CULTURAL VALUES AND CHOICE OF INTERNATIONAL TERTIARY EDUCATION

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Abstract

Cultural values are recognized as a powerful force shaping consumers’ motivations, lifestyles and product choices (Bednall & Kanuk 1997; McCort & Malhotra 1993). Despite the plethora of studies on choice in international education, there is a scarcity of discussion on the impact of cultural values in education purchases. In a review of the literature, hypotheses are developed and validated by questionnaire survey in Singapore and Malaysia. The result of this study suggests that cultural values had an impact on students’ intended choice of international tertiary education and their preferred sources of information for university enrolment. The findings of this study add to the extant literature regarding educational choice factors and also offer useful practical contributions.

Keywords: Cultural values; Preferred sources of information; International tertiary education.

JEL Classification Codes: I2; I21; M31.

1. Introduction

There are more than 1.6 million students studying outside their home country (Dahlman 2003), contributing significantly to the economy of the education exporting countries. Among those studying outside their home countries, ethnic Chinese form the largest single group in New Zealand (Education Count 2004) and Australia (Australian Education International 2006). Despite the plethora of studies on choice in international education, few view students’ decisions from a cultural perspective. This paper investigates the following issues among ethnic Chinese students in Singapore and Malaysia:
   i) How cultural values influence a students’ decision on study destinations?
   ii) How cultural values influence students' preferred sources of information for university enrolment?

The Chinese are predominant in Singapore and constitutes about 30% of Malaysia’s population (Wikipedia). In this study, the purchase intention is used as the predictor for the preferential choice of students regarding the destination country (New Zealand) as a provider of undergraduate and postgraduate studies.

2. Cultural values

Culture is a set of control mechanisms- plans, recipes, rules, instructions for governing of behavior (Geertz 1973). Culture includes things that have worked in the past, shared beliefs, attitude, norms, roles and values found among speakers of a particular language who live during the same historical period in a specific geographic region (Triandis 1994). A value is an enduring belief of a very specific kind that guides people’s lives (Rokeach 1973) or an individual’s broad tendency to prefer certain states of affair over others (Hofstede 1980). Schwartz (1994, p. 88) defines human values as “desirable goals, varying in importance, that serve as guiding principles in people's lives” consistent with definitions suggested by Rokeach (1973).

Group orientation and harmony in relationship are some of the prominent characteristics in Chinese society (Bond 1991; Luk, Fullgrabe & Li 1999). These characteristics have their roots in the teaching of Confucianism where its core doctrine is the maintenance of harmony in relationship (Bond 1991). According to Bond, the following values and norms greatly contribute to the maintenance of harmony in relationships: group orientation, respect for authority, interdependence (‘guanxi’), friendship (‘ganqing’), and reciprocity (‘renqing’).

In consumer behavior literature, values are recognized as a powerful force shaping consumers’ motivations, lifestyles and product choices (McCort & Malhotra 1993; Bednall & Kanuk 1997). Gray

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et al. (2003) suggest that cultural integration characteristics are not important influencing factor in students’ choice of tertiary education. This study proposed:

**Hypothesis one:** Cultural values have a positive influence in student’s choice of international tertiary education.

Schwartz (1994) presents ten human motivational value types at the individual level (Figure 1) and seven values at the cultural level, structured into two bipolar dimensions: Autonomy (Intellectual & Affective) versus conservation; Hierarchy and Competency versus Egalitarian compromise and Harmony. There exists a variety of replication studies supporting Schwartz’s division of values (Bilsky & Koch 1996; Bilsky & Jehn 1999). Schwartz’s definition of human values is adopted in this study, providing the basis and guidance to all discussion relating to values within a cultural context.

**Figure 1: Schwartz’s (1994) motivational value types and measurement items**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual motivational value types</th>
<th>Measurement items (Schwartz Value Survey)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i) Achievement: Personal success through the demonstration of competence according to social standards.</td>
<td>Success, ambition, influential</td>
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<td>ii) Benevolence: concern for the welfare of close others in everyday interaction.</td>
<td>Helpful, honest, forgiving</td>
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<td>iii) Conformity: restraint of actions, inclination that likely to upset or harm others and violate social expectations/norms.</td>
<td>Politeness, obedient, honouring parents/elders</td>
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<td>iv) Hedonism: pleasure and sensuous gratification for oneself.</td>
<td>Pleasure, enjoying life</td>
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<td>v) Power: attainment of social status and prestige, and control or dominance over people and resources</td>
<td>Social power, authority, wealth</td>
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<td>vi) Security: safety, harmony, and stability of society, of relationships, and of the self.</td>
<td>Family &amp; national security, social order (harmony)</td>
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<tr>
<td>vii) Self-Direction: independent thought and action</td>
<td>Creativity, freedom, independence and curious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>viii) Stimulation: excitement, novelty, and challenge in life</td>
<td>Daring, varied &amp; exciting life</td>
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<tr>
<td>ix) Tradition: respect, commitment and acceptance of the customs and ideas that one’s culture or religion impose on the individual</td>
<td>Humble, devout and respect for tradition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x) Universalism: understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature.</td>
<td>Broad minded, social justice, equality and protecting the environment</td>
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3. Preferred sources of information for university enrolment

Hall (1976) distinguishes patterns of culture according to 10 universal anthropological "Primary Message Systems of which four (context, space, time and information flow) later became popular among marketers. In particular, the context concept is useful for understanding consumer behavior across cultures. According to Hall, members of low Context cultures have less personal contact with each other, and therefore, communications within this culture are very detailed, explicit and direct, often by way of written texts. In contrast, members of high Context cultures have closer and more familiar contact with each other, where information is frequently shared via indirect communication, often based on symbols and pictures. Who says it and when, how, and where it is said can be more important that what is said in high-context culture (Hall & Hall 1987). This is unlike the low-context culture where accurate communication is not dependent so much on long-standing personal relationships or other contextual factors. A study by Kras (1988) argues that high Context cultures value public appearances, prestigious image and reputation.

Traditionally, university relies on the print media, word of mouth and public relations to recruit students. Lately, the Internet (Web) has become an alternative communication channel. Gray et al. (2003) argued that advertisements in traditional print media and the Internet are important in student recruitment. However, Russell (2005) argued that word of mouth and the Website are key influencers in students’ university enrolment with much less important being attached to the print media. This study proposed:

**Hypothesis two:** There is a positive correlation between cultural values and student’s preferred sources of information for university enrolment

**Hypothesis three:** In a Chinese society, the preferred sources of information for university enrolment are reflected by its high Context nature.
4. Research methodology

Respondents were requested to provide their opinions, using a Likert seven-point interval scale. The pre-tested questionnaire comprised four sections:

A) Demographic information: Age group, gender, ethnicity

B) Cultural values (16 items): Respondents were asked how well variables identified from a modified Schwartz’s (1994) Value Survey describe them.

C) Preferred sources of information for university enrolment (10 items): Extracted from Gray et al. (2003).

D) Intended study destination: Respondents were asked how interested they are in doing a tertiary study in New Zealand.

The targeted samplings are high school and junior college students in Singapore and Malaysia. Students in their uniforms are common sights in the various shopping malls in Singapore and Malaysia. Thus, they are easy to spot and solicit responses for the survey. Students were selected from four malls in Singapore and four malls in four major towns in Malaysia (Johore Bahru, Kuala Lumpur, Kuching, Miri) over a 2-week period. Interviewers were positioned at the high traffic locations near the mall entrances to randomly select the respondents. Six hundred and seventy-four questionnaires were collected but 258 questionnaires were rejected due to missing responses, non-Chinese ethnicity or respondents disinterested in doing their tertiary studies in New Zealand. Out of the remaining 416 questionnaires, 203 were from Singapore while the rest were from Malaysia.

The scatter plots revealed univariate normality of data while the boxplot chart showed 6 cases of outliers (retained as it is in the data). The final 416 samples met the primary requirements for factor analysis (5:1 case/variable ratio as recommended by Coakes & Steed 2001). All the measurement scales in the study were subjected to EFA using SPPS’s Principal Component Analysis (varimax rotation) techniques. Both measurement scales had a KMO index greater than 0.8 and Bartlett’s p<0.5 indicating the appropriateness for factor analysis. Items that did not load to a significant extent (coefficient of less than 0.3) to a unique factor were deleted. Two components were extracted from the individual values scale, explaining 51.3% and 23.4% of the variance. Two components were also extracted from the preferred communication sources scale, explaining 60.1% and 18% of the variance.

Structural Equation Modelling using AMOS ver. 6.0 program on all factorial models showed that the discrepancy between the sample covariance matrix S and the population covariance matrix Σ(θ) is minimal (that is, [S - Σ(θ)] = minimum). Elimination of items to improve fits statistics resulted in the re-specified model as presented in Figure 2. There is sufficient evidence of goodness-of-fit between the measuring models and the sample data for further hypothesis testing (CMIN/DF=1.36, RMSEA=0.018, CFI = 0.997 and GFI= 0.994). In addition, all measurement models showed internal consistency with Cronbach’s alpha coefficient value greater than 0.7. This confirmed that all the measurement models were statistically valid.

5. Findings and discussions

Cultural values

As shown in Figure 2, respondents intending to study in New Zealand exhibit the Confucian values of personal honesty, helping others as a way of life (Schwartz’s benevolence) and living harmoniously in society (Schwartz’s security). These values seem to be in tandem with the perceived image of New Zealand as ‘fair-go’ society (Hazeldine 1998), high in individual honesty/low corruption (Transparency International 2006), and low crime relative to USA, Britain and Canada (Segessenmann 2000), which contributes to a peaceful/harmonious society. This suggests the ability to integrate into the host country society and being able to live harmoniously in the host country is an influence factor in students’ choice of study destination. The strong correlation between the exhibited Confucian values and the intent to study in New Zealand (regression wt=0.47), supports hypothesis one that cultural values have a positive influence in student’s choice of international tertiary education.
6. Preferred sources of information for university enrolment

A review of the mean score statistics for each of the measured variables showed that traditional print media (magazines, newspapers, and brochures), and television had mean score less than 4.0 (out of max 7), implying that they are not the effective advertising channels to potential tertiary student from Singapore and Malaysia. While Gray et al. (2003) point out the importance of using the print media in delivering promotional messages to potential students in Singapore and Malaysia, this was not reflected in this study. Those indicating the possibility of studying in New Zealand expressed high preference for using education fairs, sponsorship, university open day (foreign offshore campuses), representative agents and the Web as sources of information for university enrolment (regression wt=0.43).

The expressed desire of using open day and education fairs to get educational information means students in Singapore and Malaysia value some form of physical presence or public appearance (high context communication) to advice them about overseas study. This explains the expressed importance of representative agents in disseminating university information in those two countries. Hypothesis two was supported given that there is a positive correlation between these preferred information sources and the exhibited Confucian values in the sample (regression wt=0.43). Consequently, Hypothesis three: In a Chinese society, the preferred sources of information for university enrolment is reflected by its high Context nature, is also supported.

7. Conclusion

The study suggests that the ability to integrate into the host country society and being able to live harmoniously/peacefully in the host country is an influence factor in ethnic Chinese students’ choice of study destination. There is a positive correlation between cultural values and students’ preferred sources of information for university enrolment. Respondents also expressed the preference of using education fairs, sponsorship, university open day and representative agents as sources of information for university enrolment.

References


