

A Chinese Cultural Perspective of Marketing Communications in
Public Higher Educational Institutions

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Executive Summary

In an increasingly globalized world of massification in higher education, where students from all over the world spanning across multiple nationalities, generations and demographics are expecting to be treated more like consumers, universities can no longer afford to view their target audiences with a mono-dimensional traditional lens. International students, and in particular Chinese students show marked differences in the way they engage and respond to marketing. Strengthening engagement with and increasing recruitment of Chinese students and communities requires an adaptation to domestic recruitment strategies based on differing priorities, motivations and preferences that can be seen in the research and contextualized by Hofstede's national cultural framework.

Introduction

More than 4.5 million students studied away from their country of citizenship in 2012, which is expected to double by 2025 (OECD, 2014). International students coming to Canada for higher education have increased by 51% since 2005 (Kunin, 2012) as public higher educational institutions (PHEIs) have realized the value of international students and the benefits they can bring to an institution and economy. As of 2011, China made up 25.4% of the total number of international student enrolments globally, therefore making it the leading country exporting students overseas (IIE, 2012; Jin and Cortazzi, 2011). This increased Chinese growth pattern and demand in higher education continues to present significant opportunities and challenges for marketing in public higher educational institutions (PHEIs).

The University of Calgary currently has a 10% international student makeup with a strategic mandate to recruit more international students. As globalization continues, marketing is playing an increasingly important role in student recruitment (Cubillo, Sánchez, and Cerviño; Ivy, 2001; Maringe and Foskett, 2002; Fisk and Allen, 1993; Carlson, 1992) as traditional methods of segmentation are no longer sufficient. Results from studies strongly suggest that PHEIs should be prepared to differentiate and segment their recruitment strategies according to potential international students' national and cultural backgrounds and motivations to have successful outcomes (Prange, 2016; James-MacEachern, Yun, Dongkoo, 2017; Falcone, Santa, 2017; Liu and Lin, 2016).

The purpose of this paper is to more clearly understand Chinese national cultural factors that influence consumer behaviour patterns when selecting a university. Under Hofstede's cultural framework lens, this report investigates the ways that Chinese national culture impacts the strategic planning and implementation of a successful global marketing campaign geared towards recruitment of prospective Chinese students. What cultural considerations impinge on the service marketing mix for Chinese students compared to other cohorts and how does that translate into practical marketing communication deliverables? Should the University maintain its traditional marketing strategies for all international student recruits or adjust it to account for specific national cultural differences in China?

The aim is to create marketing strategies that are culturally sensitive, specifically tailored to stakeholder motivations and directly engage the needs of the cohort and, as a result, offer positive recruitment outcomes. However, the majority of current marketing theory has been done and validated in western countries leaving gaps in the research on culture and consumption. Discussion and recommendations for senior management will be outlined in an attempt to support strategic marketing planning and decision-making at the University.

Review of the related literature

A country's culture has been identified as a key environmental characteristic underlying systematic behavioural differences. Cultural norms and beliefs are powerful forces shaping people's perceptions, dispositions, and behaviours (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Culture is reflected in "general tendencies of persistent preference for particular states of affairs over others, persistent preferences for specific social processes over others, and general rules for selective attention, interpretation of environmental cues, and responses" (Tse, Lee, Vertinsky and Wehrung, 1988, p. 82). Hofstede defines culture as "the collective programming of the mind distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from others" (Hofstede, 1984, 2003). The past decade has seen increased growth of research addressing the relationship between culture and consumption (Ogden, Ogden & Schau, 2004). Research has demonstrated that there are significant cultural differences that can account for the manner in which individuals and groups from different cultures engage in consumption and therefore respond to marketing (Soares, Farhangmehr & Shoham, 2006). The failure to account for cultural differences between countries has led to and been the cause of many business failures (Steenkamp, 2001). Similarly, cross-cultural research in recruitment for higher education is scarce and highly western-centric.

Hofstede's National Cultural Framework

Using empirical analysis, Hofstede developed the most influential national culture framework accounting for behavioural and attitudinal differences between societies (Hofstede, 1991). There have been criticisms of Hofstede's framework and that conceptual definitions of his dimensions may mean different things in different countries (Steenkamp, 2001). Some consider other newer frameworks like Schwartz's (1994, 1997), to be more empirically grounded. However, for the purpose of this paper the focus will be on Hofstede's framework. It includes six dimensions of culture: Power Distance, Individualism, Masculinity, Uncertainty Avoidance, Long Term Orientation and Indulgence (Hofstede, 1991).

Broadly speaking, under Hofstede's Power Distance dimension Chinese people expect and accept that there are inequalities amongst members and that not all individuals of the society are equal. China, in fact, has one of the highest scores on Hofstede's Power Distance index (PDI). Compared to Canada, who scores substantially lower, the Chinese are willing to accept subordinate-superior relationships and hierarchies as they believe that citizens should not have aspirations beyond their rank (Hofstede, 1991). China's national culture can be described as non-egalitarian and collectivist, unlike most western countries such as Canada. Collectivist societies being the opposite of individualistic cultures like Canada, the US and the UK, are described in terms of people's self-image being defined in terms of "I" or "We". While China is considered collectivist (low individualism) its culture expresses itself as extremely masculine, more so than Canada. Meaning it is highly competitive and driven by achievement and

success. The Chinese society is largely long-term orientated meaning the Chinese are extremely practical, adaptable and “they encourage thrift and efforts in modern education as a way to prepare for the future” (Hofstede, 1991). In addition, China scores low on both the Uncertainty Avoidance and the Indulgence factors, meaning a culture fairly comfortable with risk and highly restrained in terms of desires and impulses.

International Student Research

To date, there is very little research in international higher education recruitment and Hofstede’s framework directly. However, a variety of related studies can help to understand and identify the Chinese student decision-making processes and the various motivations and influences that go into choosing a university. Understanding how this process may be different for Chinese students as a result of cultural diversity can help PHEIs craft marketing strategies related explicitly to different cohorts of students. Consumer behaviour theories from marketing (Maringe and Carter, 2007; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002) and U.S. based college choice models (Chapman, 1981) are typically used to explain student flow and university choice patterns. Consumer behaviour theories have focused on large industries such as banking with a need to better understand the complexities of higher education and “the relationship between institutional marketing practice and student selection of a particular institution” (Mazzarol, Soutar & Thein, 2001, p. 52). More specific research in this area would be welcomed by PHEIs as they require a more nuanced understanding of motivation and mindsets of its stakeholders which are spanning cultures, generations, and demographics.

International student research highlights that decisions on which country to study tends to be strongly influenced by reputation, language, location, and safety (Bodycott, 2009; Cubillo et al., 2006; Eder, Smith, & Pitts, 2010; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, Zwart, 2012). Other studies have investigated course and career information, course suitability, facilities, cost of education, value of education, image, emotional and social value, empathy, academic reputation and teaching quality (Soutar and Turner, 2002; Firdaus, 2006; Maringe, 2006) as being influencers of choice in university selection. However, most of the research on university selection and consumer behaviour in international higher education has been US-centric (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015) and does not account for global contexts (Chapman, 1981; Lee, 2008). In this way, studies are limited in their ability to explain the complexity of cultural influences on global student migration (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015, Lee, 2008).

Cross-Cultural Evaluations

Cross-cultural studies (James-MacEachern and Yun, 2016; Padlee, Kamaruddin and Baharun 2010; Wilkins and Huisman, 2011b) demonstrate significant differences between Chinese students’ choice in selecting a higher education based on sources of information used,

usefulness of the information, pull motivations, and reference groups/items. Other studies confirm these differences (Padlee et al., 2010; Wilkins et al., 2011b). Chinese students, in particular, tend to show marked differences in motivations and preferences during the selection process, being more likely to use “educational recruitment agencies,” “someone or alumni from the institution,” and “local government websites” than domestic students. The influence of reference groups is prominent in a collectivistic Chinese culture. Reference groups often influence and become an important part of understanding student choice in selecting institutions. A successful Chinese recruitment strategy should consider materials that speak not only to the student but to his/her entire network of influencers.

Education is a service and quality of education is difficult to evaluate especially by Chinese international students before being experienced (Suomi, Kuoppakangas, Hytti, Hampden-Turner, & Kangaslahti, 2014) which is why a strong positive reputation is a critical objective of PHEIs. Reputation is able to serve as a surrogate for quality, facilitating evaluation and selection (Hemsley-Brown, 2012; Munisamy, Jafaar, & Nagaraj, 2014). It has been shown that this concept is even more important for Chinese students given that they have less contact, proximity or familiarity with an institution’s brand during the selection process. For Chinese students, reputation or brand becomes even more important in terms of influencing their decision to choose an institution. “International students have a somewhat different set of considerations, with institutional reputation being much more important” (Szekeres, 2010, p. 431).

While much attention has been paid to rankings for international students and other key motivations to study at large universities in Canada, including teaching quality, specific program of study, qualification reputation, reputation of education system, and institution reputation (i-Graduate, 2012), other studies have found that the most significant motivational factors are tangible environmental cues and educational facilities. While a strong positive reputation is seen as the highest concern of PHEI management worldwide (Lomer, Papatsiba, and Naidoo, 2018; Plewa et al., 2016; Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007), country of study and stakeholder group have been found to significantly moderate the effect of reputation (Ali, Lynch, Melewar and Jin 2014). As PHEIs strive to attract international Chinese customers, reputational associations need to be carefully considered as different stakeholder groups do not have a homogenous perception of an institution’s reputation (Ali et al., 2014).

Tangible Resources & Cues

When evaluating the quality and reputation of a particular university it can be difficult for Chinese students to assess specific intangible resources, such as core learning environments (Kettle, 2011). Therefore, international student cohorts are more likely to look to tangible cues like facilities and admin support (Plewa, Ho, Conduit, Karpen, 2016; James-MacEachern et al, 2016). International student groups perceived “environmental cues and educational facilities”

as the most important pull motivational factor and the university itself as the reference that has the most significant influence on student decision-making (Karzunina, Bridgestock and Philippou, 2016). In light of this, communications and marketing materials for Chinese students should focus on the tangible learning support environment and community student life.

Studies related specifically to marketing materials indicate that international students considered “the university’s website” as the most used information source but perceived “direct communication from the institution” as the highest ranked usefulness of the information when selecting a university (Karzunina et al., 2016). Chinese students make frequent visits to university websites during the selection process. The website quality, usability, and value in providing what is expected in order to support decision-making will leave a lasting impression on Chinese students and their networks.

Service Quality

Pull-type marketing techniques employed throughout the university decision-making process are numerous including: brochures, websites, social media, chatbots, prospectus, media relations and alumni networks. Studies have shown there to be gaps between the information that potential international students want, and the information offered by universities (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2006). The literature indicates it is critical for higher education institutions to understand student demand factors in selecting particular institutions. “University managers are increasingly focused on marketing techniques, such as targeting and communicating with market segments” (Rindfleish, 2003, p. 148). Given the complex nature of choosing a university, marketing tactics are critically important to delivering information that is often lacking for many students and parents in general. Reportedly, information on scholarship and funding is the most difficult to find on university websites.

PHEIs need to ensure that what they offer is aligned with what the Chinese student is seeking based on their mental model and motivations. Traditional demographic segmentation is no longer sufficient in an increasingly globalized education sector. Universities have been long known for their brand-orientation toward the market.

Conclusions

This report suggests that special cultural considerations are very important when planning successful marketing campaigns and preparing marketing materials for the Chinese and South-East Asian student cohorts. Strengthening engagement with and increasing recruitment of Chinese students and communities requires an adaptation to domestic recruitment strategies based on differing priorities, motivations and preferences that can be seen in the research and contextualized by Hofstede's national cultural framework.

In marketing and recruitment strategies geared towards Chinese student cohorts, management could do well to not only understand the needs and motivations of the student but also the periphery players in the decision-making process. Given that China is a highly collectivist society, Chinese students rely heavily on the people around them to make big decisions. Therefore, communication materials need to be tailored not just for the student but also parents and reference groups. In other words, marketing and communications need to appeal to the needs of a network of people around the student in order to be successful.

Universities recruiting students from China will likely have an advantage if they leverage the Chinese motivation for personal challenges and dynamic environments. As discussed, Chinese culture is marked with a high degree of masculinity and hence derives great value from both personal and professional success and achievement. Emphasizing opportunities for personal challenges, including research and post-study employment opportunities should be part of the marketing strategy. In addition, special attention should be paid to the promotion of the tangible cues such as location, educational facilities and student life when it comes to the Chinese cohort.

Given that the university website is heavily relied upon by potential Chinese students, and is a qualifier for reputation, it should be given special attention. Content needs to be written at a level for easy consumption and include what referral groups might require. Information should be detailed enough to help decision making, emphasize personal challenge and achievement, document student life and local environmental information along with a willingness to engage questions about funding.

Despite the seemingly endless opportunities within the Chinese and South-East Asian market, it is important to note that international recruitment strategies should also continue to be diversified across other countries due to some warnings regarding an uncertain future with Chinese student mobility. The growing strength of China's own education system, the mixed outcomes of those returning from studying abroad and possible political interference are reasons to have diverse marketing strategies in place.

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