Peer-Reviewed Article

A New Conceptual Model for Understanding International Students' College Needs

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ABSTRACT

This study concerns the theory and practice of international marketing in higher education with the purpose of exploring a conceptual model for understanding international students' needs in the context of a four-year college in the United States. A transcendental phenomenological design was employed to investigate the essence of international students' needs within their study experiences and explore a conceptual model that can explain these needs. Qualitative data were collected from 12 undergraduate and graduate international students through semi-structured interviews. Using thematic analysis, findings expand typical marketing mix frameworks and advance an eight-dimensional international student needs model: Program, Place, Price, Promotion, Process, People, Physical Facility, and Peace.

Keywords: Globalization, Higher Education, Internationalization,Marketing Mix, Student Needs

Colleges have been engaged in recruiting international students who are largely perceived as a source of revenue, while paying little attention to these students' desires and requirements. The crux of sustainable marketing and success in recruiting international students is about analyzing and satisfying students' needs and aspirations. The study reported in this article is distinct from other needs analysis/assessment studies, e.g. Martens and Grant (2008), where the objective is to engage in the evaluation of the level of need for specific programs or services that would assist in developing and/or improving these programs or services (Posavac & Carey, 1997). The present study concerns the broader phenomena and aims at providing insights for campus level strategic internationalization planning.

BACKGROUND AND STUDY MOTIVATIONS

As free-market and neo-liberal economic views have spread since the 1990s, the global direction taken by governments worldwide has been favoring a near-universal participation in an ever more financially independent and market-oriented higher education (Kwiek, 2004). The General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in January 1995 is an expression of commitment to such global direction (Herbert & Abdi, 2013). Governments, as well as higher education providers, view international students mainly as a source of revenue (Naidoo, 2010). The United States of America (U.S.) Department of Commerce (2016), for instance, reports that international students contributed more than $32 billion to the U.S. economy in 2014.

In fact, the significance of international students extends beyond the amounts of money these students bring, as they make useful political, cultural, social, and educational contributions (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Campuses that host international students benefit from international profile and reputation building; faculty, student, and staff development; and research and knowledge production (Knight, 2004). Countries that attract and retain talented international students build their human capital, knowledge economy, and develop strategic alliances with other nations (Altbach, 2016; Edwards, 2007).

Further internationalization of higher education, including wider attendance of international students in classes and other campus life activities, seems to be happening with an inexorable veracity. This is so mainly because internationalization is a consequent of globalization that is empowered by continual advances in transportation and communication technology (Casey, 2009). In fact, globalization concerns the current reality relevant to the virtual impossibility for nations, societies, and communities to sequester themselves and their educational functions from their counterparts in the world (Spring, 2008). Globalization necessitates looking at the world as a whole since current human activities in different localities involve increasingly intensifying processes of transfer and exchange of products and services, as well as views, information, knowledge, and people (Anderson, 2001).

Globalization and neoliberalism – including its consequent increasing higher education internationalization activities – are tied to each other, as they happened to spread around the world around the same time in history (Schuetze, Kuehn, Davidson-Harden & Weber, 2011). Neoliberalism concerns the reconstruction of the philosophical underpinnings and economic mechanisms through, and by, which education functions in society in a way where individuals, rather than the state, are more responsible for pre-dictated outcomes (Davies & Bansel, 2007). Critics argue that claims of value made by neoliberal thinkers are not supported by

evidence from empirical research, as individuals' interests may be different from the society as a whole (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2008). At the international level, underdeveloped and developing countries may not have enough potential to actively or equally engage in a free trade context; such countries are likely to become consumers rather than providers or equal partners (Beck, 2012).

On the other hand, proponents of neoliberal and market orientations to education believe that neoliberal economies design policy and practices to be focused on outcomes and quality enhancement through market freedom; quality improves through global competition, as only schools that satisfy students' need, hence are perceived as good, survive (Szekeres, 2010). Maringe and Gibbs (2009) argue that due to the current global economic conditions, "the university has had to embrace the technologies of the market and consumerism; strategic planning with its emphasis on mission, vision and value, matching resources to opportunities and of course marketing" (p. 4). Except for the case in some affluent Western European countries, much of higher education around the world has increasingly been involved in entrepreneurial revenue generating activities and marketing (Childress, 2009).

MARKETING AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' NEEDS

In fact, marketing has often been a source of suspicion to educationalists; it can easily be linked to commercialism and selling, and is regarded as an intrusion on educational values (Hayrinen-Alestalo & Peltola, 2006). It is not, "an uncommon misconception that marketing is little more than advertising and selling" (Ivy & Alfattal, 2010, p. 131). Marketing, however, is not necessarily so as it is a multi-value process and not merely about selling and promotion (Wright, 2014). The concept of marketing involves, "identifying the nature of what is required by the clients [students and other stakeholders] and then ensuring that the school gives ultimate priority to supply that product [program or other services] and maintain its quality" (Davies & Ellison, 1997, p. 4). In a similar vein, Ham and Hayduk (2003) propose that marketing higher education is about satisfying the needs of higher education customers, students, faculty, parents and other stakeholders, while higher education sustains its quality and values; otherwise, higher education institutions will not, in the long run, and under normal competitive conditions, survive and prosper.

The market has the force to improve education since one of the intended benefits of increased competition and choice is to motivate schools to develop a closer relationship with students and become more responsive to their needs (Brown & Baker, 2013). The market is not an actor that positively or negatively affects education and its quality, but rather the

domain in which different stakeholders interact and perform exchanges (Regini, 2011). Neoliberalists advance that the state and the academic communities are not agenda free and do not necessarily act for the best interests of all citizens (Brown, 2013). Marketing education, on the other hand, helps provide the context in which social interests are negotiated and fulfilled by society (McMahon, 2009). A common feature of all marketing definitions is the investigation of customer needs – requirements and desires – and the satisfying of those needs (Filip, 2012). The analysis of customer needs is often done through a marketing tool referred to as the marketing mix (Ivy, 2010).

A highly cited marketing mix model for education is the 7Ps: Program, Place, Promotion, Price, Process, Physical Facilities, and People (Kotler & Fox, 1995). These constitute the domains of students needs' as (1) 'Program' refers to the programs a higher education campus makes available to students. (2) 'Place' concerns the delivery of 'Program', as it relates to making education accessible in terms of time and physio-geographical distribution of 'Program'. (3) 'Promotion' is all the methods that institutions use to speak to the public. (4) 'Price' are tuition and other expenses incurred during study. (5) 'Process' is the management of enrollment, teaching, and learning. (6) 'Physical Facilities' concerns the way in which the institution is physically shaped and includes the nature and quality of campus facilities provided. Finally, (7) 'People' is the administration, the faculty, and the staff of a higher education campus. The degree of importance of each of the dimensions of the marketing mix is perceived differently by different student populations. Thus, sustainably successful higher education institutions need to constantly engage in the analysis and satisfaction of relevant student populations' needs as per the contexts and the objectives of such institutions (Ivy, 2008).

RESEARCH METHOD

This research is based on findings from a qualitative study regarding the experiences of 12 undergraduate and graduate international students who were studying at a public comprehensive university campus in Southern California. The campus was medium size, almost 20,000 students of which 1,172 were international, about six percent. Two participants were from China, two from Korea, two from Saudi Arabia, one from Brazil, one from Germany, one from Japan, one from Mexico, one from Syria, and one from Turkey. Seven participants were undergraduates and five were graduates, and they studied in five different colleges, Arts and Letters, Business and Public Administration, Education, Natural Sciences, and Social and Behavioral Sciences. Nine students were self and/or family funded, and three students received funding through scholarships.

Data used were extracted from a more comprehensive mixed methods longitudinal project. The transcendental phenomenological study reported here sought to explore what it was like to experience international education in the U.S. in comparison to the dimensions of international students' needs established in the literature: Program, Place, Promotion, Price, Process, Physical Facilities, and People. This method helped investigate the universal essence of the lived experiences of participants with the objective of finding out about the commonalities in these experiences (Polkinghorne, 1989). Elicitation of data was done while asking broad questions about what and how in semi-structured interviews that lasted between 60 and 90 minutes: (1) What is international education experience like? And (2) how is international education experienced? The first question was intended to help listen to stories where students described what international education meant to them including these students' desires and requirements. The second question, on the other hand, provided an opportunity where students could report challenges they faced as they were experiencing international education. Both questions were purposefully constructed in broad terms with the intention to help collect freely emerging data (Seidman, 2012), that would answer the following specific research question: What can be a conceptual model that would explain international students' college needs?

Interviews were recorded and manually transcribed. Then, data were coded in two cycles using theme analysis methods and Moustakas (1994) six-step procedure: (1) bracketing out researcher impressions about the phenomena; (2) verbatim transcript were studied with respect to their significance for a description of the experience, all relevant statements were recorded and each non-repetitive, non-overlapping statement was listed; (3) the meaning units were related and clustered into themes; (4) the meaning units and themes were synthesized into a description of the textures of the experience using verbatim examples; (5) a structural description was constructed; and (6) a textualstructural description of the meanings and essences of the participants' experience was constructed.

Taking into consideration that themes come both from the data, an inductive approach, and from the researcher's prior theoretical understanding of the phenomenon, a priori approach (Ryan & Bernard, 2003), and due to the nature of the research question, data were coded in two cycles. The first cycle was top-down and employed 'structural coding' (Saldaña, 2009, p. 66). The topics of inquiry, or priori themes, corresponded to the 7Ps marketing mix model. The second cycle of coding was bottom up, as it looked for any additional and freely emergent themes other than those identified in the model. Hence, inductive and deductive thinking were employed (Creswell, 2014), while trying to make sense of data and build the themes of international students' needs.

Trustworthiness of the data was enhanced by member checking through face-to-face follow up interviews where participants gave feedback on the descriptions of their experiences. Additionally, feedback from two peer debriefers who are experienced qualitative researchers was solicited to ensure credibility. One debreifer had been an international student herself and the other was familiar with international students' issues as he had coordinated international programs at a comprehensive university campus in Texas. Debriefers were given the raw transcripts, the structural descriptions, and the individual textural descriptions. The researcher and the debriefers had four 45-minute discussion sessions on the meanings made of the participants' experiences.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis suggests that international students' requirements can be descried through Program, Place, Promotion, Price, Process, Physical Facility, and People model advanced previously in the literature. However, as an additional theme emerged from the data, a more comprehensive conceptual model would include an eighth P dimension that can be called 'Peace'.

The Need Domains in the Traditional 7Ps Model

Colleges offer degree and non-degree programs, libraries, housing, dining, and other services. These are all referred to as Program and establish the offerings higher education institutions provide to their students (Ivy, 2008). Data in this study suggests that international students expect these to be of better quality and/or uniquely different from programs offered in their home country. In addition, when asked to describe their program needs, participants provided meaning units that illustrated that they aspired to distinguish themselves by having international education experiences that would elevate them socially, and qualify them for improved employment prospective.

> I made my decision to leave home and come here based on the quality of the education such as our school of business here has excellent reputation and they have many majors in MBA we do not have at home. People will respect my degree when I go back home. The education here is, I think, is the best and I am sure I will easily find a good job back in Saudi Arabia. (Frank)

Frank thought that his program at the campus where he studied offered more focused concentrations, and it was of better quality than similar programs in his home country. The analysis of the data revealed Program related needs were the most to be brought up and expanded on by participants. These findings suggest that much of the essence of

international students' experiences revolve around program and service needs relevant to expectations from their host international campus and their international experience as a whole. In addition, textural descriptions also revealed People, Price, Physical Facility, Process, and Place needs. Although these need domains were consistent as categories with those advanced in the traditional 7P model by Kotler and Fox (1995), it was found that international students' requirements do not constantly match those of domestic students. For instance, international students interviewed in this study thought that course scheduling was unexpectedly inconvenient for them. In fact, campus scheduling, especially for graduate courses, takes into consideration the domestic population's needs for evening classes since a good percentage of these work and study at the same time. On the other hand, international students are normally dedicated only to their full time study and prefer morning classes.

Lastly, compared to other need domains, Promotion was reported in less significant statements and only four meaning units in the data were deemed relevant. Participants suggested that they needed effective communication about their campus programs, services, activities, and events. Here is a reflection that Henry shared in his interview:

> A lot of things are going on. I heard from my friends the rec center give a skiing trip last week. I did not know until after. I still do not know where to find out. They should tell us… We would go because it is a lot of fun and I could make American friends.

In fact, international students appreciated engagement opportunities provided by activities organized by student union, student clubs, and their campus recreational center, although they thought that information about these activities are not always easily available. This suggests that campuses need to consider additional channels that can deliver messages to these students more effectively.

Adding Peace: The New 8Ps Model

The most important finding of the analysis in this study is the recognition of a new need domain, Peace, that was not reported on in previous marketing mix models. Figure 1 below illustrates the new 8Ps international education marketing mix model advanced by this study.

In addition to the traditional seven need domains, structural and textural descriptions in the present study reported reflections on how participants sought safe and peaceful experiences while they were studying abroad. Meaning units that made this theme incorporated 'safe/safety', 'tolerant/tolerance', 'welcoming', 'friendly', 'peaceful/peace', and

'secure/security'. In describing their need for Peace, participants shared the following:

> You know, living in China and coming here is different, totally different. In China, I cannot imagine what it is going to be like here. I was afraid and my family wants me to be safe. You know Hollywood movies… In China, we think that Americans are big, and dangerous, and have guns in their cars. I am sorry for the stereotype but this is how we think. Yes, I was afraid when I first came… mmm… I am still… I don't stay out after eight. The university should have more life and activities at night. I feel lonely and do not know how to go to parties. I did not travel all the way … come here to stay in my room. (Laura)

> Honestly… Errr… The U.S. can be scary. Just after I arrived I saw the picture of a wanted person posted on doors in the university. I think he kidnaped a student. When I saw that, I was scared because it was posted about two days before and I said, mmm… this is the beginning. I know there is police station on campus but I need the university to help make the campus secure especially for people like me. You see I am wearing hijab [Muslim headscarf] and people may not tolerate my religion. I feel unwelcomed sometimes and make me sad. (Sarah)

Figure 1: International Students' Needs 8Ps Model
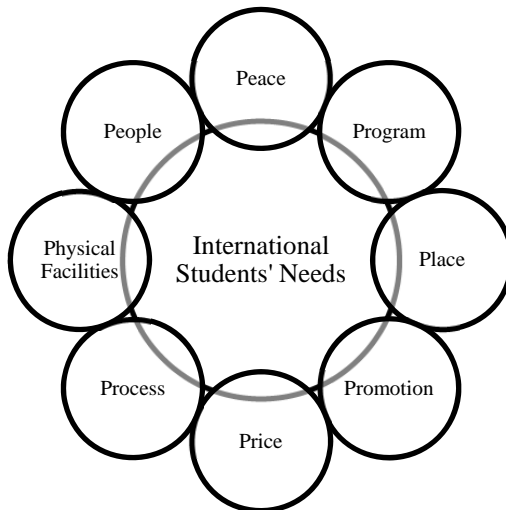
Laura and Sarah needed further support from their campus. They thought that their experiences could be enhanced if their campus had invested more in promoting its safety of environment, or Peace. As most

campus facilities, including the library, were closed in the late evening and at night, students felt that they were locked to their rooms with much fear to participate in non-university-organized activities. Sarah further told that compared to domestic students, international students had more sensitivity and anxiety relevant to their identity and religious beliefs, as these might not be tolerated. Other support needs brought up by participants, and were found to be related to Peace, were relevant to international students' potential feelings of isolation and loneliness. These students hoped that not only would their campus provide them with educational guidance, but also it would have venues through which it provided emotional, motivational, social, and sense-of-security-related support. These four main aspects of Peace, as an international student need domain, are illustrated in Figure 2 below.
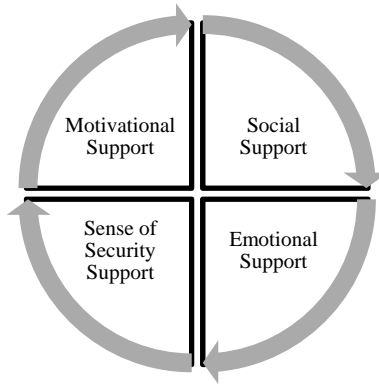

Figure 2: The Four Main Aspects of Peace Need Domain

Figure 2 suggests an intersectional and sequential relationship between the four aspects of the Peace need domain identified. Participants' testimonials evinced that campuses that engaged international students for the betterment of any of these four aspects were likely to positively influence the other aspects at the same time. For example, when a campus engaged its international students with social activities, the campus was at the same time providing emotional and sense of security support through providing students with opportunities to build social networks. These were likely to reduce potential feelings of loneliness, isolation, and intolerance, while at the same time they increased international students' motivation to engage more with campus life, which again resulted in more opportunities to receive social support through building more, or expanding, social networks.

To conclude, a variety of needs and need domains were associated with international students' experiences. Many of these students left considerable economic, social, cultural, and navigational capitals they possessed at their home countries, as they ventured into foreign educational

experiences. These students engaged in building social networks with domestic, national (from their home country), and other international populations. They also invested efforts to learn about their new environment, and they expressed an expectation that their host university campuses would provide support through programs, as well as advising and counselling services that could help them navigate towards achieving their aspirations. While the marketing mix model was developed primarily with domestic students in mind, previous research into international students' needs has reported on educational, social, and cultural challenges that international students experience, as well as these students' acculturation and adjustment processes (Lewthwaite, 1997; Lin & Yi, 1997). In addition, studies such as Luzio-Locket (1998), and Misra, Crist, and Burant (2003) described the influence of cross-cultural adjustment on students' academic performance and highlighted the significance of formal (campus-provided) and informal (community-provided) social support. Findings in this study lend support to those advanced in Stoynoff (1997) where difficulties international students experience relate to sense of insecurity, social isolation, financial concerns, psychological problems including anxiety, loneliness, and depression.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Motivated by economic, cultural, and educational benefits, higher education institutions around the world have been engaged in recruiting international students. Recruitment activities have been mainly reactive to competition rather than informed strategic marketing, where the analysis of students' needs guides the development of responsive higher education offerings. A tool for conducting such analysis is the 7Ps marketing mix, which was used as a conceptual model for the study reported here. Findings suggest that international students' needs go beyond those that are reported in traditional marketing models and a new 8Ps model was advanced. International students additionally require Peace, which can be defined as all aspects of an educational campus that provide students with welcoming, safe, peaceful, study-oriented, and socially inclusive experiences. Colleges may want to invest in improving Peace on their campuses and communicating the availability of relevant environments to their prospective international students. This is likely to positively influence international students' choice, satisfaction with choice, and consequently sustainable, successful marketing through word-of-mouth.

Finally, limitations in this study relate to its methodology. The original objective of the study was not to examine or develop a conceptual model, as for these, qualitative methodologists suggest grounded theory techniques. However, in the process of data analysis in this study, and as the

Peace theme strongly emerged as a district need domain not covered in traditional marketing mix need dimensions, it was imperative to reconstruct the research agenda and advance these findings. Future research into international students' needs may test the 8Ps conceptual model proposed here statistically through data reduction methods, e.g. principal axis factoring techniques, with the objective of revealing the underlying matrix of the different need items, as well as possible correlation and intersectionality amongst need domains.

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