

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE RELEVANCY OF MARKETING EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

It is interesting to note that many tertiary institutions have started to incorporate marketing courses in their various programmes in order to fulfil the demands of today's competitive industry. Marketing courses play a vital part in business as well as non-business programmes. However, students' reactions to such courses have not been well studied. Most marketing education studies have focused mainly on the teaching methodologies without giving due consideration to students' perceptions of such courses. There is a dearth of research into students' perceptions of the relevancy of marketing education, specifically in the Malaysian context. Added to this, there is also a need to determine possible links between student's perceptions and their performance in a marketing course. Studies have shown that students place more effort in learning when they view the subject matter as relevant to their future careers. For this study, data was gathered from a cohort of eighty students consisting of those who majored in marketing and those who had marketing as a course in their programme of study. Analysis of perceptions showed that students who majored in marketing favoured these courses more and mostly outperformed non-marketing majors.

Keywords: Marketing education, Tertiary education, Perceptions, Business programmes, Relevancy

INTRODUCTION

There is currently a dearth of research into students' perceptions of marketing education, especially in the Malaysian context. Most of the research carried out has been written from a western perspective and analysed based on the perceptions of academicians (Roach, Johnston & Hair, 1994). Teaching methodologies and the marketing curriculum were often used to evaluate the importance of marketing education (Hilton, Hughes & McDowell, 2007; Tregear, Kuznesof & Brennan, 2007; Biggs, 1996; Ramsden, 1997; Whitworth, Price & Randall, 2002) without giving consideration to students' perceptions and needs for such courses.

In today's competitive environment, it is necessary to take into account students' perceptions in order to tailor marketing courses to suit students' needs. In a study on students' perceptions of a marketing course, Celuch & Slama, (2000) found that consistency in the approach to teaching the course made a difference in the manner in which students responded to the course content. However, this research did not attempt to assess students' perceptions of the content material but was more interested in determining effectiveness of teaching strategies which could be influenced by students' perceptions of content relevancy.

Interest in students' perceptions

When students have a negative perception of the course, it affects their appreciation of the course learning materials as well as the teaching methods used in class (Bierhoff, 1989). This can influence students' motivations and the learning approaches used in their marketing courses (Entwistle, 1987; Hassal & Joyce, 2001; Entwistle *et al.*, 2002), hence posing a challenge for academicians to create conducive learning environments for their students.

Research has also found that some students perceive marketing courses to be irrelevant as most undergraduate texts are structured around the marketing mix which is comprised of product, price, place and promotion (Hilton, Hughes & McDowell, 2007, p.180). The same research also found that students are not able to apply what they have learned to different contexts. As such, academicians are concerned that students do not reflect on the content materials they are learning. Students are more concerned with obtaining answers for their marketing assignments instead of understanding how the answers can be applied in the current or future contexts of their lives (Keddie & Trotter, 1998). This affects the efforts students put into understanding lessons as they are more concerned with memorising marketing concepts and passing examinations. Hence academicians teaching marketing courses found it more challenging to engage students from different majors (Ho & Polonsky, 2007).

Another issue faced by academicians is the need for their lessons to be perceived as relevant to the industry by the stakeholders (Lambert, 2003). Marketing courses have been subjected to criticisms that suggest they lacked relevance and usefulness in meeting the needs and demands of organisational tasks (Piercy, 2002). Other studies have found that the type of materials used in teaching the courses and the assessment methods could influence students' learning approach and perceptions of the relevancy of the course (Weil *et al.*, 2001; Hassal & Joyce, 2001).

Evidence from research has also found that academic performance is influenced by the learning approaches adopted by students. These learning approaches are influenced by students' perceptions of the course. Positive perceptions commonly associated with deep learning approaches (Ramsden, 1992; Jackling 2005; Houghton, 2004) result in higher academic performance (Biggs, 1987). Generally, students with negative perceptions tend to adopt the surface learning approach (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Houghton, 2004) that seems to influence students' performance negatively (Booth *et al.*, 1999).

In another study on students' perceptions of business communication, McPherson (1998), found that students' perceptions of the relevance of course content to their future careers determines whether or not they make the effort to learn the content material. The same study also found that students do not make an attempt to learn materials they perceive as not relevant for their careers. Students who have already formed a negative perception of the course are not persuaded even when their instructors impressed on them the importance and relevancy of the material they are learning.

Content versus Context

Students' interpretation of their contextual environment was found to influence their learning (Vermunt, 2005). According to Entwistle (2000) three factors that influence students' learning are: student characteristics, teaching characteristics and departmental characteristics. Entwistle includes among students characteristics: prior knowledge, intellectual abilities, personality, attitudes towards courses, motivation, study skills and work habits. Teaching characteristics encompass level, pace, structure, clarity, explanation, enthusiasm and empathy to teaching. Departmental characteristics encompass course design and objectives, learning materials, assessment criteria, workload, and freedom of choice and study skills support. These characteristics help determine whether students take a surface approach or a deeper approach to learning a course. Vermunt (2005) also stresses the importance of the influence of students' context on their learning in a course. It is known that students with little educational experience, irrespective of age, do not do as well in courses, suggesting that an increased formal education allows students to develop strategies that help them become more engaged with their learning.

According to Hernandez (2003), students learn better if content material is in a context they can relate to. In order for students to communicate ideas effectively, what they are learning must be placed in context to allow for meaningful interaction to take place. As such, in marketing courses, which are often content driven, it would be essential for instructors to focus on the context of the course material and share it with students.

Before we progress further, it is important at this point to define the meaning of perceptions in the context of marketing courses. Perceptions in this study encompass students' reactions to the course content material as well as their opinions about the effectiveness of the course to help them in their future careers. The students' willingness to move beyond focusing on content to an awareness and appreciation of the content will also be studied, as this will give a more complete view of marketing education.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The perceptions of students on the relevancy of marketing education as well as on the content and the delivery of the course will be addressed. Although the perceptions analysed may be unique to the Malaysian context, the findings may be applicable to other students in a similar situation. In order to help us keep focus, three research questions (RQ) will underpin the study:

RQ1. What were students' perceptions of marketing education?

RQ2. Did the overall perceptions change at the end of the course?

RQ2. Are these perceptions reflected in their performance in the course?

METHOD

The study was carried out using a qualitative research approach on a sample of marketing major and non-marketing major students in a Malaysian institute of higher learning. In order to note changes in students' perceptions over the duration of studying the course, students

were given surveys to answer over the duration of ten weeks. The survey itself was divided into three stages: initial, mid and end. The initial stage consisted of survey questions that were handed out in the first week of study, prior to the students' first marketing lesson. This was done to gather data on students' initial perception of the relevancy of marketing education. During mid-stage, surveys were handed out from the second week until the ninth week. During this time, students were exposed to the content of their marketing course and gained some understanding about the course. Thus, the data collected reflects students' perceptions of marketing education as the course was progressing. Finally, after the completion of the marketing course, surveys were handed out to determine changes, if any, in students' perceptions of the course. This was the end-stage portion of the research.

Using the probability sampling method, a cohort of eighty students was selected through stratified sampling technique (Jarboe, 1999). These students were first separated into two mutually exclusive groups which consisted of marketing majors and non-marketing majors. This was then followed with a simple random selection of forty students from each group in order to obtain a balanced cohort of eighty respondents.

Prior to the handing out of survey questions, a pre-test was done using the same procedures and methodology on twenty randomly selected test samples. Minor changes to the wording of questions were made based on the pre-test results. The revised surveys were then handed out to students over the course of ten weeks. The entire survey consisted of twenty open-ended questions which allowed students to record their thoughts and ideas (Cooper & Schindler, 2006). See Table 1 for the list of questions. This allowed a better assessment of what the students truly perceived (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). The informed consents of the students were obtained and the cohort was told they could withdraw from the study at anytime they wished. They were also told that the data obtained for the study would only be viewed by the researchers and their identities would be kept confidential.

Throughout the duration of this study, students were encouraged to be honest with their responses. Each survey response was read and re-read until commonalities appeared. These commonalities were then grouped under several identifiable themes. These themes were then used to answer the RQs. From this point on, our respondents will be defined as marketing majors and non-marketing majors.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

RQ1. What were students' perceptions of marketing education?

During the analysis of the initial survey responses, it was noted that most of the students found marketing education to be important and relevant to their needs. Several themes emerged as to why students perceived marketing education to be important to them. These themes were: Relevance to Career, Soft Skill and Alternative Career Path.

Relevance to Career

All marketing majors and 97.5% of non-marketing majors perceived that it was important to learn marketing as they found the knowledge acquired to be relevant to their future careers. However, it is interesting to note that the reasons given by marketing majors were different from those given by non-marketing majors.

Marketing majors perceived that learning marketing would help increase their employability as they would obtain more knowledge about marketing concepts and learn about current marketing practices. For example, marketing major, Student A commented:

“I like learning marketing subjects because there are so many interesting concepts and terms to be learned. As I wish to be a marketer, I can use these concepts to impress my interviewer and hopefully obtain the job.”

Additionally, marketing major, Student B responded:

“I believe that by learning marketing courses, it’s relevant to my pursuit of a career in the marketing field. The case studies and current examples of marketing strategies used by both local and international companies will help me to be more creative in solving marketing challenges.”

Conversely, non-marketing majors perceived it important to learn marketing to provide them with a foundation to start new businesses or continue family businesses already established. They did not foresee themselves as marketers but perceived marketing education as beneficial to their future career as the proprietor of a business. For example, non-marketing major, Student C commented:

“I think marketing is useful for my future, like when I start my own business. This is because I want to start my own software company in the future. By learning marketing, indirectly, I learn how to run and promote my products and services to customers. This helps to increase my profitability.”

Likewise, non-marketing major, Student D commented:

“I have no intention of becoming a marketer or being in the sales line. However, I still find this subject interesting and important to me because I may have to continue on my father’s business. Marketing teaches me how to attract new customers and retain existing customers. I hope to help my father expand his business.”

Soft Skills

Ninety-six percent of marketing majors and 85% of non-marketing majors perceived that they acquired soft skills through marketing education. The soft skills mentioned in their responses included interpersonal communication, negotiation, and customer relationship management as well as leadership and teamwork skills. Both groups were very specific with the reasons why these skills were important to them. These reasons were grouped into two sub-themes: personal relevance and work task relevance.

Personal Relevance

Seventy-two and a half percent of marketing majors and 15% of non-marketing majors perceived that the soft skills learned through their marketing courses could be used in their daily lives. They noted that they had these skills in their daily activities. For example, marketing major, Student E noted:

“Marketing teaches me how to communicate and build rapport with customers effectively. Firstly, I have to recognise customers’ needs and wants and fulfil them through my products or services. I noticed that I tend to use that skill to find out the expectations of each lecturer and then design my assignment around that expectation. I also use it when trying to convince my friends on trying out a new restaurant.”

Likewise, non-marketing major, Student F commented:

“During marketing lessons, we are taught how to communicate better and to work well with others through our unique coursework tasks. I also learn how to better understand people through marketing topics such as consumer behaviour. This helps me to work better with my classmates during assignment tasks and to manage the various team members’ personalities.”

Work Task Relevance

Ninety-seven and a half percent of marketing majors and 65% of non-marketing majors perceived the relevance of the soft skills for their future careers. Both groups of students were of the opinion that the soft skills could be used for their work in future. For example, marketing major, Student G commented:

“As a future marketer, we need to have good interpersonal skills as we have to deal with people. As such, through this marketing subject, I learn how to improve on my EQ and negotiate better deals on behalf of the company that I will work for.”

Non-marketing major, Student H commented:

“Even though I don’t want to be a marketer but my future work tasks may require me to interact, lead or convince others. I may have to present my project to the management or lead my subordinates. Through this subject, I learn how to better deal with customers and colleagues through good teamwork and effective listening skills. This will help me during my future work assignments.”

Alternative Career Path

During analysis of the survey results, it was noted that only non-marketing major students commented on how marketing education provided them with the opportunity to choose an alternative career path. Seventy-five percent of them perceived marketing education as an alternative pathway to a career in marketing and sales. For example, non-marketing major, Student G commented:

“Nowadays, getting a job in my field of interest is quite difficult and competitive as there are so many other I.T. graduates out there. However, I feel a little confident because I can still opt to work in other firms as a marketer or a sales executive since I’ve learned marketing”.

Non marketing major, Student H also commented:

“I think marketing education is important to me because it’s my back-up plan just in case I cannot get the job that I want. My lecturer told us that with marketing, I would learn how to analyse the needs and demands of the market and so, I believe I can apply it in any job. Even if I can’t become a programmer, I could still work with other businesses and help them market their products and services while waiting for the opportunity to get the job that I studied for.”

Although both groups viewed marketing as an important course, their perceptions were from two different perspectives. Marketing majors perceived marketing education to be

important to them as it was relevant to their career paths as marketers. This would seem to support the findings by Lambert (2003) that students found a course important when they perceived the lessons as relevant to their career and demands of the industry. Marketing majors believed that it would increase their employability as well as their marketing efficiency as they were able to learn about current marketing practices during lessons. Students saw the knowledge gained from marketing education as being in line with the demands of the marketing industry. This was related to the current marketing examples and case studies used in class. This finding supported the research conducted by Weil *et al.* (2001) and Hassal and Joyce (2001) who found that a lecturer's choice of teaching materials used in class could influence the students' perceptions of the course.

In contrast, non-marketing majors viewed marketing education as useful in helping them gain the necessary knowledge to run a business successfully. The views of non-marketing majors seemed to support the research conducted by Piercy (2002) who found that marketing education needs to be seen as relevant and useful in helping students meet the needs and demands of their future careers. Students perceived that the course allowed them to create a business that was more customer-centric as they learned about the methods to attract and retain customers and gained a more profound insight on how to understand customers better.

Marketing and non-marketing majors perceived that marketing education provided them with soft skills such as interpersonal communication, negotiation and teamwork. It was interesting to note that when compared to non-marketing majors, an additional 57.5% of marketing major students perceived marketing education as relevant to their personal needs. Conversely, a majority of non-marketing majors did not perceive how marketing education could be applied to their personal lives.

The higher percentage of marketing majors who perceived marketing to be personally relevant could be due to the fact that marketing majors had more exposure to various aspects of marketing. This was in line with the research carried out by Vermunt (2005) who found that an increase in the prior exposure to relevant courses allowed students to analyse, develop and apply learned marketing strategies in a practical manner as they could relate to the course in a more holistic manner. Thus, marketing majors who have studied a wider array of topics in their marketing courses since the beginning of their programme had a better understanding of marketing and its principles and theories and were able to apply them in their daily lives.

Both groups of students perceived that by learning marketing, they were able to acquire the necessary soft skills to function effectively and efficiently at work. Even though they were from different programmes, they highlighted that marketing education exposed them to the techniques of how to interact and manage their relationships with their bosses, colleagues and customers. This would seem to support research by Hernandez (2003) who found that students learned better in a context to which they could relate. Thus, despite the difference in programmes chosen, both groups of students were able to grasp the essentials of marketing education and used it as a bridge to new learning; where they saw its relevancy in their future work.

The content of the marketing curriculum was perceived by the non-marketing students to be useful to them. It is believed that marketing courses prepared students for employment as students were taught how to apply the theories learned in actual practice. This would seem

to support Wellman's (2010) Revised Marketing Competence Model that showed a strong interest among students toward bridging the gap between theory and practice. This also highlighted how a marketing course could improve employability.

Adding to this, a lecturer's role when delivering the content material in the relevant context would also influence students' perceptions of the usefulness of a marketing course. This seemed to support Entwistle (2000) who found that teaching characteristics such as the lecturer's explanations, clarity and structure of teaching would influence the students' learning and perception.

RQ2. Did the overall perceptions of students change at the end of the course?

At the end of their marketing course, it was noted that marketing majors remained firm in their perceptions about the importance of marketing education. They consistently believed that marketing education played an important role in shaping their lives and creating opportunities to secure their career of choice. On the contrary, the perceptions of non-marketing majors had changed. During the first five weeks of the course, 97.5% had believed marketing education to be important, especially concerning its relevance to their future careers. However, when asked again their opinions at the end of their marketing course, only 62.5% had the perception that marketing education was important to them. The remaining 35% had changed their perceptions. Non-marketing majors also stated that they were overwhelmed with the amount of information to be learned. For example, Student I commented:

"No, I don't think marketing course is important. We have to learn so many different theories and terms which I don't think I'll be using in my future career. It would have been better if it was taught as a short-term course of 7 weeks instead of for the whole semester. I'm only learning to pass my marketing exam."

Likewise, Student J commented:

"The first few chapters were interesting and seemed relevant but now after studying all the chapters, I think that many things that I learned are not relevant to my future needs. It's not very useful to learn and memorise so many things that I might not be even able to apply during my job."

After the completion of their marketing course, it was noted that 35% of non-marketing majors had changed their perceptions of the relevancy of marketing education to their careers and futures. They no longer found it relevant to their careers. This supports research by Hilton, Hughes & McDowell (2007) who found that the course structure of the marketing mix made most undergraduate students perceive marketing education as irrelevant.

Students were overwhelmed with the amounts of information that they had to learn. They seemed only concerned about learning enough to pass their examinations. This learning attitude towards and perceptions of marketing education further supported research by Keddie & Trotter (1998) on marketing courses, that students were only focused on obtaining answers to class tasks instead of placing effort on understanding how the lessons learned could be applied in their lives. Furthermore, it also supports the theory that non-marketing

students preferred to adopt the surface learning approach associated with memorising concepts in an isolated and unlinked manner. (Houghton, 2004).

RQ3. Are the students' perceptions of their marketing courses reflected in their overall course performance?

The results of students' performances in the marketing course are found in Table 2.

As shown in Table 2, both marketing majors and non-marketing majors performed well in their overall coursework and final examinations. Marketing majors performed better as 95% of the students attained an A grade for their coursework. This was in line with their perceptions that marketing education was important and relevant to their current programme and future careers. In addition, they had also been continuously exposed to other marketing courses during the duration of their studies. This supported research by Vermunt (2005) who found that students with more relevant education experience and exposure did better in courses as they became more engaged with their learning. Hence, marketing majors who had been exposed to marketing courses early on in their programme developed a higher learning drive, and their rate of comprehension of the subject matter was better.

Furthermore, marketing majors maintained a positive perception of marketing education throughout the duration of their course which resulted in higher overall passes compared to their counterparts. Marketing majors were able to apply the concepts learned to their personal lives leading to more indepth understanding of the course. This form of deep learning approach allowed students to develop the ability to analyse, link and apply the lessons learned in unfamiliar contexts which resulted in better overall academic results (Ramsden, 1992; Jackling 2005).

It was interesting to note, when compared using their coursework grades, both groups had some decline in their final exam results. Although students who majored in marketing perceived the course to be relevant and important, these perceptions did not translate into their final exam results. This could be explained by Entwistle's (2000) research which found that factors such as student characteristics, teaching characteristics and departmental characteristics could have contributed to the marketing major students' average final exam results.

In addition, 27.5% of non-marketing majors failed their final marketing exam. The higher failure rate compared to marketing majors could be reflective of the change in perceptions of the 35% of non-marketing majors, who now perceived marketing to be irrelevant to their needs. Although briefed on the importance of marketing education, their attitude and motivation toward learning marketing had declined by the end of the course. This is in accordance with the research conducted by McPherson (1998) who found that students placed less effort on learning content material that they perceived as irrelevant. Such perceptions influenced their motivation and learning approach compared to marketing majors which supported research conducted by Entwistle, 1987; Hassal and Joyce, 2001; and Entwistle *et al.*, 2002.

As mentioned in the comments, non-marketing majors were only concerned with learning enough to pass their exams, showing that these students were inclined toward adopting the surface learning approach. This had been found by Booth *et al.* (1999) to

negatively impact students' academic performance and explained the higher failure rate among non-marketing major students. This explained why students felt overwhelmed with the amounts of information which they memorised without understanding the concepts.

CONCLUSION

The results from this research gave a glimpse of students' perceptions of marketing and marketing education. Marketing majors perceived marketing education to be important as it increased their chances of being employed in the industry, while non-marketing majors perceived it as a tool that would help them run their own business. The difference in perceptions of importance must be noted. Marketing majors viewed themselves as employees while non-marketing majors viewed themselves as employers. However, both groups collectively perceived the exposure to marketing as useful for their future careers.

Changes in the opinions and perceptions of non-marketing majors emerged toward the end of their course. Non-marketing majors found the course irrelevant for their needs. One underlying reason was the feeling of being overwhelmed with new information that was contextually unfamiliar and content that was unrelated to the other courses they were taking. This explained students' surface learning approach, and why they were unable to link the new concepts with existing ones.

These changes were reflected in their overall final exam performance where there was a higher failure rate among non-marketing majors. It was also interesting to note, that the performance of marketing major students also declined during the final exams. However, the reasons for this decline were not obvious from the data collected. Added to this, is the acknowledgment of the subjectivity of the results as the research was carried out with a small group of students in one university campus. As such, further research needs to be carried out by analysing other variables such as the exam paper content and form. Future studies may expand on this research by including additional variables such as students' existing interest, practicality of the course and even the students' perception of the course' syllabus.

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Interview	Survey Questions
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Stages

Table 1. Interview Questions

(Initial

Stage)

1. In your opinion, why do you think you needed to learn marketing?

Week 1

2. Do you believe that the marketing lessons to be learned will be useful for you? Why or why not?

(Mid-Stage)

Week 2

3. If you find a course to be irrelevant, would you lose interest in the course? Why or why not?

4. What keeps you motivated to continue learning a course?

Week 3

5. What do you find most interesting about this course?

Week 4

6. Do you think you will be able to apply what you have learned into your personal life?

7. Using the marketing concepts learned in class, do you think you will be able to strengthen your power of persuasion? Why or why not?

Week 5

8. Are you able to comprehend what you have learned so far in your marketing classes? Why or why not?

9. Do you find it easy to grasp what is taught in your marketing lessons?

Week 6

10. Are the theories learned in this course, useful for you? Why or why not?

11. How would you apply what you have learned in class?

Week 7

12. Do you believe there is a connection between what is being taught in class and the actual working world scenario? Why or why not?

13. Would you be able to apply what you have learned theoretically into the practical side of your future career? Why do you believe so?

Week 8

14. Would you be able to learn about marketing without attending

marketing classes? Why do you believe so?

Week 9

15. By learning marketing, are you able to better understand people, particularly customers? Why?

16. Is this knowledge relevant to your future career? Why or why not?

(End Stage)

Week 10

17. After having completed your course, do you think it was necessary for you to learn marketing? Why or why not?

18. Did you enjoy learning marketing?

19. In the future, when you are working, would you be able to apply the theories learned in class?

20. Would you recommend this course to be kept as part of your programme?

Table 2. Students Performance in their Coursework and Final Exam

Programme	Marketing majors		Non-marketing majors	
	Coursework (%)	Final exam (%)	Coursework (%)	Final exam (%)
Grades				
A	95	22.5	70	35
B	5	47.5	30	27.5
C	0	17.5	0	10
F	0	12.5	0	27.5