

HOW PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN INDONESIA CHANGED THEIR MARKETING MIX AMIDST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected industries in their efforts to amass consumers with the education industry not being an exception. For-profit higher education institutions (HEIs) in Indonesia were forced to rethink their marketing strategies as COVID-19 restrictions and a changing economic landscape hit the country. Five private HEIs from four different cities in Indonesia have been the subjects of this study which focuses on how parents' demands and the pandemic in general were able to drive a change in these HEIs' 7P marketing mix. In-depth interviews were conducted with the representatives of these HEIs' marketing teams, and it was found that three of the seven Ps in the aforementioned HEIs' marketing mix had to be changed (price, promotion and process). From this finding, it could be concluded that in Indonesian higher education settings, there is a distinct producer-consumer relationship that hinders patrons to make demands as freely as they would with other types of services.

1. INTRODUCTION

For-profit higher education institutions (HEIs), which have fully evolved into one specific type of enterprise, are subject to the demands created by the changes in the environment (Bapat & Gankar, 2019). In 2020, HEIs around the world were forced to adapt to extreme environmental changes due to the then emerging COVID-19 pandemic and to resort to digital learning platforms (Jandrić, 2020, as cited in Teräs et al., 2020). Until the writing of this paper, the Indonesian government's ban on face-to-face classroom learning would still remain. HEIs across the country have been utilizing different online learning strategies to run their classes. Most students whose first year at the university was in 2020, as a result, had not had the opportunity to step foot on their campus grounds. Education marketing, in regards to HEIs, has placed its focus on the 'recruitment-oriented' endeavors which would consist of "open days, advertising campaigns and alumni events rather than considerations, such as the marketing orientation, market fit and commercial relevance of modules and degree programmes" (Durkin et al., 2016, p. 355). The changes in social activities during the COVID-19 pandemic would see alterations being made not only in the methods of HEIs marketing, but also the services that are being marketed as all learning activities must be done remotely through online platforms. Inevitably, the pandemic would eventually affect the marketing mix employed by the marketing teams from different HEIs.

This paper focuses on the alterations made towards the 7P marketing mix of different private HEIs in Indonesia, as they are known to make use of their own marketing teams to market their services, as opposed to their public counterparts. The use of 7P marketing mix has been used multiple times in the discussions on HEIs and their marketing strategies as demonstrated by Bapat & Gankar (2019) and Tahir et al. (2017). As there are an abundance of contributing factors which influence the choice of university amongst prospective students (Maniu & Maniu, 2014), HEIs are required to employ different strategies to market their services especially during a worldwide pandemic which can halt many on-campus activities for a long period of time. The alterations to 7P marketing mix of the sample HEIs studied in this research will show how much HEIs have adapted towards the new demands of the education market during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis and conclusion will also be drawn through the Goffmanian concept of 'impression management' as actions of HEIs (including those pertaining marketing activities) are socially influenced by their role as centers for education within a society.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Education Marketing

Yang (2016) defined the concept of 'education marketing' as the "application of marketing management's theories and methods in education field" (p. 1185). The implication of this general definition is that, as Yang explained, 'education' can be considered a field of business and is within the same dimension as the fields of 'automobile' or 'sports' in 'automobile marketing' or 'sports marketing'. Education marketing runs through a process involving factors similar to the marketing of other types of

services, and as demonstrated by Camilleri (2019), this particular type of marketing can be seen and studied through a simple SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats).

2.2 Marketing Mix of HEIs

Nonthapot and Thomya (2020) synthesized the 7P elements of marketing mix as product, price, place, promotion, people, physical evidence and process. In the context of marketing for HEIs, as broken down by Tahir et al. (2017), marketing mix would include:

Product (program): undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate programs;

Price: fee levels, discounts, scholarships and accommodations;

Promotion: advertising, publicity and education expos;

Place: location of HEI and ease of access;

People: faculty, staff members and students;

Process: teaching-learning activities, evaluation processes, admissions and staff recruitment activities; and

Physical evidence (physical facilities): buildings, classrooms, libraries, laboratories, etc. (pp. 181-182)

2.3 Adaptability of Marketing Mix during the COVID-19 Pandemic

A research by Dušek and Sagapova (2020) demonstrates how marketing mix of one specific industry should change as customers' demands change during the COVID-19 pandemic. Dušek and Sagapova recommended that, based on a survey conducted towards Czech tourists, accommodation facilities in the Czech Republic should expand on the products that they offer in response to the more recent trends that would see tourists preferring local travels and less crowded tourist spots. Their conclusion stated the following in regards to how two out of the seven P's (product and price) in an accommodation facility's marketing mix should change: Considering the marketing mix recommendations relevant for destinations and accommodation facilities, it can be concluded that there is great demand for the expansion of the typically offered "product" with additional services that will be included in the price of accommodation, for example wellness, degustation of wine or local products, equipment for sport activities or free tickets for sights and attractions in a particular destination. (p. 6) A similar research was conducted to see how cafes could benefit from changing their 4C marketing mix during the COVID-19 pandemic. The 4C marketing model focuses on four important elements of marketing: customers' needs, cost (of the product being marketed), convenience and communication (Jarad, 2020). Hutauruk (2020) conducted a study on how cafes in Samarinda, Indonesia, would benefit from improving one of the four C's (convenience) by providing more outdoor dining options: one C which is 'customers' needs' affects another C on the grid which is 'convenience'. In contrast with the two research mentioned above, this research focuses more on highlighting the changes made by the sampled HEIs in their marketing mix in order to observe the spectrums that can and cannot be altered. Marketing for HEIs as a discussion is a relatively new discursive territory as it is still debatable whether students can be considered 'customers' (Durkin, 2016), and this perspective could be a hindrance for HEIs to act the exact same way as fully for-profit enterprises do.

2.4 Parents' Position within Private HEIs

In the context of private HEIs, it is safe to say that parents take a similar approach towards their children's education as they would in the context of the school-parent dynamic in private schools. As stated by Chubb and Moe (1988), private schools have full control over their goals, standards and methods which "may reflect the values of owners or patrons" (p. 1,067). Also in the same light, in private schools, Chubb and Moe explicitly stated that students and parents "occupy a much more central position" (p. 1,068). The implication to this view is that parents are in the position to make demands towards what methods private schools employ in their activities. However, before parents go into making demands for changes, it is worth noting that parents would first also go over the process of choosing an ideal school for their children based on "rational calculations of cost, benefits, and probabilities of success of options" (Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007, p. 92).

3. METHODOLOGY

This research employed a deep narrative analysis which required in-depth interviews with actors involved in activities related to the sales and marketing of the HEIs which they are a part of. Five interviews were conducted all in March 2021 with representatives from five different HEIs located in four different cities: Jakarta (2), Bekasi (1), Bandung (1) and Surabaya (1). The informants interviewed are members of their HEIs' marketing team, and by the time of the interviews, they had experienced selling their products both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The narrative data acquired from the interviews were coded based on two basic categories: what the informants thought changed and did not change from their marketing mix after the pandemic began. From there, not only the author was able to determine the alterations made towards these HEIs' marketing mix, but also parents' perspectives towards what they could and what they could not demand from HEIs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. RESULTS

This results section is divided into five smaller sections and each section presents findings from each of the five interviews. Excerpts from interview transcriptions had been translated from Bahasa Indonesia to English before being included in this chapter. The five sections are presented sequentially based on the order of which interviews were conducted before the next ones. For confidentiality reasons, the names of both the HEIs and the informants are undisclosed. The details of the HEIs and the informants are as follows:



Table 1: Details of interviews

No.	Name of HEI	Details on Informant(s)
1	HEI 1 (campus location: Jakarta)	Informant 1A (Head of Master of Management Recruitment) Informant 1B (Student Recruitment Staff Member & PA to Marketing Director)
2	HEI 2 (campus location: Jakarta)	Informant 2 (Marketing Executive)
3	HEI 3 (campus location: Bandung)	Informant 3 (Head of Interactive Marketing)
4	HEI 4 (campus location: Surabaya)	Informant 4 (Marketing Staff Member)
5	HEI 5 (campus location: Bekasi)	Informant 5 (Marketing Staff Member for Jabodetabek Area)

4.1 HEI 1

The first interview that was conducted was with two representatives from HEI 1 which is located in Jakarta. HEI 1 comprises two faculties/schools: Faculty of Management and Faculty of Creative Industries. The interviewees of this particular interview were Informant 1A (Head of Master of Management Recruitment) and Informant 1B (Student Recruitment Staff Member & PA to Marketing Director). As the first interview of five, the questions that were asked were exploratory and rather broad. The answers obtained from this interview were used as the basis of deeper inquiries during the next four interviews. The first finding from the interview that the author would like to highlight is the fact that parents had not had any demands or complaints regarding the learning process which was moved to online platforms due to COVID-19 restrictions. When asked about whether the marketing team would communicate the changes in the learning process, Informant 1A stated: Since the pandemic has been going on since February or March, parents have been aware (of the changes in the learning process). However, there are still (parents) who would ask whether (the classes) would be held online or offline. (Informant 1A) In general, the questions that had been asked by parents in regards to learning during the pandemic would revolve around 'when face-to-face classes will resume' and 'what facilities students could get to support their online learning'. Parents' decision to whether or not to send their children to study at HEI 1 was said to not be affected by the switch to online learning as parents had already understood the changes that had to be made during the COVID-19 pandemic. The finding that shows the difference in HEI 1 marketing activities during the COVID-19 pandemic is the adjustments the campus had made in reaction to the demands regarding payments. In regards to parents' questions that were asked only during the pandemic, Informant 1A stated: If we cannot go to campus like this, parents (would ask whether or not) they need to pay in full. (Informant 1A)

Informant 1B then continued to explain regarding how parents would request for financial aids:

(Parents would ask the campus) to increase the amount of scholarship given. So, if they have already been given a certain amount of scholarship (for their child), but (they would say) they need more scholarship. Or, they would ask for financial aid, more discount. (Informant 1B) With all that being said, HEI 1 still had not yet developed a rigid system of special payment arrangements for scholarships or discounts during the pandemic. Informant 1B explained: It depends on what these parents request for. We would usually inform the finance department (regarding a request made by a parent). If finance approves and the request makes sense, then it is done. (Informant 1B) As with how marketing activities had been conducted during the pandemic, HEI 1 had been unable to do school visits during the pandemic. All marketing presentations had been done online through zoom. However, Informant 1A stated that this had resulted in more flexibility towards how HEI 1's marketing team had approached their activities. Informant 1B explained that the entrance test that would normally be done on campus on Sundays had been conducted online instead.

4.2 HEI 2

The second interview conducted was with Informant 2, a Marketing Executive from HEI 2 which is located in Jakarta. HEI 2 comprises two faculties/schools which are the Faculty of Technology and Design and the Faculty of Social Science and Humanities. This interview was conducted by using more or less the same questions but with the addition of one focus: do parents demand for more scholarship/discount/financial aid? This added focus was inspired by the first interview with HEI 1 and it was intended to help the author/interviewer determine whether the demand for financial aid during the COVID-19 pandemic also played a significant (and perhaps the only) role in the alteration of HEI 2's marketing mix. The interview started with a simple question of "what is different about the marketing efforts of HEI 2 during the pandemic?". Informant 2 answered that generally, there had been no significant difference as marketing activities are usually all the same every year. However, these marketing activities had shifted to online ones where everything moved to Zoom and Google Meet: instead of doing school visits and organizing campus events, HEI 2 had been doing online marketing presentations, online scholarship info



sessions and virtual campus tours. Despite there being a decline in sales at the beginning of the pandemic, everything had gotten to their normal state pretty early on, with some Marketing Executives already reaching 50% of the annual sales target early at launch.

An interesting finding came after Informant 2 was asked regarding “what questions have begun to start asking since the beginning of the pandemic?”. Informant 2 began with the fact that, since campus promotional events had been done fully online, HEI 2 marketing team had been making the extra effort to make sure parents could accompany their children during info sessions. This was due to some parents thinking that the information provided could be fraudulent. After that, Informant 2 had one remark on the subject of payment installments which he said that parents would now always ask about. As planned, the author probed further on this subject. Informant 2 then further explained: Regarding the installments, they (parents) would ask whether they should pay everything now (forward) or after (their children) finish their studies. Or, (parents would also ask) whether there are other methods of installments. During this pandemic, we do not know whether their families are affected economically. So, parents would ask for a longer time for (their) installment tenor. (Informant 2) The author then proceeded to ask regarding how the campus would handle these requests to which Informant 2 responded: Because we have back office and scholarship teams, so they have prepared us a method (for installments). So, at the beginning, when we inform (parents) about the scholarship (that their children get) and how the payment works, we inform them about the general method of installments. However, if parents feel they need more (scholarship/discount) or they need to be given a longer tenor, the scholarship team already has a policy (which enables them) to give the parents that (special) tenor. (Informant 2)

Before the pandemic, Informant 2 added, the nature of these ‘special’ tenors were something that needed to be discussed first: no special policy on this whatsoever which would allow parents to acquire financial aid instantly by request. Other than a new policy on payment installments, HEI 2 also provided new scholarship opportunities which the campus started to offer during the pandemic. A program had been established which would enable freshmen to not have to pay any entry tuition fees. On top of that, these students could also get a partial to 100% discount in their semesterly tuitions. Informant 2 highlighted that changes in the product that HEI 2 marketed only went as far as the addition of different financial aids. If there were any, it would only be the free mobile internet plan that the campus distributed to students during to help them with their online study, but this depended on the only learning needs of each program of study. Nonetheless, Informant 2 stated that this was also communicated to potential HEI 2 parents.

4.3 4HEI 3

The third interview conducted was with Informant 3, the Head of Interactive Marketing at HEI 3 which is located in Bandung. HEI 3 is a Catholic HEI which comprises seven faculties/schools: economics, social and political sciences, IT and sciences, industrial technology, engineering, law and philosophy. The questions and focuses of the interviews after the second one had been made consistent, making the third, fourth and fifth interviews to be based on the HEI 2 (second) interview. Early on during the interview, the author asked Informant 3 whether there had been shifts in parents’ concerns/questions during campus info sessions conducted by HEI 3’s marketing team, specifically the author asked regarding parents’ concerns on the shift in the learning methods caused by the pandemic. Informant 3 responded with a straightforward answer: In regards to learning methods, actually, there have not been that many changes. (I) mean, it is still the same. However, there have been many questions regarding the technicalities of registration (for admission), selection, (and) payment. Those are the things that have changed a lot (in regards to questions). (Informant 3)

Informant 3 then elaborated on his statement on how these three topics had been asked frequently by parents (admission registration, entrance selection and payments). Firstly, before the pandemic, there would be two options available for registration and selection: on-site and online. The pandemic had forced the former to not be an option, thus resulting in the marketing team to conduct everything online. This posed a problem which saw parents who had low proficiency in digital technology to need more close guidance during both registration and the entrance test. Secondly, in regards to payments, Informant 3 stated that the questions asked by parents had forced a change in the policy on financing methods for future students. There were two main changes in financing methods policy at HEI 3: a higher scholarship quota for prospective students and the newly-allowed installment payments. HEI 3 had actually been providing different scholarships to students even before the pandemic started. However, during the pandemic, a new category of scholarship was provided where the requirements were loosened as opposed to other scholarships offered at HEI 3; it would usually take students to prepare every single required document to be able to apply for a scholarship, for this aptly-named Financial Aid Scholarship (Basiswa Bantuan Ekonomi) the requirements had been loosened to just school recommendations or recommendations from a local public administrator. As for payments, HEI 3 had since allowed parents to request for installment payments, where before the pandemic, the campus did not allow installment payments at all.

As for other changes that were made by HEI 3, there were only a few that could be named. First, the campus had to increase their server size to accommodate a more massively done online entrance test. The marketing team would also need to communicate a more online learning process to parents using an online learning platform that the campus had established. Having said that, Informant 3 added that the campus had actually developed and used said online learning platform before the pandemic started. HEI 3’s marketing activities had been done mostly online during the pandemic. Webinars and Zoom workshops had been heavily utilized instead of education expos. School visits had been mostly halted with the exception of a few occasions where the marketing team could visit some local Bandung schools to meet teachers. Informant 3 also stated that there had been a change in how people consume media: people have now been more familiar with audio-visual materials rather than written ones (especially those which are in the form of 15-30 second videos). This resulted in HEI 3 doing more adjustments in how they create their promotional materials. In continuation of his explanations on HEI 3’s marketing



activities during the pandemic, Informant 3 stated that online marketing plans had positively affected the general number of reach the marketing team could obtain. Before the pandemic, one marketing officer could only visit one school per day, while during the pandemic, they could do a virtual marketing presentation to four to five schools per day. Such flexibility also allowed the marketing team to involve more faculty members in their webinars and workshops. For this reason, Informant 3 explained that HEI 3 would actually consider maintaining some of these online strategies after the pandemic ends.

4.4 HEI 4

The fourth interview conducted was with Informant 4, a Marketing Staff Member at HEI 4 which is located in Surabaya. HEI 4 is a culinary school which offers a 3-year advanced diploma culinary program and 1-year certification gourmet program. HEI 4 was the most specialized school amongst the five involved in this research. The interview began with a discussion on whether there had been questions from parents regarding the shift in learning method. Informant 4 stated that there had been questions about the learning process during the pandemic from both parents and school counselors (private HEIs in Indonesia would organize promotional events at schools through counselors as their gatekeepers). Informant 4 explained that at HEI 4, their learning would usually focus on 30% theories and 70% practical skills training. During the pandemic, lessons on theories were done online and cooking classes were done fully offline on campus. Around 95% of the parents allowed their children to come to campus for these offline sessions while the rest did not. For these students who were not allowed to come to campus by their parents, HEI 4 would ask them to keep the receipt of all the raw materials they had bought for reimbursement (raw materials are normally provided by the campus for cooking classes).

According to Informant 4, only 1 or 2 potential parents had asked about a discount for during the pandemic. As students were still able to get access to all facilities (even those who insisted on doing their cooking classes at home were given reimbursement for raw materials), HEI 4 did not provide potential students with any discount. Discount was only given to those who were admitted during the first batch of registration as would normally be the case before the pandemic began. The only financial aid that was provided during the pandemic was a new policy on installment payments. During the pandemic, parents could request for a longer tenor. For installment payments, tuition fee could usually be paid in 3 to 4 installments, during the pandemic, it could be extended to 12 installments (1-year tenor). However, Informant 4 stated that there had only been 5 to 10 parents who requested for a longer tenor. HEI 4's marketing activities had been done online during the pandemic. The campus would normally rely on edufairs, cooking demonstrations, and events organized for school counselors. However, instead the aforementioned strategies, the pandemic had forced them to settle with online presentations. That being said, Informant 4 the campus would eventually combine old strategies with online marketing activities once the pandemic ends.

4.5 HEI 5

The last interview conducted was with Informant 5, a Marketing Staff Member at HEI 5 which is located in Bekasi. The campus comprises four schools/faculties: business, engineering, computer science and humanities. The interview began with the usual question of whether parents had been asking about the shift in learning method since the start of the pandemic. Informant 5 stated that there had been quite a lot of questions on that topic. The marketing team would explain to these parents that the campus had an e-learning platform that had always been used even before the pandemic: it was not that the campus had to develop a special online platform for the pandemic, but the marketing team would use this already created platform and explain it to the parents as one of the main ways online classes were conducted. While this platform was only used as a medium to upload materials, online synchronous classes would still be conducted through Zoom or Google Meet. In regards to payments, Informant 5 stated that there had been no special scholarships made for during the pandemic. However, HEI 5 had established a collaboration with third party financing platforms which enabled parents to pay their children's tuition in installments. These platforms had been certified by OJK (Otoritas Jasa Keuangan/Financial Services Authority) and could help parents by paying off their children's tuition first to HEI 5 as a loan that parents need to pay back in installments. This method of payment was new to HEI 5 as a way to help potential parents during the pandemic and had been offered by the marketing department to parents as a solution to their financing problems. Before this, HEI 5 only had one installment scheme where parents/students would need to fulfill the campus's requirements:

the scheme would be determined by the HEI 5's finance department and parents' financial ability (and that would only cover for first year's entrance fees). Informant 5 explained that most marketing endeavors had been conducted online through Zoom events and webinars. Parents who had inquiries could still visit HEI 5, however, inquiries had been mostly done through calls or text messages (due to the fact that a portion of the parents/potential students interested in HEI 5 lived outside the city). The marketing team had also been able to visit some schools located outside of the COVID-19 'red zones' to meet teachers, but they would need to make appointments first as these teachers would not always be at school. The way the marketing team would meet teachers would mainly be through webinars which were organized especially for teachers. With all that explained, Informant 5 stated that this online approach would still be utilized for after the pandemic ends as it could help the marketing team with expanding their reach to those who could not visit the campus.

5. DISCUSSION

The results above have significant implications on the general discussion of education marketing: the changes found in these HEIs' marketing mix above further cement the notion that there is a producer-consumer relationship between HEIs and students/parents. As demonstrated in a research by Dušek and Sagapova (2020) on the tourism industry, consumers' demands during the COVID-19 pandemic could change the marketing strategies of a whole industry, and this research on HEIs in Indonesia also demonstrates how the higher education industry could experience changes in its marketing strategies when there are changes in demands by consumers. However, with HEIs, it is not that simple of a task to pinpoint the drivers of the changes made in the industry's marketing endeavors. Based on the 7P HEI marketing mix formulated by Tahir et al. (2017),



there are seven basic elements that make up the entire set of one HEI's marketing strategies: product, price, promotion, place, people, process and physical evidence. The findings laid out in the results section show that only three of the seven P's were affected by the pandemic: price, promotion and process. The changes can be broken down as follows: Price: all five HEIs had to create a new scholarship/discount scheme and/or a new payment system in order to accommodate parents who were having financial problems due to the pandemic;

Promotion: all five HEIs had to settle with mostly remote marketing strategies which utilized online communication/meeting platforms; and Process: all HEIs, with the exception of HEI 4, had to settle with online classes (and HEIs 1 and 3 admitted to conducting their entrance tests online during the pandemic). Out of the three elements of marketing mix that were affected, price is the only one that was a byproduct of parents' demands. The shift in promotion and classes/tests to online sessions is, on the other hand, a result of these HEIs' responses towards the country's COVID-19 restrictions and concerns. This research found that, in the higher education industry, the COVID-19 pandemic did not drive consumers to demand for changes in products, unlike what was found through the research on the tourism industry in Czech Republic by Dušek and Sagapova (2020). As Chubb and Moe (1988) explained, in private schools, parents play a more central role. In this case, private schools would have goals, standards and methods which are affected by their patrons/parents. However, in the case of private HEIs in Indonesia, that is certainly not the case. When choosing the best school for their children, parents would go through these rational calculations of different factors (Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007), and what was found through this research is that parents would just stop at that calculative process rather than making demands based on how the pandemic had developed and affected them. The only demand that they made was for HEIs to understand their financial situation and to help them get their children to start their study amidst the pandemic.

6. CONCLUSION

This research is another proof that education marketing is a legitimate discursive vehicle in marketing research. The findings above have demonstrated that the higher education industry is capable of some adjusting amidst an abruptly changing economic landscape, albeit with its own distinct results due to the particularity of its producer-consumer relationship. However, this conclusion poses more questions for further research: do these findings speak for the entirety of the global higher education industry, or are they only true for Indonesia? There are more phenomena to study out of marketing strategies in the higher education industry within a plethora of contexts, and the author wishes that it does not end at the cultural relativity amongst different demographics of consumers. The producer-consumer relationship in the education industry (not just in higher education settings) in general needs to be explored further in its relation to education marketing and/or sales.

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