

Information Sources Influencing Students' Choice of Private Colleges in Malaysia: An Exploratory Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study examined students' perceptions of the influence of information sources that led to their choice of private college. Data were solicited from 808 newly enrolled students in 72 multi-discipline private colleges in Malaysia through random sampling. A two part questionnaire consisting of background data and students' perceptions of the influence of information sources for the selection of private colleges was distributed through the 'drop-off' method and mail survey. Likert-like scales with values ranging from 0 (Not applicable), 1 (low) to 7 (high) were used to obtain responses. One hundred and seventy (21%) students reported their personal experience, an internal source, as having moderate influence on their choice of private college. Within the category of personal sources such as friends, a type of external source, 236 (29.2%) perceived them as a moderate influence. The National Accreditation Board and the Ministry of Education, an external independent source, were perceived by 176 (21.8%) students to have a strong influence on their decision making process. As for other external information sources, 206 (25.5%) students perceived course counselors, a commercial source, to have moderate influence, and 191 (23.6%) students perceived personal inspection, an experiential source, to have a strong influence on their decision to choose a private college. The findings imply that there are varying degrees of influence among the different sources that affect students' choice of private college. This highlights the need for private colleges to

review their promotional tools, media, message, timing and frequency to disseminate the necessary information in the most effective manner to achieve the targeted enrolment.

Introduction

From its humble beginnings in the 1930s, private higher education in Malaysia has grown to its current formidable state with 535 private colleges and 26 private universities and university colleges registered with the Ministry of Education (Marzita, 2005). Though deemed important in contributing towards producing highly skilled and trained professionals to meet Vision 2020, there is a highly competitive state within the education industry. Such intense competition has resulted in an estimated average 20% decline in student enrollment among private colleges (Zalina, 2003). However, this trend is more prevalent among the smaller private colleges whose student enrolment ranges between 400 and 500 (Zalina, 2003). Such a competitive state has posed a new challenge to the survival of private colleges in this country.

Furthermore the enactment of several statutes such as the Education Act 1996 (Act 550), Private Higher Education Institution Act 1996 (Act 555), National Accreditation Board (LAN) Act 1996 (Act 556), University and University Colleges (Amendment) Act 1996, National Higher Education Fund Corporation Act 1997 (Act 566) (Disney and Adlan, 2000, <http://www.mohe.gov.my>) has regulated the conduct of private higher education operators to promote quality education and has caused a number of private colleges to be served with closure notices, revocation of their license, show cause letters issued and directives to cease offering certain programs (Rohana, 2003). Consequently, private colleges have been compelled to adopt information and communication technology such as technology infrastructure, network and systems use, course development, administrative systems, E-planet and technological applications, 'smart' products, teaching and learning technology, and efficient methods of distributing education through E-Learning. Such moves were deemed necessary to keep up with technological innovations in education as expected by stakeholders.

In short, contemporary changes in the competitive, legal and technological environments have imposed greater pressure on private colleges. Thus, an initial understanding of information sources influencing consumers' choice of private college could be a viable platform available

to assist private colleges in designing effective communication strategies to reach out to their potential customers.

Information Sources Influencing Consumers' Decision Making Process for Choice of Private College

An information search is the second stage in the pre-purchase phase of a consumer decision making process prior to the execution of a purchase decision (Lovelock and Wright, 1999; Lovelock, Patterson and Walker, 1998). Once consumers identify their problem or need they embark on an information search to resolve their problem. An information search is the process by which consumers search for appropriate data from both the internal and external environment to facilitate their decision (Schiffman and Kanuk, 1990; Hawkins, Best and Coney, 2001). At this stage, the needs and expectations of consumers are important because of their influence on the alternatives a customer would consider. Students who have decided that continuing their studies would solve their problem, would move into the information search stage. According to the utility equation advanced by Engel, Kollat and Blackwell (1973), consumers will continue searching for as long as they perceive the value of information exceeds the cost of soliciting the information. Kotler (2000), Duncan and Olshavsky (1982) have identified five primary sources of information which consumers can access to meet their information needs. They are: memory of past searches, personal experiences and low involvement learning; personal sources such as colleagues, friends, family and relatives; independent sources namely consumer movement group and government agencies; commercial sources such as company's advertisements, sales people, sales promotion, public relations effort, packaging and good brochures; experiential sources entail customer's experience of handling and inspecting or product trial.

In the case of a prospective student's decision making process to select a private college for higher education, an intensive information search might be conducted. This is because the stakes involved are high and this is a first-time or infrequent purchase. As such, prospective students lack the requisite information to make an informed decision (Dorch, Grove and Darden, 2000). According to Punj and Stewart (1983) students are likely to elicit information pertaining to private colleges and

their programs from personal sources particularly their family and friends since they do exert a significant influence on the purchase choice. This is especially so in Malaysia where the family unit is still (Schuttewith and Charlante, 1998). Commercial sources such as advertisements, education fairs, brochures and course counselors are well subscribed since these are key medium employed by private colleges to disseminate information to the public about their offerings. Consequently, as education is a pure service, experiential sources such as an inspection of the college's facilities (such as classrooms, library, laboratories and eateries) or servicescape (such as design, facade and layout) can furnish prospective students with first hand information about the college. Moogan, Baron and Bainbridge (2001) postulated that a majority of students have little or no experience of higher education. Thus they would extensively search the 'educational market' to make the best possible choice. This concurs with the "inverted – U" shaped relationship between search activity and consumers' experience suggested by Schiffmen and Kanuk (1990) and Johnson and Russo (1984). This relationship proposes that limited consumer experience propels heightened search activity. Among the sources of information are prospectuses, electronic sources, course counselors, family and friends. A significant number of students who enroll for the first time with private colleges for tertiary level education may have little or no experience about these colleges and their offerings. As such, their limited experience drives them into an active information search activity.

Information sources can generally be broken down into two kinds, namely internal and external (Mowen and Minor, 1998; Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997). Internal information would include a variety of information, feelings, and past experiences committed to long-term memory. Among the types of internal information commonly retrieved are information on the set of brands, product or service attributes, overall evaluation (likes or dislikes of the product or service as well as experiences both positive and negative). External information, on the other hand, constitutes sources from the external environment, which are appropriate to the problem at hand. Some sources from which external information can be obtained are advertisements, friends, salespeople, store displays and product testing magazines (Loudon and Bitta, 1993), published sources (magazines, pamphlets or books), packages and dealers (Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997). Lastly, consumers may also acquire first hand experience from visiting a private college's premises to inspect the service environment, physical resources (Disney and Adlan, 2000) and perhaps

even attend trial lessons. All these experiential sources would enable them to better assess the quality of education rendered by the said college. In short the information search to facilitate the decision making process for an appropriate choice of private college commonly includes key information sources, namely, the internal and external sources. A combination of information sources would minimize consumers' perceived risk associated with a specific choice of private college since this is a first time purchase for many.

Research Objective

The objective of this research is to explore students' perceptions of the influence of information sources on their pre-purchase stage of consumer decision making process for a choice of private college.

Methodology

The unit of analysis for this study is newly enrolled students (3½ months) at private colleges. They were asked their perception of the influence of a variety of information sources on their information search process to choose a private college. Questionnaires were distributed to the multi-discipline private colleges through the drop-off survey method, where the researcher personally left the questionnaires with the respondents to be completed at a later time. The completed questionnaires were later collected by the researcher (Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Perak, Penang, Kedah, Melaka and Negeri Sembilan) and mail survey (Sabah, Sarawak, Kelantan, Trengganu, Pahang and Johor). This has enabled the researcher to explain the purpose of this research to the respective colleges and students so as to elicit their cooperation.

A census of 124 multi-discipline private colleges enlisted in the Green Pages Index of Wencom Higher Education Guide 2000/ 2001 (Quek, 2000) were selected. Four were omitted either because their license was revoked or because they had their status changed from a multi-discipline college to a specialty college. One thousand three hundred and twenty first semester students were selected via random sampling based on the class register of newly enrolled students. A census was possible as it was reasonable and would result in the probability distribution of the population represented in a normal bell shaped distribution pattern (Hair,

Bush, Ortinau, 2000). Eleven newly enrolled students (3½ months) were selected from each private college by random sampling. However, not all questionnaires were returned. The researcher is of the opinion that newly enrolled students would be more objective in indicating which information sources were influential to them as they have just gone through the purchase process while minimizing the influence of their current college environment.

The questionnaire consisted of two main sections. The first section addressed the background data such as gender, age, level of program and ethnicity. The second section requested the respondents to indicate their perception of the influence of numerous information sources that led to their choice of private college. Their perceptions were indicated on a scale of 1 (weak influence) to 7 (strong influence) and 0 if an item is not applicable. Values of 1 to 2 were considered as low levels of influence, 3-5 as moderate levels of influence and 6-7 as high levels of influence. Prior to the administration of the questionnaire to the respondents a pilot test was conducted among 88 students at a private college in Petaling Jaya, Selangor. This was to ensure the appropriateness of questions posed, wording, and sequencing, length of questionnaire, clarity of instructions and reliability of instrument (Gofton and Ness, 1997, Luck and Rubin, 1987). These students were excluded from the sample.

Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation and variance) were calculated. This enabled the strongly influential information sources to be singled out. Following this, an item analysis consisting of two aspects, namely test of unidimensionality and reliability, were performed. For the test of unidimensionality the item-to-scale coefficient was performed to establish if the items are tapping the same construct (Vaus, 2002; Bryman and Duncan, 1999). Where the item-to-scale coefficient values were more than 0.30 it can be inferred that those items belongs together (Vaus, 2002). Results from the test of unidimensionality revealed that more than 50% of the item-total correlations were above 0.30. However there were items that had values of less than 0.30 but they were retained because conceptually they belong together. Thus, none of the items were eliminated because it can be safely posited that they are tapping the construct they represent. Consequently the data was treated to a Cronbach Alpha reliability test to determine their external and internal reliability. The Cronbach Alpha values (summated scale) obtained was .870 for information search. Hence the summated scores of the construct

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were good as the Alpha value obtained was more than 0.6 (Hair et al., 2000).

Sample Characteristics

Out of the 1320 questionnaires distributed 822 (60%) were returned from 120 private colleges. An additional fourteen were rejected as there were numerous missing values, resulting in the actual number of response being 808 (61%). Females and males made up 63% and 37% of the respondents respectively. Twenty-eight percent were enrolled in diploma programs, 58% for undergraduate programs and 14% for masters program. The 22-25 age group made up the largest group of respondents with 62%. This was followed by 18% for the 17-21 age group and 12% for the 22-30 age group. The remaining 8% were above the age of 30. The Chinese students constituted the majority ethnic group with 62%, followed by 18% Malays and 13% Indians.

Analysis and Findings: Information Sources Influencing Students' Choice of Private College

The information search process addressed by this study focused solely on sources of information students have employed to solicit pertinent information to facilitate their decision making process to select a private college. Key categories of information sources are: internal information sources, external information sources, personal sources, independent sources, commercial sources and experiential sources. Internal information consisted of students' past information and their personal experiences. Personal sources comprised the family, friends, colleagues and relatives. Independent sources included the NAB and the Ministry of Education and consumer associations. Advertisements, course counselors, brochures, leaflets, exhibitions and community programs were considered to be commercial sources. Trial lessons and personal inspection constituted experiential sources.

One hundred and seventy (21%) students perceived that their personal experience had moderately influenced their decision making process to choose a private college. This was understandable as some students, especially those enrolled on a part-time basis, may have had the

experience of studying at a private college prior to their current enrollment. The same may be true of some full time students. As such, they would have had personal experiences that could have influenced their decision. Within the category of external personal sources, 236 (29.2%) perceived these as a moderate influence stemming from friends, while 108 (22.3%) students perceived that their family had a strong influence on their decision making process to select a private college. Again, the family unit has been perceived as being very influential. This reiterates the literature that Malaysians still value their family (Schuttewith and Charlante, 1998).

The NAB and Ministry of Education, as external independent sources, were perceived by 176 (21.8%) students to have a strong influence on their decision making process. The NAB, which is part of the Ministry of Education, was formed with the objective of pursuing the quality assurance tasks with private higher educational institutions, through the Board's implementation of new regulations such as a need for accreditation, and audits. NAB has strongly influenced private colleges to mandate the delivery of quality education to students. This has given it publicity, prominence and credibility.

As for commercial sources, 206 (25.5%) students and 182 (22.5%) students perceived course counselors and advertisements as having a moderate influence. Course counselors and advertisements constituted a paid form of communication by private colleges and hence disseminate information to students. However students view them as having moderate importance probably because other sources may have taken precedence in their decision making process such as family and personal inspection.

Lastly, as for experiential sources, 191 (23.6%) student's perceived personal inspection to have a strong influence on their decision to select a private college. The intangible nature of service could have led students into perceiving their personal inspection to be strongly influential. No amount of description can substitute for one's ability to personally view for themselves a private college's surroundings, facilities, people and so forth, as "seeing is believing" (Table 1). Such a personal assessment would evoke confidence in the decision making process.

Conclusion

This study uncovered that a variety of information sources have influenced prospective student's information search processes, prior to deciding on their choice of private college. The importance of the information would

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Table 1: Frequency for Student's Perceived Importance of Information Sources to Choose a Private College

Scale	NA		WI				SI		
Information Sources	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	n=808
1. Internal Information									
a. Past information (%)	20 (2.5)	68 (8.4)	115 (4.2)	115 (14.2)	150 (18.6)	155 (19.2)	105 (13.0)	80 (9.9)	M=3.97 SD=1.863 V=3.471
b. Personal experiences (%)	70 (8.7)	33 (4.1)	100 (12.4)	82 (10.1)	112 (13.9)	170 (21.0)	95 (11.8)	146 (18.0)	M=4.19 SD=2.230 V=4.975
2. External Information: Personal sources									
a. Family (%)	15 (1.9)	103 (12.7)	110 (13.6)	75 (9.3)	100 (12.4)	110 (13.6)	115 (14.2)	180 (22.3)	M=4.27 SD=2.174 V=4.726
b. Friends (%)	40 (5.0)	42 (5.2)	129 (16.0)	20 (2.5)	100 (12.4)	236 (29.2)	155 (19.2)	86 (10.6)	M=4.30 SD=1.964 V=3.857
c. Colleagues (%)	96 (11.9)	56 (6.9)	68 (8.4)	59 (7.3)	157 (19.4)	180 (22.3)	91 (11.3)	101 (12.5)	M=3.90 SD=2.174 V=4.728
d. Relatives (%)	95 (11.8)	59 (7.3)	139 (17.3)	85 (10.5)	152 (18.8)	121 (15.0)	76 (9.4)	81 (10.0)	M=3.50 SD=2.125 V=4.728
3. External Information: Independent sources									
a. Consumer Association (%)	79 (9.8)	54 (6.7)	78 (9.7)	88 (10.9)	81 (10.0)	166 (20.5)	101 (12.5)	161 (19.9)	M=4.16 SD=2.267 V=5.141
b. National Accreditation Board/ Ministry of Education (%)	120 (14.9)	102 (12.6)	76 (9.4)	32 (4.0)	89 (11.0)	168 (20.8)	176 (21.8)	45 (5.6)	M=3.61 SD=2.316 V=5.363
4. External Information: Commercial sources									
a. Advertisements (%)	10 (1.2)	15 (1.9)	70 (8.7)	115 (14.2)	182 (22.5)	201 (24.9)	149 (18.4)	66 (8.2)	M=4.44 SD=1.544 V=2.383

Continued

Cont'd Table 1: Frequency For Student's Perceived Importance of Information Sources To Choose A Private College

b. Course counselors (%)	57 (7.1)	75 (9.3)	60 (7.4)	50 (6.2)	206 (25.5)	125 (15.5)	151 (18.7)	84 (10.4)	M=4.07 SD=2.040 V=4.161
c. Brochures, leaflets, exhibitions (%)	52 (6.4)	55 (6.8)	60 (7.4)	111 (13.7)	148 (18.3)	110 (13.6)	159 (19.7)	113 (14.0)	M=4.20 SD=2.040 V=4.161
d. Community programs (%)	55 (6.8)	30 (3.7)	151 (18.7)	92 (11.4)	228 (28.2)	129 (16.0)	46 (5.7)	77 (9.5)	M=3.69 SD=1.854 V=3.437
5. External Information: Experiential sources									
a. Attend trial lessons (%)	142 (17.6)	46 (5.7)	86 (10.6)	98 (12.1)	87 (10.8)	152 (18.8)	105 (13.0)	92 (11.4)	M=3.58 SD=2.331 V=5.436
b. Personal inspection (%)	50 (6.2)	35 (4.3)	81 (10.0)	40 (5.0)	111 (13.7)	170 (21.0)	191 (23.6)	130 (16.0)	M=4.54 SD=2.031 V=4.150

Note: 0 – Not Applicable (NA); 1 – Weak Influence (WI); 7 – Strong Influence (SI)

influence a potential student's choice of information source. This is because at the point when potential students undertake their decision making process they have little or no knowledge of options in private higher education. Thus their perceived risk is high. This, coupled with the intangibility of education, makes arriving at their choice of private college an uphill task. As such it is critical for private colleges to employ an array of appropriate information sources to disseminate information to potential student's so as to draw them to their college.

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