INFORMAL LEADERS, INTERPERSONAL INFLUENCE, AND WORD-OF-MOUTH COMMUNICATION: UNDERSTANDING MASTER OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION APPLICANTS' ENROLLMENT DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

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ASHLAND UNIVERSITY, 2021

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Abstract

The enrollment decision-making process of a master of business administration (MBA) applicant contains multiple factors. Social influences from group memberships, marketing ads, and socioeconomic status carry varying amount of influence on the individual's choice for an MBA program. It is unknown what impact informal leaders, interpersonal influence, and word-of-mouth communication, both in person and electronic, have on a prospective MBA applicant's enrollment decision-making process. This study examines the ways word-of-mouth marketing, marketing ads/messages, and applicants' socioeconomic status influence their enrollment decision. This qualitative case study investigated the individual's social identity, social networks, and marketing tactics to determine the potential interpersonal influence found therein that affects the enrollment decision-making process. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and observations. The findings reveal that the impact of those in social and professional networks as well as the individual's personal development goals were the most influential, followed by the marketing ads and online reviews.

Keywords: word-of-mouth, social identity, social capital, social groups, interpersonal influence, enrollment-decision making process

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wonderful wife, Lindsey, who has been a constant source of support and encouragement during the many challenges of work, school, and life. I am truly thankful for your love and support. This work is also dedicated to my parents, Ronald and Kathy, who have always loved me unconditionally and whose examples have taught me to work hard for the things I aspire to achieve. Finally, to my sons Miles and Chandler, my family, friends, and co-workers who have also provided support and motivation, thank you for always being there for me.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure **Page**

LIST OF TABLES

Table **Page**

1

CHAPTER I

Introduction

Marketing professionals in higher education spend a considerable amount of time and effort developing targeted marketing campaigns to increase enrollment. These campaigns that have this goal can have influence on the student's decision. Often overlooked is the power of word-of-mouth (WOM) referrals which can also be considered as a targeted marketing campaign. These referrals can be made in-person or electronically, and are extremely influential on a prospective Master of Business Administration (MBA) student's enrollment decision-making process (Bruce & Edgington, 2008; Winn et al., 2014). Understanding the impact referrals and influencers have on prospective students affords MBA program administrators the opportunity to capitalize on enrollment.

Influencers and referrals can be found within social groups. Influencers within social groups can occur through WOM communication and electronic WOM (eWOM) communication. These influencers and referrals can provide vast amounts of information about the program and their experience to prospective MBA applicants.

An MBA program prepares students who have an interest in business and management to be more marketable for quality professional positions. MBA programs frequently attract students who are highly competitive, achievement-oriented, and are focused on the business world (Bruce & Edgington, 2008; Elliot & Soo, 2016). These programs generate graduates who are then able to command a higher salary on average in comparison to someone without an MBA degree. In addition to being financially lucrative to students, MBA programs are also significant revenue generators for institutions of higher learning (Blackburn, 2011). MBA programs are extremely competitive, both for applicants and for universities.

MBA programs operate in an extremely competitive environment. Due to this, targeted MBA marketing messages to prospective students containing program rankings, career placement statistics, and financial gain nearly double odds of a prospective student enrolling in an MBA program (Mullen, Goyette, & Soares, 2003). These messages can be delivered in-person or electronically, as long as the source(s) are trustworthy. Gaining the perspectives of trustworthy sources can yield the most relevant opinions, influencing the enrollment decision of a prospective MBA student.

Trust is the foundation of most social relationships. Informal leaders and interpersonal influence can be found within these relationships. Social relationships and WOM communication can influence an MBA applicant’s enrollment decision-making process and while WOM referrals are impactful, they are the most challenging to track and gather data from.

Questions arise regarding these types of referrals such as, but not limited to: How did those who served as the referral come to understand the program? Were they influenced by marketing messages, or, was it because of their familiarity with the program? Were they referred, and if so, by whom? It would be beneficial for MBA program administrators to maintain engagement and relationships with current MBA students and alumni to understand more fully the depth of social ties and the impact they have on a prospective student’s enrollment decision-making process. Understanding these relationships can aid in providing answers to these questions.

Problem Statement

Students interested in earning an MBA degree have a multitude of options: online programs, evening programs, weekend programs, and accelerated programs. The current global and highly competitive environment among MBA programs is contributing to the development of unique marketing and effective recruiting strategies with a greater focus on the student (Giner, 2016; Winn, Leach, Erwin, & Benedict, 2014). As such, MBA programs are consistently evaluating marketing tactics to differentiate themselves in an effort to attract the most talented and qualified students. One way an MBA program can differentiate their marketing strategy from the competition is to gain an understanding of the student enrollment decision-making process by treating studying the prospective student as a consumer.

To study the prospective student as a consumer, it is necessary to look to the field of consumer behavior. “The field of consumer behavior explores why people make certain purchasing decisions, what products and services they buy, where they buy them, how they use them, the frequency with which they purchase them, and the consumer decision process in action” (Aslam, Jadoon, Zaman, & Gondal, 2011, p. 498). There is an abundant amount of research regarding the consumer decision-making process in business industries, however, this research is not as plentiful in the higher education industry, especially when understanding how students choose an MBA program and what influences lead them to that decision. As WOM communication can have an impact on applicants’ consumer behavior when making an enrollment decision, it is important to include it in research.

WOM communication is an organic marketing strategy and contains three challenges in tracking outcomes. According to Aslam et al. (2011), these challenges are "i) The frequency and types of word-of-mouth behavior, ii) The effect of word-of-mouth behavior on product evaluation and iii) The impact of word-of-mouth information on social relationships" (p. 499). It is not known the influence social relationships and WOM communication have on an MBA applicant's enrollment decision-making process.

Understanding how students choose an MBA program and the influence WOM communication has on prospective applicants is important for MBA program's sustainability and growth. Applying marketing theories, concepts, and practices in MBA program recruitment and understanding the influence marketing tactics and social relationships have on the student's decision-making process are necessary for MBA programs to remain viable and competitive (McKnight, Paugh, Fry, & Song, 2019). Furthermore, gaining this understanding can help prospective students become better consumers "by informing them of the way in which they and others go about their consumption activities" (Aslam et al., 2011, p. 497). By understanding the factor that influence prospective students to enroll in an MBA program, students can become more informed. This is one of the benefits provided by this study.

Theoretical Framework

To properly frame this study, it was important to examine the contributions made by scholars that explore social identity, social capital, and relationship marketing theories. Social identity involves the examination of an individual's belonging within social memberships while social capital reviews the resources accessible within these social memberships. Additionally, relationship marketing theory was used to properly frame this study as this theory is based on the principles of trust, mutual value creation, and commitment (Yazdanpanah & Ehsani, 2020). Of these three principles, commitment emphasizes the long-term outlook of the relationship by investing in opportunities that are mutually beneficial to all parties with its roots in social identity theory (Grewal & Levy, 2016; Rather, 2019). The overlap among social identity, social capital, and relationship marketing provided a theoretical framework of potential influential factors involved in an enrollment decision through the interpersonal interactions experienced within social groups.

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory examines an individual's sense of belonging according to their social membership(s). Within social identity theory, a social identity is defined as one's awareness that he or she belongs to a social category or group (Grossman & Helpman, 2021; Hogg & Abrams, 1982). A social group is a collection of people holding a common social identification that view themselves as members of the same social category (Stets & Burke, 2000). This social grouping creates a sense of belonging and contains capital providing opportunities to access resources.

Social Capital Theory

Two theorists who made significant contributions to social capital theory are Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman (Rogošić & Baranović, 2016). Bourdieu defined social capital as the reliance on members of a social group for access to resources, assets, and capital (Vorhaus, 2014). Bourdieu further explained that "social capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119). The resources contained within the group may be economic or cultural.

James Coleman's contributions to social capital theory also looked at resources in social relations. For Coleman, social capital is primarily found within the quality of relationships within one's family and the community (Rogošić & Baranović, 2016). The focus is on the development of an individual utilizing the resources within one's close relationships to help achieve personal goals (Rogošić & Baranović, 2016). The process of achieving personal goals involves analyzing the perceived value in decision-making.

The overlap among these theories is that an individual acquires a sense of belonging within his or her social memberships. These social memberships contain access to resources and capital which contribute to the development of the individual. An additional aspect of social memberships contributing to the development of an individual is establishing and sustaining relationships.

Relationship Marketing

Relationship marketing theory suggests that through value creation, the strength of relationships will be enhanced resulting in the likelihood of improving customer retention. This theory can be applied when examining social groups as Gumersson (2008) defined relationship marketing as interactions that occur within network relationships. The interactions that occur within network relationships center on the principles of trust, mutual value creation, and commitment. These principles generate loyalty within social groups and the relationships therein.

A social group contains certain norms, goals, and beliefs which creates an environment for informal leadership and interpersonal influence to thrive. When informal leaders are open, honest, fair, and consistent with their decisions and actions, the formation of trust among others within the group can be experienced (Yilmaz, 2019). With trust experienced, supporting those within the group with psychological and non-psychological means can influence individuals, creating value. Frequent interactions with members in social groups reinforce trust and contribute to both influence and commitment.

Belonging to a social group can provide an opportunity to develop unique relationships. Through the development of these relationships, access to resources can be experienced. These resources and relationships can contribute to one's personal and professional development within social interactions and social group settings, especially when opinions and suggestions are being sought after for advice regarding the investigation of a significant purchase for one's personal and professional development.

Deciding on whether or not to enroll in an MBA program is a significant purchase decision. The opinions and advice of those within a social group who have experiences and who hold credentials that one is interested in earning, such as an MBA degree, can be very influential. Contained within social groups are informal leaders yielding opportunities to develop interpersonal relationships and acquire access to diverse resources, contributing to the prospective applicant's MBA enrollment decision.

Purpose Statement

The topic of this study was to examine informal leaders' interpersonal influence and word-of-mouth communication impacts a master of business administration applicant's enrollment decision-making process. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the different influencers found in social groups and how those levels impact an MBA student's decision to apply at an institution of higher learning. Influencers within social groups can occur through interpersonal WOM communication and eWOM communication. Discovering the impact and influence of social networks and WOM communication on a prospective student's application decision-making process may benefit future students' understanding of these factors as well as benefit higher educational institutions. The strength of social ties and social relationships will be examined to determine their impact on a student's decision to apply for admission in an MBA program. This study took place between June of 2021 and August of 2021.

Method Type and Research Questions

A qualitative analysis was conducted to understand the interpersonal influence of informal leaders and their impact on an MBA applicant's decision to apply for admission. Given the complex nature of the factors involved that influence a student's decision-making process to apply, a phenomenological approach was used in this study. The phenomenological approach involved learning how people experience things differently from one another (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Prospective MBA applicants have different needs and reasons for pursuing an MBA program and these differences provided a unique opportunity to understand the influential factors involved in the applicant's enrollment decision-making process. To understand and acquire this information, demographic questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups were administered.

The demographic questionnaire was designed to establish the characteristics of the participants. Specifically, the participants' gender, age range, enrollment status, and ethnicity were solicited to ensure a rich and diverse study for analysis. Upon the receipt of this data, semi-structured interviews were arranged.

Semi-structured interviews were used to gain an understanding of the factors that influenced the applicant's enrollment decision-making process. Willis (2007) stated that what is important for good research is accounting for what the world means for those being studied in the constructivist paradigm (p. 6). The information gained from these semi-structured interviews were then used to create a focus group.

The focus group was organized based on the depth of the information secured from the semi-structured interviews. The demographically diverse group of selected students provided an opportunity to openly discuss the influential aspects that contributed to their application and/or enrollment decision. As Guba and Lincoln (1994) mentioned the researcher is the "orchestrator and facilitator of the inquiry process" as the values of the researcher and subjects are taken into consideration in constructivism (p. 114). The data gathered from the semi-structured interviews and focus groups were analyzed using themes and codes.

Accurately capturing the data from the participants was paramount to understanding the influencing factors on the MBA applicant's enrollment decision-making process. Organizing the data into codes and themes were used in this study to gain this understanding. The information gathered centered around the following research questions:

R1: In what ways did applicants perceive the influence of word-of-mouth marketing on their decision-making process on the graduate business enrollment decision?

a) In what ways did graduate business applicants perceive the influence of trust on their decision to enroll?

b) In what ways did graduate business applicants perceive the strength of an influencer's relationship on their decision to enroll?

R2: In what ways did graduate business applicants perceive the influence of marketing advertisements and messages on their enrollment decision?

a) In what ways did graduate business applicants perceive the influence of online reviews (eWOM) on their decision to enroll?

R3: In what ways did graduate business applicants perceive that their socioeconomic status influenced their enrollment decision?

Significance and Relevance

Deciding to enroll in an MBA program is an example of a significant purchase. When considering an expensive purchase, such as graduate education, relying on current and previous consumers for their opinions and guidance can impact the purchase decision (Patti & Chen, 2009). WOM can be an important source of information for students in such a complex and competitive environment such as graduate education (Herold et al., 2017). Even though WOM is recognized as a major source of information, little is known about how students make use of the information once it is received (Martin, 2014; Martin & Lueg, 2013, Yang et al., 2012). Therefore, it was important to understand the ways in which WOM information is processed within social groups to truly capitalize on the benefits of this form of interpersonal communication used by applicants when selecting an institution of higher learning.

Selecting an institution of higher learning is a very demanding process that requires many factors to be taken into consideration. Information transmitted via WOM can be very influential on an MBA student's enrollment decision. Given the costs of higher education, applicants tend to seek out information from their social network(s) which can impact their enrollment decision. There are many influencers within one's social network and the strength of these relationships lead this channel to being considered as a trustworthy and influential resource.

The first-hand experience of others can be very influential. "WOM senders provide professional, knowledgeable, insightful suggestions or comments mainly related to critical issues such as university and teaching quality, program structure, faculty operation, academic performance, learning style, teaching approaches, and career planning" (Patti & Chen, 2009, p. 373). Additionally, they can communicate customer satisfaction as the relationship between WOM communication and customer satisfaction may be positive, neutral, or negative, influencing the receiver's attitude and behavior (Anderson, 1998).

Gaining an understanding of how an MBA applicant arrives at an enrollment decision through an examination of WOM communication can be beneficial as it can lead to an understanding of an MBA applicant's purchase process. An MBA applicant's purchase process is very similar to a traditional consumer's purchase decision-making process. As Aslam et al. (2011) mentioned "the decision-making process itself is presented as a logical flow of activities, working from problem recognition to purchase to post-purchase evaluation" (p. 499). Learning how an MBA applicant moves through this process can provide higher education marketers and MBA program administrators with insight related to customer satisfaction and the strength of an applicant's social network.

Delimitations

The study included a small, private, faith-based university located in the Midwest region of the United States with an MBA enrollment size of less than 500 students. The criteria for participant selection included those students who self-identified on their application for admission, "Word-of-Mouth," or, "Website Referral," or, "Other" to the supplemental question on how they came to hear about the MBA program. The sample size contained 11 participants who were referred to the MBA program. The participants included those who applied for admission, those who were admitted, and those who were admitted and enrolled for the spring 2021 and summer 2021 semesters. The timing of the study occurred from June 2021 through August 2021.

Organization of the Study

The remainder of this study will be organized into four chapters, a listing of references, and appendices. Chapter II will provide a review of the related literature that formed the theoretical framework as well as situational factors of WOM communication and the consumer behavior process. Chapter III will delineate the research design and methodology of the study as well as review the instruments used to gather the data, the procedures followed, and determination of the sample size selected for the study. An analysis of the data and a discussion of the findings will be presented in Chapter IV. Chapter V will contain the discussion, implications, suggestions for future research, and conclusions. The study will conclude with a listing of references and appendices. The appendices will contain the demographic questionnaire and interview guides used in the semi-structured interviews and the focus group.

Definition of Terms

1. *Enrollment Decision-Making Process* –The decision-making process undertaken by an individual choosing to enroll in an institution of higher learning.
2. *eWOM* – An electronic form of word-of-mouth (WOM) communication. Examples include text messages, email, websites, webpages, blogs, and online reviews.
3. *Graduate Education* – A level of education at an institution of higher learning resembling a master's program.
4. *Influence* – A form of persuasive opinion from an individual; can be positive, negative, or neutral.
5. *Institution of Higher Learning* – An academic institution containing an associate, baccalaureate, master's, and/or doctoral program; college or university.
6. *Prospective Student* – An individual considering an academic program at an institution of higher learning.
7. *Referral* – The act of mentioning a product or service to someone for further investigation.
8. *Word-of-Mouth (WOM)* – An interpersonal interaction promoting a product or service taking place online or in-person.

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

This chapter presents the theoretical literature on social identity, social capital, and relationship marketing that served as the foundation for the study. The chapter begins with a historical review of the conceptual research that examined the development of social identity theory and social capital theory from their earliest forms in the 1970s through the present. The next section will explore relationship marketing theory and examine the core principles of trust, mutual value creation, and commitment. Additionally, this chapter examines literature regarding word-of-mouth communication, both in-person and electronic, and aspects of customer satisfaction that are relevant to higher education. Finally, the chapter will examine the decision process of MBA applicants through the lens of the consumer decision process, and the implications of social identity, social capital, and relationship marketing theory on this process, and conclude with a developmental perspective of the MBA applicant's enrollment decision-making process.

The pandemic has contributed to the oversaturation of MBA programs operating in the online environment. Given the additional institutions who are now competing in the online environment, it is more apparent that MBA programs must differentiate themselves in order to successfully recruit prospective students (Matarranz & García-Madariaga, 2021). Understanding the enrollment decision-making process of MBA applicants can assist with this situation.

This literature review contains secondary sources of peer-reviewed journal articles, books, chapter summaries, dissertations, white papers, and conference proceedings. The primary online database used was “Academic Search Complete.” Google Scholar was also utilized to search for information. Over 300 sources, dating from 1947 to present, were identified with relevant material. Older sources were included in the literature set to provide the reader with a perspective of the historical aspect of the topic. A subset of the sources retrieved are listed in the references section of this dissertation as these were the most relevant sources for this study and provide the foundation of the literature review.

This review revealed five themes: (a) trust and influence, (b) postgraduate student research, (c) customer satisfaction and WOM, (d) situational factors, and (e) the consumer consumption process. Key phrases used to identify articles were social identity, social capital, relationship marketing, informal leaders, influence, trust, loyalty, WOM communication, consumer decision process, MBA program selection, and enrollment decision process. Upon locating the articles, the skimming of abstracts, introductions, and conclusions, as well as the reviewing of the bibliographies, played a crucial role in narrowing the selection.

Theoretical Framework

The theories that served as the foundation for this study were social identity theory, social capital theory, and relationship marketing theory. The key overlap among these theories is the development of an individual through relationships. Furthermore, examining these theories is relevant due to the characteristics of an individual’s belonging within social memberships, the resources available in a social network that can serve as influential factors in a prospective MBA applicant’s enrollment decision, and the core tenets of establishing and sustaining relationships.

Relationships and interactions between stakeholders and organizations are one outcome produced by marketing tactics, including WOM referrals. By assessing the customers' needs and wants, a business creates and delivers messages that attract customers to inquire about a product or service. This attraction transpires into interactions and, ultimately, relationship building through the purchase process and post-purchase process. The relationships built through the post-purchase process generate customer loyalty and retention as the customer feels a sense of belonging to the organization. This sense of belonging offers the opportunity for WOM referrals to occur.

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory focuses on an individual's sense of belonging to a social category or group (Grossman & Helpman, 2021; Hogg & Abrams, 1982). A social group is a collection of individuals holding a common identification or viewing themselves as belonging to a specific social category. Examples of a social group are a family, professional occupation, and members of a social class. Prior to establishing a sense of belonging to a group, an individual has his or her own personal identity.

Depending on the situation, an individual will activate in oneself their individual identity or their social identity. "The level of identity that is activated depends on factors in the situation, such as social comparison or normative fit, which make a group identity operative and override the personal identity" (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 228). Different situations and different identities contribute to changes in self-categorization, activating different hierarchical levels of inclusiveness.

There are three levels of hierarchical inclusiveness. They are superordinate, intermediate, and subordinate (Stets & Burke, 2000). An example of an individual at the superordinate level would be the entry point. An individual has identified a social group in which they would like to become a member. To move to the intermediate level, an individual would have to advance to actually becoming a member of the social group. The subordinate level would then have the individual self-identifying as the leader of that particular social group, producing different situations or saliency.

Salience is when a situation changes and becomes more noticeable. “In social identity theory, salience pertains to the situational activation of an identity at a particular level” (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 231). Within social identity theory, salience is more focused on the psychological significance of a group membership, versus attention-grabbing properties (Oakes, 1987). This salience activates an identity relative to a situation.

A salient social identity becomes activated based upon the situation and influence of an individual’s membership with the group. Oakes (1987) discussed that salience, in social identity theory, is the outcome of accessibility and fit. Accessibility is the psychological dimension and fit is the situation. The individual has a certain set of characteristics and can offer significant contributions, representing accessibility. Therefore, a particular identity becomes activated once the accessibility of an individual and the social fit are combined. This combination produces group identifications.

Social groups contain members who identify with one another based on similarities and commonalities. Stets and Burke (2000) stated that “people are tied organically to their groups through social identities; they are tied mechanically through their role identities within groups” (p. 228). Social identities and role identities are always in concert with one another and have significant influence on the group’s behavior (Stets & Burke, 2000). These identities are what help create an affiliation with what are labeled out-groups and in-groups.

Much of social identity theory attempts to explain the concept of intergroup relations. It is through the discovery of these intergroup relations that people either view themselves as belonging to a particular social group or not. Out-groups are those social groups containing individuals that one has a challenging time relating to. An out-group's norms, values, members, or collection thereof can make it challenging for one to relate to and limit one's interest in joining. Compared to the challenges of joining an out-group, people often are more eager to join an in-group.

In-groups are those social groups whom an individual can associate with. These groups are a recognized collection of individuals who share commonalities similar to an individual's identity. The individual develops a sense of comfort and identification to that particular social group, working towards a shared purpose.

Individuals who identify with a group and have a shared purpose represent the group as a whole. This representation is displayed, despite individual attachments within a social group (Hogg & Hardie, 1992). Social identity theorists have discovered that individuals identifying with a particular social group develop a strong attraction and commitment to the group even when the group's social status is not strong (Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje, 1997; Hogg & Hardie, 1992). Once a group's identity is established, this commitment serves as a motivational and influential mechanism distinguishing the individual from others within the group and enhancing the individual's self-evaluation as a group member (Brewer, 1991; Simon, Pantaleo, & Mummendey, 1995; Turner et al., 1987). This process influences one's self-esteem.

One's self-esteem contains a leadership component within a group. "Specifically, one's self-esteem is enhanced by evaluating the in-group and the out-group on dimensions that lead the in-group to be judged positively and the out-group to be judged negatively" (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225). The judgement imposed upon in-groups and out-groups is what is called social comparison, which is one important process in social identity formation. The other process important in social identity formation is self-categorization.

People establish their own identity prior to entering into society. In social identity theory, personal identity is the lowest level of self-categorization (Brewer 1991; Hogg & Abrams 1982). This individual identity contains self-goals and interests that are separate from other individuals, which explains the rationale behind it being placed at the lowest level.

Upon entering society, an individual adapts his or her individual identity based on influences from society. These societal influences can come from all sorts of motivating causes, such as political or environmental, and contribute to an individual joining a social group. Over time, an individual will belong to multiple social groups, each with their own unique influences and contributions to both the individual and society as a whole. This sense of belonging to different social groups creates an individual's social identity and establishes the remainder of one's self-categorization, creating a unique self-concept of the individual (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Self-categorization in social identity theory is very fluid as there are many categories an individual can represent. An individual can label themselves in certain ways relative to other social categories or classifications (Stets & Burke, 2000). This fluidity and labeling of this process is called self-categorization in social identity theory (Turner et al., 1987). These multiple roles and categories within the social group fosters depersonalization.

Depersonalization is an important process in the activation of social identity. This process involves an individual viewing oneself as an embodiment of the group's shared norms and values in the specific social category and contributes their own unique norms and values to better the group (Hogg Terry, & White, 1995; Turner et al., 1987). Once depersonalization is realized, a group's social identity is activated. Their contributions fuel their membership in the group.

An individual's membership in a social group creates a sense of belonging as others within the group realize and value the contributions of the individual and each other. This recognition creates a sense of self-worth. As Stets and Burke (2000) stated, "self-worth through group membership may involve acting so as to promote acceptance through appropriate behavioral enactments; such behavior has implications for fulfilling the need to feel competent" (p. 233). The processes involved with social comparisons, self-categorization, and depersonalization contribute to the activation of social identity. This social identity and social group membership provide the opportunity to develop relationships and access the group's assets.

Social Capital Theory

Group membership activates the opportunity for social relationships within the social group. The forming of these relationships provide access to members' assets, capital, networks, and help with social mobility and reproduction. Group memberships and the relationships developed therein form the basis of social capital theory.

The concept of social capital is to explain the influence of social position on the development of human capital, measured by level of education. Schuller, Baron, and Field (2000) broadly defined social capital as “social networks, the reciprocities that arise from them, and the value of these for achieving mutual goals” (p. 1). Although social capital theory contributions are related to explaining economic and social phenomena, there are additional interpretations that can be made (Baron et al., 2000; Vorhaus, 2014; Woolcock, 1998). The theory supports the concept that educational achievements of individuals are related to various forms of capital that one possesses or does not, such as social, economic, and cultural capital.

Social capital theory interprets capital as assets and resources found within social relations. Social relations can take the forms of individuals, family, and networks outside the family. Social capital theorists have identified three sources of functionality of social capital: social control, family support, and the benefits experienced from networks outside of the family (Dika & Singh, 2002; Portes, 1998; Vorhaus, 2014). The material and immaterial assets nested within social capital can be contested especially by those in authority such as educators and higher education administrators (Vorhaus, 2014). The contributions of Coleman and Bourdieu served as the theoretical foundation for social capital related to this study.

Coleman’s take on social capital theory views capital as the resources contained in social relations and focuses on the whole development of an individual. The social relations Coleman emphasizes are those within the family and networks outside the family. These social relations create a social structure and the capital within this structure is defined by its function (Coleman, 1988). Additionally, Coleman (1990) stated that “the set of resources that inhere in family relations and in community social organization are useful for the cognitive or social development" (p. 300). This development is dependent on the quality of the relationships within the social relations.

Social capital hinges on the relationships found within the community and family. What the individual contributes to the relationships strengthens the quality of the relationships which in turn creates social structure. This structure can be found in families as well as organizations, such as higher educational institutions. As Vorhaus (2014) has stated:

> Followers of Coleman's tradition operationalize social capital by highlighting the social capital available within the family (which implied the quality of family relationships and the family structure), as well as the social capital of the community (the quality of relationships between members of the community; in some cases, authors also take structure into consideration. (p. 85)

In addition to Coleman, Bourdieu's contributions are relevant to this study and provided the importance of access to the assets and relationships therein of the social group.

Bourdieu's outlook of social capital theory values the resources found in group memberships and relationships. As Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) stated "social capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (p. 119). This outlook views the group membership as having unique benefits and that those benefits bring together the social group enabling all members access to use the collective capital (Vorhaus, 2014). Through the use of collective capital, the individuals within the social group form cultural capital.

Cultural capital is found within the family and is separate from social capital. Additionally, the foundation of all capitals within the social group is economic capital, yet cultural capital includes, specifically, the knowledge and intellectual skills of the social group (Vorhaus, 2014). Respect and acceptance of interpersonal relationships is paramount given that accessing capitals is unevenly distributed in society since individuals contain different amounts of economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Vorhaus, 2014). These varying amounts of economic and cultural capital mobilize the capital within the group.

When connected with the education of the individual, the activity of social capital facilitates social reproduction among social groups. Social reproduction is the process of transferring the cultural and economic capital from one social group to another. This reproducing of cultural and economic capital contributes to the social group's existing situation (Alshalhoub et al., 2021; Rogošić & Baranović, 2016). "The actions of an individual are largely determined by external factors, i.e., socioeconomic status" (Rogošić & Baranović, 2016, p. 89). This social reproduction mobilizes social groups.

The concept of social capital is to explain the influence of social position on the development of human capital, measured by level of education. The theory supports the concept that educational achievements of individuals are related to various forms of capital that one possesses or does not, such as social, economic, and cultural capital. Mobilizing of social assets is where the contributions of Bourdieu and Coleman overlap. Mobilizing assets such as economic, cultural, and educational contribute to the social group's ability to pursue the group's goals and develop the individuals within the social group. This social mobility contributes to social reproduction, which is fueled by social networks.

Social networks can be lean or expansive and benefits may be realized from either classification. A lean social network generates a more concentrated grouping of capital. Exchanges of information, relationships, norms, goals, and obligations are more noticeable with a lean network and can be used more efficiently in achieving personal goals (Rogošić & Baranović, 2016). Furthermore, a lean network with a small number of individuals who have extensive ties can yield greater social capital benefits as these informal ties can act as a source of trust (Burt, 1992; Glanville et al., 2013).

When closing a network, access to external capital is not realized. Limiting this access can contribute to a lack of trust outside of the social group (Fukuyama, 2001). Rogošić and Baranović (2016) stated that when individuals who aspire to maintain or preserve specific social relationships, closing the network is relevant, but when individuals seek and aspire to obtain resources of social capital, they require relationships with other individuals and thus closing the network is not relevant (p. 87).

When examining social capital, the contributions of all members of a network are considered. This view includes members within the family and outside of the family as the contributions provided by all members will contain unique assets. However, a network should be concentrated to include specific individuals with rich contributions. This efficiency can be found in a network structure.

Examining the social network through the lens of a structural approach can provide a different insight into the roles of individuals within the social network. Their position within the network structure relates back to their social identity, their contributions, and the experiences in which they have to offer, which will benefit the social group as a whole. Rogošić and Baranović (2016) mentioned that taking a structural approach assumes that individuals within a social network do not act according to their own personal attitudes, norms, goals, and individual characteristics, but rather according to their relative position within the network structure. The size, scope, and structure of a social group, and the capital found within, yield educational outcomes and contribute to social reproduction.

In social capital theory, the educational attainment of individuals is a source of capital. Additionally, the educational achievements of individuals are related to the multiple forms of capital one possesses or does not possess, such as social capital, economic capital, or cultural capital (Coleman, 1988; Rogošić & Baranović, 2016; Sullivan, 2001). Those who have more access to these forms of social capital produce greater educational achievements, which can influence the position of those members within the group's structure (Pishghadam & Zabihi, 2011; Rogošić & Baranović, 2016). Not only can these achievements influence the position in the group's structure, it can also influence other members within the group.

The relationships found within a social group can help influence the educational attainment of others. "Social capital is frequently offered up as a variable to explain such educational outcomes as academic attainment, drop-out rates and cognitive development" (Vorhaus, 2014, p. 185). The impact social capital has on educational attainment adds to the human capital of the individual and leads to social reproduction and advancement of the social group. Given the impact on educational achievement, social capital also positively influences students' behavior and development, reduces drop-out rates, increases college enrollment and graduation rates, and contributes to improved test scores (Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001; Rogošić & Baranović, 2016; Sun 1999; Yan, 1999). Researchers who have built upon the theories of Coleman and Bourdieu have pointed out the impact socioeconomic status has on educational achievements. Educational achievements of individuals increase their social capital which leads to social reproduction and what contributes, strengthens, and sustains social reproduction are healthy relationships.

Relationship Marketing

Relationship marketing theory was developed in the field of services marketing in the 1980s by Leonard Berry. He defined relationship marketing as attracting, maintaining, and enhancing the customer relationship (Yazdanpanah & Ehsani, 2020). As this concept developed, additional contributions from other theorists increased dramatically.

These contributions primarily centered on how relationship marketing can improve the profitability of the organization through customer retention. Specifically, Grönroos's (1994) discussed how relationship marketing helps to achieve the goals of all parties through mutual exchange and fulfillment of promises, as well as through the termination of relationships. The overlap is that relationship marketing will produce mutual value through accomplishing the objectives of all involved through effective and efficient relationships (Grönroos, 1994; Sheth, Parvatiyar, & Sinha, 2015; Yazdanpanah & Ehsani, 2020).

Effective and efficient relationships can be found in social networks. Gumersson (2008) outlined relationship marketing as interactions that occur within network relationships, resulting in a marketing network. Given the interpersonal dynamic involved with relationship marketing, scientific fields addressing the characteristics of relationships such as psychology, sociology, and educational sciences have been included in relationship marketing theory (Pilny & Siems, 2019). Also nested within relationship marketing theory are service qualities and satisfaction elements that can be experienced through the maintenance of relationships.

Relationships can be maintained through routine behaviors. Canary and Stafford (1994) stated that maintenance behaviors are "actions and activities used to sustain desired relational definitions" (p. 5). Canary and Dainton (2006) listed that maintenance behaviors can be experienced in dyadic systems as well as in oneself, a network, and a culture. A key component of maintenance behaviors is stating and following through on a promise.

When examining relationships and relationship marketing, the concept of a promise is important, as it is an integral element of relationship marketing (Yazdanpanah & Ehsani, 2020). The concept of promises involves both giving a promise for influence and persuasion as well as keeping a promise that can maintain, enhance, and evolve a relationship (Calonius, 1988; Yazdanpanah & Ehsani, 2020). The promise aspect is related to understanding the three main principles of relationship marketing.

The three main principles of relationship marketing are trust, mutual value creation, and commitment. Maintaining, enhancing, and evolving a strong relationship with these three principles can generate loyalty, which is a deliverable intention of relationship marketing (Akarapanich, 2006; Payne, Clark, & Peck, 1995; Yazdanpanah &

Ehsani, 2020). The foundation of establishing a relationship, and the first main principle of relationship marketing, is trust.

Creating mutual value is the second principle in relationship marketing. Mutual value is the total benefits received based upon the sacrifices made (Buzzell & Gale, 1987; Mousa Khani, Haghighi, & Torkzadeh, 2012; Yazdanpanah & Ehsani, 2020). The aspects of this analysis can include items such as cost, but can also examine non-financial aspects, including time, and mental effort (Chung-Yu & Li-Wei, 2011; Yazdanpanah & Ehsani, 2020). Through the creation of mutual value among partners in an exchange, commitment can be realized.

Commitment is the third principle of relationship marketing. Having its roots in social identity theory, commitment is one of the dominant principles in relationship marketing research and has been defined as having a goal to maintain a valued relationship, in an effort to make the relationship mutually satisfying, beneficial, and most importantly, successful (Gundlach et al., 1995; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, & Gremler, 2002; Moorman, Zaltman, & Despande, 1992; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Su et al., 2016; Rather, 2019; Yazdanpanah & Ehsani, 2020). Commitment "is involved with emotional bonds, sense of belonging, competitiveness of the value proposition, and enduring relationships" (Rather, 2019, p. 130). The principles of commitment and trust are closely linked together in the sustainability of relationships.

Morgan and Hunt (1994) indicated that in order to make relationships valuable, mutual trust and commitment is needed. Cheng-Hsui (2001) and Sweeney and Swait (2008) identified that trust, from the relationship marketing aspect, is an important determinant of brand loyalty due to the exchange relationships that occur between sellers and buyers. Specifically, within a service provider industry, “if customers trust a service provider, they will be more secure in maintaining their assets, which will result in security, value, and loyalty” (Yazdanpanah & Ehsani, 2020, p. 62). Therefore, sustaining a trusting and committed relationship, loyalty can be experienced.

Loyalty can relieve doubts, thus improving trust and relationships (Chattananon & Trimetsoontorn, 2009; Yeğin & Gürbüz, 2020). Loyal relationships include trust, commitment, and service quality, which can produce a loyal customer who is more likely to become actively engaged with the brand (Harris & Goode, 2004; Narteh, Agbemabiese, Kodua, & Braimah, 2013; Rather, 2019). Engagement in relationship marketing occurs when those involved are perceived to be equally investing resources (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011; Rather, 2019). Through the establishment of a loyal relationship that produces engagement with the brand, a loyal customer will be created.

Successful relationship marketing produces loyal customers. Within the relationship marketing theory, a loyal customer provides unique opportunities for brands. “Loyal customers serve as an unbiased source of information, no strings attached, which is even more convincing than a company’s marketing efforts” (Ferguson et al., 2021, p. 23). Also, a loyal customer is one who repurchases from the same organization and who also recommends or cross-sells via word-of-mouth (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000; Rather 2019; Rather & Sharma, 2017; Sharma & Rather, 2017; Vivek et al., 2012). Therefore, with the mediating role of brand equity and brand identity, a loyal customer becomes a brand ambassador and a trustworthy influencer (Farzin et al., 2021).

Word-of-Mouth Communication

When investigating a product or service to purchase, seeking the opinion of someone whom is trustworthy and credible can influence the purchase decision. Sharing an opinion about a product or service is the definition of word-of-mouth (WOM) (Aslam et al., 2011). Typically, WOM involves comments about the organization's products or services as well as information about the organization itself that is passed from one person to another (Patton, 2000). This sharing of information is where an ability to rely on trustworthy and credible sources can be beneficial when considering a purchase decision.

WOM communication is dyadic. The impact of the information being communicated is reliant on the message, the recipient, and the source's relationship (Gilly et al., 1998; Glanville et al., 2013; Matos & Rossi, 2008; Van Hoye et al., 2016). Therefore, social ties and social relationships between the source and the recipient, are impactful (Glanville et al., 2013). Analyzing social ties is important to understanding the influence of WOM.

Stated previously, within social networks and communities, there are strong ties and weak ties. Labeling of ties also help explain the dispersion of information among a social network as well as outside of the social network. Van Hoye et al. (2016) stated "friends and family are examples of strong ties, whereas acquaintances are considered to be weak ties" (p. 45). Contributions made by Godes and Mayzlin (2004) revealed that "any piece of information that traverses a weak, as opposed to a strong, tie is likely to reach more people" (p. 547). In reaching more people, it is helpful to understand how information is dispersed among social networks.

Within social networks, information is spread quickly as members within the same network interact more frequently with each other and as a result learn more from each other versus interacting from members outside of the network (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Thelen & Yue, 2021). These interactions can prove to be beneficial when members of the same network are considering the purchase of an educational program. As Zhang, Cracium, and Shin (2010) stated when "evaluating a product/service in which technical outcomes are dominant, consumers are more likely to seek information from professional sources which offer more impersonal information" (p. 6). While seeking information within social networks, certain situations present themselves that are likely contributing to the sharing of WOM information and experiences.

There are three situational factors that influence the opportunity that WOM information will be shared. The three factors are: (a) when people become familiar with the purchase and service received, (b) when users of a product or service experience a favorable or unfavorable emotional reaction, and (c) when someone is dissatisfied with a product or service yet are unable to complain to the provider and therefore express their opinions to others (Gelb & Johnson, 1995; Patton, 2000). These situational factors create interactions stemming from outcomes of previous sales (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). Therefore, WOM communication is a form of interpersonal interaction including in-person and electronic information sharing.

Electronic WOM

Electronic WOM (eWOM) is another form of interpersonal communication regarding the spread of information related to a product or service. eWOM includes social groups and communities that exert influence on a purchase decision. These online communities influence both online and offline purchases and conversations.

Fueling these conversations is feedback on the product or service purchased. In the online environment, reading WOM feedback that is positive or negative influences the decisions of prospective customers and research suggested that online feedback is influential on decisions to purchase, especially if the feedback is attributed to a known individual (Buttle, 1998; Sandars & Walsh, 2009). Therefore, eWOM feedback can influence a purchase decision.

eWOM is different than traditional WOM. Specifically, traditional WOM is reliant on social cues related to persuasion whereas eWOM relies on content characteristics to determine persuasiveness and influence (Knapp & Daly, 2002; Walther, 1996; Zhang et al., 2010). Therefore, public opinion can shape and produce content that can be transmitted to mass audiences in the digital environment. This content may empower people offline leading to a need to redefine the concepts of online communities and personal influence (Anspach, 2017; Castells, 2009; Marcos-García, Alonso-Muñoz, & López-Meri, 2020; Xu et al., 2014;). As such, there are three areas in which to explore to determine influence in the digital environment.

Analyzing influence in the digital environment covers three main areas. These areas are: (a) defining new opinion leader, (b) identifying relationships between influencers and the ability to disseminate information, and (c) labeling valid indicators to measure online influence, especially on social networks (Marcos-García et al., 2020). In traditional social group settings, opinion leaders can influence online discourse, however, their influence can be thwarted by online bloggers and activists who have become influencers (Marcos-García et al., 2020; Papacharissi & De Fátima Oliverira, 2012; Valente & Pumpuang, 2007). Online influencers can achieve greater exposure due to the frequency of the content they produce as well as through others who propagate their messages thus amplifying the impact due to the ability to condition the flow of information (Bakshy et al., 2011; Kwak et al., 2010; Marcos-García et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2014). Measuring the impact of online influence on social networks is a challenging task, due to the rapid expansion of social networks (Gallagher et al., 2021). It is also important to note that although online conversations offer organizations and people the opportunity to track and observe the flow of interpersonal communication, the visible online conversations are not representative of all online conversations (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). Due to the subjective nature of both eWOM and traditional WOM, there are some concerns related to investigating this phenomenon.

WOM can be a very influential method of marketing and communication, due to the relationships involved between the sender and the receiver. Additionally, reading online reviews and feedback from those who are labeled as ‘opinion leaders can have an impact on the reviewer. However, although WOM can be considered as influential in fueling consumer actions, it is unclear which aspects of WOM are important due to its subjective nature and limited reach, making it difficult to analyze accurate content (Aslam et al., 2011; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). These characteristics of WOM create challenges in evaluating the true impact.

Both traditional WOM and eWOM are interactive between a sender and a receiver. As Patton (2000) stated, “both the receiver and the source of the word-of-mouth perceive the communication process and both can react to each other’s input” (p. 346).

Therefore, measuring WOM is difficult since it is a precursor to as well as an outcome of a consumer decision (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). As a result, there are three main challenges when measuring the impact of WOM.

The first challenge is related to gathering accurate data. The frequency and types of WOM behavior, including private conversations, make direct observation difficult (Aslam et al., 2011; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). The second challenge is to determine which aspect(s) of the conversations should be measured to determine the product or service evaluation (Aslam et al., 2011; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). Finally, the third challenge is to determine the impact WOM information has on social relationships (Aslam et al., 2011). One way to address these challenges is to evaluate the impact positive, neutral, or negative WOM has on consumer behavior.

Those who have personal experiences with a product or service are able to disseminate information relative to their outcomes of using the product or service. These people transmit information to receivers and are perceived as fairly objective and reliable sources of information (Patton, 2000). Additionally, this information may be viewed as more credible because it is not delivered in a manner that is promoting a specific organization (Van Hoye et al., 2016; Van Hoye & Lievens, 2005). The information transmitted may be positive, neutral, or negative, and as such, can be harmful or beneficial to an organization (Aslam et al., 2011). Therefore, WOM can have a profound impact on consumer behavior and if deployed correctly, can contribute to the promotion of products or services (Aslam et al., 2011; Santoso, Widowati, & Auliya, 2021).

Positive WOM can reveal many aspects of an organization as well as its products and services. Examples of positive WOM include, but are not limited to, pleasant or novel experiences; providing recommendations to others; and physically displaying a tangible outcome from a service, such as a diploma or certificate from completing a program, or the physical product itself (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). However, positive WOM does not transmit as frequently across mediums as negative WOM.

Several researchers have mentioned that negative WOM spreads more quickly than positive WOM. Examples of behaviors that can contribute to negative WOM are unpleasant experiences, rumors, complaining, and a lack of satisfaction with the product or service (Anderson, 1998; Kim, Lee, & Mariani, 2021). Most notably, Arndt (1967), Richins (1987), and Kotler (1991) revealed that customers dissatisfied with a product or service will notify on average eleven acquaintances in comparison to notifying three acquaintances if they are satisfied. Additionally, Hart, Heskett, and Sasser (1990), similarly identified that those who recall a poor service or experience will inform approximately eleven people versus notifying six people of a positive experience. Furthermore, people may engage in negative WOM to reduce anxiety and hostility, warn others, seek vengeance, and reduce harm to a social network (Allport & Postman, 1947; Anderson, 1998; Jung, 1959; Knapp, 1944; Richins, 1984; Rosnow, 1988; Shibutani, 1966). These researchers revealed the importance and results of customer satisfaction in WOM communication.

Customer Satisfaction

Understanding the impact of both positive and negative WOM communication is important for marketers within any service industry, including higher education. Specifically, marketers in higher education can create marketing and advertising tactics relative to customer service, student retention, service recovery, and recruitment of prospective students (Patton, 2000). Although Westbrook (1987) found a negative correlation between customer satisfaction and WOM, this relationship contains two behavioral features.

The two central behavioral features of the relationship between customer satisfaction and WOM are related to activity. The first central feature indicates that as the utility of engaging in WOM activity increases, which can result from either satisfaction or dissatisfaction, WOM activity will increase (Anderson, 1998). Engaging in the act of WOM will depend on whether the perceived benefits outweigh the costs (Anderson, 1998; Becker, 1965). The most common cost will be that of time spent on engaging in the activity of WOM communication and therefore, "only the behavior of those for whom the utility of word of mouth exceeds the costs of engaging in word of mouth is observed" (Anderson, 1998, p. 12). This behavior can be experienced by those customers who are either very satisfied or very dissatisfied, because these categories of customer satisfaction are most likely to engage in WOM communication (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). These levels of satisfaction contribute to the second central behavior of the relationship between customer satisfaction and WOM related activity.

The second central behavior between customer satisfaction and WOM related activity corresponds to the degree of dissatisfaction of engaging in WOM. As Anderson (1998) stated, "the impact of dissatisfaction on the degree of word-of-mouth activity should be greater than the impact of satisfaction" (p. 7). The individual level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction experienced with using a service is the main antecedent to engage in WOM (Anderson, 1998; Arndt, 1967; Bitner, 1990; Dichter, 1966; Reichheld & Sasser, 1990; Rogers, 1962; Westbrook, 1987; Yi, 1990). Therefore, the decision to engage or not engage in WOM will depend on the marginal utility that will be produced from the chosen activity of engaging or not engaging relative to all other activities (Anderson, 1998). Nested within these central behaviors between customer satisfaction and WOM communication are appearance and loyalty factors.

Appearance and loyalty factors related to the central behaviors between customer satisfaction and WOM communication are related to the individual engaging in the WOM activity. Specifically, positive customer satisfaction and WOM can bring about in an individual a desire to help others by sharing knowledge and experiences, demonstrate the appearance of being knowledgeable, defending an ego, and reducing cognitive dissonance (Anderson, 1998; Arndt, 1967; Dichter, 1966). Furthermore, it has been identified that loyal and satisfied customers of a particular organization will choose to engage in positive WOM (Anderson, 1998; Bitner, 1990; Bloch, 1986; Hunt, 1977; Oliver, 1980; Reichheld & Sasser, 1990). Therefore, from the onset, it is important to create an environment in an organization, especially in a service industry, that deploys a high level of service quality instead of reacting to improve service quality later (Archer & Wesolowsky, 1994; Patton, 2000). One such service industry where this is important is the higher education industry.

Higher education students can become life-long learners of the institution and can also become life-long customers by not only enrolling in multiple advanced degree programs, but also through contributions as alumni. As Patton (2000) mentioned, "word-of-mouth communication takes the place of the lifetime value of a customer in the service of higher education" (p. 347). In an effort to maximize the opportunity for positive WOM and customer satisfaction, it is imperative in the highly competitive environment that

MBA programs operate to have a customer service model in all facets of operations. This focus on the student as a customer can influence the student's decision process on selection. Elements of the process students undergo in institution selection can also be found in the consumer decision process.

Consumer Decision Process

Analyzing how students arrive at an enrollment decision requires an understanding of the elements of consumer behavior. Aslam et al. (2011) stated "consumer behavior explores why people make certain purchasing decisions, what products and services they buy, where they buy them, how they use them, the frequency with which they purchase them, and the consumer decision process in action" (p. 498). Additionally, Loudon and Bitta (1994) contributed that the consumer decision process involves a psychosocial activity that one engages in when consuming, deleting, researching, or acquiring goods and services. Understanding and analyzing these factors can provide a number of benefits.

Knowledge and awareness of consumer behavior as it relates to an applicant's enrollment decision has many benefits. These benefits include: assisting enrollment and student service managers with information to make strategic decisions and improve customer service; providing marketing research with a theoretical base from which to analyze how applicants make an enrollment decision to improve enrollment opportunities; plan new programs while enhancing existing ones; and contribute to prospective applicants, helping them to become more aware of the ways in which they can arrive at an informed enrollment decision (Alshammari, 2016; Aslam et al., 2011).

The decision-making process an applicant undergoes when making an enrollment decision involves a series of logical steps. Overall, applicants will begin with recognizing a problem or need for higher education. They will then work to choose an institution, enroll, and then analyze their post-enrollment decision (Aslam et al., 2011). Arriving at an enrollment decision can be influenced by a number of societal, environmental, and other outside influences (Aslam et al., 2011). Regardless of outside influences, the consumer decision process involves five stages.

There are five stages in the consumer decision process that are relative to an applicant's enrollment decision process. These five stages involve: (a) need recognition, (b) information search, (c) alternative evaluation, (d) purchase, and (e) post-purchase (Grewal & Levy, 2016). When choosing a university, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) proposed a three-stage decision process which includes aspiration formation, search and submitting an application, and selection and attendance. Applying the consumer decision process to this three-stage process, need recognition would relate to aspiration formation, information search and alternative evaluation would relate to search and application, and purchase and post-purchase would relate to selection and attendance. The first-stage of aspiration formation is where the applicant identifies the need for higher education.

Aspiring to enroll in higher education is where an individual has recognized the need to earn a degree, a certification, and/or the acquisition of knowledge about a particular subject. Regardless of the level of enrollment decision, there are differences between needs and wants. A need is the difference between one's actual state and the desired state, whereas a want is something that is desired (Grewal & Levy, 2016). Needs can be categorized into two different types: functional and psychological.

Functional needs pertain to the performance or output of a service (Grewal & Levy, 2016). Regarding higher education, the output can be a degree, a certification, and/or knowledge. Psychological needs are those that fulfill individual gratification associated with a service (Grewal & Levy, 2016). Within the higher education industry, having a sense of accomplishment by earning a degree, or, enrolling into a program to acquire a different professional position would be examples of a psychological need. One example of a higher education program that generates functional and psychological needs is an MBA program.

An MBA degree affords many opportunities for career advancement, professional development, and is a highly sought-after degree on a global scale. Blackburn (2011) stated that an MBA degree "is academic in nature and yet provides practical preparation for individuals in business and management. An MBA can not only complement professional experience, but an MBA graduate is able to command a higher salary" (p. 473). These characteristics of an MBA describe the functionality of the degree.

Blackburn (2011) also mentioned that networking opportunities are attractive to those aspiring to enroll in an MBA program as a way to increase personal and professional development. Networking can enhance career development opportunities, positively impact society, and develop business skills, all of which can apply to psychological needs. Once the balance between functional and psychological needs is met movement into the next stage of the enrollment decision process will take place.

The second stage of the enrollment decision process involves research, evaluating and considering alternative options, and applying. Previous research has indicated that not all applicants make informed decisions when selecting postgraduate courses as some students choose to remain at the same university as their undergraduate career due to familiarity, satisfaction, and financial considerations while others base their selection on hearsay, reputation, and limited information (Blackburn, 2011; Kiley & Austin, 2000; James, 2000). On the contrary, other researchers have identified that postgraduate research for MBA applicants can be extensive and involve several resources in arriving at a well-informed decision and that they are fully aware of their options, especially when they are funding the program themselves (Blackburn, 2011; Vural & Başaran, 2021). Given the financial investment of an MBA program, the review of the literature indicated that it was more likely for applicants to undergo extensive search methods in researching their options than not.

Through a prospective applicant's research, two types of searches are utilized. These searches are labeled internal search for information and external search for information (Grewal & Levy, 2016). With an internal search for information, a prospective applicant relies on personal experiences, memory, and general knowledge about an institution. Most commonly, this internal recollection is applicable to the research discovered by James (2000) in which some applicants choose to remain at their undergraduate institutions for postgraduate programs due to factors such as familiarity, satisfaction, and financial considerations. With the external search for information, applicants seek information from external, preferably reliable sources. These sources contribute to factors that affect the applicant's search process and provide a significant amount of influence.

External searches for information can come from a variety of influential sources. Faculty, staff, family, friends, acquaintances are some examples of personal external search sources, whereas promotional materials, ranking tables, and internet searches also contribute to external searches in the selection process (Blackburn, 2011). To acquire information from external searches, access and opportunities to these sources is required.

Access to reliable sources can be limited or expansive based on one's social identity. Due to one's social identity, one may have access to specific social networks containing relevant social capital (Rowe-Johnson, Rice, & Ali, 2021; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Social networks are supportive in the quality of relationships nested within as these relationships contain interpersonal ties to people who are committed and capable of distributing resources and capital (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Vorhaus, 2014). The relationships within the structure of the social network and capital resources available can be influential in the search phase of an applicant choosing an MBA program as they can offer information and enhance one's self-image (Grewal & Levy, 2016; Vorhaus, 2014). Additionally, informal leadership can be found within these networks on the basis of trust and experience. The experiences of others within a social network can unveil WOM communication, contributing to the applicant's information search process.

WOM communication can be helpful and influential during the applicant's information search phase. In general, consumers rely on WOM for help in making purchase decisions, especially on purchase decisions that can have a long-term impact (Aslam et al., 2011). Additionally, WOM feedback from a reliable and trusted individual can be helpful in the search and decision-making phases (Buttle, 1998; Dellarocas, 2003; Sandars & Walsh, 2009). Due to these facets, WOM communication can help with factors affecting the applicant's search process.

There are three factors that affect the applicant's search process. These factors are: (a) the perceived benefits versus the perceived costs of the search, (b) locus of control, and (c) the actual or perceived risk of the enrollment decision (Grewal & Levy, 2016). With the perceived benefits versus the perceived costs of the search factor, time and effort spent on researching institutions is the main consideration, relative to the cost of an MBA program. This factor involves students weighing the benefits of their time and effort researching MBA programs in comparison to the investment required within the identified set. The next factor that affects the applicant's search process is locus of control.

Applicants conducting searches on different MBA programs have an internal locus of control and an external locus of control. An internal locus of control is where applicants believe they have control over their outcomes and actions on their enrollment decision and are more likely to engage in an extensive search process (Grewal & Levy, 2016). Applicants with an external locus of control will not take credit if they are satisfied with their decision and, alternatively, will not be at fault if they are not satisfied with their decision (Grewal & Levy, 2016). The third factor in the applicant's search process is the actual or perceived risk.

Within the actual or perceived risk, there are certain types of risk relevant to an applicant's enrollment decision. Specifically, the risks involved are performance risk, financial risk, social risk, and psychological risk (Grewal & Levy, 2016). In selecting an MBA program, one of the main outcomes expected is a higher salary. This can be attributed to an elevated position or a promotion. Therefore, in selecting the appropriate

MBA program, the performance risk would be related to the opportunity of achieving these outcomes.

Associated with the performance risk is the financial risk. The cost of an MBA program varies and although a higher salary may be experienced, the return on the investment (ROI) is a factor to also consider. The length of time it will take to experience the ROI from an MBA program is the financial risk that is considered.

The social and psychological risks related to an applicant's choice of an MBA program are relative to one another. The social risk involves the worry that the choice an applicant makes on the MBA program selected will not be regarded in a positive light by the perceptions of others (Grewal & Levy, 2016). This perception could be from friends, family, and/or social networks. The psychological risk is also associated with perception of others and can come from the positive or negative perception of an employer or social group member on the institution chosen. The analysis of these risks contributes to the evaluation and consideration of alternative options. To help mitigate these risks, reliance on social networks can offer different perspectives leading to more concrete evaluations and consideration processes.

Evaluating and considering institutions to choose from is part of the search process. The identified institutions will be a part of what is termed a universal set that includes all possible choices (Grewal & Levy, 2016). After outweighing the risks and organizing the options, the student would start to begin an evaluation process for consideration to enroll.

The evaluation process of an applicant involves self-regulation. Self-regulation is the process in which applicants set their goals, identify and choose behavioral strategies to accomplish their goals, and assess their progress in goal achievement (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Zhang et al., 2010). One of the main goals is the consumption goal, referring to time and cost consumption aspects of an MBA program. This consumption goal is divided up into two separate mental categories, each with their own individual goals, thus providing a process that helps applicants allocate resources to accomplish conflicting goals, making the consumption behaviors more effective (Zhang et al., 2010; Thaler, 1999). The two separate categories are labeled promotion and prevention goals (Zhang et al., 2010).

Both the promotion and prevention goals rely upon information to determine the appropriate category. Promotion goals are associated with achieving desirable outcomes and advancement through consumption (Zhang et al., 2010). As an example, Zhou and Pham (2004) revealed that regarding financial decisions, such as investing in an MBA program, applicants will rely on the promotion system for maximum ROI and will rely on the prevention system to avoid negative ROI. With this example, avoiding negative ROI is relative to prevention goals. Prevention goals are concerned with the avoidance of negative and undesirable outcomes (Zhang et al., 2010). Through time and experiences in the search phase of an MBA program, applicants will become familiar with how to compartmentalize their promotion or prevention goals (Zhang et al., 2010). This compartmentalization facilitates the search and evaluation phase leading to institution selection. The choice of institutional selection can involve certain characteristics.

Plank and Chiagouris (1997) identified five characteristics of an institution that influenced selection. These five characteristics are the institution’s program offerings, leadership opportunities, employment opportunities after graduation, financial aid, and perceived value for the investment (Plank & Chiagouris, 1997). Additionally, a program's duration and quality of education, faculty, and facilities also are characteristics important in student selection (Alshammari, 2016; Bin Yusof et al., 2008; Brown, 1991). These characteristics contribute to progressing to the selection and attendance phase.

The third stage is selection and attendance. This stage can also be considered the purchase and post purchase phase. Within this phase, there are three situational factors, or factors specific to the situation, that can influence psychological and social issues related to the purchase and shopping situations, as well as to temporal states (Grewal & Levy, 2016). Generally speaking, these factors are related to the social and psychological risks identified earlier. Applicants may be predisposed to enroll in one institution, but then certain situational factors may change the purchase consideration (Grewal & Levy, 2016). For example, if an applicant was in the process of committing to Institution A but then acquired different information on Institution B from a trusted source, the applicant may commit to Institution B, or, be heavily influenced on the original commitment to Institution A.

As another example, if an applicant were to physically tour an institution, the experience they would have would likely influence their shopping situation. Maintained buildings, customer service, and the general atmosphere of a campus are all factors that can contribute to the enrollment situation of an applicant. Both the purchase situation and the shopping situation can impact the temporal state.

The temporal state refers to the applicant's state of mind, which can be influenced and change at any time. As such, a purchase situation may appeal to applicants differently, based on their emotions and experiences (Grewal & Levy, 2016). As an example, if an applicant were to visit an institution, despite the aesthetics and positive customer service the applicant may have received during the visit, if the applicant was issued a parking ticket, that experience could impact the mood of the applicant and influence the enrollment decision. Nevertheless, once the applicant has researched and analyzed all choices in their data set, the decision to enroll can be made. Upon selection of the institution, acquiring admission, and attending the chosen MBA program, the selection and purchase phase is complete and the post purchase behavior begins.

In the enrollment decision process, post purchase behavior is the final outcome of the applicant's decision on the MBA program as the applicant transitions from applicant to enrolled student. The behavior exuded by students is critical for both the student and the institution as a whole. There are three possible post purchase behaviors, which are customer satisfaction, post purchase cognitive dissonance, and customer loyalty (or disloyalty) (Grewal & Levy, 2016). Customer, or student, satisfaction can be achieved through appropriate marketing of the MBA program, as well as treatment of students during the program. Increasing customer satisfaction can yield students re-enrolling after graduation, contributions to alumni affairs, and avoiding the spread of negative WOM.

Post purchase cognitive dissonance is "an internal conflict that arises from an inconsistency between two beliefs or between beliefs and behavior" (Grewal & Levy, 2016, p. 183). This can be experienced, especially with expensive and infrequent purchases such as an MBA program, when a student questions the enrollment decision after the decision has been made (Grewal & Levy, 2016). This is where student service can step in to help alleviate the student's struggle which can contribute to customer loyalty and avoid disloyalty.

Customer loyalty, in the field of higher education, can yield significant value. Alumni donations, re-enrollment opportunities, and positive WOM are just some of the benefits that can be experienced by the institution. Producing student loyalty will contribute to avoiding negative consumer behavior such as the spreading of negative WOM and rumors, which is critical as negative WOM spreads faster than positive WOM. Figure 2.1 provides an overview of a developmental perspective of the student enrollment decision-making process with interpersonal influence from individual and societal factors.

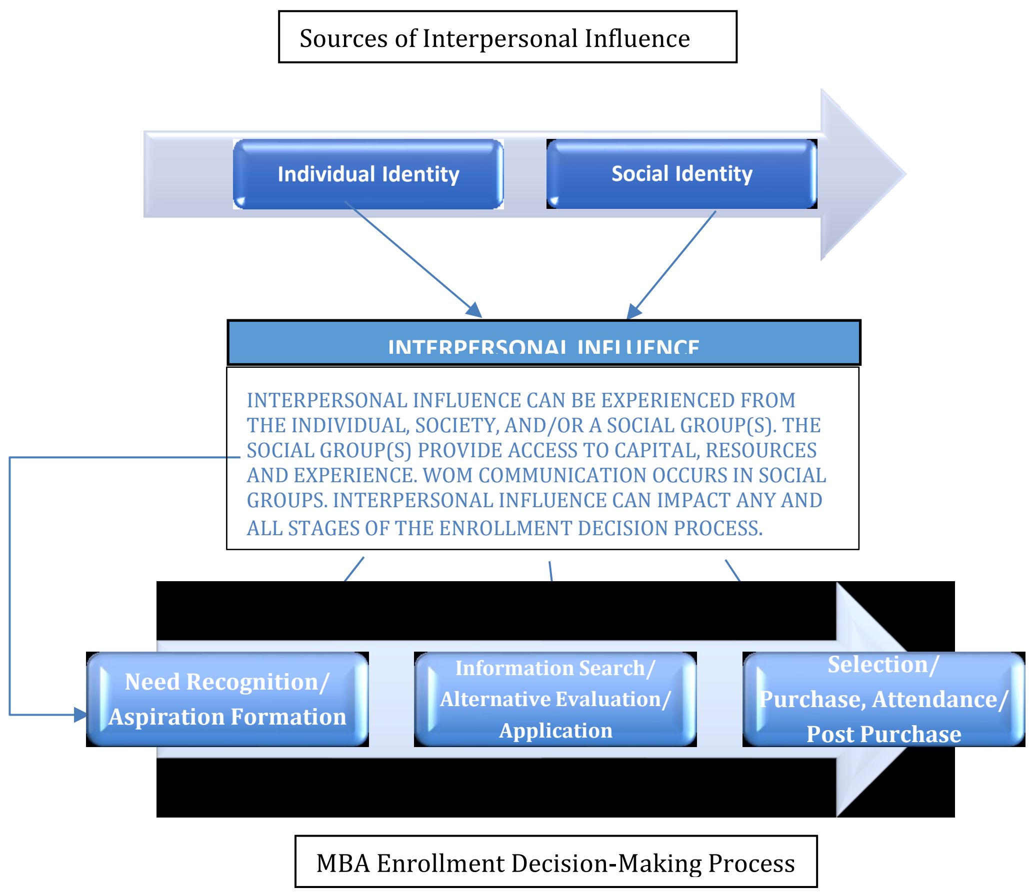

Figure 2.1

The MBA student enrollment decision-making framework with influences from societal factors. [Adapted from: Grewal & Levy, 2016; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987)]

As Figure 2.1 demonstrates, interpersonal influence on an individual's enrollment decision making process can be experienced from the individual themselves through a self-developed identity, from a social identity, and/or a social group. People establish their own individual identity prior to entering into society. This individual identity contains self-goals and interests that are separate from other individuals. Upon entering society, an individual can adapt their individual identity based on influences from society. These societal influences can contribute to an individual joining a social group, which contain members who can have similarities and commonalities.

A social group is a recognized collection of individuals who share commonalities similar to an individual's identity. The individual develops a sense of comfort and identification to that particular social group, who collectively work towards a shared purpose. An individual's membership in a social group creates a sense of belonging as others within the group realize and value the contributions of the individual and each other. This social identity and social group membership provide the opportunity to develop relationships and access the group's social capital.

Nested within the group's social capital are informal leaders with vast arrays of experiences and resources. Accessing and sharing of social capital affords the opportunity to develop individuals and put the social group on paths towards achieving goals. These interpersonal interactions can be influential when members of the social group are considering the purchase of an educational program. Within the pursuit of information in social groups, those deemed to be trustworthy, committed, and able to offer value are perceived to be loyal and, as such, are more likely to contribute valuable sharing of WOM information and experiences, both in traditional and electronic formats.

Through the sharing of social capital and WOM communication, interpersonal influence can be experienced. This influence can then impact the enrollment decision, which can be examined either as a process as a whole or by its individual areas within the enrollment decision-making process. Viewed as a process, interpersonal influence can help identify or fuel an already developed need, contributing to research on a program and alternative options, then moving the individual towards applying, gaining admission, enrolling and paying for courses. Upon the completion of the courses, the evaluation of the instructor and program via surveys is also completed. However, viewed in individual areas, if an applicant already has an identified need of earning an MBA, interpersonal influence can go directly to the research stage and continue through the remainder of the process. Alternatively, if an individual has an identified need and an identified institution, interpersonal influence can bypass the need recognition and research phases and be more impactful directly on applying to a specific program and institution. Regardless of the viewpoint, the journey to arrive at an application decision can be influenced by a number of societal and interpersonal interactions from individuals or social groups which may contribute to an MBA applicant's enrollment decision.

Summary

Social identity theory focuses on an individual's sense of belonging to a social category or group. This sense of belonging to a social group creates an individual's social identity and creates a unique self-concept of the individual (McGee, 2020; Stets & Burke, 2000). With a unique self-concept developed, intergroup relations can be realized, which are how people either view themselves as belonging to a partciular group or not. Those who identify themselves as belonging to a specific group have a shared purpose, representing the group as a whole, while also strengthening their own self-evaluation as a group member. An individual's social group membership creates a sense of belonging to others within the group providing the opportunity to share and acquire resources from other group members.

Social group membership activates the opportunity for social relationships to develop, providing access to members' assets, captial, and networks, which forms the basis of social captial theory. Social captial theory interprets capital as assets and resources found within social relations, which can take the forms of individuals, family, and networks outside the family. This, in turn, adds to the human capital of the individual and leads to social reproduction and the advancement of the social group. This advancement and reproduction centers on the ability to have strong and meaningful relationships.

Strong and meaningful relationships are centered on the three principles of trust, mutual value creation, and commitment. These three principles are the foundation of relationship marketing. Maintaining, enhancing, and evolving a strong relationship with these three principles can generate loyalty, which is a deliverable intention of relationship marketing (Akarapanich, 2006; Payne et al., 1995; Yazdanpanah & Ehsani, 2020). Within relationship marketing theory, loyal customers provide unique opportunities for brands as these customers become trustworthy influencers through continued interpersonal communication.

WOM communication is created through relationships and interactions. When investigating a product or service to purchase, seeking the opinion of someone who is trustworthy and credible can influence the purchase decision. The sharing of information is where reliance on trustworthy and credible sources can impact the members of a social group as information is spread quickly within social networks. These interpersonal interactions can be in person and/or electronic as well as prove to be beneficial when members of the same network are considering the purchase of an educational program. The members within the network are also influential in sharing their level(s) of satisfaction.

Loyal and satisfied customers of a particular educational program will often choose to engage in positive WOM (Anderson, 1998; Bitner, 1990; Bloch, 1986; Hunt, 1977; Oliver, 1980; Reichheld & Sasser, 1990). As Patton (2000) mentioned, “word-of-mouth communication takes the place of the lifetime value of a customer in the service of higher education” (p. 347). Therefore, establishing a focus on the student as a customer can influence the applicant’s enrollment decision process on program selection.

Analyzing how applicants arrive at an enrollment decision requires an understanding of elements of consumer behavior. Knowledge and awareness of consumer behavior as it relates to an applicant’s enrollment decision has many benefits. Arriving at an enrollment decision can be influenced by a number of societal and environmental factors when selecting and attending an institution of higher learning. Therefore, it is important to examine the need recognition and aspiration formation stage an applicant experiences in order to determine the interpersonal influence an informal leader may have had on an MBA applicant’s program selection.

There is a research gap that needs to be filled about the impact interpersonal influence and social groups have on an individual’s enrollment decision through WOM communication. Even though WOM is recognized as a major source of information, little is known about how students make use of the information once it is received (Martin, 2014; Martin & Lueg, 2013; Yang et al., 2012). Social influences from group memberships may impact an individual's choice of an MBA program and institution. MBA program selection is a highly involved process with many personal and professional factors taken into consideration. This study examined these factors and the impact of the applicant's social identity, marketing advertisements, and socioeconomic status on the enrollment decision-making process.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Introduction

In an effort to address the research questions, the qualitative approach for this study was a case study. Case studies in qualitative research are used when the researcher is describing, exploring, or explaining a particular phenomenon. Because of this, case study approaches are bounded by certain parameters, such as a specific time or place and provides an overview of the problem or phenomenon in a social context (Creswell, 2013; Hesse-Biber, 2017). The rationale for this research design was due to several factors.

Hesse-Biber (2017) identified three case study designs: (a) single instrumental, (b) single intrinsic. and (c) collective. This study used a collective design which allowed for comparisons and contrasts of different cases by analyzing multiple diverse cases (Hess-Biber, 2017). What is important in the outcome of the case study is that the results present an in-depth understanding of the case (Creswell, 2013).

The primary research purpose was exploratory in nature as an investigation into an under researched social aspect was conducted (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Locke, Silverman, & Spirduso, 2010). As Creswell (2013) stated:

> This type of case study approach is selected because it contains rich data-gathering possibilities and also for what it may represent or reflect regarding other cases like it. Pursuing an exploratory design allows researchers to gain new insights into their research question with the goal of formulating specific ideas or theories they might want to later use to test out their ideas on similar cases. (p. 223)

Given the primary focus of understanding a group of students' lived experiences through their social identity, social networks, and influences found therein via word-of-mouth communication, the phenomenological approach was relevant. This approach involves learning how people experience things differently from one another (Hesse-Biber, 2017). MBA applicants and enrolled students have different identities, networks, needs and reasons for pursuing an MBA program and these differences provide a unique opportunity to understand their experiences in arriving at an application or enrollment decision. Additionally, investigating and identifying in-depth descriptions and understandings of these lived experiences was warranted to help address the research questions.

To help address the research questions, the constructivism paradigm is relevant as the research topic generated curiosity to the evidence gained from participants and their views (Creswell, 2013). There are two assumptions within the constructivism paradigm; epistemological and methodological. Guba and Lincoln (1994) stated that within the constructivism paradigm, an epistemological assumption involves a linkage between the investigator and the subject resulting in outcomes being created and within the methodological assumption, the refinement of findings can only develop based on the interaction between the investigator and the respondents when conducting research (p. 111). Additionally, values of the researcher and subjects are taken into consideration in constructivism which is vital since the researcher is the "orchestrator and facilitator of the inquiry process" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 114). Therefore, determining the influence social relationships and WOM communication have on an MBA applicant's enrollment decision-making process resonated with the purpose of this study.

This chapter has been organized by introducing the research questions of the study followed by the context. The population and sample are then reviewed followed by the examination of ethical considerations and human subjects protection. The chapter then discusses the procedures involved, data analysis, trustworthiness, and conclude with the limitations of the study.

Research Questions

It is unknown the impact informal leaders, interpersonal influence, and word-of-mouth communication have on a prospective MBA applicant's enrollment decision-making process. To investigate these unknown variables, there are three primary research questions to address this problem:

R1: In what ways did applicants perceive the influence of word-of-mouth marketing on their decision-making process on the graduate business enrollment decision?

a) In what ways did graduate business applicants perceive the influence of trust on their decision to enroll?
b) In what ways did graduate business applicants perceive the strength of an influencer's relationship on their decision to enroll?

R2: In what ways did graduate business applicants perceive the influence of marketing advertisements and messages on their enrollment decision?

a) In what ways did graduate business applicants perceive the influence of online reviews (eWOM) on their decision to enroll?

R3: In what ways did graduate business applicants perceive that their socioeconomic status influenced their enrollment decision?

The first question investigated in what ways did word-of-mouth marketing influence the decision-making process on the graduate business students' application decision. This question contains two subsets of questions. The first subset explains in what ways did trust among those in social and professional networks influence the graduate business students' application decision. The second subset identified in what ways did the strength of the influencer's relationship have on the graduate business students' decision to apply.

The second research question addressed in what ways did marketing ads and messages influence the graduate business students' application decision. This question has one subset question which identified in what ways did online reviews, or electronic word-of-mouth, influence the graduate business students' decision to apply. Since word-of-mouth communication can come in the forms of in-person and electronic means, this question identified if the participants were influenced by their own search, online reviews, or a combination thereof.

The third research question examined the participants' socioeconomic status. This question addressed the students' social identity, access to social capital, and the participants' social network, based on their socioeconomic status, to determine any influence these factors may have had on the enrollment decision.

Context

The study took place at a small, private, faith-based university located in the Midwest region of the United States with an MBA enrollment size of less than 500 students. The criteria for participant selection included those students who self-identified "Word-of-Mouth," or "Website Referral," or "Other" on their MBA application for admission. The population for this study contained first time applicants to an MBA program for the spring 2021 and summer 2021 semesters. The population size was 76 students. From this population, a sample of students was identified.

The sample size contained 11 participants who were referred to the MBA program. The participants included those who applied for admission, those who were admitted, and those who were admitted and enrolled for the spring 2021 and summer 2021 semesters. The timing of the study occurred from June 2021 through August 2021.

My positionality as the researcher involves my professional experiences. Having over 20 years of professional experience within institutions of higher learning, my background involves familiarity within the field of student services at the baccalaureate and master's levels. Due to my positionality and professional experiences, my approach to this study was that of an insider researcher.

In my current professional role as an executive director of an MBA program, my responsibilities include: managing administrative aspects of the MBA programs, coordinating retention programs, and develop academic support services for MBA students. Additional responsibilities include recruiting, marketing, and enrollment initiatives for the MBA programs. This experience is what led to a keen interest in this study and directly influenced the research design. Given my current professional role and approach as an insider researcher, there are specific advantages and disadvantages.

One of the advantages of being an insider researcher was my familiarity of where to gather data specific to this study. Additional advantages to being an insider researcher are gaining acceptance, trust, and cooperation among the group as well as understanding of the group being studied (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002). Furthermore, I was able to more fully involve myself with the participants in this study (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002). Although these are advantages to being an insider researcher, there are disadvantages.

The disadvantages of being an insider researcher related to this study are that the participants may have viewed me as more of an advocate instead of a researcher (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002). Furthermore, it cannot go unnoticed that I have my own biases towards the topic given my professional role and experiences. However, these disadvantages were minimized through the process in which data were collected and analysis.

Population and Sample

Purposive sampling methods were used throughout the recruitment of participants (Patton, 2014). Purposive sampling methods are designed to target specific individuals or groups of individuals who offer “information-rich” responses to questions contributing meaningful information to the investigator (Patton, 2014). The sample of students identified was based on their citizenship and information they self-disclosed on their application for admission.

Due to COVID-19, non-United States citizens applying for admission into the MBA program at the institution selected for this study was limited. Also, in an effort to increase the likelihood of participation, it was decided to specifically target domestic United States citizens. One of the questions on the admission application at the institution selected for this study asks the applicant to share: “How did you hear about the Master of Business Administration Program?” The specific responses this study paid attention to were “Word-of-Mouth,” “Website Referral,” and “Other.” MBA students who applied for admission into the spring 2021 and summer 2021 semesters who selected any of these three options to this supplemental question contained the targeted population. This targeted population of students represented all those who self-identified that a referral was the main source of hearing about the MBA program.

The targeted population contained 76 applicants. Once the targeted population was identified, communication occurred in the forms of email and telephone to discuss the purpose of the study and judge interest from the applicants. This communication included an introductory statement to the purpose of the study with the goal of entering a discussion on the applicants' and enrolled students' willingness to participate in the study. Those applicants and enrolled students who expressed interest were sent a consent form. Those who submitted a signed consent form became a part of the sample size. For this study, 11 participants responded from the targeted population and Table 3.1 outlines the listing of pseudonyms and basic information of the participants involved with this study.

Table 3.1

Pseudonyms Used and Basic Information of Participants

Name (Pseudonym)	Gender	Race	Enrollment Status	Referred By	(Years) Work Experience	Interview	Focus Group
Colleen	Female	Other	Applied & Admitted	Personal	5+	Yes	No
David	Male	European American	Registered	Personal & Professional	5+	Yes	No
Erika	Female	European American	Applied & Admitted	Other	5+	Yes	No
Joe	Male	European American	Applied & Admitted	Other	5+	Yes	Yes
John	Male	Other	Registered	Other	5+	Yes	Yes
Kathy	Female	African American	Registered	Professional	5+	Yes	Yes
Lindsey	Female	European American	Registered	Family, Personal, & Professional	5+	Yes	No
Michelle	Female	African American	Registered	Other	5+	Yes	Yes
Renee	Female	European American	Registered	Professional	5+	Yes	Yes
Scott	Male	European American	Registered	Personal	5+	Yes	Yes
Steve	Male	European American	Registered	Family	5+	Yes	No

Additional categories for the inclusion criteria included professional work experience of no less than one year, which is self-disclosed on the student's application for admission. Additionally, distribution of gender and ethnicity was attempted to ensure a diverse sample in the representation of the population. Furthermore, distribution of enrolled, admitted but not enrolled, and application submission only categories of students within the sample was ideal to represent all different levels of MBA applicants. Paramount with this study was demonstrating research ethics and subjects' protection in explaining the lived experiences of the participants' enrollment decision-making process.

Research Ethics and Human Subjects Protection

Protecting all participants was paramount for this study. As a part of ensuring the protection of all participants, an application was submitted to the institution's Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) prior to the qualitative study beginning. No contact was made with any of the participants until approval was granted, and all procedures outlined in the HSRB application were followed as well as compliance with any required modifications that were required for approval. This process was followed to ensure that the rights and welfare of human participants in this study were properly protected. Appendix A contains the approval notification. Additionally, specific steps were taken to protect the participants with this study upon receiving approval from the HSRB committee.

Participation in this study was strictly voluntary. All participants were free to decline to be in this study or withdrawal from this study at any point. The participant's decision to contribute or not carried no penalty. There were and are no immediate or long-range risks to any of the participants.

Each participant in this study did not and will not experience a loss of privacy. All records will be handled confidentially and all responses recorded were coded for privacy. Furthermore, the recordings will be deleted or destroyed after 36 months. Pseudonyms were used for the participants and all collected data and notes are locked in a filing cabinet. Care was taken to ensure that the participant's responses did not place any participant at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the participant's financial standing or employability. The research did not deal with sensitive aspects of the participant's own behavior. Only the researcher and members of the dissertation committee had and continue to have access to the survey responses and no individual identities were used in any reports or summaries that resulted or may result from the study.

This research study focused on collecting data related to interpersonal influence and word-of-mouth communication from social networks on a student's application decision-making process. The study was designed to solicit feedback from those who volunteered to be in this study. A consent form was distributed to all participants who agreed to participate in the study. A copy of the consent form distributed can be found in Appendix B. Only those who completed the consent form were contacted for participation in the study.

Procedures

For the collection of data within this social context, multiple instruments and techniques were distributed, gathered, cataloged, and deployed. The instruments used were self-developed and a total of three instruments were specifically designed for this study. The instruments are a demographic questionnaire, semi-structured interview questions, and focus group questions.

The first step in collecting the data involved acquiring the applications and resumes of the students who self-identified “Word-of-Mouth,” “Website Referral,” or “Other” to the supplemental question on the application for admission that asked applicants how they heard about the MBA program. A collection of 76 applications and resumes occurred. Of the population, six were in the category of having only applied, 24 had applied and been admitted, and 46 were registered. Once this information was collected, these applications were contacted using email and telephone communications.

This communication outreach resulted in no return telephone or email responses from those in the applied category. Within the applied and admitted category, three students expressed interest. Two of the three students had indicated “Other” for the supplemental question on the application for admission and one had indicated “Word of Mouth.” Within the registered category, eight students expressed interest of which four indicated “Other” and four indicated “Word of Mouth” for the supplemental question on the admission application. On the basis of these conversations, a consent form was sent to these 11 students who agreed to participate. Upon the receipt of the consent form, the demographic questionnaire was distributed.

Demographic Questionnaire

The second step in collecting data for this study was to examine the responses on the demographic questionnaire. This questionnaire was sent to the participants to ensure an appropriate diverse representation of enrollment status, gender, ethnicity, employer influence, and professional work experience. This type of questionnaire was chosen for collecting precise and specific information as well as to ensure the data gathered from the admission application matched that of the participant. The questions asked of the participants were to identify their: enrollment status, gender, ethnicity, length of professional experience(s), how they came to hear about the MBA program, and employer influence on pursuing an MBA program. These questions were designed in alignment with the objectives of the study. For the specific listing of questions contained on the demographic questionnaire, please see Appendix C. Once the demographic questionnaires were collected and reviewed, semi-structured interviews were organized.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The third step in collecting data for this study was to conduct semi-structured interviews. In this qualitative research study, the main technique used to gather the participants' lived experience(s) was through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to share their experiences by telling stories, which helps others, including the researcher, make sense of the participants' social world and interview data (Seidman, 2019). Furthermore, in-depth interviewing provides the opportunity for the researcher to place their focus on the participant, affording the opportunity to truly capture the lived experience and meaning of that experience encountered and described by the participant, as to have a more well-rounded view of who the participant is by interacting with them directly, tying into the phenomenological approach (Seidman, 2019). The design of the in-depth semi-structured interviews used in this study was based, in part, on Seidman's three-interview series methodology.

Seidman's three-interview series starts with a focused review of the life history of the participant, followed by a concentrated effort on the lived experience of the participant, and, finally, a reflection on the meaning of the experience from the participant (Seidman, 2019). Although Seidman proposed that, ideally, each interview be conducted separately from the other and that each interview be 90 minutes in length, to capture the true essence from the participant within this series.

Given the timing of this study, consideration was also given to practical issues such as accessibility and time constraints, the design of the semi-structured interviews also took into consideration Granot et al. (2012). This resulted in a single interview containing three stages (Granot et al., 2012). The first stage places the subjects' experience in context relative to the topic, the second stage centers on the subjects' current experience relative to the topic, and the third stage asks subjects to reflect on the meaning of their experiences (Granot et al., 2012). "The combination of exploring the past to clarify the events that led participants to where they are now, and describing the concrete details of their present experience, establishes conditions for reflecting upon what they are now doing in their lives." (Granot et al., 2012, p. 550). The design of the questions used elements from both the three-interview series from Siedman (2019) and the three stages outlined by Granot et al. (2012).

The interviews were conducted with 11 students, after the demographic questionnaire had been completed. The interviews were arranged on the basis of availability and willingness to participate and participants were offered flexibility in terms of meeting location. In-person meetings at a public place, such as a coffee shop, library, and the researcher's office were offered. Additionally, due to COVID-19, Zoom meetings and phone conferences were also offered as alternatives to in-person gatherings.

Semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility to discuss unexpected items as well as seek clarification on any details as needed (Blackburn, 2011; Maxwell, 1996). These interviews contained a mixture of open-ended questions. “The goal is to have participants reconstruct their experiences relevant to the topic” (Granot et al., 2012, p. 549). The open-ended questions allowed for a more information-rich type of interview for gaining information on particular topics.

Each of the semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. The goal was to conclude all 11 interviews within a two-week timeframe. The questions were divided up according to each of the individual research questions of the study.

Pilot interviews were conducted with MBA alumni to receive feedback on the clarity of the questions. Initial feedback from these interviews contributed to refining the questions within the three categories. The first category contains ten questions, the second category contains nine questions, and the third category contains six questions, totaling 25 questions during the semi-structured interview. All 25 questions were asked in all interviews and the questions in each category were open-ended affording the participants the opportunity to expand upon specific topics in “the context of their personal and professional lives and the lives of those around them” in an effort to gain a holistic picture of their lived experience(s) (Granot et al., 2012, p. 549). Please see Appendix D for a listing of the questions contained in the semi-structured interviews.

All of the semi-structured interviews, conducted in person or online, were audio recorded using the Zoom meeting software. Upon the conclusion of the semi-structured interviews, all recordings were transcribed using MAXQDA software for analysis of the interviews and identifying more accurate codes and themes. Upon the review of the information garnered from the semi-structured interviews, a focus group was organized.

Focus Group

The fourth step in collecting data for this study was to conduct a focus group. This step used the third instrument for this study, the set of questions that would be asked to participants during the focus group. The focus group was used to identify participant's viewpoints on the topic "and illuminate complex psychosocial phenomena" (Powell & Single, 1996, p. 500). The focus group contained participants "from a diverse range of backgrounds, views, and experiences" (Powell & Single, 1996, p. 500). The participants were from the semi-structured interview sample and selected on the basis of availability and willingness to participate in the focus group. Based on the analysis of the responses, a selection of participants joined on the basis of their availability. The goal was to conduct the focus group the week following the completion of the interviews. Once a common time was identified among all participants, two options were presented to the participants: to attending the focus group in-person or in a Zoom meeting.

Just as with the semi-structured interviews, flexibility was given to the focus group participants. This was the most popular and ultimately chosen method of conducting the focus group among the participants. The focus group meeting lasted 70 minutes and contained questions in a similar format as the semi-structured interviews, involving open-ended and exploring questions. Six students participated in the focus group. The rationale for the time allotted and group size was to not have a group too large due to avoid creating an environment where the participants may not feel comfortable sharing their thoughts, opinions, beliefs, and experiences (Morgan & Hunt 1994;

Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009; Vaughn et al., 1996). The group contained an equal mix of enrolled and not enrolled applicants, as well as a mix of gender, ethnicity, and professional experiences of the participants. All responses provided by the participants were anonymized.

The questions were divided up according to each of the individual research questions of the study. The questions were modified versions of those asked in the semi-structured interview, and their design was also influenced by the work of Seidman (2019) and Granot et al. (2012). The first category contained nine questions and the second and third categories each contained six questions, totaling 21 open-ended questions that were asked during the focus group.

The focus group was recorded using Zoom software. The Zoom software was sufficient to capture all interactions and discussions of the focus group. Upon the conclusion of the focus group, the recording was transcribed using MAXQDA software for analysis identifying more accurate codes and themes. Please see Appendix E for a listing of the questions that were involved in the focus group.

Observations

To capture the life history, details of the lived experience, and the reflection on the meaning, observation of the participants was necessary. Observation offers the researcher the opportunity to use as many of the five human senses of touch, taste, hearing, seeing, and speaking as possible (Creswell, 2013). This emphasis on full engagement heavily influenced the type and role of the observer that was used in this study.

There are four types of observation each with differing foci: complete participant, participant as observer, observer as participant, and complete observer (Merriam, 2009). Within this research project, the complete participant type was applicable, which is where the observer is fully engaged. The engagement of the researcher was in every facet of the procedures involved with this study, especially within the in-depth semi-structured interviews and the focus group.

Within the in-depth semi-structured interviews and the focus group, observation techniques in data collection were used. Specifically, field notes were documented during each interview and focus group. Alternatively, upon the conclusion of each interview and focus group, a summary of my thoughts was documented pertaining to the main themes or topics that were produced during these sessions. Furthermore, reflection techniques were used to collect additional insight.

As the study progressed, daily, weekly, and monthly reflections were experienced. Summaries of these reflections included free writing exercises to capture ideas, thoughts, and potential themes. The free writing summaries were discovery in nature and lasted for 15 minutes per session, contributing to the collection of the data.

Data Analysis

Upon collection of the data using the three instruments, analysis of the data focused on a qualitative, non-statistical, approach. “Qualitative data are of greater value in the identification of underlying causes, as well as the understanding of process” (Granot et al., 2012). An initial review involved reading through the text data from the first instrument. After this initial review, division of the responses were organized into segments of information from the responses (Creswell, 2013). This similar approach was undertaken when reviewing the data collected from the second and third instruments.

The data collected from the second and third instruments related to the semi-structured interviews and focus group. A total of 11 students participated in the semi-structured interviews. One interview was conducted in-person, three via zoom meeting, and seven via phone. The focus group contained six students, all of whom requested a zoom meeting. Upon the conclusion of the semi-structured interviews and focus group, analysis of the data involved an initial reading through the transcriptions as well as field notes taken.

These interpretations were assigned what Quartaroli (2009) defined as codes, which are words or phrases applied to text as a label to aid in categorizing, organizing, and comparing data. Saladna (2009) expanded by identifying that participant activities, perceptions, tangible documents, artifacts, the researcher's notes, and the researcher's comments are examples of what to code. Merriam (2009) further elaborated indicating that coding is a process of making notes next to the data collected that appear as relevant for answering the research question. Coding involves a series of steps that was followed with this study.

The first step in coding that was used in this study was open coding. Open coding is the naming and organizing of the data (Merriam, 2009). This step can be either a top-down approach with codes coming from literature, or a bottom-up approach with codes coming from the data itself (Merriam, 2009). During this process of open coding, a total of 43 codes were identified and categorized. I organized these codes in MAXQDA software using colors that I attributed to each research question and corresponding sub-question(s). From this pattern, I then underwent the process of In Vivo coding.

In Vivo coding comes from the participants and identifies how they label the data. During this process, I identified five In Vivo codes. Once the open codes and the In Vivo codes were identified, I proceeded with selective coding.

Selective coding contains a core category of themes that develop (Merriam, 2009). “Themes in qualitative research (also called categories) are broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea” (Creswell, 2013, p. 186). This step is applicable into what Saladna (2009) labeled second cycle coding, involving longer passages of text, or a reconfiguration of the codes themselves. This second cycle of coding involved longer segments of text and reconfiguring the codes. Within this step, the codes were reduced to 30 producing six themes: network contributions, recommendations, points of distinction, testimonials, imagery, and personal development. Generalization of the themes was applied so as to expand the findings to a larger population (Creswell, 2013). After completing the second cycle of coding, I processed a third round of coding where I combined common patterns, codes, and themes resulting in nine codes and three themes. An additional method of analyzing the data that was used in this study was memos.

Memos are an intermediate step between the coding of data and the write-up of the data (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Descriptive memos summarize the data while analytical memos contain explicit written ideas about the analysis and interpretation of the data (Hesse-Biber, 2017). The coding and memo processes and techniques discussed were also applied to the data collection techniques used with the focus group. An additional resource to use in representing the findings of this study included figures and charts.

Figures and charts were used in the data analysis. Physically drawing out figures and charts contributed to additional patterns and identification of themes that may otherwise have been more challenging to recognize. These figures and charts contributed an additional manner in which to organize and identify key information. Furthermore, specific software was utilized to contribute to describing and analyzing the data gathered.

Contributing to the process of collecting and analyzing the data gathered from the semi-structured interviews and focus groups was the use of MAXQDA software. MAXQDA software was used, not only for transcribing the interviews and focus group, but also as an additional step and process to ensure the codes and themes identified and organized in the preliminary review were an accurate representation of the participants' responses. Upon receipt of the summaries provided by this software, further analysis was completed whereby the raw data was broken down in order to classify them and reveal their characteristic elements and structure in a more refined manner (Blackburn, 2011; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2000). This process and review confirmed data saturation and sufficiency.

Analyzing the data from the interviews and the focus group revealed data saturation. Data saturation occurs when the results from the analysis are repeatedly represented and further collection of more data would produce no additional interpretive worth (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009; Sandelowski, 2008; Saumure & Given, 2008). Further analysis and interpretation of the data among the focus group reached within-group data saturation revealing identical themes generated from both the interviews and the focus group (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). This analysis contributed to the trustworthiness of the study.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in a qualitative study is important to document, as it ensures that the findings and representations of the participants' viewpoints are accurately portrayed. Establishing trustworthiness in this study stemmed from the phenomenological interview structure by Bevan (2014) with influences from Seidman (2019). The phenomenological interview structure contains three domains, which were incorporated in this study in the design of the interview guides for the semi-structured interviews and the focus group: contextualization, apprehending the phenomenon, and clarifying the phenomenon (Bevan, 2014). This interviewing structure was important for "maintaining methodological consistency and trustworthiness" (Bevan, 2014, p. 138).

Additional steps taken to establish trustworthiness within this study were to ensure dependability, confirmability, transferability, and credibility of the study (Shenton, 2004). Dependability and confirmability are related to the reliability and objectivity of the study, transferability refers to addressing the generalization of the study and external validity, and credibility refers to internal validity (Merriam, 2009; Shenton, 2004).

Dependability and Confirmability

Both dependability and confirmability are concerned with identifying the accuracy of the data and their alignment to the findings and outcomes. Additionally, dependability and confirmability explain the adequacy of the records kept by the researcher. For these purposes, dependability and confirmability are focused on the reliability and objectivity of the study.

Dependability focuses on addressing how dependable the results are and answers the question of did the data presented match the findings and outcome (Shenton, 2004). The processes undertaken in the data collection and analysis were reported in detail, as well as the design of the instruments, storage of data, and interpretation of data. Doing so helped the readers ensure that appropriate qualitative research protocols have been followed (Shenton, 2004).

The sections within the study that include ensuring dependability are mentioned in the research design and its implementation and describe what was planned and deployed, and the operationalized detail of the data collection (Shenton, 2004). Additional key components in the study to mention addressing dependability were the use of overlapping methods, such as using interviews and the focus group, as well as the in-depth methodological description that demonstrated the ability for the study to be repeated (Shenton, 2004). In order to report these elements of dependability in the study, key items were needed to establish confirmability.

Confirmability is concerned with the adequacy of records kept by the researcher. Additionally, confirmability is also concerned with the researcher's objectivity to the study and demonstration of any potential bias by the researcher was mentioned in this study, in addition to ensuring that the data reported was that of the participants and not of the investigator (Shenton, 2004). Just as mentioned in dependability, a detailed description of the methodological procedures and processes, as well as discussion of potential shortcomings in the study's methods and their potential effects to allow integrity of the research findings, was important to also demonstrate confirmability (Shenton, 2004).

To help demonstrate dependability and confirmability, certain methods were needed. The first method was triangulation. This method involved using multiple investigators, sources of data, or data collection methods to confirm the findings (Merriam, 2009). As it relates to this study's design, using a focus group and interviews to acquire a wide range of informants, coding, and use of memos all contributed to triangulation (Merriam, 2009; Shenton, 2004). An additional method to address dependability and confirmability was an audit trail.

An audit trail is a detailed account of the methods, procedures, and decision points in conducting the study (Merriam, 2009). Within the study, diagrams were constructed from a data-oriented approach, demonstrating how the data led to the formation of recommendations as well as the gathering and processing of that data (Shenton, 2004). An additional approach was a theoretical approach that described the concepts related to the research question that provided the foundation for the study (Shenton, 2004). As mentioned in the data analysis section, figures and diagrams were used in this study to address this audit trail method.

An additional method to address dependability and confirmability used in this study was peer review. Peer reviews are discussions with colleagues regarding the process of the study, the findings within the raw data, and any interpretations of the outcomes of the data (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, peer scrutiny of the project was welcomed and provided in the study (Shenton, 2004). Building into the study triangulation, audit trails, and peer review methods addressed the notions of dependability and confirmability.

Transferability

Transferability addresses the notion of being able to replicate the study, relative to a potential reader's context (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Methods of establishing transferability include thick, rich descriptions and ensuring a maximum variation of samples (Hesse-Biber, 2017). According to Shenton (2004), there are specific pieces of information that should be addressed within the study's outset including: the geographic location of the study; the mention of any restrictions in the type of people who participated; the number of participants involved with the study; the data collection methods conducted; the number and length of data collection sessions; and the overall time frame of the study in which data collection methods ensued (p. 70).

For purposes of this study, descriptions of the context and participants, as well as the sample size are provided. Also, care was administered to ensure a maximum variation of the sample by ensuring diversity of the participants' demographics and enrollment status. Participation was more accepted by the participants due to the frequency of Zoom meetings that has taken place within the most recent year due to COVID-19. This familiarity and ease generated increased interest and participation, despite the potential limitations of not physically being present on site to conduct interviews or the focus group in person.

Credibility

To ensure credibility in a study, one must address how well the study was conducted (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Specific items to address are: identifying if the sample matched the study's purpose, if the researcher's theoretical framework matched the purpose of the study, if the researcher spent adequate time in the field, and that established qualitative research protocols and procedures were followed (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Establishing credibility is one of the most important factors in demonstrating trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004).

There are many methods that can be utilized for confirmability. One method is member checks which was used in this study. Member checks can involve taking an analysis of the participants' data and affording them the opportunity to review and ensure the outcomes reflect their intent (Shenton, 2004). Additionally, the participants can verify or feed into the researcher's developing theories and add different perspectives, further contributing to the study (Shenton, 2004).

Further steps a researcher can make to ensure credibility is to undergo critical self-reflection on their position or reflexivity (Shenton, 2004). By conducting a self-examination on the positioning of world views, biases, or other items that could affect the investigation, is important to ensure credibility. Additionally, as this project proceeded, it was important to not only undergo the process of self-examination, but also to evaluate the project as it developed and record impressions of each data collection session as theories and patterns emerged (Shenton, 2004).

Additional items that ensured credibility with this study was ensuring adequate time was spent in the field and documenting those occurrences (Shenton, 2004). This refers to the collection of data, visits to the organization for document collection, and time spent with participants (Shenton, 2004). Furthermore, additional peer review sessions debriefing the findings and the processes being undertaken were needed as this study progressed (Shenton, 2004).

Finally, this study acted to ensure that the data collect from participants was accurate and honest. Shenton (2004) has offered several tactics such as the subjects should be able to voluntarily participate in the study, be given assurances of no right or wrong answers, that the status of the researcher should be emphasized, and that iterative questioning should be used. Regarding this study, participation was voluntary. All participants were free to decline to be in this study or withdrawal from this study at any point. The participant's decision to contribute or not carried no penalty and there are no immediate or long-range risks to any participant.

All participants did not and will not suffer a loss of privacy. All records were handled confidentially and all responses recorded were coded for privacy and will be deleted or/destroyed after 36 months. Pseudonyms were used for the participants who agreed to participate and all collected data and notes are locked in a filing cabinet. Care was taken to ensure that the participants' responses did not and will not place any of the participants at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the participant's financial standing or employability. Only the dissertation committee and I had access and will have access to the original survey responses. Consent forms were distributed to all participants who agreed to participate in the study and only those who completed the consent form were contacted for participation in the study.

Protecting all participants was paramount for this study. To contribute to the protection of all participants, a review of the study by the dissertation committee was done, followed by an application to the HSRB committee at the selected institution for permission to conduct the study. This was accomplished, prior to the qualitative study beginning. No contact was made with any participant until approval was granted and the study was in full compliance with all required modifications. This process was followed to ensure that the rights and welfare of human subjects in this study were and are properly protected.

As the primary researcher with this study, I successfully completed the training related to protecting human research participants, and evidence of this is on file. A certificate of completion from the National Institutes of Health Office of Extramural Research is on record and was also included within the HSRB application. Furthermore, additional steps were taken to protect the participants with this study upon receiving feedback from the HSRB committee.

Limitations

Investigation into other comparable private, faith-based institutions from multiple states would be warranted to make a larger generalization. Furthermore, expansion into state-funded universities could also be suggested to investigate similarities and/or differences in social networks, informal leaders, and influencers found therein, as well as rates of referrals, to determine the impact on the application decision-making making process of MBA students in comparison to private, faith-based institutions. Depending on the additional institutions chosen for a larger study, this could also bring about regional and cultural differences.

Care was taken with the purposive sampling measures used in this study to include as diverse of a sample size as possible for the semi-structured interviews as well as the focus group. Although the participants provided a diverse demographic representation, there was no response from those in the category of having only applied. With a larger study, the same care would be recommended so as to capture multiple diverse perspectives as possible, including this category. Despite the care taken in the purposive sampling of this study, there were specific external limitations.

Due to COVID-19, most of the participants, with the exception of one, Lindsey, preferred to participate in the semi-structured interviews and focus group in methods other than in-person. Lindsey was the only participant comfortable with an in-person interview. Flexibility was given to all participants based on their comfort level, willingness to participate, and participation preference, however, their availability to participate in-person or not can be considered a limitation to this study since all participants for the semi-structured interview did not participate in person. Although the data and perspectives were still captured, meetings held via phone and Zoom in lieu of in-person were seen as a limitation of this study as there is currently no true substitute for in-person dialogue.

Additionally, the Zoom meetings, held in the semi-structured interviews and the focus group, struggled with technological challenges in the forms of interruption of internet service and the recording equipment malfunctioning. Specifically, within the semi-structured interviews, the Zoom software did not record the full interview for one of the participants, Erika. Reliance upon field notes was required to include her interview and her summary was member checked. Within the focus group, two participants, Scott and Kathy, had internet service disruptions resulting in missed opportunities for them to hear from the other participants as well as limiting their opportunities to make contributions to certain questions asked of the group. Finally, during the focus group, Joe was distracted by the multiple monitors he had open at his home and was unable to devote his full attention to the questions.

Furthermore, it was difficult to capture when and where marketing ads may have influenced the application decision process of the student. Between banner ads, pop-up windows, email communications, and other forms of electronic advertising it was difficult for participants to truly identify which form of communication occurred first. Participants also had a difficult time remembering the exact sequence of events that contributed influence, if any, on their application decision. Another limitation of this study is related to my role as the researcher, given my professional occupation.

Serving as an executive director of an MBA program, my role as the researcher may have impacted the participants' responses. Despite my explanations, consent forms, and communications to all participants, it cannot go unnoticed that my role may have contributed to participant's responses to the questions in the semi-structured interviews and the focus group. Furthermore, related to my professional role and that of the researcher, I set aside my professional and personal experiences, as much as possible, to take an unbiased perspective. As Creswell (2013) mentioned, this concept is called bracketing or epoché and is seldom perfectly achieved (p. 80). The final limitation of this study was the availability of all participants, given the timing of this study.

The timing of this study occurred during the summer months of 2021. With the initial improving situation of COVID-19, but then the rising cases caused by the Delta Variant, participants were unable to take time off of work to participate, were unavailable due to scheduled vacations, or simply did not have the capacity or interest to participate in the study. All of these limitations impacted the findings of this study.

CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the different influencers found in social groups and how they impact an MBA student's decision to apply at an institution of higher learning. Students can be influenced by influencers within social groups through interpersonal communication, WOM communication, and electronic WOM (eWOM) communication. The strength of social ties and social relationships was examined to determine their impact on a student's decision to apply for admission in an MBA program. Also examined were the impact marketing ads, online reviews, and socioeconomic status had on the participants' enrollment decision. This study took place between June of 2021 and August of 2021.

It is unknown the impact informal leaders, interpersonal influence, and word-of-mouth communication have on a prospective MBA applicant's enrollment decision-making process. To investigate these unknown variables, this study addressed the following research questions:

R1: In what ways did applicants perceive the influence of word-of-mouth marketing on their decision-making process on the graduate business enrollment decision?

a) In what ways did graduate business applicants perceive the influence of trust on their decision to enroll?
b) In what ways did graduate business applicants perceive the strength of an influencer's relationship on their decision to enroll?

R2: In what ways did graduate business applicants perceive the influence of marketing advertisements and messages on their enrollment decision?

a) In what ways did graduate business applicants perceive the influence of online reviews (eWOM) on their decision to enroll?

R3: In what ways did graduate business applicants perceive that their socioeconomic status influenced their enrollment decision?

During the summer 2021 semester, 11 interviews and one focus group were conducted. There were six participants in the focus group. All six participants were also among the 11 interviews. Upon collection of the data, I began transcribing the interviews and focus group recordings and then reviewed all field notes and memos from what was observed.

This analysis revealed themes and codes used to describe the participants' lived experiences as well as serve as generalizations for a larger population. The three themes discovered are network contributions (R1), institutional points of distinction (R2), and personal development (R3). Each theme represents each research question and their associated sub-questions, where applicable. Additionally, each of the three themes contains three codes that all contributed to explaining the impact informal leaders, interpersonal influence, and word-of-mouth communication had in the participants' enrollment decision-making processes. Figure 4.1 displays the three themes, their associated codes, and the overlap among the themes.

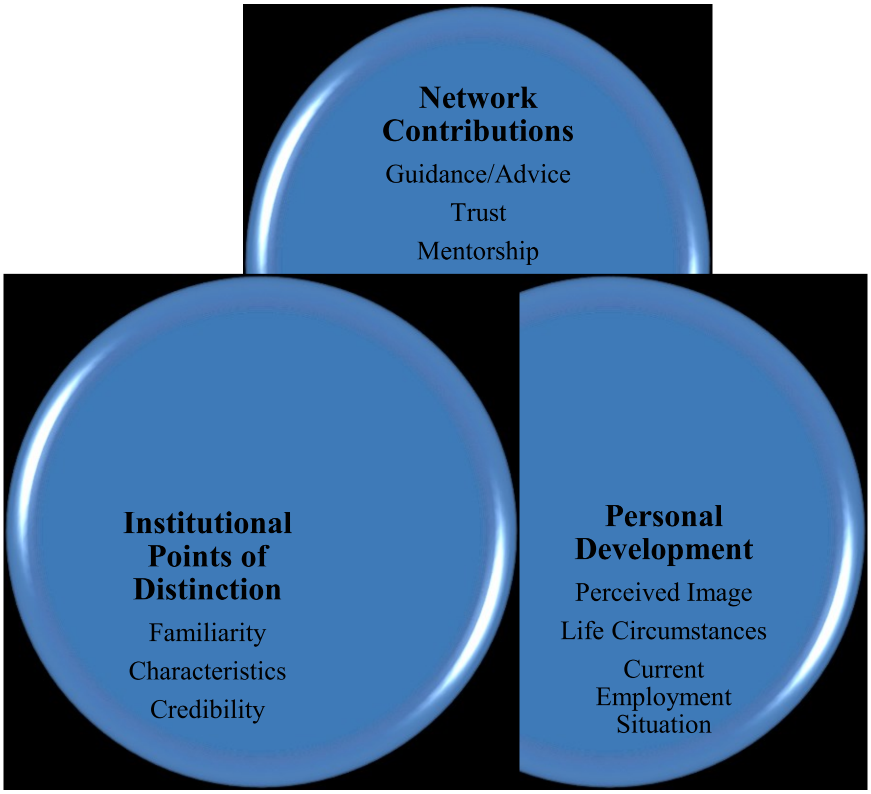

Figure 4.1

Three Themes and Associated Codes.

The theme of network contributions is related to research question one and its two sub-questions. The three codes within this theme that are most applicable from the participants' data are guidance/advice, trust, and mentorship. This theme was the most dominant among the three themes. The participants heavily relied upon those within their networks for information related to MBA programs and this reliance influenced the participants' enrollment decision-making process. However, the theme personal development was also influential in the participants' enrollment decision-making process and contained the next most influence. This theme is related to research question three. This theme contains the codes perceived image, life circumstances, and current employment situation. Finally, the theme institutional points of distinction carried the least amount of direct influence of the three themes, yet still contributed to the enrollment decision-making process. This theme is related to research question two and its sub question. The theme institutional points of distinction contain the codes familiarity, characteristics, and credibility.

This chapter will be organized by introducing the findings of the study. The findings are organized and presented in accordance with the numerical listing of each research question and its corresponding theme. Nested within each theme are three codes representing the participants' lived experiences as they relate to the research questions. The chapter will then discuss the conclusions that were drawn from the study.

Findings

Network Contributions

The theme network contributions relate to research question one and its associated two sub questions, addressing word-of-mouth marketing influence, trust, and the strength of the influencer's relationship on the enrollment decision-making process. For this study, network contributions refer to the experiences of those people whom the participants had discussions with regarding enrolling in an MBA program. All participants identified that they have social and professional networks and had discussed with those members their ideas of pursuing an MBA degree. These discussions concentrated on receiving guidance and advice from the people in their networks. The participants described that their relationships were formed on the basis of trust, specifically stemming from their networks' experiences with MBA programs and services. All participants valued and actively engaged with those who had experience with an MBA program within their networks. As a result, the participants felt that they received mentorship in return for this engagement. This theme was the most dominant among the participants in what contributed to their enrollment decision-making process and Figure 4.2 outlines this process.

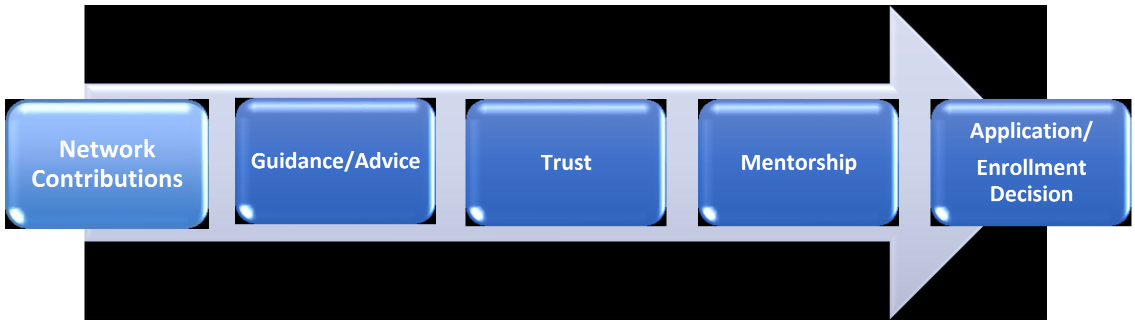

Figure 4.2

The network contributions theme and its codes.

Guidance and Advice

Seeking input from those who have experience with an MBA program can help with making an enrollment decision. Asking questions, addressing concerns, and discussing plans with those who have familiarity with an MBA program helps build more confidence in the applicant's enrollment decision-making process. This was evident from Renee's responses.

Renee relied upon those with experience when she was first considering enrolling into an MBA program. She had received recommendations to start her career first and gain professional experience before applying for admission to a program. Based upon this advice, she gave herself a timeframe of acquiring "a minimum of five years of professional experience because I always thought five years was a good mark." She continued that "I value those with experience in something I'm looking into to help me with my decision as I move forward." Additionally, "seeking recommendations from someone who has experience and is more familiar with a program and institution was extremely valuable." Finally, Renee stated with a sense of delight that her manager "recommended the institution I chose because she wants her people to grow and this helped with my decision."

Similarly, when Joe was researching MBA programs, he leveraged the experiences of those in his social and professional networks. He initiated discussions with people in his networks "for ideas, recommendations, and advice." Once Joe decided on the institution, he "solicited feedback on the program's structure and cost from people I knew that went there because of their knowledge and experience. These conversations had more impact than anything else in helping me decide." He was adamant about how he specifically targeted those in his social and professional networks that he trusted and had built up relationships with.

Lindsey contacted her sister and her previous manager for their viewpoints on pursuing and enrolling into an MBA program. She referenced these two, specifically, in the interview because she "wanted to have meaningful conversations with people who I knew had experience and could give me specific things to consider." She mentioned that her previous manager spoke to her regarding his success, and that "he told me that the MBA degree helped him advance and so he was encouraging me to do it."

This reoccurring concept of discussing ideas with others and seeking insight into their experiences contributed to the labeling of this code. These recommendations, guidance and advice helped contribute to the participants' enrollment decision-making process. An additional factor involved in the enrollment decision-making process was the level of trust the participants had with those in their networks.

Trust

All participants, in one way or another, referenced trust in their dialogue as it was a crucial aspect in deciding whom they would seek advice from in their social and professional networks. Additionally, all individuals reported trusting the information and guidance they were provided with, given the advice givers' experience with MBA programs as well as the pre-established relationships. Built on trust as a foundation, four interesting outcomes were produced by the participants regarding any meaningful interactions someone: situational trust, reciprocation, ties to leadership and links to relationships.

During the semi-structured interview and the focus group, Scott described who he trusts. As the conversation ensued, I labeled his definition of trust as situational trust based on his responses. He mentioned, in a confident tone during the interview, that "it depends on whom I'm speaking with and the return I'm going to get with those in my networks. Those people within my network whom I value the opinions of, I trust." Within the focus group, he again confidently stated, "however, I determine the level of trust I have in someone or something as calculating the value I'll receive by investing my time and/or money."

Kathy and Renee had a different perspective in that trust, for them, is reciprocal. During her interview, Kathy expressed forcibly in her mentioning that, "trust goes both ways." Renee, also during her interview, seemed as if she wanted to ensure I understood her definition of trust during the interview by clarifying, "it's important to me that trust be given to me the same way I give it to someone else. To me, trust is also found in leadership as well as knowing someone will be honest, dependable, and have open communication."

John's perspective on trust was directly tied to leadership. He indicated during the interview that for him, "trust is the backbone of leadership. Without trust, you can't even fit the definition of leadership." He was very specific as he digressed into his background, explaining that this is something he learned from his experience as a supervisor for three years as trust needed to be earned from those whom he was responsible for. He further elaborated during the focus group that, "my mentor, whom I trust with my life, influenced me to pursue an MBA program both in our discussions and his actions."

As soon as John had finished with his explanation of trust in the focus group, Kathy expanded upon it, stating that "trust means follow through, mutual agreement, and respect." It was apparent to me that social comparison was occurring, specifically as what Thompson (2008) identified as "comparison with similar others" when "people engage in comparison with similar others when they desire to have accurate appraisals of their abilities" (p. 230). She indicated that she considers these characteristics as those found in leaders and that is why she trusted the advice and recommendations of those in her network. She continued to explain in the focus group saying that, "trust means dependability, someone always coming through, someone to talk to, and you're able to take their word."

Both Colleen and Joe indicated, in their interviews, how, for them, trust is linked to relationships. To Colleen, trust is very important. She elaborated, "you need trust to build and form a strong relationship. You can have a relationship with someone without trust, but the relationship will be challenging and not fully formed." To her, a relationship is not substantial without trust. For Joe, trust is critical both personally and professionally, and he trusts those with experience. He mentioned in a confident tone that, “trust is the biggest factor of three, for me, in any relationship and for help in decision making. The others are credibility and aptitude.”

Although it was evident that the participants trusted those within their social and professional networks whom they sought for advice, guidance, and recommendations, this trust factor was earned, not given by default. The trust that comes when someone’s advice or recommendation is based on an earned experience carries significant weight when helping others. Trust also aids in the development and sustaining of a relationship.

Mentorship

Mentoring involves sharing experiences, offering guidance, and building trust. Although the participants differentiated their social networks from their professional networks, key statements were observed and analyzed from the participants leading to this code. The mentorship ranged from the participants’ family, former classmates, faculty whom they knew, and colleagues at work.

Michelle’s sister was entering an MBA program while Michelle was finishing up her baccalaureate program. Her sister offered a unique perspective of the content contained within an MBA program and was able to provide Michelle not only with tangible, detailed information, but also more intangible observations. Michelle indicated to this in the interview that, “I gained first-hand experience by witnessing how the MBA program was making her a more well-rounded individual and could see the benefits of the group work involved within her program.” Michelle credited her sister with not only providing information regarding the content of the classes, but also mentored her on the outcomes she experienced both in her personal and professional careers. Michelle also mentioned other family members that guided her on earning an MBA degree.

During the interview, Michelle explained that two of her uncles also have an MBA degree. She stated, “not only do they have their MBA degrees, they also have their PhD’s in chemistry and I recognized how their MBA degrees have made them more marketable.” She also mentioned that several people within her sorority have MBA degrees and “I witnessed the direction they are going in their careers.” During this discussion, she continued on the importance of the program advice and encouragement to pursue an MBA degree that she received from her uncles. She seemed envious of those having a degree already whom she referenced, but it was also apparent that their proven successes motivated her as well. An additional person whom Michelle mentioned was a former faculty member she met during her undergraduate program.

During the interview, Michelle mentioned that in one of her undergraduate courses, at a different institution from the one she selected for her MBA program, this faculty member encouraged her to consider the institution she chose instead of the institution she was attending for her undergraduate degree. As she recalled that conversation, she seemed confused that her instructor “referred me to speak with a faculty member at the institution I enrolled in for my MBA program, because where I was going for my undergrad had an MBA program.” She then indicated that she engaged in a conversation with this specific faculty member and that conversation “contributed to my decision on where I enrolled in for my MBA degree. He’s still a mentor to me to this day.”

Scott's views on personal relationships were apparent. He shared during the interview that, "personal relationships are important. Meeting with people and talking with people who I have a relationship with exposes their true lived experience and I can physically see the value." He continued that for him:

> Talking through my ideas on an MBA program was my strategy due to the fact that I trusted the individuals I was discussing this with, and my personal relationships with them, and discussions from their lived experiences added the most value in helping me make my decision.

The people Scott referenced, who provided him with this mentorship, were faculty members who taught in the MBA program he selected.

Colleen shared that she had discussed her MBA program pursuits with her manager and her "indirect manager" in her current place of employment. She pleasantly stated during the interview that "the atmosphere they have created is an ask me anything type of environment. This culture makes me trust them and include them in other professional relationships I have. They are my mentors."

From the participants' data, it was evident that mentorship contributed to their enrollment decision-making process. Some of the participants referenced family members as contributing to mentoring and guiding them on an informed decision, while the majority referenced those within their professional networks. Observing and analyzing the data from the participants revealed codes that produced the theme, network contributions.

During the interviews and the focus group, it was apparent that, for these participants, enrolling into a master's program or an MBA program was an already determined goal. However, to reaffirm and assist with the pursuit of that goal, reliance upon those within the social and professional networks was sought after. This mentorship came from those whom the participants are or were tied to and who could offer guidance, who could be trusted, and whom, ultimately, could provide mentorship that could contribute to the participants' enrollment decision-making process.

Institutional Points of Distinction

The theme institutional points of distinction addresses research question two and its sub-question, identifying the ways marketing ads and online reviews influenced the participants' enrollment decision-making process. This theme references specific attributes the participants identified during the interviews and focus group when discussing marketing ads and online reviews. It was apparent that while the participants' social and professional networks offered unique insights into MBA programs, the participants also relied on additional research to help them make an informed enrollment decision. Throughout the course of the participants' research process, marketing ads and online reviews contributed to the participants' desired attributes of the program and institution of interest.

The three codes produced within this theme by the participants are familiarity, characteristics, and credibility. These codes involved certain attributes of the MBA program(s) and institution(s) for consideration by the participants that were sought after when viewing marketing ads and online reviews. The main attribute was an already established familiarity with an MBA program and its accompanying institution. Figure 4.3 provides an outline of how the marketing ads and online reviews contributed to the expansion of the participants' research process by incorporating certain institutional points of distinction.

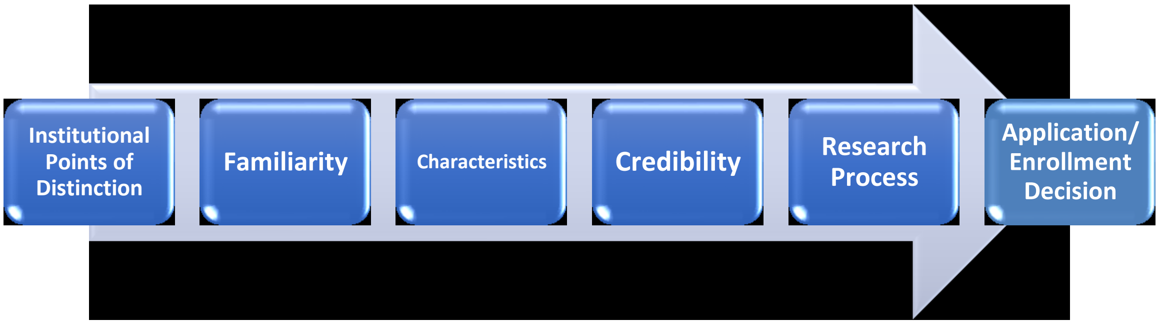

Figure 4.3

The institutional points of distinction theme and its codes.

Familiarity

The participants' knowledge of, or familiarity with, an institution was revealed to be of importance during the interviews and the focus group. The participants were often already familiar with several institutions, but what was revealed during the discussions was that marketing ads and online reviews stretched the participants' research scope to include and look into other institutions. This code carried the most weight within this theme and served as an extension of the research process by providing additional comparisons the participant could use against the institutions they were already familiar with. Through this extension of the research process, in addition to reaffirming an already established personal goal, it created an opportunity for the participant to either become familiar with other institutions or not, based on an initial assessment of the characteristics of the institutions identified in the marketing ads or online reviews.

Erika had always wanted to pursue an MBA program and considered it "as a life goal." She discussed during the interview that her online research process involved reviewing rankings by "well known entities." She clarified in a confident tone that she examined, “US News and World Report and how they rank and list MBA programs.” This contributed to her awareness of institutions in which to review.

John had a different analysis. During the interview, he specifically referenced an advertisement that promoted the affordability of an institution he was not familiar with. As he recollected, “it makes you think, should I go cheaper?” He then continued, “it causes thought and was eye catching. You can see the whole marketing strategy. You see the flashing lights, but at the end of the day, it’s the name and the reputation of the university that sells it.” For John, it was his familiarity with the institution on the basis of name recognition and reputation that carried influence for his decision on where to apply and enroll.

Joe had encountered a lot of different marketing ads. He received many ads from institutions he was familiar with and ads from institutions he was not as familiar with. Many of the ads with which he was not as familiar with were primarily from regional institutions, in proximity to where he lived and worked. The ads he came across from institutions he was not familiar with were from what he labeled, “100% online institutions. These types of ads made me lose interest due to my lack of familiarity as well as the lack of my ability to travel and visit the campus.”

Joe clarified further during the interview, exclaiming, “I’ll tell you what. What the marketing ad did have influence on was researching other institutions.” As we continued the discussion, he identified that the other items which were influential on the ads he saw that caused him to research an institution further was, again, his familiarity with the name of the institution, the outline of the program, cost of the program, and the accreditation of the institution.

Characteristics

Throughout the course of the interviews and the focus group, the participants' mentioned that they were more likely to look at an MBA program that had promoted their unique characteristics. When viewing marketing ads and online reviews, those marketing pieces that readily identified specific items of interest to the participants were the institutions that underwent further investigation. Throughout the analysis of the interviews and the focus group, the participants revealed the characteristics most important to them that they felt were distinctive and unique.

Lindsey's interview revealed several specific institutional points of distinction of MBA programs that were involved in her research process. Those points were the institution's accreditation, career placement reviews, and salary ranges for MBA alumni. She recalled during the interview that, "while I was an undergraduate, I wasn't clear on how to use my university's career services center and wanted to make sure that where I chose to go had a dedicated career services focus, specifically for MBA students." She explained that she determined this due to the different viewpoints and information from those in her social and professional networks that she acquired, and, when she researched MBA programs, that these were the items she was looking for in the marketing ads and online reviews. As she repositioned herself in her chair, she continued that while the marketing ads and online reviews "did not influence my decision to apply, they did influence my decision to research more, due to my experiences as an undergraduate student."

Renee had a similar experience to Lindsey. During the interview, Renee recalled that some marketing ads and online reviews "intrigued me to look further into the program. Others were overwhelming.” When I asked her if she could expand on the “overwhelming” comment, she seemed appreciative that I asked that question. She stated, “what was overwhelming was the ads contained a lot of text. There were too many bullet points and words and this made me lose interest in those programs. The ones that were straightforward and to the point were the ones I researched.”

Renee continued that what the ad(s) did do were “draw me to explore some other colleges/universities I hadn’t thought of before.” Thus, the ad(s) only expanded her research, and then, based on her research, she narrowed her selection as she learned more unique features about the institution and the program. This then led to more meaningful conversations with her networks.

She then clarified specific features of the program that helped her in the selection process. These items were, “price, location, course descriptions, program outlines, and accreditation.” The program outlines were related to the number of required courses and program options such as full time, part time, online, and in-person. She credits the information and knowledge gained from her network as being more influential on her application decision-making process than a marketing ad. This information was also repeated by others in the focus group.

During the focus group, Renee repeated how her research process went while discussing the influence of marketing ads and online reviews. She mentioned that, “my research involved local institutions I was familiar with, their classes, requirements, timeframe to completion, program offerings and options, accreditation, and rankings of the program. These are items I looked for in the ads I received.” She mentioned more in the focus group than in the interview which may be attributed to social comparison, as she was the last one to respond to this question during the focus group and those who went before her all mentioned “rankings” in their responses.

The marketing ads and online reviews that included specific characteristics the participant identified with were considered most important during the participants’ research process. Throughout the interviews and the focus group, it was clear that when examining marketing ads and online reviews, in addition to being familiar with the name of an institution, the accreditation of the MBA program carried influence and was a key characteristic of the program for consideration of further research. An additional characteristic looked for when the participants were receiving and examining the marketing ads and online reviews was the credibility of the institution.

Credibility

When examining the marketing ads and online reviews, the participants mentioned that, in addition to extending their research process, the marketing ads and online reviews also served as a way of justifying the credibility and legitimacy of the MBA program. What was revealed was that credibility and legitimacy not only stemmed from the perceived knowledge of and familiarity with an institution and its associated MBA program, but also the MBA program’s teaching delivery method from the institution. Additionally, the participants mentioned that they defined an institution and its MBA program as credible or legitimate, by those ads and reviews listing the institution’s physical characteristics and proximity to where they live and/or work.

When interviewing Joe, we discussed his viewpoints when examining online reviews. For Joe, when he examined online reviews, he would always question the credibility of the review. Overall, he does not put too much value in, or reports being influenced by, online reviews. For Joe, he emphasized confidently that “having someone with experience and knowledge that I can capture first-hand was a factor in my decision-making process versus an online review.”

John had comparable skepticism during the interview, as Joe did, when discussing online reviews. John mentioned that when he examined online reviews, “it caused me to ask questions, such as, are these actual graduates? Are they paid sponsors?” He thought that the institution he selected did a good job of providing online reviews, since the reviews he encountered included the graduation year and name of the individual which, for him, “created trust and validity in the review.” He continued saying that other reviews he had seen appeared “sketchy” without those characteristics.

Scott had a different perspective than Joe and John when discussing marketing ads and online reviews. He mentioned during the interview that it is important in a marketing ad and online review for institutions to promote in a specific, yet declarative tone, “the culture of the school. Even if they are doing an online program, students want to physically go and experience someone at the school and see the institution for themselves.” He continued his thoughts later in the focus group, stating,

> Even though online classes have been the norm for the past year, given the pandemic, I find value in being able to physically visit the campus and see the connection between faculty and students. This provides validity and credibility in marketing promotions of MBA programs.

Scott also referenced in the focus group that when viewing marketing ads and online reviews, institutions that have a physical campus location that are in close proximity to where he lives add credibility to the marketing promotion. This sentiment was also reciprocated by Michelle during the focus group.

During the interview and focus group, Michelle specifically mentioned that she, "wanted to be tied to a brick and mortar institution." During the focus group, she stated that she, "viewed some ads, but the ads I wasn't interested in were those promoting online institutions that I could not make the connection with to a brick and mortar institution." What was interesting was after she mentioned "brick and mortar" in the focus group, the common information effect was apparent as all participants then nodded their heads in agreement and exclaimed, together, with an emphatic, "yes, brick and mortar!" The common information effect explains that when groups get together, they discuss items in which they already have in common and this common information dominates the discussion (Thompson, 2008). It was apparent that they were all trying to find the right words to describe physical campus or physical location and once Michelle used this term it changed the tone of the focus group, making it more relaxed when providing responses about this topic, since there was now a common term that everyone wanted to use but couldn't until that point. Michelle continued in the focus group that those institutions' whose marketing ads and reviews are "local are those I deem credible and legit." Once again, the group nodded in agreement.

During Kathy's interview, she shared about her experience encountering marketing ads promoting MBA programs on billboards and social media, and she also referenced emails she receives "every now and then about applying for an MBA program, regardless of the fact that I'm enrolled." For the institutions she is familiar with and knows are legitimate, she opens and reads these emails she receives. If she has not heard of an institution, or is unfamiliar with an institution's ad, she does not open it or read it and begins questioning the legitimacy of that institution. She defined legitimacy as, "an institution I'm familiar with."

Kathy continued to explain in her interview that she believes that marketing ads for legitimate schools have value, especially if she is aware of people who have received an MBA degree from the school in the ad. During the focus group, Kathy mentioned that her list of "top schools" contained institutions that were close to where she lived and worked and only considered an online MBA program as "reputable" if she could physically attend the "brick and mortar institution."

The credibility given to the marketing ads and online reviews were centered on the participants' familiarity with the institution and MBA program. However, once the name was recognized, the ad or review needed to contain certain characteristics to merit further examination into that institution and program. Also, being able to promote a physical campus location that was close to the participants' residence and/or work was of paramount to these individuals. Combining these characteristics added credibility and legitimacy to the institution and program in the eyes of the participant, inspiring further research.

Summary

The codes of familiarity, characteristics, and credibility created the institutional points of distinction theme. These codes involved certain features the participants were seeking when viewing a marketing ad or an online review. While the marketing ads and online reviews did not carry direct influence on the enrollment decision-making process, the marketing ads and online reviews did influence further research aspects and created more opportunities for further discussions with the members in their social and professional networks. Therefore, the marketing ads and online reviews carried indirect influence in the participants' enrollment decision-making process.

Throughout the interviews and the focus group, all participants identified specific institutional points of distinction. Collectively from the participants, those distinctive points were cost, program structure, program outline, program delivery, length of program, accreditation, rankings, career services, physical location, familiarity with a program, salary outcomes, reputation, specialization or concentration of offerings, ease of admissions process, no entrance exam, existence of testimonials from alums including name and year graduated, and course descriptions. Those institutions whose marketing ads and online reviews captured as many of these distinctive characteristics as possible in their promotions were those that influenced the participants the most to expand the scope of the participants' research.

Even if the institutional points of distinction did not directly influence the decision-making process, they did contribute information that allowed participants to have more meaningful discussions with those in their social and professional networks. Those conversations did have a direct impact on the participants' enrollment decision-making process.

Personal Development

The theme of personal development is related to research question three, addressing the influence the participants' socioeconomic status had on their enrollment decision. All participants had indicated during the interviews and the focus group that personally developing themselves was their intent in pursuing an advanced master's degree.

Erika mentioned that when she was a child, her grandmother had inspired Erika to never stop pursuing education and was one of her drivers in her decision to earn a master's degree. Lindsey, Colleen, and Joe had established a goal of earning an MBA degree while in high school. The remaining participants mentioned that it was during their undergraduate careers that they had decided to later enroll in an MBA program. While all participants established their personal goal of earning an MBA degree at different points in their lives, there were life circumstances which influenced them to pursue their MBA degree now. These life circumstances carried the second most influence, after the relaying of first-hand experience of those in the participants' social and professional networks.

While their personal goal of earning an MBA degree was being established, interpersonal influences contributed to the development of an image of those who have an MBA degree by the participants. Further adding to this image were external events occurring within the participants' personal and professional environment. Therefore, for the participants, the items motivating the pursuit of their MBA degree were their perceived image of people post-degree, their current life circumstances, and their current employment situation. Figure 4.4 shows the flow of the codes for the personal development theme that influenced the participants' decision to enroll in the MBA program given their socioeconomic status.

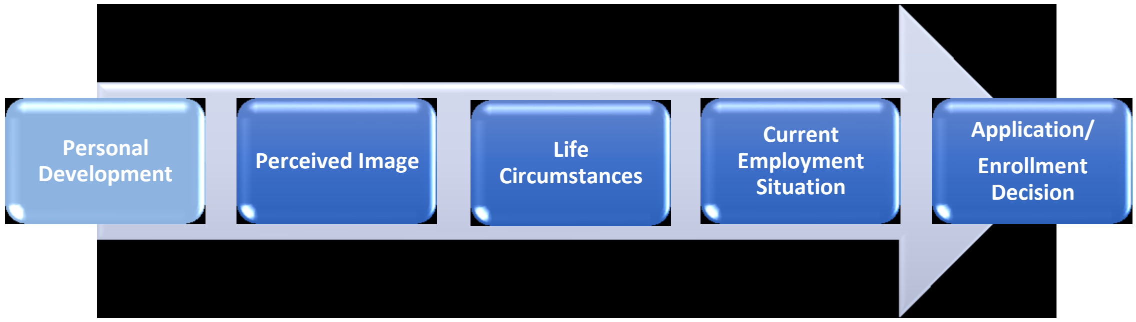

Figure 4.4

The personal development theme and its codes.

Perceived Image

Throughout the course of conducting the interviews and the focus group, it was apparent that all participants had built a perceived image for themselves of those who were enrolled in or had graduated from an MBA program. While the development of this perceived image happened at different stages of the participants' lives, it did play a role, albeit different ones, in influencing the participants decision to at some point pursue an MBA program. The overarching responses from all participants centered on witnessing career related outcomes and personal development of the individuals whom influenced their image. However, some participants mentioned also the societal image of earning an MBA degree.

During the interview, Renee mentioned that "an MBA degree is a way to improve my resume, when I seek out career opportunities in the future." She expanded in the focus group that "obtaining an MBA degree was always one of my personal goals. An MBA degree offers the benefit of more knowledge and I'll rely upon that to advance my career." She then confidently stated, "the knowledge I gain in this program will make me a more successful professional."

Lindsey had a somewhat related, yet different, image from Renee. During the interview, Lindsey explained that at the time she was finishing her high school career, her sister was pursuing her MBA degree and that triggered some curiosity. It was Lindsey's understanding that in order to acquire a good job, "you would need an MBA degree." Additionally, the image of an MBA degree, to Lindsey, "was someone who was elite, knowledgeable, had a sense of accomplishment, recognition, it commands respect from others, and it is a confidence booster." She continued that, "being able to say I have an MBA will boost my confidence."

Colleen, also, had first heard of an MBA program while she was in high school. Specifically, she stated during the interview that her viewpoints on the word "MBA as well as those who have one is that it carries a certain amount of prestige, elevation of status, only smart people have one, and they make a lot of money." During the focus group, this was reiterated when she stated, "I'm pursuing my MBA degree to accomplish a personal goal. It will be personally gratifying for me to have MBA in my title. I'll have an elevated status and prestigious recognition." She then continued that, "I believe I'll be happier with my career and it may lead to different job opportunities with the possibility of making more money."

Steve, also, discussed during the interview a similar image to Colleen. His response was very direct and to the point. He mentioned "I always wanted to earn an MBA degree. I view those who have one as professional and have an elevated status." John's view was similar to Steve's, however, John expanded on the societal image.

During John’s interview, he indicated that “I needed to have a bigger voice and so I put in my application. An MBA degree will command a certain level of prestige.” I asked him to expand on this thought and he explained:

> An MBA can be influential and promote a certain image. Society sees college as prestigious. I want an MBA to expand my knowledge of business functions and I feel that gaining this knowledge will help me more effectively communicate and relate to those I interact with personally and professionally. It’ll make me more marketable.

Michelle, also, combined career related images, personal advancement, and societal factors during her interview. She mentioned that earning an MBA degree will help advance her in her own personal and professional life and was passionate in her response as she explained:

> If you want to make it in a career field, an MBA is the way to get a promotion and climb the corporate ladder. I feel this way based on what I’ve seen at work and other societal factors. A lot of millennials are coming in with their MBA and their bachelor’s degrees at the same time and are promoted immediately, despite having no professional experience. It didn’t matter where they earned the MBA degree from; online or a brick and mortar school. Institutions are offering the opportunity to earn both an undergraduate and MBA together and that’s what is influencing me to pursue an MBA degree now.

Scott had a unique perspective to offer during the interview, which he repeated during the focus group. During the interview, he mentioned that “completing an MBA will provide me with a good backup plan in case my organization goes through more budget cuts." In his view, an MBA degree "carries with it valuable street cred for other career opportunities and can open doors for jobs I'm not even thinking of right now." Within the focus group, he clarified that he is not pursuing the MBA degree for a promotion or an increase in salary, but rather, "to acquire extra credentials and be more marketable." He has a personal desire to "continuously grow."

Throughout discussions with the participants, it was evident that they all had certain perceptions of what having an MBA degree represents. All of the participants referenced the opportunities an MBA degree affords in advancing careers; however, it was also interesting to learn that some of the participants viewed an MBA degree as a way to expand their own knowledge and make themselves better, personally. Further contributing to their perceived image of an MBA degree were changing trends in higher education, society, and other life circumstances that had influence on the participants.

Life Circumstances

Within all of the participants' responses, both from the interviews and the focus group, it was evident that specific events were occurring in both their personal and professional lives that influenced them to apply now for an MBA program. The personal events related to family situations and the impact the pandemic had on the participants' families. The pandemic also had an impact on the participants' chosen professions. These personal and professional events contributed to the code life circumstances.

Erika stated determinedly during the interview that earning an MBA degree is a "bucket list item. Again, it was ingrained in me as a child by my grandmother to pursue a master's degree and I was determined to do an MBA degree, regardless of my undergraduate major." Given her life situation, her personal ambitions, and her steady employment, now is the best time for her to pursue her MBA degree.

David provided a different perspective during his interview. He stated that, "given my current occupation and the company I work at, I started researching MBA programs within the most recent year." When I asked if he could expand on what was occurring at his company, he quickly responded, "the pandemic provided me with the opportunity to make the most of my time at home and capitalize on advancing my career." He paused and then continued, "it also will make me ready for opportunities in my career, should they become available."

Renee discussed the life circumstances influencing her to enroll in an MBA program. She began her MBA program after gaining six years of professional experience. Due to the pandemic, and given her current professional position, the timing seemed right to enroll in an MBA program now. She stated during the interview:

> Working from home and being able to balance work with school, I have time outside of my job and figured since I'm spending more time at home, now would be a great time to do this with what is going on with the world.

She also repeated this information during the focus group when she shared, "I decided to enroll in an MBA program now due to being able to balance work with school, given this pandemic situation we're in."

Colleen had similar life circumstances as Renee. During the interview, Colleen mentioned that her company has a tuition reimbursement program and she chose to enroll in January of 2021. She specifically chose that entry point due to her employer's "budgetary process for tuition reimbursement." Had she waited beyond January of 2021 she would have had to wait until January of 2022 to begin her program in order to be able to fully capitalize on her company's tuition reimbursement. She didn't want to miss out on the benefit and, "my children are becoming more active, so both my family and work-related situations contributed to my decision to begin now."

Steve's perspective slightly departed from the other participants. During the interview, he discussed that this past January was also the right time to look into an MBA program because he was in the process of transitioning out of military service and his current undergraduate degree, which is in a non-business-related discipline, was not helping him in his job search. According to Steve, it was "either get an MBA or go back and get a bachelor's degree in something else." Returning to another undergraduate program was not appealing for him so he chose to enroll in an MBA degree because he, "didn't want to start all over and pursue another worthless degree."

While the participants mostly had similar, yet different, life circumstances that contributed to their decision on when to enroll in an MBA program, it was evident that the pandemic was a major factor. Changes in the workplace, family situations, and career transitions also contributed to the participants' decision to enroll when they did. These life circumstances are also related to their socioeconomic status as well as their current employment situation.

Current Employment Situation

The participants indicated that changes in their workplace as well as their current employment situation contributed to their decision to enroll in an MBA program. Some of the participants indicated that they are currently witnessing updated hiring policies while others indicated that they are unemployed and are trying to position themselves for different career opportunities as well as acquire knowledge and experience to open their own business. Based on the participants' responses in the interviews and the focus group, this contributed to the code of current employment situation.

David mentioned during the interview that he has remained at his company for 24 years. He is pursuing an MBA degree because he wants to have more job security as he has, "witnessed changes in the hiring practices at my company." These changes have influenced him to enroll and complete his MBA not only to provide him with the opportunity for job security, but also for potential advancement. This is why he wants to do the MBA degree now and, "complete it in as timely a manner as possible."

Joe has also witnessed changes occurring in his organization. During the interview, he mentioned that "my company was acquired and while it wasn't a hostile takeover, there is volatility in the future of my career at this place." He explained this in a very calm and deliberate manner as he continued, "therefore, I began researching different MBA programs for job security, building up my skills, and marketability that is to be expected when looking for a new job." He then clarified "whether that's with this company or not."

John had a different perspective that he brought up during the focus group. Explaining confidently, he stated, "I'm doing an MBA now for potential advancement, although, it is not specifically needed for a promotion in my profession." He did mention later during the focus group that an MBA "could open more doors and serve me better in the future, but my current job is stable."

Steve, on the other hand, has a unique situation. As he is transitioning out of military service, he is currently unemployed. During the interview, he discussed what he would like to do with his MBA degree once he earns it. He stated with excitement indicating, "I'm interested in becoming an instructor and applying my project management specialization into what I did during the military. I want to translate technical writing into simplified language for people." I then asked if he could expand on this and he clarified again with excitement, "I have an interest for being a middle person for contractors, coders, and non-technical literate professionals."

Sharon is also unemployed. However, her situation differs from Steve's in that, due to the pandemic, she was able to retire from her previous industry. This has led her to explore other business interests with the time she has available. She emphatically stated during the focus group that she is "going into consulting and is actively seeking opportunities, combining my experience with my interests and my hopeful MBA degree soon!"

Throughout the course of the interviews and the focus group, it was evident that the participants are taking some challenging work situations and trying to make the most of them in an effort to secure their immediate future. While the pandemic contributed to some of the participants' employment situation, all of the participants referenced changes in their work environment or noticed changes forthcoming. These employment situations all carried influence on choosing to pursue their MBA degree now in an effort to secure and/or advance their employability as well as their socioeconomic status.

All of the participants had their own perceived image of what an MBA degree can do for them, based both on what they have witnessed from those in their networks as well as others outside of their networks whom using MBA degrees to advance their careers. While the participants' perceived images of life post-MBA degree were created during different times in their lives, the participants had referenced similar life circumstances that impacted this perception. Most notable were the participants’ family situation, work environment, and the pandemic. Also, due to the pandemic, this impacted some of the participants’ current employment situation, which influenced their decision to enroll in an MBA program.

Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that the participants did undergo a process in arriving at an enrollment decision for their MBA program of choice. Although no participant followed the exact same process, there were common influential aspects discovered in how they arrived at an enrollment decision. Although the main influencing theme was experience, 100% of the participants revealed that their intention to enroll in a master’s program was an already present, established goal.

The participants’ goal of enrolling in an MBA program was influenced, in part, by their perceived image of those who held an MBA degree as having successful career outcomes. The people whom the participants referenced provided mentorship and were within in their social and professional networks. Those within their networks were sought after for their guidance and advice, based on trusting those individuals.

The participants differentiated their social networks from their professional networks. Those identified within their social networks included immediate family, friends, and classmates. The participants’ professional networks comprised of colleagues, co-workers, current faculty, former faculty, current supervisors, and former supervisors. Within the interviews and the focus group, the findings revealed that the participants’ professional networks contained more diverse influencers in comparison to their social networks. Although both networks were utilized, the participants' professional networks were more frequently mentioned as having influence, based upon their likelihood of having direct experiences with an MBA program.

It was evident that those who had experience with an MBA program were sought after and were most influential in the participants' enrollment decision-making process. Based upon this experience, guidance and advice was provided from those individuals, contributing to trust, establishing or building a relationship, and contributing mentorship to the participants. While most of the participants did state that they would have enrolled in an MBA program regardless of obtaining a referral within their social or professional networks, researching an MBA program was influenced by marketing ads and online reviews. This research contributed to more meaningful discussions in these networks.

During the research process of the participants, there were certain institutional points of distinction the participants investigated. This pre-determined list of items was validated as the participants received marketing ads and messages as well as researched online reviews. Those marketing pieces that did draw interest, were primarily based upon the participants' familiarity with the institution as well as the characteristics chosen by the program or institution to be promoted. All of this was ultimately used in an effort for the participants to determine the credibility of the program. The marketing pieces were reported to have contributed to more meaningful discussions among those in the participants' social and professional networks. Throughout the research process of the participants, the marketing items identified by the participants served more for conversation pieces rather than directly influencing their enrollment decision. Regardless, in all participants, pursuing an MBA program was an established goal in their desire to contribute to their personal development.

The main items contributing to the participants' personal development were their perceived image of those with an MBA degree, the participant's current life circumstances, and the participants' current employment situation. The life circumstances were overwhelmingly influenced by the pandemic, affording the participants the opportunity to examine their current professional situation and their family situation. Additionally, participants saw an opportunity to take advantage of additional time they gained since those who were employed were provided the opportunity to work from home. Also, for those who were employed that participated in the study, there were certain factors at their work, influenced by the pandemic, causing them to consider enrolling into an MBA program and improve their socioeconomic status.

Some of the participants indicated that their future employment with the organization they currently work for was uncertain. Regardless of loyalty or dedication to the organization, uncertainty in changing work policies and hiring practices caused confusion among some of the participants, influencing their decision on the timing of their enrollment in an MBA program. Additionally, there were a few participants who were unemployed and transitioning their careers. These specific types of employment situations afforded the participants with an opportunity to try and accomplish an already established goal.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the different influencers found in social groups and how those influencers impacted an MBA student's decision to apply at an institution of higher learning. The participants in this study all indicated that they belonged to social and professional networks and they differentiated among these networks. This belonging stemmed from their personal identity which is related to social identity theory.

This chapter will be organized by introducing the overview of the findings followed by a discussion of the findings. Implications for theory, leadership, and practitioners will then be reviewed. The chapter will continue with suggestions for future research. The chapter will then conclude with the conclusions section, which will be described in accordance with the order of the research questions.

Overview of Findings

The findings from this study revealed that all participants underwent an enrollment process in arriving at their institution and program of choice. While the process was different for each participant, all participants relied heavily upon their social and professional networks for guidance and advice. Additionally, they all had a goal to personally develop themselves by pursuing an MBA degree and marketing ads and online reviews revealed characteristics of importance to the participants, causing them to expand their research process. Figure 5.1 provides a summary of the models identified related to the themes of network contributions, institutional points of distinction, and personal development that were found with this study.

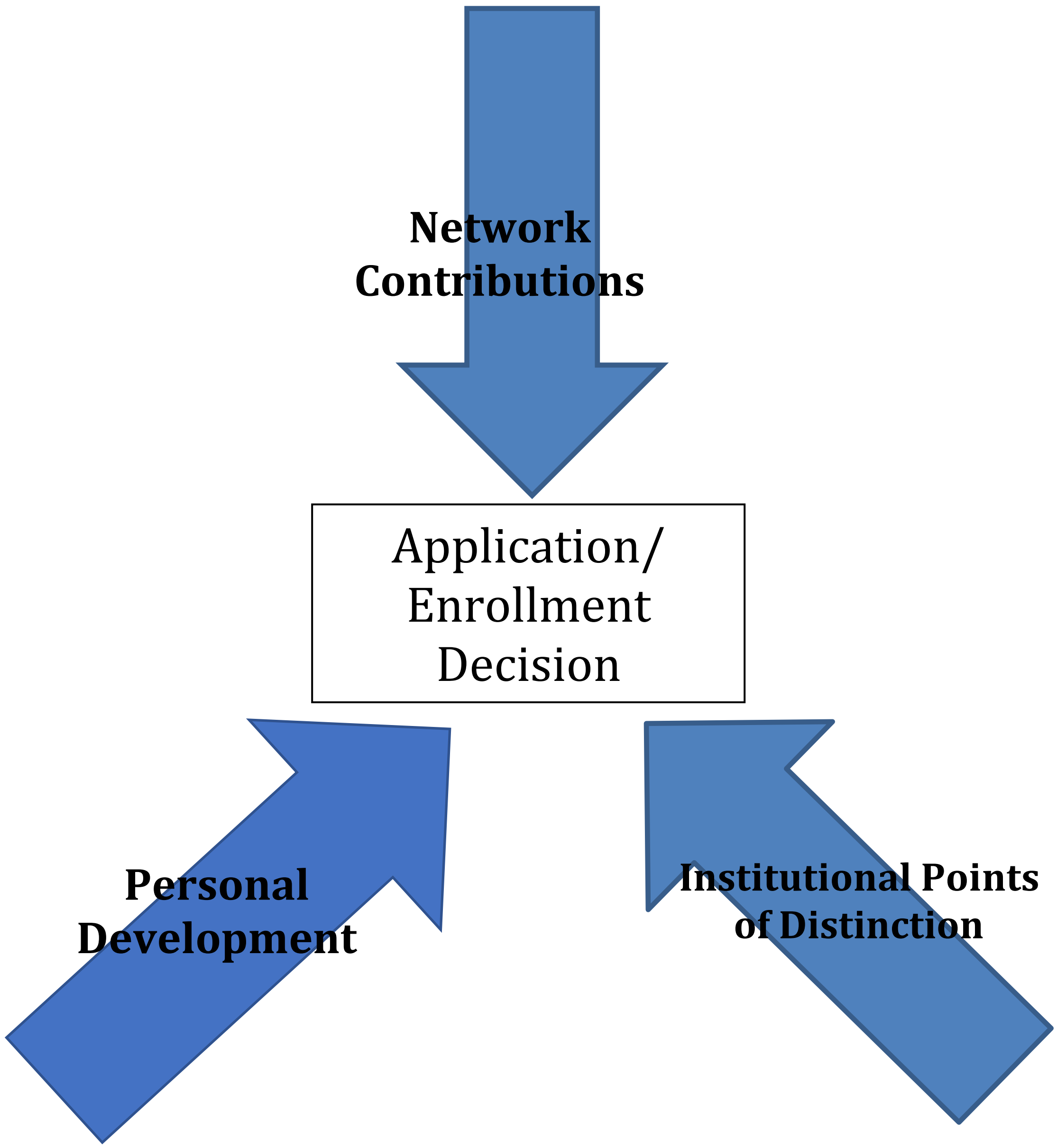

Figure 5.1

Summary of the models found.

The enrollment decision-making process the participants underwent was complex. While 100% of the participants mentioned that they would have enrolled in an MBA program regardless of receiving a referral, current events and life circumstances influenced discussions and fueled more active research into their MBA enrollment-decision. Despite the nature of the events that were occurring within the participants' lives, they all seemed pleased on their choice of institution and what their MBA program can do for them in the near future.

Discussion of Findings

WOM communication includes relationships and interactions. Through these relationships and interactions, the constructivism paradigm is relevant. This paradigm served as my researcher's lens and epistemology (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, determining the influence social relationships and WOM communication have on an MBA applicant's enrollment decision-making process was in line with the purpose of my study.

In answering the three research questions and their associated sub questions, the structure of this section is presented in accordance with the themes discovered. The themes network contributions, institutional points of distinction, and personal development are in order of research questions one, two, and three, respectively. The data provided by the participants answered the three research questions. The section concludes with an overview of the theoretical frameworks adopted that built on prior research.

Network Contributions

The theme network contributions refer to the lived experiences of those within the participants' social and professional networks who are enrolled in or have graduated from an MBA program. The participants revealed that those whom they relied on for insight into their MBA pursuits were those whom they had established relationships with. The relationships of those in their network and the participants tended to be family members, friends, colleagues and co-workers, mentors, faculty, and both current and former supervisors. The experience of others carried the most weight in influencing the participants' enrollment decision-making process and this theme answered research question one and the two sub-questions.

Those within the participants' social and professional network were relied upon by the participants for their guidance and advice. Input from those with experience and knowledge of MBA program contributed to meaningful discussions and ideas. This experience, knowledge, guidance, and advice from those within their social and professional networks were valued by the participants, especially due to the perceived trustworthiness of those individuals as mentioned by the participants.

The guidance and advice provided by the individuals in the participants' social and professional networks were from individuals that were trusted, given the experiences with an MBA program and the existence of established relationships. These established relationships were based upon rapport that revealed genuine care and emotional connections that created bonds, providing the basis for trust (Gu et al., 2021). The participants revealed four interesting outcomes they provided that answered sub-question one, which were situational trust, reciprocation, ties to leadership, and links to relationships. These trust factors contributed to the acceptance of guidance and advice which offered the opportunity for enhancing the trustworthiness of the relationship and provided meaningful mentorship.

Within the participants' social and professional networks, mentorship occurred. Mentorship was clearly built upon trust, given the guidance and advice disseminated from the experiences shared, which answered the second sub-question. In an effort for the participants to have received this type of mentorship from those referenced in their networks, it can be assumed that those in the participants' social and professional networks could be considered "satisfied customers" as they were positive about their experience(s) within their MBA programs.

This satisfaction with a product or service is at the root of being able to provide quality mentorship. Customer satisfaction with an MBA program includes a combination of student services, faculty expertise, knowledge gained, and experiential opportunities. As Giantari et al. (2021) stated, "customer satisfaction is the feeling of pleasure that is felt because consumers feel that their expectations have been fulfilled by presenting the performance of a product" (p. 1048). These facets contribute to the total experience, which determines whether or not there is an increase in positive word-of-mouth communication, recommending and offering guidance, building trust, and leading to the mentorship of others (Giantari et al., 2021). Additional researchers mentioned that student satisfaction is directly related to faculty and universities meeting the students' expectations and goals (Appuhamilage & Torii, 2019; Doan, 2021).

Determining the influence social relationships and WOM communication have on an MBA applicant's enrollment decision-making process resonated with research question one and the two sub-questions. Through the identified relationships and interactions, the evidence gained from the participants addressed the curiosity as to the true impact WOM communication had on the enrollment-decision making process.

Additional factors revealed were the value of trust in those within the participants' social and professional networks and the influencers among their networks. Also, while not directly provided by the participants, customer satisfaction with an MBA program of those in the participants' social and professional networks can be presumed, based on the positive WOM guidance and advice revealed. Understanding the interpersonal influence and impact WOM communication had on an MBA applicant's enrollment decision-making process confirmed the relevance of the constructivism paradigm.

Institutional Points of Distinction

Institutional points of distinction refer to the program and institutional characteristics the participants identified as being important to them. Specifically, the participants mentioned that when examining marketing ads and online reviews, those institutions whose ads or online reviews contained as many of the characteristics as possible drew the participant to research those specific institutions and programs further. Overwhelmingly, it was identified that the knowledge of and familiarity with an institution and/or the name of an MBA program was the most impactful in contributing to the participants' research process.

Whether or not the participant had familiarity with an institution was the main characteristic drawing interest. However, if the participants saw an ad from an institution or program they were familiar with but had not yet researched, they would then include it in their research scope. In addition to the familiarity of the institution, there were other characteristics of importance to the participants when examining the marketing ads and online reviews.

One of the important characteristics of an MBA program, according to the participants, was the accreditation. Additional characteristics that were considered desirable were cost, program outline, and program offerings, meaning full-time, part-time, or online options. The name recognition and characteristics of interest to the participants that were promoted in the marketing ads and online reviews led to the development of participants' perception of the program or institution's credibility and legitimacy.

Having a physical campus that the participants could easily travel to was the main characteristic used to determine credibility. Specifically, the participants mentioned their preference of attending an institution that was a "brick and mortar" institution. Despite the lack of in-lecture course offerings given the pandemic, it was still important for the participants to be able to identify with an institution that was local to where they live and work as this determined the credibility and legitimacy of the institution for them.

Marketing tactics including ads, messages, and online reviews include relationships and interactions. Based on the evidence acquired from the participants, it was determined that the impact the marketing creative had was on their research process rather than their final enrollment-decision. Additionally, elements of relationship marketing theory were revealed while answering research questions one and two since this theory is based on the principles of trust, mutual value creation, and commitment (Yazdanpanah & Ehsani, 2020). This was an interesting find as the participants' experiences revealed the marketing ads, messages, and online reviews carried no direct influence on the enrollment-decision and many did not find value in the online reviews. Despite previous researchers indicating that efforts have been made to build and strengthen trust between customers and online service providers, the participants did not trust the online reviews mentioned. However, these reviews and marketing tactics did expand their research process (Gu et al., 2021; Edelman & Luca, 2014). They then brought this information back to their social and professional networks whom they trusted for guidance and advice that generated mutual value creation and enforced commitment to their personal development.

Personal Development

All of the participants identified that they had an established personal goal to pursue an MBA program. The study revealed that in addition to enhancing their career outcomes, they also felt that earning an MBA degree would also contribute to their own personal development. This personal development was fueled by the perceived image of the participants as to what an MBA degree could do for them, stemming, often, from the perceived successes of those in their social and professional networks.

The participants referenced the career successes of those who had an MBA degree, were within their social and professional networks, and whom they directly discussed their intent on enrolling into an MBA degree with. Additionally, the participants referenced what they perceived to be society's image of those whom have an MBA degree, based on what they witnessed in both their personal and professional lives. This perceived image, as well as other life circumstances, contributed to the participants ultimate decision of enrolling in an MBA degree at this specific point in their lives.

The participants were all at different stages in their lives and careers at the moment of their decision. As a result, each were affected by varying life circumstances that contributed to their decision on enrolling in an MBA program. The main factor for all participants was the pandemic. Due to the pandemic, they had more time at home and could better balance work and family situations. They also were witnessed changes in their workplace as a result of the pandemic, which caused uncertainty.

It was evident that the pandemic influenced their personal and professional situations causing them to more aggressively consider enrolling into an MBA program. The professional situations that the participants mentioned varied. The participants provided examples such as stability, transitioning careers, retiring early, job security, and changes occurring in their workplace.

It was also evident that the perception of what an MBA degree can do, the personal and professional situations impacted by the pandemic, the participants' current employment situations, and events occurring in their workplace provided the opportunity to have more meaningful discussions with those in the participants' social and professional networks. Additionally, the already established goal of earning an MBA degree coupled with the perception, the pandemic, and events occurring in the participants' workplace fueled the self-evaluation of the participants, further motivating the pursuit of an MBA program. This leads us to the participants' socioeconomic status which is influenced by personal and professional events and also contributed to the enrollment decision-making process answering research question three.

The multiple events impacting the participants' enrollment decision-making process was another interesting find. Due to the pandemic, the participants accelerated their enrollment decision-making process to apply for an MBA program. Furthermore, examining the participants lives, based on the data provided, revealed their social memberships and the resources available in their social and professional networks that served as influential factors in their enrollment decision and the core tenets of establishing and sustaining relationships.

Theoretical Findings

As Stets and Burke (2000) identified, people are tied organically to their groups through social identities and are tied mechanically by their role identities. One's social identity and role identity influence the social group's behavior. An important process in the activation of one's social identity is depersonalization. Depersonalization is the process of adopting the social group's norms and values in a specific social category where the individual contributes their own unique norms and values to improve the group (Hogg et al., 1995; Turner et al., 1987). Once depersonalization is realized, the social group's identity is activated, fueling membership and belonging. Within this study, evidence of social identity theory was noticeable throughout all of the research questions, but was primarily noticeable in the findings related to research question three.

As social groups acquire an identity and members, resources and assets of those members contribute to social capital. Social capital theory interprets capital as assets and resources found within social relations. According to Coleman (1988), social capital involves the resources in social relations, focuses on the development of an individual. Bourdieu's view of social capital values the resources found in group memberships and relationships, especially when connected to the education of the individual which contributes to social reproduction (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Vorhaus, 2014). Followers of both Coleman and Bourdieu recognize the impact socioeconomic status has on educational achievements which, through the sharing of similar characteristics, fuels stronger relationships (Coleman, 1988; Rogošić & Baranović, 2016; Sullivan, 2001).

Additionally, social capital is an important factor for individuals to gain competitive advantages, as enhancing their own social capital enhances competitiveness for future opportunities (Guo, Wang, & Wang, 2021). Evidence of social capital theory was most noticeable in the findings related to research questions one and two.

When examining social groups and the relationships found therein, relationship marketing theory is relevant. Gumerrsson (2011) defined relationship marketing as interactions that occur within network relationships. This theory suggests that through value creation the strength of relationships will be enhanced resulting in the likelihood of improving customer retention. These principles of relationship marketing theory produce loyal customers, who provide unique opportunities for brands as they are more likely to recommend or cross-sell via word-of-mouth (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000; Rather 2019; Rather & Sharma, 2017; Sharma & Rather, 2017; Vivek et al., 2012). Within this study, evidence of relationship marketing theory was most prevalent in findings related to research questions one and two.

When researching a product or service, seeking out the opinion of someone who is trustworthy, credible, and has experience with that product or service can end up influencing the purchase decision. The sharing of an opinion related to a product or service is the definition of word-of-mouth (Aslam et al., 2011). This sharing of information is where reliance on trustworthy and credible sources can be beneficial when considering a purchase decision, as the impact of the information being communicated hinges on the message, the recipient, and the source's relationship (Gilly et al., 1998; Glanville et al., 2013; Matos & Rossi, 2008; Van Hoye et al., 2016;). Word-of-mouth communication is a form of interpersonal interaction that includes in-person and electronic information sharing. Evidence of word-of-mouth communication was found throughout the findings of this study, but most evident within research question one and its two sub-questions.

Electronic word-of-mouth communication also spreads information on a product or service, but is different than traditional word-of-mouth communication. Traditional word-of-mouth communication is reliant on social cues related to persuasion whereas electronic word-of-mouth communication relies on content characteristics to determine persuasiveness and influence (Knapp & Daly, 2002; Walther, 1996; Zhang et al., 2010). Reading online reviews, marketing ads, and marketing messages that are positive or negative influences the decisions of prospective customers as research suggested that online feedback is influential on decisions to purchase, especially if the feedback is attributed to a known individual (Buttle, 1998; Sandars & Walsh, 2009). For positive word-of-mouth to occur customer satisfaction is paramount. Electronic word-of-mouth communication was most evident in the findings related to the sub-question in research question two.

Customer satisfaction and word-of-mouth communication are related to an individual or group engaging in word-of-mouth (WOM) activity. Positive customer satisfaction and word-of-mouth can bring about in an individual a desire to help others by sharing knowledge and experiences, demonstrating the appearance of being knowledgeable, defending an ego, and reducing cognitive dissonance (Anderson, 1998; Arndt, 1967; Dichter, 1966). Within the field of higher education, WOM was shown to convey the advantages of the institution, the program, and the advantages found therein (Alwi et al., 2019; Giantari et al., 2021; Hemsley et al., 2016). In an effort to maximize the opportunity for both positive word-of-mouth and customer satisfaction in higher education and MBA programs, it is important to understand the enrollment decision process of an MBA applicant. Customer satisfaction was most prevalent within the findings related to research question one and the sub-question of research question two.

The process an MBA applicant undergoes in both program and institution selection is directly related to the consumer decision process. The enrollment decision-making process an applicant undergoes involves a series of sequential steps. Overall, MBA applicants will begin with recognizing a problem or need for pursuing an MBA degree, to choosing an institution, enrolling, and then analyzing their post-enrollment decision (Aslam et al., 2011). Acquiring an understanding of consumer behavior and its relationship to an MBA applicant's enrollment decision-making process has many benefits which include assisting enrollment and student service managers to improve customer service, plan new programs, and enhance existing ones (Alshammari, 2016; Aslam et al., 2011). Evidence of the consumer behavior process was found throughout this study, but most evident in the findings related to research questions two and three.

Implications for Leadership and Implications for Practice

There are several implications that can be concluded from this research. While the marketing ads and online reviews did not have direct influence on the participants' enrollment decision, they did produce meaningful conversations and expanded the research scope of the participants. The direct influence of the experiences shared of those within social and professional networks as well as the participants' personal goal of earning an MBA, presents opportunities that leaders in higher education to capitalize on.

Enrolling into an MBA program is a significant purchase decision. This purchase decision can be due in part to one wanting to advance their career, improve their professional development, and advance their business acumen. The more information attained from experienced, trusted, influential, and respected individuals within one's social group, the more informed decision, in theory, one can make. Thus, the opinions and advice of those within a social group who have experience and who hold the credentials that one is interested in earning can be very influential.

Through social interactions in social groups, elements of situational, authentic, transformational, and servant leadership can be experienced. Advising one to improve their own situation by identifying a path towards achieving a goal, and delivering the advice authentically and truthfully, can help transform an individual. This transformation not only benefits the individual in arriving to a decision of enrolling in an MBA program, but also demonstrates how they can, in return, transform others. Transforming and serving others can take multiple forms, including offering advice and opinions that will develop and help individuals for their betterment, leading to empowerment.

Individuals who are empowered have a sense of wanting to develop others, which is also a characteristic of servant leadership (Alston & McClellan, 2011). Empowering someone towards a path of arriving at an enrollment decision after providing advice and suggestions also builds trust and accentuates influence. An influential tactic that can be used to fuel empowerment, trust, and influence through leadership and established relationships is positive word-of-mouth communication.

Generating positive word-of-mouth communication involves improving the student experience which, in turn, should generate customer satisfaction. Improving the student experience involves a concentrated effort on superseding the students' expectations. This can involve enhancing student services, promoting experiential learning activities, creating focused career center services, and ensuring faculty and staff are continuously developing themselves in an effort to provide concierge service. These improvements will contribute to a more informed prospective student, enrolled student, and satisfied alumni who will repeat the process of recruiting more students through word-of-mouth communication and interpersonal influence. In order to improve student services, the culture of the organization must be examined.

The culture of an organization is extremely powerful and important to understand before implementing an institutional change. Schneider (2000) has contributed an important point regarding culture in that, "no management idea, no matter how good, will work in practice if it does not fit the culture" (p. 26). To move forward with an improvement initiative, an institutional leader should be aware of the organizational structure and implement a simple structure while still taking into consideration the organization's culture.

The role of institutional leaders is to assess the needs of the institution and be ready to meet challenges for the betterment of society, those whom they lead, and most importantly, themselves. Colleges and universities are designed as an employer to serve employees while also at the same time utilizing its employees and institutional capital to shape and serve students. This is a unique characteristic of higher educational institutions as it is designed to meet the needs of multiple stakeholders, simultaneously. Therefore, the outcomes produced by this study are not specific to MBA programs, but rather all programs that institutions of higher learning provide.

The results produced by this study can be applied to undergraduate and graduate level programs. Surveying and meeting with current students and alums in an effort to improve program offerings and services can impact the entire organization, leading to positive word-of-mouth communication and referrals. Establishing more intimate relationships with students and alumni through surveys and interviews as well as acting by implementing suggestions provided, where appropriate, also demonstrates trust.

The students and alumni of an institution of higher learning invested their time, money, and trust in the college or university with the expected outcome of obtaining a degree that will improve or maintain their socioeconomic status. It is then the institution of higher learning's responsibility to reciprocate that trust with their students and alumni in an effort to keep improving and adapting in the ever-changing environment of higher education. Reciprocating trust in students demonstrates collaborative innovation that can lead to knowledge sharing (Yilmaz, 2019). This knowledge sharing contributes a more informed prospective student.

Those who have more educational attainment are deemed to be more trustworthy. This can be attributed to better socioeconomic circumstances, access to social capital, and cognitive abilities since education develops cognitive skills and noncognitive traits such as sense of control, conscientiousness, and resourcefulness (Becker, 1965; Glanville et al., 2013; Mirowsky & Ross, 2003). Additionally, those with more education have an increased ability to participate in other forms of socializing (Fischer, 2011; Glanville, Andersson, & Paxton, 2013; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006). Other forms of socializing can be within social groups that are governed by shared norms, values, rules, and understandings (Axelrod, 1984; Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Burt & Knez, 1995;

Glanville et al., 2013; Putnam, 2000). Those who have educational attainment and socialize in groups generate trust among other members of the group, contributing to social reproduction, which related to higher education, can generate more enrollment.

An initiative that can generate more enrollment is through the inclusion and involvement of alumni in the recruitment process. Specifically, MBA program administrators can create an alumni mentorship program that can be open to any alum from any class year who is interested in serving as a mentor to current MBA students and prospective MBA students. Assistance with academic guidance, career advice, and personal development can be provided by the alumni. Additionally, the alumni can offer prospective and current students' first-hand knowledge from an expert in industry, as well as an opportunity to expand their professional relationships and connections and explore interests and employment opportunities. These added benefits can serve as both recruitment and retention initiatives, fueling and contributing to social reproduction.

MBA program administrators can also involve alumni and current MBA students through the creation of networking events. The networking events can serve as opportunities for current students to more intimately engage with alumni on career options and MBA program course selection while at the same time can serve as recruitment initiatives. The benefits for the prospective students, current students, and alumni are the sharing of experiences, creation of relationships, and expansion of networks.

For those MBA programs that already have a successful current student and alumni population, who are eager to contribute to the institution in more than just monetary donations, the establishment of a word-of-mouth referral program would also be a strategy that practitioners can deploy. The power of WOM referrals affords MBA program administrators the opportunity to re-evaluate the services and experiences of students within the MBA program and capitalize on enrollment while also generating loyalty.

Researchers have stated that student loyalty is not only dependent on student satisfaction with the education and service delivery of the institution, but also on the relationship with the institution (Doan, 2021; Gallegos & Vasquez, 2019). This concentrated effort on relationship development will contribute to the sustainability of the university. This activity of generating more intimate relationships with current students and alumni can influence both loyalty and sustainability (Doan, 2021; Latif, Bunce, & Ahmad, 2021).

Gaining the perspectives of alumni who have gone through the MBA program yields the most relevant opinions for not only programmatic and service changes, but also for future recruitment. Additionally, the current MBA student body can also be impactful in referring people they know who would benefit from the institution's MBA program. The goal would be to create a WOM referral program, relying on alumni and current students to serve as a backbone of recruitment for future enrollment.

Limitations

This study was conducted with several limitations. First, this study investigated one private, faith-based institution in one geographic location. As such, the population and sample size limited the cultural differences of social and professional networks' impact on the enrollment decision-making process to one specific region. However, the generalizations discovered can be applied to other faith-based institutions within the geographic region of where the study was conducted.

Second, due to COVID-19, most of the participants preferred to participate in the semi-structured interviews and focus group in methods other than in-person. Flexibility was given to all participants based on their comfort level, willingness to participate, and participation preference, however, their availability to participate in-person or not can be considered a limitation to this study since all participants for the semi-structured interview did not participate in person. Although the data and perspectives were still captured, meetings held via phone and Zoom in lieu of in-person were seen as a limitation of this study as there is currently no true substitute for in-person dialogue.

Third, the enrollment decision-making process is complex and difficult to assess. Specifically, it was difficult to capture when and where marketing ads may have influenced the application decision process of the student. However, through iterative and systematic questioning techniques in the interviews, the participants were able to convey their experiences. Additionally, within the focus group, using iterative and systematic questioning techniques revealed the similarities and differences between the enrollment decision-making process as the participants were able to share their experiences and relate to one another.

Fourth, another limitation of this study is related to my role as the researcher, given my professional occupation. Serving as an executive director of an MBA program, my role as the researcher may have impacted the participants' responses. I set aside my professional and personal experiences, as much as possible, to take an unbiased perspective. As Creswell (2013) mentioned, this concept is labeled bracketing or epoché.

Suggestions for Future Research

Replicating this study among other higher education institutions offering an MBA program would be one suggestion for future research. Included within this scope would be institutions identified as small to medium sized faith-based and non-faith-based institutions, larger state funded institutions, and research-based institutions. Through this replication, examining the similarities and differences among the diversity of the participants, socioeconomic status, and establishment of a personal goal among those participants pursuing an MBA degree would be suggested. Additionally, examining the participants' social and professional networks to determine different levels of influencers who may have contributed to the enrollment decision and examining the impact marketing ads and online reviews had on the participants to determine similarities or differences to the outcomes of this study would be recommended.

Moreover, including those participants who applied only would be suggested to determine what prevented them to progress in the application cycle. Identifying factors, timing, discussions, or any other influential characteristic(s) of those who only applied can contribute to a better understanding of barriers to entry as well as events that occur that impact the enrollment decision-making process. This information can also provide a depiction of students within this category and ways the institution(s) could assist them in completing the decision-making process.

Different types of institutions attract and retain different types of students. By replicating this study to all types of institutions offering an MBA program, a wider appreciation of an MBA students' enrollment decision-making process would be expected. Also, identifying how, if at all, prospective students applying at different types of institutions utilize their networks would be recommended. However, replicating this study can go beyond the scope of newly admitted and enrolled MBA students.

The expansion of this study would be recommended to involve current MBA students who are nearing graduation as well as alumni. Examining their networks, socioeconomic status, and levels of influence would be suggested to gain a larger perspective of retention and satisfaction with their choice. Additionally, replicating this study can be expanded beyond MBA students.

This study can also be expanded to include undergraduate and graduate programs of all disciplines. Involving applicants, admitted students, enrolled students, and alumni of multiple disciplines can gather a larger scope of influencers and characteristics of what attracted them. Furthermore, the information produced can provide marketing professionals with unique opportunities to design specific tactics for individual programs. Every major and program has unique characteristics found within their discipline and identifying those unique attributes, and modifying the study to those distinctive features, would be another suggestion for future research. The outcomes of these suggestions for future research can yield significant opportunities for leaders and marketing professionals in institutions of higher learning to make impactful changes in programs and services based on student feedback.

These changes will demonstrate institutional trust and value in their customers, which will be reciprocated by future referrals. Additionally, investigating the levels of customer satisfaction through replicating this study to multiple populations of applied, admitted, enrolled, and alumni can provide feedback that can lead to meaningful updates. These suggested replications will help determine the impact informal leaders, interpersonal influence, and word-of-mouth communication have on an applicants' enrollment decision-making process for multiple disciplines, institutional sustainability, and growth.

Researching in a Pandemic

Suggestions from this study for future research can assist those conducting qualitative research in this current environment. COVID has changed the learning environment and afforded prospective participants with flexibility in participating. I summarize the practitioner, methodological, and conceptual suggestions for future researchers in Table 5.1 and the key findings from the results are discussed in greater detail below.

Related to this study, there are five suggestions relevant to those conducting qualitative research studies in this current pandemic environment. Those suggestions are technology, interviews, focus group, non-verbal communication, and observations. The suggestions are related to researchers, methodological, and conceptual frameworks.

One of the suggestions is technology. Using multiple devices containing recording software can aid the researcher with capturing the lived experiences of the participants across multiple variations. Additionally, technology also refers to ensuring quality internet connections of both the researcher and the participant in order to capture the lived experiences and have a meaningful interaction with the participant. Furthermore, in order to have a meaningful interaction with participants, flexibility is suggested.

Flexibility to participants in this current environment must be practiced. Affording options such as in-person, online, or over the phone during a period of uncertainty affords the contributors opportunities to participate in comfort and ease, contributing to the quality of the experiences gained. Further adding to the suggestions is the focus on non-verbal communication.

Having a concentrated focus on the participants' non-verbal communication while using recording software affords researchers opportunities to understand the lived experiences. Changes in tone, physical positioning, and facial expressions can lend information to the researcher for perhaps points of clarification, follow up questions, or emphasis on a particular topic. Observing these characteristics can present significant findings relative to the phenomenon being studied.

Conducting a qualitative study during a pandemic presents the researcher with more of an opportunity to be engaged in every procedure of the study. Detailed field notes, memos, and summarizing immediate reflections after conducting an interview, focus group, as well as a random thought is paramount. The benefits of recording technology afford the researcher with the opportunity to revisit comments and non-verbal communication that can further contribute to supporting the methodology and the concepts under review. While there is no substitution for an in-person meeting when conducting a qualitative study, familiarity with technology software affording the opportunity to interact has provided researchers with the ability to continue expansion of recording the lived experiences of individuals.

Table 5.1

Suggestions for future qualitative researchers.

	Technology	Interviews	Focus Group	Non-Verbal Communication	Observations
Researcher	Use recording software on multiple devices for each interaction with participant(s); smart phone, tablet, and computer. Ensuring internet connection is adequate of both the participant and the researcher.	Flexibility provided to the participant for meeting location based on their comfort level. Online interviews should be sensitive of time for participant to remain engaged and share their experiences.	Flexibility provided to the group for meeting location based on their comfort level. Online focus groups should be sensitive to time for participants to remain engaged and share their experiences.	Active listening and focused visual techniques during sessions in an online environment.	Use as many of the senses as possible. With online or phone sessions, focused hearing, seeing, and speaking senses will be used. Engagement of the researcher in every procedure is paramount.
Methodological	Having multiple recording options will ensure the capturing of the lived experiences of the participants should one or more tools become inoperable.	Understand how individuals experience things differently. Concentrated effort on the lived experience of the participant.	Understand how a group of individuals experience things differently. Concentrated effort on the lived experiences of the participants.	Being mindful of non-verbal communication can present significant findings contributing to the phenomenon during the session(s).	Field notes, memos, and immediate reflections upon the conclusion of interviews and/or focus group to capture themes or topics produced during sessions.
Conceptual	Using recording software on multiple tools provides opportunities to explore and analyze diverse cases. Backup options to internet connections is recommended to ensure the quality of the recordings.	Allows for individuals to share their story with a focused interest placed on the participant in an online environment. Comfort level of using online software provides opportunity for participants to be at ease.	Allows for comparisons and contrasts of multiple diverse experiences in an online environment. Comfort level of using online software provides opportunity for participants to be at ease.	Recognizing changes in pitch, tone, and/or body language can reveal aspects of the participant's lived experience related to the question(s).	Consider the context, explore ways to capture the phenomenon with descriptive questions, and actively imagine the phenomenon when analyzing transcribed data.

Conclusions

This study examined the impact informal leaders, interpersonal influence, and word-of-mouth communication had on an MBA applicant's enrollment decision-making process. An investigation into the participants' social identity, social networks, verbal and electronic word-of-mouth communication, was conducted to determine the impact on the MBA program and institution selected. Furthermore, an examination of the participants' socioeconomic status occurred to determine influence on the enrollment decision.

This study revealed that the experience of those within the participants' social and professional networks carried the most influence in the enrollment decision. It was evident that WOM marketing was influential on the participants' enrollment decision-making process. Those whom the participants trusted within their social and professional networks contributed to meaningful discussions, influencing the decision-making process. Furthermore, the strength of the relationships among those within the participants' social and professional networks contained family, friends, colleagues, supervisors, former supervisors, classmates, and faculty. These influencers provided meaningful mentorship to the participants and addressed research question one and the two sub-questions.

The institutional points of distinction that the participants were looking for in the marketing ads and online reviews, when found, expanded the scope of research into other institutions as opposed to having a direct influence on the enrollment decision-making process. Those ads that contained the characteristics of the institutions and/or MBA program the participants were familiar with were deemed as credible by the participants. Through this expansion of the research process, the participants were able to further discuss their decision with their social and professional networks and ask for guidance and advice. This addressed research question two and the one sub-question.

The next most influential aspect in the enrollment-decision making process, after the participants' social and professional networks, was the participants' own personal development goal. This goal was influenced and reinforced by their perceived image of what an MBA can do for them, as well as their environmental circumstances such as the pandemic and their current employment situation. These situations contributed to additional meaningful and impactful conversations with those in their social and professional networks, which ultimately influenced their enrollment-decision making process and addressed research question three.

Collectively, the enrollment decision-making process involved multiple factors. Although these factors all contributed influence into the decision-making process, the participants' social and professional networks were the most influential. Examining the lived experiences of the participants involved with this study revealed the impact informal leaders, interpersonal influence, and word-of-mouth communication had on the enrollment decision-making process.

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Appendix A

HSRB Approval Letter

TO: Ron Mickler

FROM: Ashland University HSRB Chair

SUBJECT: HSRB Approval

PROJECT TITLE Informal Leaders, Interpersonal Influence, and Word-of-Mouth

Communication: Understanding Master of Business Administration Applicants'

Enrollment Decision-Making Process

HSRB APPROVAL CODE 6-16-21 #31

The Human Subjects Review Board has approved your research study. You may proceed with the study as you have outlined in your proposal. The approval is granted for one calendar year. Research participant interaction and/or data collection is to cease at this time, unless application for extension has been submitted and approval for continuance is obtained.

The primary role of the HSRB is to ensure the protection of human research participants. As a result of this mandate, we ask that you adhere to the ethical principles of autonomy, justice, and beneficence. We would also like to remind you of your responsibility to report any violation to participant protections immediately upon discovery. Likewise, we would like to remind you that any alteration to the research proposal as it was approved cannot move forward. Any amendment to the application must be submitted for approval before the project can resume. We wish you success in your discoveries,

Dr. Peter R. Mallik
Chair, Human Subjects Review Board
Ashland University

Appendix B

Consent Form

Informal Leaders, Interpersonal Influence, and Word-of-Mouth Communication: Understanding Master of Business Administration Applicants' Enrollment Decision-Making Process

(Participant Consent)

A. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

Mr. Ronald J. Mickler, Jr., in Ashland University's Doctoral in Leaderships Studies program is conducting a collective case study to help gain a better understanding of the enrollment decision-making process you underwent in submitting your MBA application. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are identified as having submitted an MBA application for admission into the Spring 2021 or Summer 2021 semester.

B. PROCEDURES

If you agree to be in the study, the following will occur:

> You will complete one demographic questionnaire. The purpose of the demographic questionnaire is to validate the information submitted on the MBA application. Upon the receipt of the demographic questionnaire, you will be invited to participate in a semi-structured interview. Upon the completion of the semi-structured interview, you will be invited to participate in a focus group.

The demographic questionnaire will be distributed during June of 2021 and will take a total time of about five minutes.

The semi-structured interview will be arranged during June or July of 2021 and will take a total time of about 60-90 minutes.

The focus group will be arranged during July of 2021 and will take a total time of about 90 minutes.

C. RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

Confidentiality: Participation in research will not involve a loss of privacy. Your records will be handled confidentially with all responses coded for privacy.

Only Mr. Mickler will have access to the responses. No individual identities will be used in any reports or publications that may result from this study.

D. BENEFITS

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information that is gained from this study on the enrollment decision-making process an MBA applicant undergoes will provide valuable information for educators and the information you provide may help higher education and marketing professionals develop enhanced tactics and services for current and future MBA students.

E. COSTS

There will be no costs to you as a result of taking part in this study.

F. PAYMENT

There is no payment for this study.

G. QUESTIONS

You have talked to Mr. Mickler, or the person who signed below, about this study and have had your questions answered. If you have further questions, you may call him at 440-454-0435 or Dr. Judy Alston, Professor, Department of Leadership Studies at 419-207-4983.

If you have any comments or concerns about participation in this study, you should first talk with the researcher. If for some reason you do not wish to do this, you may contact the Human Subjects Review Board Chair, Dr. Peter Mallik, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. You may reach Dr. Mallik at 419-289-5340 or via email at: pmallik@ashland.edu

H. CONSENT

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. You are free to decline to be in this study, or to withdraw from it at any point. Your decision as to whether or not to participate in this study will have no influence on your present or future status as a student.

If you agree to participate, you should sign below.

____________________ ____________________________________

Date Signature of Study Participant (student)

____________________ ____________________________________

Date Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Appendix C

Demographic Questionnaire

Please indicate the gender you identify with:

- Female
- Male
- Other

Please indicate the race you identify with:

- African American
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Caucasian
- Hispanic
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- Other

Please indicate your enrollment status:

- Submitted Application Only
- Applied and Admitted Only
- Applied, Admitted, and Registered for MBA classes

How did you arrive at a decision to apply for an MBA program? Please select all that apply:

- Family Referral
- Personal Referral
- Professional Referral
- Online Referral
- Marketing Ad
- Other

Was your decision to apply for an MBA program influenced by your current employer?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Please indicate how many years of professional work experience you have:

- ○ 1-2 years
- ○ 3-4 years
- ○ 5+ years

Appendix D

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Part 1:

1. Please tell me when did you first hear about an MBA program? What were your thoughts?
2. Please tell me when did you first decide to do an MBA program?
3. Did you actively try to network with others and seek advice regarding an MBA program?
4. What can you tell me about your social network? Do you differentiate your personal social network from your professional network? Please explain.
5. Please tell me if anyone in your network(s) has an MBA Degree. Did anyone in your network(s) recommend an MBA program to you?
6. How long have you've known the people in your network(s)?
7. Please tell me about the people in your network(s) that you would label as a leader.
8. How long have you known the leader(s) in your network(s)?
9. In the context of relationships, what does trust mean to you?
10. Do you trust the opinions of those in your network(s)? Why or why not? Please explain.

Part 2:

1. Please tell me about marketing ads you have seen promoting MBA programs.
2. What was your impression of the marketing ads?

3. Please tell me the influence the marketing ads had on your decision to apply for an MBA program.
4. What had more influence on your decision to apply for admission; the marketing ads or someone within your network(s)? Please explain.
5. Which occurred first regarding your decision to apply for an MBA program: a conversation with your social network or a marketing ad? Please explain.
6. What is your impression of online reviews regarding MBA programs?
7. Did an online review(s) influence your decision to submit your MBA application? Please explain.
8. Would you have made the choice to apply for an MBA program if you were referred or not?
9. How do you define "referral?"

Part 3:

1. Please tell me about your current job/profession.
2. How did you acquire your job?
3. How many years have you worked in this position?
4. Please tell me about your academic background.
5. Why did you choose that institution/major? Why are you interested in pursuing an MBA Degree?
6. Would you feel comfortable discussing these items in a small focus group?

Appendix E

Focus Group Questions

Part 1:

1. How did you come to know about the MBA program?
2. Please tell me when did you first hear about an MBA program? What were your thoughts?
3. Please tell me when did you first decide to do an MBA program?
4. Did you actively try to network with others and seek advice regarding an MBA program?
5. Why are you choosing an MBA program at this point in your life?
6. Who or what referred you to the MBA program? Was it a person or a marketing ad?
7. Would you state that you trust that person/people who referred you? Please explain.
8. Tell me about who referred you.
9. How long have you known that person/those people?

Part 2:

1. Please tell me about the marketing ads you've seen on MBA programs.
2. Did you research the MBA program online? If so, why?
3. Did you research the MBA program online before talking to influencers/your social network?
4. Who/what would you say influenced you more to choose an MBA program; an online ad or in-person referral? Why?

5. Would you have made the choice to apply for an MBA program if you were referred or not?
6. How do you define "referral?"

Part 3:

1. Please share and describe what you do for a living.
2. Were you referred by someone to apply for your current job? Were you referred by someone to any job you've held?
3. Are people you work with part of your network?
4. Would you state you trust them and their advice?
5. Please share and describe your academic background. How/why did you choose that institution/program?
6. Were you referred by someone to the institution you earned your bachelor's degree/major? If so, who made the referral? Family, friend, other?