Marketing Mix (4Cs) Affecting Decision to be an Online Degree Student: A Qualitative Case Study of an Online Master’s Degree in Thailand

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Abstract: This study aims to explain the influence of the marketing mix (4Cs) on the decision to be an online master’s degree student in Thai people. A purposive sampling of Thai six online master’s degree students from three universities was selected for a qualitative study. The data were analysed employing content analysis and the NVIVO software program. The results show that the 4Cs-marketing mix (communication, cost, convenience, and customer or student centre) is related to the decision to be an online master's degree student at a university in Thailand. Online master’s degree students perceived cost as the highest essential factor, followed by convenience, communication, and customer (student) centre. Educators and program directors should consider marketing mix (4Cs) because these factors influence the decision to be an online master’s degree student in this qualitative research. The implication could help all service sectors find the appropriate marketing mix or customer relationship management (4Cs) for their customers because it influences behavioural intention or decisions among consumers.

Keywords: education, marketing mix (4Cs), decision, online degree, student.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, online education had rapidly grown and been adopted (Xie et al., 2020). Nowadays, higher education, in general, and distance education are undergoing many changes due to advances in information technology and changes in student demographics (Kirkwood, 2014; Shaik, 2005). Many universities around the world have been affected by the COVID-19 virus. In less than a month, face-to-face learning has been replaced by online learning to keep education going (Chung et al., 2020). Furthermore, higher education is expected to grow and become more competitive, increasing pressure on institutions to market their programs (Adams & Eveland, 2007). The 4Cs relationship management or the 4Cs-marketing mix (communication, convenience, cost, and customer) is a critical strategy (Jianting & Feng, 2012; Wongsansukcharoen, 2022). Besides, in educational management, the
4Cs-marketing mix (communication, convenience, cost, and customer or student centre) not only effectively monitors and tracks student expectations but also provides students with meaningful and relevant services (Gambescia & Paolucci, 2009; Shaik, 2005; Stellefson et al., 2008). For instance, providing cost reduction, convenience, as well as an effective and professional student service or centre is critical to keep students motivated, satisfied, and enrolled in online learning courses and programs (Gray & DiLoreto, 2016; Kumar, 2010; Ramij & Sultana, 2020; Watts, 2017). Moreover, communicating about the success of an institution's alumni is one of the fundamental ways to increase student retention in an online programme (Boston et al., 2009; Herbert, 2006). Thus, the 4Cs-marketing mix of educational management (communication, cost, convenience, and customer or student centre) is critical in determining an individual's decision to be an online master's degree student in this study.

1.2. Problem Statement

The development and advancement of information technology make it easier for educators to change how they teach and create new ideas in education. Besides, the global COVID-19 pandemic has set the stage for even more opportunities for large-scale use of online education. Because online education is flexible, easy to find information, has a global reach, equity, innovation, and efficiency, more and more educational institutions are offering degree-granting distance and hybrid education programs that can be done at home or online (Xie et al., 2020). Earning a degree online, especially a degree of Master of Business Administration (MBA), is becoming more popular as more universities expand this mode of delivery. Besides, several factors can influence a student's decision to be an online degree student (Bejerano, 2008; Gambescia & Paolucci, 2015; Mujtaba, 2005). Several studies supported the antecedents of students' decision to be an online degree student, including students' satisfaction and perceived learning outcomes (Eom et al., 2006), the image of the study program (Helgesen & Nesset, 2007), online educational systems' reputation (Dehghan et al., 2014), and service quality in the context of an institution (Sultan & Wong, 2013). Still, few studies support the factors influencing students’ decision to be online master’s degree students employing the 4Cs-marketing mix model. Hence, this qualitative study explains how the 4Cs-marketing mix (communication, cost, convenience, and customer or student centre) affects the decision to be Thai online master’s degree students. It may benefit educational leaders, institution presidents, and program directors in developing an appropriate strategy to respond to students' needs and expectations wishing to pursue online degrees.

1.3. Research Objective

This study explains the influence of marketing mix (4Cs) on the decision to be an online master’s degree student in Thai people.

1.4. Research Question

What are the main factors of the marketing mix (4Cs) that influence Thai people in an individual's decision to be online master’s degree students?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Marketing Mix (4Cs)

The marketing mix, a collection of manageable marketing tools used by a company to generate the desired response in the targeted market, is one of the most fundamental marketing concepts (Khan, 2014). In the 4Cs-marketing mix strategy, customers are the most important aspect as this strategy is related to the customers’ attributes (Lin et al., 2013). Besides, the 4Cs-marketing mix, or relationship marketing, affects customers’ decisions in today's competitive world because it proposes what they want to buy or use. The 4Cs-marketing mix includes customer value, cost, communication, and convenience (Babaei et al., 2022; Ertz & Michelet, 2022). Education is a service, and students are the institution's primary focus (Shaik, 2005). As a result, students, as stakeholders or customers in educational management, are demanding quality services and are
less likely to embrace compromises in educational service quality. Educational institutions should consider implementing the 4Cs-relationship marketing strategies (communication, cost, convenience, and customer or student centre) to recruit and enrol new students and build long-term relationships with students (Aguinis et al., 2019; Shaik, 2005).

2.1.1. Cost

A critical component of the cost required to meet the customers' needs or desires is price. Pricing strategies for products and services must be affordable, and the products and services provided must be equal to their value (Idris, 2021). Educational costs, including tuition fees, living expenses, educational supplies, and other educational costs, should be considered when deciding whether to take a course (Johnson et al., 2016; Pennell & West, 2005). Similarly, financial considerations and other costs influence students' decisions to enrol in courses (McKinney et al., 2022). Furthermore, compared to traditional academic or trade school courses, online courses are less expensive, benefiting taking online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Johnson & Mejia, 2014; Kumar, 2010). As a result, to gain a competitive advantage, it is recommended that a price incentive, a marketing relationship strategy, be implemented to promote student enrollment (Shaik, 2005).

2.1.2. Convenience

Convenience in the 4Cs-marketing mix concept, which refers to the ease with which customers can obtain the goods and services they require, is a major marketing consideration for businesses. Besides, businesses that can maximise customer convenience will gain a competitive advantage (Cheng, 2017; Fei et al., 2021; Idris, 2021). Convenience in the educational marketing relationship includes the determinants such as study location, time, course duration, and so on (Kumar, 2010; Watts, 2017). The benefits of an online program include convenience and flexibility. Students can study online at their own pace and time of their convenience (Muthuprasad et al., 2021; Watts, 2017). Hence, with various student interactions, education as a service should be well-positioned to use relationship marketing to provide consistent and personalised services, including convenience, to students over time and across multiple touchpoints (Shaik, 2005).

2.1.3. Communication

Communication strategy in the 4Cs-marketing mix relationship is bidirectional marketing communication between enterprises and customers, customer engagement in enterprise product development and production (Cheng, 2017). Communication using the appropriate strategies with customers can help a marketing campaign succeed, which is one of the most effective marketing strategies marketers should employ (Idris, 2021). Similarly, communication, such as recommendation, word of mouth, and review, about an institution's excellence is important because it can influence a person's decision to pursue an online degree program (Edmiston, 2008; Shao-Chang, 2013; Tham & Werner, 2005). Also, communication about an institution's alumni success is vital because it can inspire and influence people to enrol in a course (Azhar & Sikumbang, 2018; Gallo, 2012).

2.1.4. Customer (Student) Centre

In the 4Cs-marketing mix strategy, customers must be prioritised (Constantinides, 2002). Customer service, or customer centre, is one of the most effective marketing strategies that marketers should employ. The company must focus on customer service to improve customer satisfaction and loyalty (Juanamasta et al., 2019; Parasuraman, 2000). Furthermore, the service centre for students attempts to analyse and service students' needs while providing a comprehensive, coordinated approach to meeting those needs over time. The student centre focuses on improving interactions and one-on-one relationships with students (Shaik, 2005). The ability to provide an integrated student profile to various student interfaces while maintaining the confidentiality and integrity of student data is critical to the service centre's implementation. The service centre enhances the student relationship by providing critical information to the student
2.2. The Decision to be an Online Master’s Degree Student

Several other factors influence individuals' decisions to be a master’s degree student, such as future career aspirations (Wu, 2014), faculty’s reputation, institution’s reputation, and admission requirements (Abdullah & Saeid, 2016), as well as programme quality and university's reputation (Blackburn, 2011). Furthermore, online learning plays a significant role in increasing access and participation in higher education for diverse student cohorts. Besides, adult learners with jobs, families and other responsibilities can update their career knowledge and skills through online learning, saving money on travel to a campus, and allowing for a flexible schedule (Kumar, 2010; Kuo & Belland, 2016; Stone et al., 2016). Hence, students enrolled in the online program because of its inexpensiveness, flexibility, convenience, and effectiveness, a good fit with their goals, professional development, obtaining an advanced degree in the field, as well as the university's strong reputation (Blackburn, 2011; Kumar, 2010; Willging & Johnson, 2009).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Method

Qualitative research aims to investigate every context in which people or groups make decisions and act and explain why that specific observed phenomenon occurred (Ritchie, 2003). In this study, the qualitative approach was used as a research strategy. In-depth interviews were conducted to clarify the influence of the 4Cs-marketing mix (communication, cost, convenience, and customer or student centre) on the decision to be an online master’s degree student. Semi-structured interviews were employed to collect data from six Thai online master’s degree students.

3.2. Population and Sample

Purposive sampling involves the researchers selecting the most useful sample based on their expertise. It is frequently employed in qualitative research. The goal is to learn everything there is to know about a specific phenomenon or population (Etikan et al., 2016). The population in this study was Thai online master’s degree students in Thailand. The study’s sample was master’s degree students over 18 years old, and all were Thai in a university in Thailand.

3.3. Data Collection

The researchers reviewed the secondary data by adopting the documentary method for appropriate key survey questions through in-depth interviews to accomplish the primary data results. The survey interview questions are shown as follows.

Main Questions

Q1: What is your source of information about your online degree program?
Q2: What factors do you consider before enrolling in an online degree program?
Q3: What do you expect to gain from your online degree program?
Q4: What are your thoughts on your online learning environment?
Q5: What factors of your online degree program satisfy you?
Q6: How would you rate the overall quality of your online education?
Q7: Could you describe your program's learning style and relationship management?
Q8: Would you advise others to enrol in an online degree program, and why?

Probe Questions

Q1: What are your thoughts on the cost of an online master’s degree? Do you think the cost of an online master’s degree is essential in your decision to be an online master’s degree student? Please explain.
Q2: What are your thoughts on the convenience of an online master’s degree? Do you think the communication of an online master’s degree is essential in your decision to be an online master’s degree student? Please explain.

Q3: What are your thoughts on the communication construct of an online master’s degree? Do you think the communication of an online master’s degree is essential in your decision to be an online master’s degree student? Please explain.

Q4: What are your thoughts on the customer (student) centre of an online master’s degree? Do you think the customer (student) centre of an online master’s degree is essential in your decision to be an online master’s degree student? Please explain.

Q5: What are your thoughts on the growing trend of an online master’s degree? Do you think there is an increasing trend of online master’s degrees? Please explain.

3.4. Data Analysis

The respondents in this study were Thai online master's degree students in a university in Thailand. Three males and three females were selected through purposive sampling. Content analysis is a qualitative method for systematically and objectively describing specific phenomena by making valid inferences from verbal, visual, or written data (Salem et al., 2022). Therefore, the content analysis method and the NVIVO Trial Version (a qualitative approach software) were used in this qualitative study to analyse the qualitative data collected through in-depth online and face-to-face interviews.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Respondents’ Demographics

Six Thai online master's degree students participated in this study. Three females were 29 years old, 34 years old, and 32 years old, respectively, and three males were 31 years old, 28 years old, and 42 years old, respectively. The participants were online master’s degree students from a university in Thailand; over 18 years old, and all were Thai.

Table 1. Respondents’ Demographics and Priority of the 4Cs-Marketing Mix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Age - Gender</th>
<th>Cost</th>
<th>Convenience</th>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>Student Centre</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 1</td>
<td>29 - Female</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>(March 08th, 2022)</td>
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<td>Respondent 2</td>
<td>34 - Female</td>
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<td>Respondent 3</td>
<td>32 - Female</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>(March 10th, 2022)</td>
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<td>Respondent 4</td>
<td>31 - Male</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>(March 11th, 2022)</td>
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<td>Respondent 5</td>
<td>28 - Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respondent 6</td>
<td>42 - Male</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>(March 13th, 2022)</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>28 - 42</strong></td>
<td><strong>1 = 3</strong></td>
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<td><strong>1 = 0</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
4.2. Content Analysis

4.2.1. The Influence of Cost on the Decision to be an Online Master’s Degree Student

Referring to the interviews, financial considerations and other costs influence students' decisions to enrol in an online master's degree programme. Most of the respondents would choose an online master’s degree programme if the programme were affordable. Therefore, an online master's degree program institution must consider an effective cost strategy.

“I also considered the price or university fee. It is a master’s degree program, so it is not that expensive. I mean, it is affordable.” – Respondent 1: a 29-year-old female, interviewed at 10:30 a.m. on March 08th, 2022.

“Well, the factors I have considered studying in this program are the course fees, course flexibility, course quality, and perceived usefulness.” – Respondent 3: a 32-year-old female, interviewed at 07:00 p.m. on March 10th, 2022.

“The cost of this programme is good, and it is affordable for an online master’s degree program in the business. I have also got support from my family, so I am fine.” – Respondent 5: a 28-year-old male, interviewed at 07:00 p.m. on March 12th, 2022.

4.2.2. The Influence of Convenience on the Decision to be an Online Master’s Degree Student

Referring to the interviews, convenience influences students' decisions to enrol in an online master's degree programme. Most of the respondents would choose an online master’s degree programme if the programme was convenient and flexible. As a result, education as a service should be well-positioned to use relationship marketing to provide students with consistent and personalised services, including convenience, over time and across multiple touch points.

“Also, this program is super convenient. It is flexible. There is also the benefit of learning whenever and wherever I want.” – Respondent 2: a 34-year-old female, interviewed at 06:00 p.m. on March 09th, 2022.

“Of course, it is convenient, in terms of place and time. I can learn whenever I am free from wherever I am if I have the internet and the access.” – Respondent 4: a 31-year-old male, interviewed at 06:30 a.m. on March 11th, 2022.

“From my experience, the programme is very convenient and flexible. It is perfect and supportive for an online program during the COVID-19 pandemic. I mean we can work and study. Classes will start around 7 p.m., and if you cannot make it, you can watch the recorded webinars.” – Respondent 6: a 42-year-old male, interviewed at 10:30 a.m. on March 13th, 2022.

4.2.3. The Influence of Communication on the Decision to be an Online Master’s Degree Student

Referring to the interviews, positive communication influences students' decisions to enrol in an online master's degree programme. For instance, communication about an institution's excellence, such as recommendations, word of mouth, and reviews, is important because it can influence a person's decision to pursue an online degree program.

“Well, I knew the information from the internet, from both the website and Facebook. The program I applied for is an executive Master of Business Administration. Also, I researched and...
asked my friends to know and make sure about the program.” – Respondent 4: a 31-year-old male, interviewed at 06:30 a.m. on March 11th, 2022.

“My source of information was from the Facebook page. It was interesting because it is an online degree program, and the university is well-known. It is my choice. I also checked the program’s information on the internet.” – Respondent 5: a 28-year-old male, interviewed at 07:00 p.m. on March 12th, 2022.

“There is good communication between staff members, instructors, and learners in the program, and I am happy with that. Also, communication on their website and Facebook about this online degree program is good and interesting. They can provide me with important information about the program.” – Respondent 6: a 42-year-old male; interviewed at 10:30 a.m. on March 13th, 2022.

4.2.4. The Influence of Customer (Student Centre) on the Decision to be an Online Master’s Degree Student

Referring to the interviews, student service, or student centre influences students’ decisions to enrol in an online master's degree programme. The student service centre’s role is an attempt to analyse and meet the needs of students while providing a comprehensive, coordinated approach to meeting those needs over time. Besides, the student centre is dedicated to enhancing interactions and positive relationships with students.

“The student centre is essential. If I need any help or anything, there is a student centre where I can communicate or talk via LINE. I have to say it is beneficial.” – Respondent 2: a 34-year-old female, interviewed at 06:00 p.m. on March 09th, 2022.

“Yes, a student centre is available online, which also is good and very convenient. I am satisfied, and I like it because it is beneficial for every learner and me to have program members assist us with our needs.” – Respondent 3: a 32-year-old female, interviewed at 07:00 p.m. on March 10th, 2022.

“Customer centre, if you mean student centre, yes, there is a platform where students can contact the program if they need help. I have to say I have got benefits from the student centre such as information about my subjects and many more.” – Respondent 5: a 28-year-old male, interviewed at 07:00 p.m. on March 12th, 2022.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1. Discussion

The 4Cs-marketing mix (communication, cost, convenience, and customer or student centre) impacts the decision to be an online master's degree student in this qualitative study. The finding supported the previous research of Aguinis et al. (2019) and Shaik (2005) that the 4Cs-marketing mix (communication, cost, convenience, and customer or student centre) can influence individuals’ decision to be an online master’s degree student. The finding supported the previous research of McKinney et al. (2022) that financial considerations and other educational costs influence students’ decisions to enrol in online courses. The finding supported the previous research of Kumar (2010), Muthuprasad et al. (2021), and Watts (2017) that convenience and flexibility influence students' decisions to enrol in online learning. The finding supported the previous research of Edmiston (2008), Shao-Chang (2013), and Tham& Werner (2005) that communication, such as recommendation, word of mouth, and review, about an institution's excellence can influence a person's decision to pursue an online degree program. Also, the finding supported the previous research of Azhar&Sikumbang (2018) and Gallo (2012) that communication about an institution's alumni success can inspire and influence people to enrol in a course. The finding supported the previous research of Hays (2020) and Shaik (2005) that a student centre can influence students' decisions to enrol in online courses.
5.2. Conclusions
The 4Cs-marketing mix or customer relationship management (communication, cost, convenience, and customer or student centre) influences individuals’ decisions to be an online master's degree student. Therefore, programme directors, educational leaders, and teachers should pay attention to cost the most, followed by convenience, communication and customer (student) centre. These factors influence people to decide to be online master’s degree students. Program directors and educational leaders could manage their strategies for the appropriate educational expenses and course fees. Communication could be enhanced through positive word of mouth about the institution’s success. Furthermore, program directors and educational leaders can increase convenience by, for example, managing coursework schedules in a way that is convenient for both teachers and students, flexible and efficient learning methods. Finally, customer or student centres can be improved by having an online student centre where students can get help from institution members online. As a result, students will purchase an online master’s degree programme.

5.3. Research Implication
This research may benefit educational leaders, institution principles, program directors, and teachers to implement appropriate strategies to meet the needs and expectations of students interested in an online master’s degree programme or any online degree program and beyond. Furthermore, the findings indicate that the 4Cs-marketing mix (communication, cost, convenience, and customer or student centre) influences individuals' decision to pursue an online degree. Hence, the findings could be applied to all online degree institutions to develop strategic management based on the 4Cs-marketing mix.

5.4. Limitations and Recommendations
The limitation throughout the study is the respondents were online master’s degree students in Thailand. Only one country may not be a good representation to explain online degrees in other countries and may not be appropriate to explain in doctoral degrees. The recommendation is to expand more areas and sample further. Moreover, a quantitative study should be considered in a future study to explain the relationship phenomenon in a large group in general.

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