our proposed model. We thus posit that Positive Online WOM (PONW) and Negative Online WOM (NONW) will influence Online WOM (ONW). We also investigated the possible mediation role of Information Source Credibility (ISC) and Online WOM (ONW) on the relationship between Offline WOM (OFW) and Intention to Buy (IB). Offline WOM (OFW) may influence consumers' Intention to Buy (IB) through the mediation of Information Source Credibility (ISC) and Online WOM (ONW). We also investigate the possible mediation role of InformationSource Credibility (ISC) on the relationship between Offline WOM (OFW) and Online WOM (ONW).

Conceptual Model

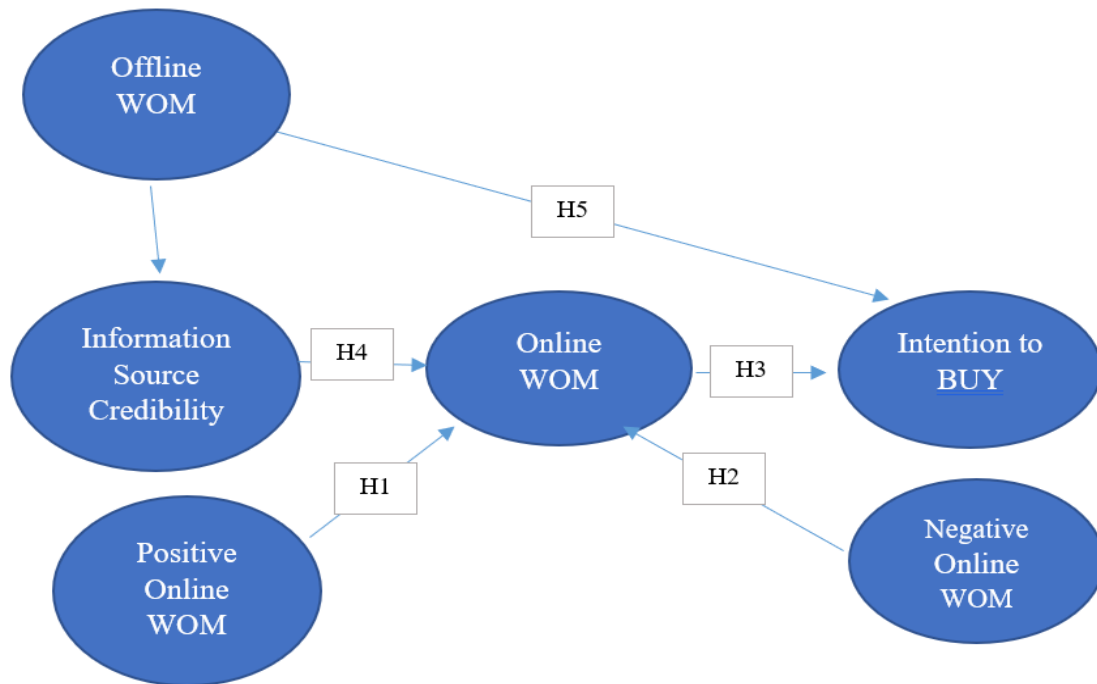


Figure 1 Conceptual Model

Positive Online WOM and Negative Online WOM

In light of IAM theory, “source credibility is a peripheral cue” to information adoption (Sussman and Siegal, 2003). Previous research on WOM has shown that “consumers tend to give more weight to negative information than positive information” (Herr et al., 1991). “Negative online WOM is more influential than positive online WOM, and that more time spent critically examining negative content than positive content” (Knolle, 2011). Research also argues that positive reviews increase product knowledge, while negative reviews confirm readers' foresighted decisions (Ricci and Wietsma, 2006). Laczniak et al. (2001) state that consumers do not trust negative content. Moreover, research has also been found that positive online WOM from online consumers can increase credibility (Black et al., 2009). In addition, a small amount of negative online WOM can increase the credibility of online WOM (Yan et al., 2019). Therefore, the power of online opinions and online WOM should not be ignored. Thus, we Hypothesis that

H1. Positive Online WOM will positively influence Online WOM.

H2. Negative Online WOM will negatively influence Online WOM.

Online WOM and Intention to Buy

The IAM model helps us understand and explain how the information on social media influences consumers. The effect of online WOM on consumers' intention to buy has been confirmed by scholars (Kumar and Benbasat, 2006; Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Zhang et al. 2010; Chan and Ngai, 2011; Huang, 2010; Park et al., 2007; Ismagilova et al., 2019). Consumers get online WOM communication on online platforms and refer to online WOM to make buy decisions; Online WOM helps consumers immediately convert into buy actions through a company website or shopping site (Barton, 2006). In addition, study found that negative online WOM was more influential than positive online WOM in influencing consumers' intention to buy (Chen et al., 2011). Moreover, online WOM provides firms with the opportunity to manage consumers' online WOM while helping them measure these online WOMs' impact on other consumers (Cantalops and Salvi, 2014). However, there are also elements of online WOM about products or services that consumers share using the Internet, making Internet control can be a challenge for companies (Yang, 2017). Also, research suggests that online WOM communication in social media directly affects consumers' intention to buy and indirect effect on the consolidation of product engagement (Wang, 2012). Thus, we hypothesis that

H3. Online WOM will directly influence Chinese student customers' Intention to Buy.

Offline WOM and Online WOM

The IAM model suggests that people can be influenced by information through central and peripheral pathways (Shen et al., 2013). Many studies have shown that consumers' buy behavior can be influenced by different types of information, with offline WOM having a more substantial impact on consumers' buy decisions than any other type of advertising (Day, 1971; Trusov et al., 2009; Wangenheim and Bayón, 2004). Researchers have demonstrated that “personal conversations and informal information exchanges between acquaintances not only influence consumer choices and buy decisions” (Arndt, 1967) but also “shape consumers' buy expectations” (Anderson and Salisbury, 2003). Trusov's empirical study found that offline WOM referrals were twenty times more effective than those achieved by corporate marketing campaigns and thirty times more effective than traditional media (Trusov et al., 2009). Offline WOM is more effective in influencing consumers' intention to buy than any other traditional marketing tool. Studies have shown that offline WOM is a trusted information source and offline WOM will influence consumers' intention to buy and preference (Lau and Ng, 2001).

The senders of offline WOM are independent from the market, which gives them credibility, and this independence makes offline WOM a more reliable and credible medium (Arndt, 1967; Brown et al., 2007; Lee and Youn, 2009).

In the marketing literature, source credibility theory has been commonly used to compare the credibility of different WOM senders (Johnson and Kaye, 2009). Watts and Zhang (2008) used source credibility theory in testing message adoption in an online platform. Source credibility also applies to investigate the effect of source credibility on information acceptance (Li, 2013). Fogg and Tseng (1999) employed trustworthiness as key dimensions of source credibility. Information sources will influence customers' perception of information usefulness and their attitudes and usage intention in the context of decision-making. Unlike offline WOM, online WOM usually come from anonymous online consumers based on text format. It is challenging to use source similarity to determine the message's credibility (Wu and Wang, 2011). However, source credibility can help us understand how the persuasiveness of communication affects the credibility of the source of communication.

As noted by the IAM model, information credibility is one of the critical determinants of consumers' decisions about the usefulness of the information. It has an indirect effect on consumers' information choices (Shu and Scott, 2014). Hovland and Weiss (1951) explained that "the source credibility theory is an established theory that explains how communication's persuasiveness is affected by the perceived credibility of the source of the communication." Kotler and Keller (2008) reported that different types of message appeals might influence the persuasive effects on message receivers. To establish an adequate understanding of the extent to which online WOM may impact offline WOM, the understanding of WOM source credibility and the type of information appeal that influences online and offline WOM on the decision-making process is essential. We argue that the source credibility theory provides valuable lenses to our conceptual model to explain the credibility of offline and online WOM. Thus, we hypothesize that.

H4: Information Source Credibility mediates the relationship between Offline WOM and Online WOM.

We also hypothesize that,

H5: Offline WOM has an indirect effect on Intention to Buy through double mediators of Information Source Credibility and Online WOM.

Methodology

This study aims to examine the determinants of Offline WOM and Online WOM information that influence Chinese student customers' Intention to Buy and explore the relationship between Offline WOM and Online WOM and the extent to which they affect the Intention to Buy.

Data Collection

Survey Participant and Procedure

Our quantitative study survey was created using Questionnaire Star online survey software to collect data. "Questionnaires are one of the most appropriate data collection tools for collecting data from large samples" (Saunders et al., 2003). Therefore, this method is perfectly suited to the purpose of this study. According to the recommendations of Bryman and Bell (2018), "provide clear guidance; avoid asking long questions and prepare questionnaires that are as short as possible; create attractive layouts and efficient questionnaire design". Therefore, this study considered the above recommendations in the process of designing the questionnaire. The questionnaire was conducted with University students in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong, Changsha, mainland China where they can access social media in their region.

Demographic Profile

Data was collected from 101 university students in China for the time of 2 January 2021 to 25 January 2021.

Characteristics of the Respondents

Table 1: Demographic Profile

Number of Respondents	Age range	Region	Occupation	Information Source
101	18-40	Beijing, Shanghai, Changsha and Guangdong, China	University Students	WeChat

Table 2: Age, Gender and Education of the Respondents

Age	Frequency	Percentage
18-23	61	60.3%
24-29	30	29.7%
30-39	8	7.9%
40+	2	1.98%
Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	74	73.27%
Female	27	26.73%
Education	Frequency	Percentage
Higher Education	101	100%

Questionnaire Development

Developing instrument measurements directly affects the reliability and validity of the collected data and requires extra attention for researchers. Bryman and Bell (2018) recommend using existing measurements that previous researchers have tested. Therefore, the measures were extracted from the existing literature and adapted by considering the study objectives and goals in this research. The following paragraph shows how the items were adopted.

All questionnaire items were translated from English to Chinese by the author, who is fluent in both languages. Participants rated all items using a Five-point Likert Scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Dependent Variables

Regarding the dependent variable, in addition to Intention to Buy (IB), our questionnaire included the Buy Decision (BD) variable. However, we had to discard this variable because the Cronbach α for the Buy Decision (BD)-value was below 0.7.

Intention to Buy (IB). We adopt four items from Bataineh (2015) to measure Intention to Buy. Sample items include, “IB1. After reading online reviews/comments provided by overseas

school students, it makes me desire to join this school; IB2. I intend to seek more reviews/comments provided by school overseas students on social media; IB3. I intend to visit the school overseas discussed in the online reviews/comments; IB4. In the future, I will consider the school overseas discussed in the online reviews/comments as my first choice” (Bataineh, 2015).

Independent Variables

Information Source Credibility (ISC). We adapted four items from Luo et al. (2013) to measure Information Source Credibility. Sample items include, “ISC1. The online recommendation on school overseas is believable”. “ISC2. The recommendation of online on school overseas is factual”. “ISC3. The recommendation of online on school overseas is credible”. “ISC4. The online recommendation on school overseas is trustworthy”.

Online WOM (ONW). We adapted three items from Ishida et al. (2016) to measure the Online WOM. Sample items include, “ONW1. I feel more comfortable applying school overseas when I have gotten opinions from people electronically”. “ONW2. Online social media communication with people influences my choice of school overseas”. “ONW3. When I consider school overseas, I ask people to give me advice via online tools such as social media, etc.”.

Offline WOM (OFW). We adapted three items from Ishida et al. (2016) to measure the Offline WOM. Sample items include, “OFW1. I feel more comfortable choosing school overseas when I have gotten opinions from people, I know face-to-face (parents or friends or acquaintance)”. “OFW2. When I consider school overseas, I ask people I know offline (parents or friends or acquaintance) for opinions and advice”. “OFW3. Face-to-face communication with my offline network (parents or friends or Acquaintance) influences my choice of school overseas”.

Positive Online WOM (PONW). We adapted three items from Kim et al. (2016) to measure the Positive Online WOM. Sample items include, “PONW1. Many social media say good things about go to school overseas”. “PONW2. Many social media recommend going to school overseas”. “PONW3. Many social media like going to school overseas”.

Negative Online WOM (NONW). We adapted three items from Wen-Hai et al. (2019) that measure the Negative Online WOM. Sample items include “NONW1. Social media spread negative word of mouth about the school overseas”. “NONW2. Social media denigrated the

school overseas”. “NONW3. When I was looking for a school overseas, social media warn me not to go to the school overseas”.

Control Variables

The study included demographic variables as control variables in the model. These demographic variables have been included in previous research that examines Intention to Buy (Ma and Agarwal, 2007). The demographics of the respondents are detailed in the Table 2. Table 2 shows the age, gender and education background of the respondents. The figures show that 60.3% of the respondents were between the ages of 18-23, followed by 29.7% between the ages of 24-29. 7.9 % were between the ages of 30-39. 1.98% were 40+. The frequency shows that nearly 90% of respondents were between the ages of 18-29, and only 1.98% were over 40 years old. The results show that the gender ratio of the respondents was significantly more female than male, with 73.27% female and 26.73% male.

Table 3: Correlations and Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Mean	S.D.	IB	ICS	NONW	OFW	ONW	PONW
IB	3.4728	.8022	1					
ICS	3.1337	.6897	.379**	1				
NONW	2.9769	.9252	.184*	.140	1			
OFW	3.7855	.8532	.311**	.395**	.0044	1		
ONW	3.5215	.7794	.696**	.386**	.173*	.542**	1	
PONW	3.2541	.7395	.100	.200**	.240**	.218**	.355**	1

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed). * . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

Pilot Testing

This study conducted a pilot test to test the validity of the questionnaire. The purpose of pilot testing is to conduct small-scale questionnaire testing prior to mass distribution to identify problems for timely adjustment (Cooper and Schindler, 2014). Therefore, a pilot study of 30 participants was conducted for this study. Participants were requested to fill out a questionnaire online via Questionnaire Star and provide feedback. We did Reliability and Validity analysis of the test questionnaire and adjusted the questionnaire accordingly. The final version of the questionnaire is available in the Appendix A. The following section describes the data analysis methods used in this study.

Data Analysis

The model analysis was conducted by using SmartPLS Version (3.2.8) to test our model. This method is widely used in many leading papers in literature (James et al., 2019). The PLS method is beneficial when a complex model is tested with multistage theoretical relationships (Lowry and Gaskin, 2014). This method is appropriate for preliminary model building in the early stage of theory building (Lowry and Gaskin, 2014). SmartPLS is widely used in IS research (James et al., 2019).

The measurement model of the study aims at examining convergent validity, discriminant validity, and reliability. Moreover, the study also used the SmartPLS version to test the structural model. The results in detail states in the following.

Measurement Model

We tested the measurement model by assessing both the construct reliability and validity. The study first assessed the reliability of the construct. Reliability can be helpfully described as consistency of conceptual measurement (Mayer, 2015). Cronbach's alpha tests for internal reliability and the Cronbach's alpha value should be greater than 0.70 (Hair et al., 2010). The Cronbach's alpha in this research ranged from 0.752 and 0.897. We examined the internal consistency of our construct reliability. The Composite Reliability (CR) should be at least 0.7. Table 4 shows that all the variables passed the test of reliability. The composite reliability of all the variables in this study is between 0.842 and 0.932.

We calculated the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) to check the convergent validity of our model. The AVE should be at least 0.5. All the AVE are higher than 0.5 (the AVE value ranges between 0.572 and 0.821). Moreover, all items loaded higher than 0.5 on their associate constructs. As shown in Table 5, all items had higher loads on their associated constructs than on the cross-constructs.

Table 4: Construct Reliability and Validity

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
IB	0.752	0.842	0.572
ISC	0.897	0.928	0.763
NONW	0.892	0.932	0.821
OFW	0.868	0.919	0.791

ONW	0.794	0.880	0.710
PONW	0.798	0.869	0.695

Table 5: Loadings and Cross Loadings

Construct	IB	ISC	NONW	OFW	ONW	PONW
IB1	0.757	0.310	0.136	0.211	0.497	0.151
IB2	0.751	0.144	0.128	0.302	0.595	0.097
IB3	0.778	0.230	0.063	0.225	0.436	-0.008
IB4	0.737	0.450	0.209	0.195	0.547	0.053
ISCON1	0.253	0.851	0.087	0.412	0.324	0.167
ISCON2	0.357	0.894	0.115	0.336	0.324	0.133
ISCON3	0.380	0.896	0.180	0.339	0.407	0.237
ISCON4	0.339	0.852	0.103	0.276	0.279	0.151
NONW1	0.181	0.126	0.857	0.012	0.111	0.211
NONW2	0.201	0.175	0.965	0.070	0.203	0.281
NONW3	0.108	0.059	0.893	0.020	0.130	0.133
OFW1	0.284	0.270	-0.097	0.848	0.495	0.202
OFW2	0.315	0.338	0.036	0.923	0.507	0.116
OFW3	0.236	0.431	0.152	0.896	0.451	0.261
ONW1	0.523	0.438	0.155	0.485	0.788	0.210
ONW2	0.674	0.339	0.157	0.404	0.898	0.354
ONW3	0.549	0.193	0.124	0.497	0.837	0.327
PONW1	-0.056	0.191	0.135	0.254	0.109	0.631
PONW2	0.090	0.212	0.235	0.219	0.288	0.910
PONW3	0.126	0.144	0.215	0.153	0.388	0.927

We also examined the Discriminant Validity (DV) of our constructs. As shown in Table 6, all the constructs meet the criteria required to pass the discriminant validity test. For each construct, the square root of its AVE is higher than its correlation with every other construct.

Table 6: Discriminant Validity

Construct	IB	ISC	NONW	OFW	ONW	PONW
IB	0.756					

ISC	0.379	0.874				
NONW	0.184	0.140	0.906			
OFW	0.311	0.395	0.044	0.889		
ONW	0.696	0.386	0.173	0.542	0.842	
PONW	0.100	0.200	0.240	0.218	0.355	0.834

The square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) is shown on the diagonal of the correlation matrix and inter-construct correlations are shown off the diagonal.

We also checked that multicollinearity is not an issue. We thus calculated the index of variance inflation factor (VIF). For all our constructs, VIF is below the recommended threshold value of 10 (it ranges from 1.082 to 1.900). We thus conclude that multicollinearity is not a problem in this study.

Table 7: VIF Values

Variables	VIF
OFW	1.900
ONW	1.838
ISCON	1.395
PONW	1.269
NONW	1.144
Age	1.082
Gender	1.123

Structural Model: Paths Coefficients and Corresponding t-values

After assessing the measurement validity, we also employed PLS to test the structural model to obtain the Paths Coefficients and Corresponding t-values. We used the bootstrapping method with 1,000 iterations to obtain t-values. The model explained 55.2 of the variances in intention to buy. A summary of the hypothesis results is presented in Table 10. The path coefficients for the structural model are shown in Table 8-9.

Table 8: Summary of the Path Coefficients (Direct effect)

Path	Coefficient	T test	P Values
ISC-> ONW	0.323*	2.996	0.003
NONW-> ONW	0.062	0.605	0.545
OFW->ISC	0.395**	4.740	0.000
OFW -> IB	-0.074	0.669	0.503
ONW -> IB	0.759**	7.946	0.000
PONW-> ONW	0.276*	1.976	0.048
Age-> IB	0.028	0.373	0.710
Gender -> IB	-0.135	1.981	0.048

*p<0.05 ** p<0.01

As shown in Table 8, Positive Online WOM (PONW) is significantly and positively related to Online WOM (ONW) (Path coefficient= 0.276 and P<0.05). We can then conclude that H1 is supported. In table 8, Negative Online WOM (NONW) is not significantly related to Online WOM (ONW) (Path coefficient = 0.062 and P>0.05). We conclude that H2 is rejected. Online WOM (ONW) is significantly and positively related to Intention to Buy (IB) (Path coefficient= 0.759 and P<0.05). H3 is then supported.

Mediator Check

We strictly followed the recommendations of Zhao et al. (2010) and Nitz et al. (2016) to assess mediation. This approach has already been used by previous research in IS (Kathuria et al., 2018). We first assess the indirect effect. If it is significant, we examine the significance of the direct effect of the independent variables and dependent variables. We can conclude that there is full mediation when the direct effect is not significant. By contrast, there is partial mediation when both the direct and indirect effects are significant.

Table 9: Summary of the Path Coefficients (Indirect effect)

Path	Coefficient	T test	P Values
PONW -> ONW -> IB	0.209*	1.989	0.047
NONW-> ONW -> IB	0.047	0.601	0.548
OFW -> ICS -> ONW	0.127*	2.095	0.036

OFW -> ICS -> ONW -> IB	0.097*	1.972	0.049
ISC-> ONW -> IB	0.245* *	2.708	0.007

*p<0.05 ** p<0.01

Hypothesis 4 argues that Information Source Credibility (ISC) mediates the relationship between Offline WOM (OFW) and Online WOM (ONW). To assess the mediation, we examined the value and the significance of the indirect effect of the mediation, and we compared them to the direct effect (Kathuria et al., 2018). As shown in Table 9, We report the value and significance of the indirect effect and the results of our hypothesis. (Path coefficient= 0.127 and P<0.05). H4 is supported.

Hypothesis 5 argues that there is a dual mediating effect with Information Source Credibility (ISC) and Online WOM (ONW) on the relationship between Offline WOM (OFW) and Intention to Buy (IB). As it is shown in Table 9, Offline WOM (OFW) has a significant indirect impact on Intention to Buy (IB) through Information Source Credibility (ISC) and Online WOM (ONW) (Path coefficient=0.097, t=1.972, p<0.05). As it is shown in Table 6, We also found that Offline WOM (OFW) has no significant impact on Intention to Buy (IB) (Path coefficient=0.023, t=0.201, p>0.05). We can hence conclude that Information Source Credibility (ISC) and Online WOM (ONW) fully mediates the relationship between Offline WOM (OFW) and Intention to Buy (IB). H5 is supported.

Table 10: Summary of the Hypothesis Testing

	Hypothesis	Support
H1	Positive Online WOM will directly influence Online WOM.	Yes
H2	Negative Online WOM will directly influence Online WOM.	No
H3	Online WOM will directly influence Intention to Buy.	Yes
H4	Information Source Credibility mediates the relationship between Offline WOM and Online WOM.	Yes
H5	H5: Offline WOM has indirect effect on Intention to Buy through double mediators of Information Source Credibility and Online WOM.	Yes

Summary of Significant Results of the Model

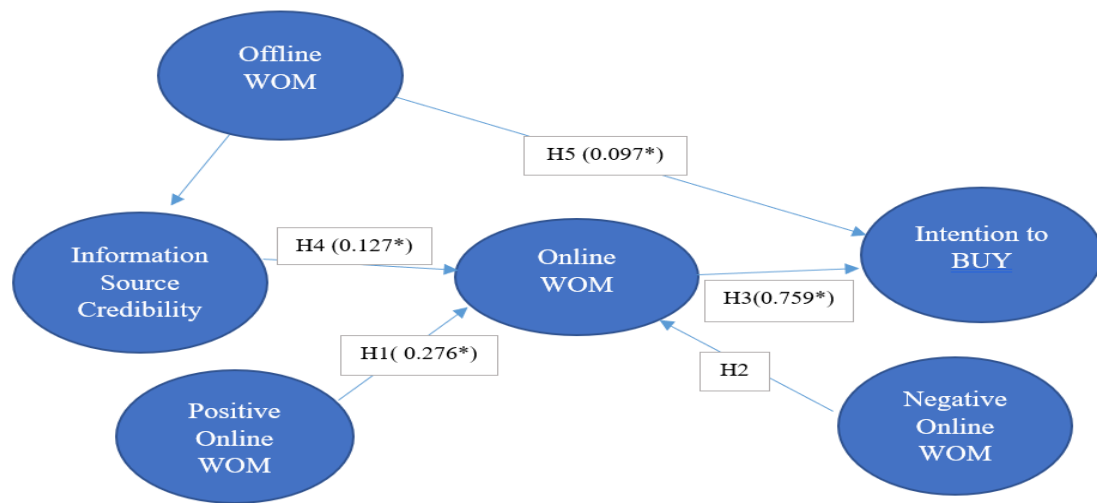


Figure 2 Summary of Significant Results of the Model

Discussion

This research has examined the extent to which online WOM and offline WOM may influence Chinese student customer's buy decision-making. The main contribution of this paper is to show the extent to which both Online WOM and Offline WOM influence Chinese customers' Intention to Buy.

Our research shows that Chinese student customers use online WOM and offline WOM to support their buy decision-making journey when choosing a school overseas. During the buy decision-making process, Online WOM directly influences Chinese students' Intention to Buy. In contrast, Offline WOM indirectly affects the Intention to Buy through double mediators of Information Source Credibility and Online WOM. We also found the Information Source Credibility plays a mediator role between Online and Offline WOM. In other words, Information Source Credibility mediates the relationship between Offline WOM and Online WOM.

Our empirical result of this study supports the direct effect of Online WOM on Intention to Buy. It is consistent with the previous studies that have confirmed the influence of Online WOM on consumers' Intention to Buy (Chan and Ngai, 2011; Huang, 2010; Zhang et al., 2010; Schau et al., 2009; Wu et al., 2014). Besides, Brown et al. (2007) suggested that offline WOM senders are independent of the market, which gives them credibility and, in turn, influences consumers. The independence of offline WOM makes offline WOM a more reliable and

credible information source (Lee and Youn, 2009). Our result confirmed that Information Source Credibility has a mediation effect between Offline WOM and Online WOM, and Online WOM and Offline WOM has a relationship through the mediator of Information Source Credibility. Furthermore, our research indicated that Offline WOM has an indirect effect on Intention to Buy through double mediators of Information Source Credibility and Online WOM. The main contribution of this paper is to show the extent to which both Online WOM and Offline WOM influences Chinese student customers' Intention to Buy. This result refers that customer consider Online WOM on social media as trustworthy when they find it credible. Information Source Credibility has been an essential variable in influencing customers' buy decision-making process (Award and Ragowsky, 2008). This result further supported the research that has proved "the effect of Information Source Credibility on Intention to Buy" (Predeergast et al., 2010).

Theoretical Contributions

The significant theoretical contribution of this study is that it has developed a comprehensive theoretical model to explain and test the extent to which Online and Offline WOM influence Chinese student customers' Buy Decision-makings. Moreover, our research highlights that both Online WOM and Offline WOM have an influence on Chinese customers' Intention to Buy. Further studies could investigate the relationship between Online and Offline WOM and Decision to Buy. Furthermore, this study contributes to the WOM theory since limited studies focus on the extent to which Online and Offline WOM on Chinese student customers' Buy Decision-making process. This research improves our understanding of how Online and Offline WOM interact to influence Chinese student customers' Decision-making process. Besides its theoretical contribution, this research also provides managerial implications and recommendations for the international education industry and companies.

Practical Contributions

This research provides applied knowledge and managerial implications for the international education industry and companies. The key for international education companies to succeed in the Chinese international education market is to understand how Chinese student consumers make buy decision-making. The study results could be a good source of information for marketers of international education companies and institutions who need to be more actively involved in online and offline WOM marketing. This study shows that Chinese students use online WOM in social media to research study opportunities. Positive Online WOM will

directly influences Online WOM. Online WOM directly influence Chinese student customers' Intention to Buy. Therefore, it would be beneficial for International education institutions and companies to include all this information interactively. International education institutions and companies need to apply and develop local Chinese social media platforms to communicate with Chinese student consumers.

In addition, this study gained applied knowledge and recommendations into the international educational institutions and companies, which can use offline WOM to influence Chinese students' buy decision-making process. This research shows that Offline WOM has an indirect influence on Intention to Buy through double mediators of Online WOM and Information Source Credibility. Trust in information sources is an essential characteristic of Chinese consumers. Chinese student consumers rank online and offline recommendations from family and friends as the most important factor in their online option choices. Chinese student consumers like to have as much information as possible to support their buy decisions before buying. Companies could provide a seamless communication experience across online and offline WOM channels to capture the Chinese student consumers' market. International educational companies and institutions should take specific actions to trigger communication among students and parents, such as online and offline WOM communication platforms and offline veterans. Students and parents share sessions where past and prospective students and their parents can share their experiences and advice.

This study explores the role that offline WOM and online WOM play in the Chinese students' buy decision-making process. Highlighting the extent to which offline and online WOM impact buy decision-making process can help employees formulating social media and WOM marketing strategies targeting Chinese student consumers.

Limitation and Further Research Directions

Our study has some limitations. First, this study used a convenience sample to collect data. Participants were University students from Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong, and Changsha in mainland China. Although University students are the main social media users, they may not accurately reflect the entire population. Convenience sampling methods may have limitations in generalizing results from small samples to large groups. Second, since Cronbach α -the Buy Decision (BD) value for the data we collected was less than 0.7 (0.69), it had to be discarded. Our study only investigates the influence of Online WOM and Offline WOM on buy decision-making process for one dependent variable that is Intention to Buy (IB). Future research can

further explore the influence of Online and Offline WOM on Buy Decisions (BD). Another limitation of this study is that the survey was done only for Chinese University student users. Most Chinese Internet users overwhelmingly use local Chinese social media rather than Western social media, such as Facebook. The results may vary depending on the websites used by Chinese and Western social media. Therefore, future research could examine online WOM on Chinese and Western social media sites. Comparing different Chinese and Western social media in terms of WOM could bring new theoretical and practical insights.

Conclusion

This research tested the extent to which offline WOM and online WOM impact Chinese student customers' buy decision-making process when choosing a school overseas. The main contribution of this paper is to show the extent to which both Online WOM and Offline WOM influence Chinese student customers' Intention to Buy. This research improves our understanding of how Online and Offline WOM interact to influence Chinese student customers' decision-making process. Besides its theoretical contribution, our research is expected to provide further insights to understand how Chinese student customers are influenced in their buy decision-making process. Highlighting the extent to which offline and online WOM may impact this decision process can help international education companies and institutions formulating social media and WOM marketing strategies. The study results could be a good source of information for marketers of international education companies and institutions who need to be more actively involved in online and offline WOM marketing targeting Chinese student customers.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A

Variable	Adapted items in English	Original items in English	Reference
Buying Decision (BD1-3)	BD1. “To what extent has the content of the recommendation motivated you to make purchase decision?”	“To what extent has the content of the recommendation motivated you to make purchase decision?”	Luo, C., Luo, X. R., Schatzberg, L., & Sia, C. L. (2013).
	BD2. “How closely did you follow the recommendation to make your purchase decision?”	“How closely did you follow the recommendation to make your purchase decision?”	
	BD3. “To what extent do you agree with the information provided by the recommendation.”	“To what extent do you agree with the information provided by the recommendation?”	
Intention to Buy (IB1-4)	IB1. “After reading online reviews/comments, provided by overseas school students it makes me desire to join this school.”	“After reading online reviews/comments, provided by university students it makes me desire to join this university.”	Bataineh, A. Q. 2015

	IB2. “I intend to seek more reviews/comments provided by school overseas students on social media.”	“I intend to seek more reviews/comments provided by university students on my social networking site.”	
	IB3. “I intend to visit the school overseas discussed in the online reviews/comments.”	“I intend to visit the university discussed in the online reviews/comments.”	
	IB4. “In the future, I will consider the school overseas discussed in the online reviews/comments as my first choice.”	“In the future, I will consider the university discussed in the online reviews/comments as my first choice.”	
Online WOM (ONW1-3).	ONW1. “I feel more comfortable applying school overseas when I have gotten opinions from people, electronically.”	“I feel more comfortable travelling when I have gotten opinions from people, I know electronically.”	Ishida, K., Slevitch, L., & Siamionava, K. (2016).
	ONW2. “Online social media communication with people influences my choice of school overseas.”	“Electronic communication with people I know influences my choice of travel.”	

	ONW3. “When I consider school overseas, I ask people to give me advice via online tools such as social media, etc.”	“When I consider traveling, I ask people I know to give me advice via electronic tools such as e-mails, instant messaging, etc.”	
Positive Online WOM (PONW1-3)	PONW1. Many social media say good things about go to school overseas.	Many users say good things about the App	Kim, H. W., Kankanhalli, A., & Lee, H. L. (2016).
	PONW2. Many social media recommend going to school overseas	Other users recommend the App	
	PONW3. Many social media like going to school overseas	Its users like the App	
Positive Offline WOM (POFW1-3)	POFW1. My offline network (parents or friends or Acquaintance) says good things about going to school overseas	Many users say good things about the App	Kim, H. W., Kankanhalli, A., & Lee, H. L. (2016).
	POFW2. My offline network (parents or friends or Acquaintance) recommends going to school overseas	Other users recommend the App	
	POFW3. My offline network (parents or friends or Acquaintance) like going to school overseas	Its users like the App	

Offline WOM (OFW1-3)	OFW1. “I feel more comfortable choosing school overseas when I have gotten opinions from people, I know face –to-face (my offline network: parents or friends or Acquaintance).”	“I feel more comfortable travelling when I have gotten opinions from people, I know face-to-face.”	Ishida, K., Slevitch, L., & Siamionava, K. (2016).
	OFW2. “When I consider school overseas, I ask people I know offline (my offline network (parents or friends or Acquaintance) for opinions and advice.”	“When I consider travelling, I ask other people face-to-face for opinions and advice.”	
	OFW3. “Face-to-face communication with my offline network (parents or friends or Acquaintance) influences my choice of school overseas.”	“Face-to-face communication with people I know influences my choice of travel.”	
Negative offline WOM (NOFW1-3)	NOFW1. “My offline network (parents or friends or Acquaintance) spread negative word of mouth about the school overseas.”	“I spread negative word of mouth about the Chunghwa Telecom Company.”	Adapted from Wen-Hai, C., Yuan, C. Y., Liu, M. T., &

	NOFE2. My offline network (parents or friends or Acquaintance) denigrated the school overseas	“I denigrated the Chunghwa Telecom Company to my friends.”	Fang, J. F. (2019).
	NOGW3. When I was looking for a school overseas, my offline network (parents or friends or Acquaintance) told me not to go to the school overseas	“When my friends were looking for a similar service, I told them not to buy from the Chunghwa Telecom Company.”	
Negative online WOM (NONW1-3)	NONW1. “Social media spread negative word of mouth about the school overseas.”	“I spread negative word of mouth about the Chunghwa Telecom Company.”	Adapted from Wen-Hai, C., Yuan, C. Y., Liu, M. T., & Fang, J. F. (2019).
	NONW2. Social media denigrated the school overseas.	“I denigrated the Chunghwa Telecom Company to my friends.”	
	NONW3. When I was looking for a school overseas, social media warn me not to go to the school overseas.	“When my friends were looking for a similar service, I told them not to buy from the Chunghwa Telecom Company.”	
Information source credibility offline (ISCOF1-4)	ISCOF1. The recommendation of my offline network (parents or friends or Acquaintance) on school overseas is believable	“This recommendation is believable.”	Luo, C., Luo, X. R., Schatzberg, L., & Sia, C. L. (2013).

	ISCOF2. The recommendation of my offline network (parents or friends or Acquaintance) on school overseas is factual	“This recommendation is factual.”	
	ISCOF 3. The recommendation of my offline network (parents or friends or Acquaintance) on school overseas is credible	“This recommendation is credible.”	
	ISCOF4 The recommendation of my offline network (parents or friends or Acquaintance) on school overseas is trustworthy	“This recommendation is trustworthy.”	
Information source credibility online (ISCON1-4)	ISCON1. The online recommendation on school overseas is believable	“This recommendation is believable.”	Luo, C., Luo, X. R., Schatzberg, L., & Sia, C. L. (2013).
	ISCON2. The recommendation of online on school overseas is factual	“This recommendation is factual.”	
	ISCON3. The recommendation of online on school overseas is credible	“This recommendation is credible.”	

	ISCON4. The online recommendation on school overseas is trustworthy	“This recommendation is trustworthy.”	
Online WOM review credibility (ONWRC1-3)	ONWRC1. “Online review is factual.”	“I think review is factual.”	Cheung, M. Y., Luo, C., Sia, C. L., & Chen, H. (2009).
	ONWRC2. “Online review is accurate.”	“I think review is accurate.”	
	ONWRC3. “Online review is credible”.	‘The review is credible.’	
Strong Ties (ST1-2)	ST1. I contact my offline network (parents or friends or Acquaintance) for advice related to choose of School overseas	I contact this person for advice related to my work.	Sykes, T. A., & Venkatesh, V. (2017).

	<p>ST2. How would you rate your social relationship with the person online who gave advice on school overseas?</p> <p>1): Casual acquaintance 2): Acquaintance 3): Casual friend 4): A friend 5): A good friend</p>	<p>How would you rate your social relationship with...?</p>	
<p>The expertise of the person offline (EPOF1-4)</p>	<p>EPOF1. How knowledgeable is your face-to-face network (parents or friends or Acquaintance) on the topic of choosing school overseas (Not knowledgeable 1 to knowledgeable 5)</p>	<p>“How knowledgeable is the person who wrote this message, on the topic of the message (Not knowledgeable 1 to knowledgeable 5).”</p>	<p>Sussman, S. W., & Siegal, W. S. (2003).</p>
	<p>EPOF2. To what extent is your face-to-face network (parents or friends or Acquaintance) an expert on the topic of choosing school overseas. (Not expert 1 to expert 5)</p>	<p>“To what extent is the person who wrote this message an expert on the message (Not expert 1 to expert 5).”</p>	
	<p>EPOF3. How informed are your offline network (parents or friends or Acquaintance) on the subject matters of choosing school overseas? (Novice 1 to expert 5)</p>	<p>“How informed are you on the subject matters of this issue? (Novice 1 to expert 5).”</p>	

	EPOF4. To what extent are your offline network (parents or friends or Acquaintance) an expert on topic on choosing school overseas? (Not at all 1 to a great extend 5)	“To what extent are you an expert on topic on this email? (Not at all 1 to a great extend 5).”	
How actively WOM is sought online. (HAWSON1-3)	HAWSON1. Before purchasing, I sought advice online from people who have no business interests with the schools overseas.	“Before buying I seek advice from people unconnected to the firm.”	Vázquez-Casielles, R., Suárez-Álvarez, L., & del Río-Lanza, A. B. 2013.
	HAWSON2. Accepting advice from other people online on choice of the school overseas.	“Probability of accepting advice from other people.”	
	HAWSON3. Explicit requirements of opinion of other people online to take decisions on a School overseas	“Explicit requirement of opinion of other people to take decisions.”	
How actively WOM is sought offline. (HAWSOFF1-3)	HAWSOFF1. Before purchasing, I sought advice offline from people who have no business interests with the schools overseas.	“Before buying I seek advice from people unconnected to the firm.”	Vázquez-Casielles, R., Suárez-Álvarez, L., & del Río-Lanza, A. B. 2013.
	HAWSOFF2. Accepting advice from other people offline on choice of the school overseas	“Probability of accepting advice from other people.”	

	HAWSO3. Explicit requirements of opinion of other people offline to take decisions on a School overseas	“Explicit requirement of opinion of other people to take decisions.”	
Online group participation (ONGP1-2)	ONGP1. “How many times in the past week did you read any messages online about school overseas?”	“How many times a week did you use a computer to connect with the Internet from home (during the last month)?”	Cummings, J. N., Sproull, L., & Kiesler, S. B. (2002).
	ONGP2. “How many times in the past week did you send any messages online regards school overseas? (actively interact).”	“How many times in the past week did you read any messages from Beyond Hearing?”	
SM used (the list of SM used) (SMU1)	SMU1 “What social media platform do you use to obtain information? (Multiple choice) A: WeChat; B: Weibo; C: QQ; D: Baidu; E: Facebook; F: Twitter; G: Google; H: Others_____ (please write down).”	“What social media platform do you use to obtain information? (Multiple choice) A: WeChat; B: Weibo; C: QQ; D: Baidu; E: Facebook; F: Twitter; G: Google; H: Others_____ (please write down).”	Self-design
	FSMU1. “How often do you use social media? Everyday; 4 – 5 days per week; Once or twice a week;	“How often do you use social media? Everyday; 4 – 5 days per week; Once or twice a week;	Erkan, I., & Evans, C. (2016).

	Very rare.”	Very rare.”	
Frequency of online review use (FONRU1)	FONRU1. “How often do you read online customer reviews before making the purchase? Always; Frequently; Sometimes; Never.”	“How often do you read online customer reviews before making the purchase? Always; Frequently; Sometimes; Never.”	Erkan, I., & Evans, C. (2016).
Age	How old are you?	18-25 26-35 36-45 46-55 >55	Ma, M., & Agarwal, R. (2007).
Gender	What is your gender? Male or Female	Male or Female	Ma, M., & Agarwal, R. (2007).
Country	Which province are you from in China?	Which province are you from in China?	Self-design

CHAPTER 4: GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONTRIBUTIONS

This research provides valuable practical insights into three research questions central to the current discussion of ‘How and Why Chinese Student Consumers Use Social Media in Their Study Abroad Decision-Making Process?’ ‘The Importance of Offline WOM and Its Interaction Relationship with Online WOM on Buy Decision-making.’ and ‘The Extent to Which Offline WOM and Online WOM Influence Chinese Consumers' Buy Decision-making Process.’ The main contributions and managerial recommendations of this research are presented as following.

Overall Contributions

This research investigates the impact of social media, online and offline WOM on the buy decision-making process of Chinese student consumers. Our research shows that online WOM in social media influences the Chinese student customers’ information search and option evaluation stage. This finding is consistent with the previous studies (Yang, 2017; Sotiriadis and Van Zyl, 2013; Daugherty and Hoffman, 2014), which suggests online WOM information that mainly affects consumers' buy decision-making process (pre-purchase and post-purchase behavior). However, our study found that offline WOM from parents or friends, or acquaintances also play a crucial role in Chinese students' final decision-making. Offline WOM has not been entirely replaced by online WOM in the buy decision-making process of Chinese student consumers and plays a decisive role in the final consumption decision. Besides, our research examined the extent to which both online WOM and offline WOM have influences on Chinese customers’ buy decision-making process. The main contribution of this research is to show the extent to which both online WOM and offline WOM influences Chinese student customers’ buy decision-making process.

Moreover, our research results show that information source credibility positively impacts Chinese students’ buy decision-making. More specifically, this study shows that offline WOM has an indirect effect on the intention to buy through double mediators of information source credibility and online WOM. This finding fills a gap in previous research that suggests “research has identified a gap in the literature on the credibility of online WOM in situations involving multiple communicators and recipients and how this ultimately affects the end consumers” (Huete-Alcocer, 2017).

Our study has some limitations. Firstly, Chapter one and two are exploratory studies that conducted in-depth interviews with 10 Chinese and 25 Chinese students respectively from Guangdong province, mainland China. The interview sample came from a single channel. Subsequent studies could expand the sample of students from different regions of the Greater China area interviewed to understand better the impact of social media, offline WOM and online WOM on Chinese student customers' buy decision-making process. Secondly, Chapter three of this study is a quantitative research that used a convenience sample to collect data. Participants were University students from Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong, and Changsha in mainland China. Although University students are the main social media users, they may not accurately reflect the entire population. Convenience sampling methods may have limitations in generalizing results from small samples to large groups. Moreover, In Chapter Three, the Cronbach α -the Buy Decision (BD) value for the data we collected was less than 0.7 (0.69), which had to be discarded. We only investigated the influence of online and offline WOM on buy decision-making for one dependent variable: Intention to Buy (IB). Another limitation of this study is that the survey was done for Chinese University users. Most Chinese Internet users overwhelmingly use local Chinese social media rather than Western social media. The results may vary depending on the websites used by Chinese and Western social media. Therefore, future research could examine online WOM on Chinese and Western social media sites. Comparing different Chinese and Western social media in terms of WOM could bring new theoretical and practical insights.

Overall Managerial Recommendations

The study provides applied knowledge and managerial recommendations for international educational institutions and companies.

Firstly, International education institutions and companies that want to succeed in the Chinese market should understand the importance of social media plays in the Chinese students' buy decision-making process and what social media apps Chinese student consumers use to get information to support their buy decisions. Our study shows that Chinese students use social media to research study opportunities and expect to find online WOM in social media. Therefore, it would be beneficial for international institutions and companies to include all this information interactively. Interactive channels such as WeChat and Weibo can be used as a platform for future communication between students and international education institutions and companies. Effectively address Chinese students' questions and provide them with the

information they need in real-time. In addition, this study gained applied knowledge and recommendations into the international education institutions and companies, which can use Chinese social media, such as WeChat and Weibo, to influence Chinese student customers' buy decision-making process.

Secondly, the key for international education institutions and companies to succeed in the Chinese market is to understand the important role of offline WOM and its interaction with online WOM in the Chinese student consumers' buy decision-making process. Indeed, as we previously explained, Chinese culture is different because parents and friends play an important role in Chinese student customers' final decision-making, especially in education. In Chinese culture, young people are taught to respect their elders and follow their advice. Chinese parents and offline WOM from strong ties have strong control and influence over students' behaviours and buy decision-makings. This research provides inputs for those who target Chinese student customers about the importance of offline WOM. International educational institutions and companies should take specific actions to trigger communication among students, such as online WOM communication platforms and offline veteran student sharing sessions where past and prospective students can share their experiences and advice.

Third, the key for international education companies to succeed in the Chinese market is to understand the extent to which both online and offline WOM influence Chinese student consumers' buy decision-making process. The study results could be a good source of information for marketers of international education companies and institutions who need to be more actively involved in online and offline WOM marketing. International education providers could include both online and offline WOM information interactively. For example, WeChat and Weibo are the most influential Chinese local social media platforms in China. Interactive Chinese home-grow social media, WeChat, and Weibo can communicate between prospective Chinese students and international education institutions and companies. International education institutions and companies could use Chinese Weibo and WeChat to research Chinese parents and students. In addition, this study gained applied knowledge into the international educational institutions and companies, which can use offline WOM to influence Chinese students' buy decision-making process. This research shows that offline WOM has an indirect influence on the intention to buy through double mediators of online WOM and Information source credibility. Trust in information sources is an important characteristic of Chinese consumers. Chinese student consumers rank offline WOM from family and friends as the most critical factor in their option choices. Chinese student consumers like to have as much

information as possible to support their buy decisions before buying. International education institutions and companies should provide a seamless communication experience across online and offline WOM channels to capture the Chinese student consumers' market. For example, International education institutions and companies can use Weibo to create online marketing campaigns based on current popular topics to quickly reach a wide range of student customers and quickly increase their new brand or service awareness. Businesses can then use semi-private WeChat groups of 50 to 100 people to pull in friends and friends of friends to showcase services, communicate with customers, and answer their questions about University and life abroad. After students and their parents have established their trust in international education companies through online social media such as WeChat and Weibo, international education companies and institutions can organize offline sharing meetings and seminars to allow students and parents who communicated online to participate in offline communication. Make full use of online and offline WOM advantages to influence the buy decision-making of Chinese student consumers.

Conclusion

This research proposed three papers, each paper to answer one research question. Paper one conducted an in-depth interview with 10 Chinese University students in Guangdong, mainland China. This paper focused on the influence of social media on Chinese student customers' buy decision-making, investigated the relationship between Chinese students' social media usage and their buy decision-making process, and highlighted the importance of social media in the Chinese students' buy decision-making process. The secondary research question of paper one is to find out what social media Chinese students use to search for online WOM before purchase. The research obtained the following main results from paper one: Chinese students use social media to find online WOM about overseas school's reputations and read online WOM from former students. WeChat and Weibo are the main social media they used. Online WOM influences the information search and option evaluation stage and affects their intention to buy.

Paper two interviewed 25 students by carried WeChat semi-interviews with current University Chinese Mainland students in Guangdong province. Paper two investigated the importance of offline WOM and its interaction relationship with online WOM on the buy decision-making process. Paper two yielded the following important findings: Chinese students mainly rely on offline WOM (parents and friends) in the buy decision-making process, which is confirmed through online WOM. Trust in information sources positively impacts Chinese students' buy decision-making process. Paper two highlight the importance of offline WOM in influencing Chinese students' buy decision-making.

Paper three conducted the quantitative study. Data were collected from 101 University students in China from 2 January 2021 to 25 January 2021. The questionnaire was conducted with University students in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong and Changsha, mainland China where they can access social media in their region. Paper three proposed a conceptual model to test the extent to which online WOM and offline WOM influence Chinese student customers' buy decision-making. The main contributions of this paper show the extent to which both online WOM and offline WOM have an influence on Chinese student customers' buy decision-making process. The study results provide applied knowledge for marketers of international education companies and institutions who need to be more actively involved in digital online and offline WOM marketing.

This research improves understanding of how online WOM in social media and offline WOM interact to influence Chinese student customers' buy decision-making process. This study shed

light on the extent to which both online WOM and offline WOM affect Chinese student customers' buy decision-making process. Moreover, this research provides applied knowledge and managerial recommendations for international education companies and institutions to develop effective social media and WOM marketing strategies targeting Chinese student consumers.

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