Parental Advisory: Identifying Parents’ Influence on Intentions to Study Abroad

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Abstract. Studying abroad is one of the most significant investments that someone makes in their entire life. Despite that, current literatures on marketing towards international students and their parents have been lacking. Conducted in Summer 2019, this study sought to investigate the influence of the parents on international students’ decision making in study abroad. The study found an inconclusive pattern that is not as quite decisive to suggest or discourage marketing towards these students' parents. Therefore, the result of the study urged higher education institutions to be strategic about spending their marketing costs towards parents. They need to have a deep understanding towards their students through segmentation so that they can decide whether marketing towards their parents is the best option that can provide the greater expected ROI or not.

Keywords: Parental influence, higher education marketing, international students, reference groups

1 Background

Enrolling in an international education program is not a routine decision that somebody is expected to make daily. Studying abroad involves adapting to different surroundings and new academic demands [1]. Making the decision even more difficult, education is in nature intangible and heterogenous [2] which makes its return on investment always vague. Mounting student debt [3] is another cause of worry when students are deciding to study abroad.

Considering the high risk [2], it is conceivable to conclude that the decision to study abroad is made by the students collectively with their social surroundings. Indeed, interpersonal influence is a major player in sectors of which products are intangible in nature [4]. In the Higher Education (HE) sector, 90% of parents reported that they played major roles in their children’s collegiate decision [5]. In the case of international education, a study by University World News concluded that 65% of the studied international students said that their parents were the ones who made program and host country decisions[6].

Considering the great numbers, it is conceivable to expect that previous studies on parents’ influence on their international student children are prevalent. However, the opposite is true. Aside from Pimpa’s works [2], [7]–[9], studies on how international students’ parent affect their children decision have been few and far between.

This study sought to demystify that under-researched area by studying the influence of international graduate students’ parents on their intention to study abroad. International students often need to travel halfway across the world to reach the host country. Such a massive change can cause distress to the students as the new place surely have different cultural and academic demands. Therefore, it is not beyond imagination to expect that international students’ parents have a major say in the students’ decision-making. Thus, this research proposed the following question: what are the types of influence(s) that international students’ parents cast on their children, or lack thereof?

This study would fill in neatly to the research gap aforementioned. Indeed, unlike Pimpa’s studies which only examined Thai international students [2], [7]–[9], this study interviewed international students from various backgrounds around the world. Therefore, this study will bring a unique viewpoint to academics. Equally important, this study would be contributive for HEIs’
decision-making. Colleges would get an insight in how to, or whether they should, market to international students’ parents.

2 Research Objectives and Scope

The current study sought to identify the type of parental influence on international students’ intention to study abroad, or lack thereof. More importantly, the study would be able to conclude whether investing HEIs attention and resources to market to their parents is recommendable or not. This study only focused on the intention forming stage during the students’ buyer journey. This particular stage refers to the time in which the students already had the interest of studying abroad but had not actively searched for information and inputs. Therefore, this study will not pay much attention on the parents’ influence on the later stages.

3 Reference Groups Constructs

To examine the degree of susceptibility each student had from their parents’ influence, Park and Lessig’s (1997) reference group construct was adopted [10]. Reference groups refer to groups of people who have the ability to influence one’s attitudes and behaviors [11]. Reference group is a classic construct which usage dated back to when Hyman (1942) used the term to refer to those whom someone compares to themselves.

More importantly, the relevance of this construct to our discussion is that it is able to examine as well as categorize the referent’s influence on someone. Therefore, it behooves this research to adopt this construct in identifying the parents’ influence on the studied international students. The influence types are [10]

1) Informational influence in which the referents are able to assert influence by giving valuable information [12]

2) Utilitarian influence, its presence makes the person feel the need to comply to gain reward or avoid punishment [12]

3) Value-expressive influence, the person would want to comply to the referent as it can enhance the way they see themselves [10]

4 Previous Studies

Pimpa’s works have been some among few studies in international students’ parents influence on their children literatures [2], [7]–[9]. Those works have generally concluded that families are an important figures for students and have major roles in their children’s collegiate decisions. Pimpa argued that family influence is either one of the following: finance, information, expectation, persuasion and competition. However, a crucial difference between Pimpa’s works and the current study is that Pimpa’s works focused on Thai students. This study, in opposite, did not confine the country of origin. In fact, the students were selected to ensure representability reflecting the global composition of international students.

5 Research Method

Employing interviews, this study is qualitative in nature. Due to the explorative nature of the research, interviews were chosen in favor of questionnaires. Moreover, this study tried to dig deep to understand how each respondent perceives their parents’ influence. Indeed, interviews are ideal for “searching for information from a more psychological (individual) perspective” [13, p. 49].
There were 10 students interviewed, they were enrolled in a private university in the northeast of US. In the interview, the students were requested to recount the time in which they were forming their intention to enroll to their current program. Therefore, the interview was not about a program they were planning to join in the future. To protect their privacy, a random name was assigned for each of them.

Table 1: the respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Program enrolled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amara</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Master</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Master</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamza</td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>Master</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howe</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Master</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Master</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessi</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Master</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marrie</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somaa</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>Cameroon</td>
<td>PhD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6 Results

Overall, the influence of parents on the students' intention to study abroad was apparent. Interesting patterns based on the students' cultural background were observed. For example, students from south asian countries in this study, Amara and Hamza, both reported that they decided to study abroad after being told to by their parents.

However, since all respondents were graduate students who mostly have a considerable amount of professional experience prior to deciding to go for a graduate school, their parents' influence were arguably less significant compared to how it would be if they were applying for an undergraduate degree. For instance, Howe, who worked for a few years in a multinational accounting firm in China, credited his "career gap" as his main reason in deciding applying for an MBA program abroad. Howe, who felt no influence from his parents whatsoever, did concur that his parents' input would be more efficacious if he were younger at the time. This is somewhat contrastive to Pimpa studies [2], [7]–[9] which unanimously concluded that the parents exerted significant influences on the international students.

Indeed, some students reported that their parents exert very little to no influence on their intentions to study abroad. Like Howe, Amy’s parents were also not influential in her decision to take her PhD in the USA. She said that her parents were surprised that she had decided to pursue her doctorate’s degree. Chinese culture does not expect women to study further, but her parents eventually understood and supported her. Marrie had a similar experience with her parents. Her father initially disagreed with her decision to pursue her PhD in the USA, her mother was "pretty upset for weeks". She was adamant of going and was ready to make the effort to change their mind. Eventually, her parents changed their decision and supported her. It means that Amy’s and Marrie’s parents were not able to reverse their daughters' decision.

Jessi, an international student from Germany argued that the local culture does not really impose influence of parents on their children. She felt that her parents would not be able to change her decision even if they opposed her decision. However, in Jessi’s case, her parents were absolutely supportive of her going back to the USA. Jessi was involved in an exchange program in the USA in her high school, her parents quoted her positive past experience studying in the USA as the main support of their approval.

The table 2 below shows students who reported that their parents exerted very little to no influence on the study abroad decision making.
Table 2. Students whose parents had little to no influence on their decision

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Influence</th>
<th>Note</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Howe</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>His parents’ input might be influential if he were less-experienced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Local culture do not see the necessity of women attaining high education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marrie</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Parents initially disagreed. She would still go even without their permission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessi</td>
<td>Little</td>
<td>Parents supported, but German culture does not impose parental influence on their grown-up children</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nevertheless, the other respondents reported that their parents, to various extents, were influential in their decision making to study abroad. On the most influential spectrum to the least, those students are presented on table 3.

Table 3. Students whose’ parents’ influence was felt

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Influence</th>
<th>Note</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amara</td>
<td>Dependant on her parents</td>
<td>She would not plan to study abroad if she was not told to by her parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamza</td>
<td>Dependant on his parents</td>
<td>He already started his master’s in his home country, then his parents told him to go to abroad instead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somaa</td>
<td>Would only go with her mother’s permission</td>
<td>His mother was pleased when he finally got home after being away for 6 years. She hoped that he would stay instead, although she did not show objections.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>Value-expressive influence</td>
<td>He looked up to his father who got his PhD from the USA. His parents were always influential in his educational decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>Value-expressive influence</td>
<td>His parents were professionally successful, he felt the pressure to emulate their success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>Built his awareness</td>
<td>His father was a internationally successful businessman, he was the first to suggest him doing his MBA in the USA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Amara and Hamza had very similar cases. They would not think of studying in the USA had their parents not recommended them to. Amara’s dependency on her parents was so great to the extent that she refused to find input from other sources to avoid unnecessary noises. She felt that other sources’ information accuracy was always questionable. Hamza had already started his master’s program in his home country, Pakistan. However, he was not satisfied with the education he was getting. That was the trigger for his parents to suggest him going abroad instead. Another important thing to note is that both Amara and Hamza had sibblings who had been in the USA. Amara’s brother already graduated and now live in the USA, so does Hamza’s sister. They both confirmed that their sibblings’ presence was the catalyst in their parents’ suggestion.

Somaa was already in the USA for 6 years before he wanted to go back to the country for his PhD. His mother was not particularly pleased with that decision, although she did not express her objection. However, Somaa emphasized that he would only go to the USA if he had his mother’s agreement. He was ready to decline the scholarship and the spot offered to him if his mother did not allow him to be away again.

Both Tony and James had professionaly and academically succesful parents. James’ mother was a professor and Tony’s father attained his PhD from University of California, Berkeley, USA. James acknowledged that his parents successes to some extent pressurized him to be successful as well, that was why he felt the need to go abroad to prove his success. However, James suggested that his parents never impose that influence on him. Tony, meanwhile, had always looked up to his father like most sons do. However, like James, Tony mentioned that he did not come from a family that impose things on their children.
Daniel’s father was the first one to mention the benefit of doing his MBA in the USA. Daniel actually got his undergraduate degree in the USA as well. Therefore, even without his father’s input, he was already certain what he “was getting” from taking an MBA education in the USA.

7 Recommendations for HEIs

This paper sought to find a case for or an argument against targeting parents for international higher education marketing efforts. As the result suggests, there is no generalizable pattern suggesting whether marketing towards international students’ parents is justifiable or not. Therefore, colleges need to be strategic about marketing towards this audience. The result of this research urges colleges to understand their target segments.

Segmentation is a paramount importance in marketing as consumers have varying views, characteristics, as well as values [14]. Unfortunately, the HE sector has been a laggard in adopting segmentation practices [15]. The universe nature in the word “university” [16] may have wrongly justified HEIs to disregard segmentation practices in favor of accessibility. However, segmentation and accessibility decisions are not always a zero sum game. The purpose of segmentation and the subsequent processes is for companies to be able to direct and focus their resources to suit the target market preferences [17] to be more cost efficient and create greater values to the consumers.

Generally, this study is not able to conclude whether marketing towards graduate international students’ parents is justifiable or not. Some students are heavily dependent on their parents, some students are completely independent, and some are somewhere in between.

Therefore, the result calls for colleges to be able to understand their current targeted segment. They need to understand the psychographic aspect of their students’ decision making. Indeed, psychographic aspect in decision making includes the socio-cultural considerations [14]. Understanding this will uncover the factors deemed important by the students and colleges will be able to judge whether marketing to their parents is worth investing or not.

When colleges are able to uncover this, they will be able to adjust their marketing approach according to the preferences and social surroundings of their target students. For instance, for students like Amara in this study, colleges should design an offering that appeals the students’ parents as these students’ decisions are heavily dependant on the parents. Schools should lay out ROIs in plain words that parents will expect by enrolling their children to their school. Therefore, colleges do not need to design multiple messages to a broad range of audience that will surely incur unnecessary costs.

References


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