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American Marketing Students' Attitudes towards Online Classes

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ABSTRACT

A sample of 304 American marketing students from four regionally diverse universities provided insight regarding their attitudes towards online education. Positives included scheduling flexibility, opportunities to take more classes offered by their own and by other universities, and the elimination of time and cost constraints. Most disconcerting was the absence of student-teacher interaction. Traditional and hybrid offerings were generally deemed to be superior to those courses using the “delivered entirely online (DEO)” format. Students need to be made more aware of the advantages of online education from both an educational and a temporal perspective. A meaningful segment is comprised of those students who have yet to take an online course and tend to exhibit more reluctance towards online education. Another constituency that needs to be targeted so as to change the existing negative perceptions is the employers who look to higher education institutions for students with the skills needed to help their organizations achieve their own goals. Another key group comprises prospective faculty, many of whom have yet to fully embrace this evolving paradigm germane to the delivery of the educational product.

INTRODUCTION

It is a fair assertion that university students are typically often among those at the forefront of any significant advance in technology that impacts the daily lives of the broader population. From Smartphones to iPads, these younger consumers can generally be characterized as innovators or early adopters. Given this reality, and their Internet savvy, one might assume that these students would openly embrace online education during this early period of adoption.

One question that might be raised is whether or not online education is an innovation in the true sense of the word. Some might argue that education delivered via the Internet does not truly represent a technological breakthrough per se; rather it simply represents a new channel of distribution for the delivery of existing educational products. Marketers might simply characterize it as an alternative channel of distribution to reach one, but not all, of higher education's many unique target markets. As alluded to in the preceding statement, it is also important to acknowledge that colleges and universities are not the sole province for the online delivery of educational content. Training courses and seminars are now routinely streamed to an array of eager learners who do not fit the typical university student profile. Corporate and military learners are two examples of these non-traditional segments. Even states like Michigan are using online educational products to teach its licensed drivers, many of whom have recently received citations for motor vehicle violations, to drive defensively. Yet it is apparent that many traditional universities, in their efforts to attract more students, have dramatically increased scope

of their catalog of online offerings. Some have even begun to offer complete degree programs that are delivered entirely online.

As with most new endeavors, online education has its supporters and its critics. Because of its relative newness, a significant portion of the information that individual faculty members have about this “product” is anecdotal at best. For example, university departmental retreats may be the scene of sharp discourse as these supporters and critics often face-off with banter that expresses their strong opinions. Media reports view it as newsworthy to enumerate the perceived pros and cons based solely on the relatively superficial analysis of a few cases. Students themselves are often eager to share their opinions with their peers or even with their “traditional” professors. So while there is an undercurrent of discussion regarding the perceived efficacy of online education, much of it is informal at best. So, what do students really think? Do opinions differ across various groups of students? Answers to questions such as these are crucial as educational institutions continue their expansion of online course offerings and programs in order to make them more readily available to current and prospective students. To these institutions, online courses may reflect a means by which the concern regarding diminishing enrollments can be side-stepped. But is it truly a market-driven solution that fulfills an actual need of one or more of the educational community’s target markets? Does it meet the needs of those for whom it is intended? This research seeks to answer important questions such as these.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is fair to say that the body of literature regarding online education is developing at a rapid rate. The literature is replete with early examples of harsh commentary regarding the use of the Internet as a tool for the dissemination of the important educational product. Of course, it would not be controversial were it not for the advocates who firmly believe in the pedagogical integrity of online education. For starters, it has been stated that faculty have been slow to embrace the Internet as a credible educational medium. Perhaps this shortcoming is best captured by an early overview offered by Totaro, Tanner, Noser, Fitzgerald, and Birch (2005, p. 18) who stated that “faculty perceive online learning as having numerous shortcomings; these include: the lack of instructor-student/student-student interaction; no structured classroom environment; students tend to teach themselves the course material; the difficulty of teaching quantitative courses online; and the challenges associated with administering exams online.” More recently, Lloyd, Byrne and McCoy (2012) used factor analysis on a set of potential barriers to faculty members’ decision to embrace online education. Specifically, they delineated interpersonal barriers, institutional barriers, training and technology barriers, and cost/benefit analysis barriers.

To many of the proponents, the critics are guilty of a myopic perspective whereby they cannot see the forest for the trees. As early as 1983, well before online education came into vogue, Clark offered the view that the medium used for the delivery of the educational product has no impact on achievement. Today’s academicians likely find humor in his analogy that “media are mere vehicles that deliver instruction but do not influence student achievement any more than the truck that delivers groceries causes changes in our nutrition...only the content of the vehicle can influence achievement” (Clark, 1983, p. 445). In line with this assertion, Palloff and Pratt (1999) articulated their belief that since the Internet is no more than a medium for the delivery of

information, its use would have no impact on student achievement. This premise that the Internet is simply another medium for delivering the educational product is repeated in several studies.

A significant controversial issue involves questions regarding the perceived legitimacy of on-line universities, particularly those which operate on a for-profit basis. These schools offer no courses through the traditional mode of delivery; rather their entire array of course offerings and programs is delivered solely via an Internet-based medium. The warning is somber; put succinctly, we are told to be aware of the reality that “some universities, and even some of the organizations that accredit them, are bogus” (Anon., 2007). Perhaps it is concerns such as those articulated in this section of the literature review that contributed to one assessment that “the poor track record of a few for-profit universities whose graduates tend to have higher unemployment rates, lower earnings and greater debt and loan default rates six years postgraduation” (Calechman, 2012, p. 104). A recent story on ABC News further delineated a number of concerns regarding for-profit institutes of higher learning, many of which focus on the online delivery of the educational product (Cuomo, et al., 2010). In line with concerns of this ilk is Chau’s (2010) characterization of *the commodification of knowledge* which he posits is transforming institutions of higher learning into *storefronts of knowledge*. However, it is worth noting that many observers would argue that there is a substantial difference in the quality of the product put forth by for-profit institutes of higher education and the curricula offered by mainstream universities that have embraced online education as an alternative mode of delivering the educational product.

Perceived Advantages and Benefits Accruing to Higher Education Students

The literature identifies a host of potential benefits that the online student may reap. The most commonly mentioned benefit is that of accessibility and convenience (Vamosi, Pierce and Slotkin, 2004). As such, Web-based instruction (WBI) has been characterized as quick and easy (Sitzmann et al., 2006), a just-in-time (JIT) delivery system (Marks, Sibley and Arbaugh, 2005), a time-saver that eliminates commuting (Marks, Sibley and Arbaugh 2005), a flexible alternative regarding the students’ use of their time (Bhrommalee, 2011; Chau, 2010; Fujii, Yukita, Koike, and Kunii, 2004; Demirdjian 2002), a flexible alternative regarding student location (Fujii, Yukita, Koike, and Kunii, 2004; Carr-Chellman, 2000), and a model that provides the students’ with the ability to take exams at times that best fit their own schedules (California Miramar University, 2012; Dale and Spencer, 2001). This flexibility is further supported by Mihhailova’s (2006) statement that there is “no need for a physical presence” on the part of the student. As such, convenience and accessibility are deemed to represent “most of the advantage” afforded by distance learning such as that which is operationalized via the Internet (Carr-Chellman, 2000). Issues such as these led to the Sloan Consortium’s (2010) assessment that synchronous tools mean that coursework can be received anytime, anywhere, and anyplace. This lack of a physical presence has raised concerns regarding the level of learning; however, recent research has provided support for online education in that the comparison of students taking classes in a traditional setting versus those enrolled in an online class did not perceive any difference in their respective levels of learning. That is to say that students enrolled in online courses tend not to think that they would learn more – or better – in a traditional face-to-face environment (Fortune, Spielman, and Pangelinan, 2011). Thus while there is no advantage per se, from the students’

perspective, there is no disadvantage. That finding will be well received by the proponents of online education. Taking that a step further, another comparison of online and traditional marketing classes concluded that online students performed better and benefitted from better cooperation among group members when completing group projects (Hansen, 2008).

It has been stated that the number of students who can now attend a college class has grown dramatically over the past few years (Renes and Strange, 2011). A result of this increased base is a second commonly discussed advantage of Web-Based Instruction, namely that of diversity (Larson, 1999). As more students are allowed to enroll, it has been stated that Web-Based-Instruction (WBI) offers more “democratic access” to university courses and programs (Carr-Chellman, 2000). As the virtual classroom transcends regional and national boundaries, cultural diversity is more likely to exist (Appana, 2008; Alshare, Kwun and Grandon, 2006). These courses also provide unfettered access to students with disabilities (Renes and Strange, 2011). To that end, it can legitimately be argued that the resultant cultural diversity enhances both the formal and the informal learning environments in which the students virtually coexist.

While not necessarily an advantage over traditional classroom instruction, e-learning does possess one key advantage over the earlier modes of delivery for distance education – that of immediacy. The technology provides a mechanism by which immediate feedback can be generated (Graham and Scarborough, 1999). Clearly, this advantage can be attributed to the *synchronous* nature of the system which facilitates direct interaction among members of the virtual community by using tools like chat rooms and instant messaging protocols (Schweizer, 2004; Kulik and Kulik, 1988). In this regard, we are seeing increases in the use of synchronous web-conferencing, a mode of delivery which requires minimal equipment to deliver a timely lesson accentuated by better interaction among the participants (Ellingson and Notbohm, 2012).

There are a number of additional advantages that also receive mention, albeit at a nominal level, in the literature. Among them are reduced costs for the students (Sheridan and Kelly, 2010), lower commuting costs (Chau, 2010; Demirdjian, 2002) and the potential for lower tuition fees as a result of the economies of scale achieved by the university (Demirdjian, 2002). Related to the cost consideration is the ability of the students to complete courses without suffering lost wages due to time away from work (Larson, 1999). This concurrently allows students to enroll in classes they might otherwise have missed, to take courses that fit their personal goals from other institutions, and to perhaps graduate earlier (Marks, Sibley and Arbaugh, 2005). Web-based delivery has the capability to accommodate students with various learning styles (Kaifi, Mujtaba, and Williams, 2009); furthermore, instructional technology engages students and contributes to their achievement of the learning objectives (Buzzard et al, 2011). It can feature customized content (Sitzmann et al., 2006), a benefit that may resonate with corporations seeking to enroll their employees in relevant executive education programs. But as easily as it can be customized, it can be standardized so as to insure the consistency of training everywhere throughout the world (Sitzmann et al., 2006).

It is worth noting that this section set out to enumerate “perceived advantages and benefits.” Despite the substantial list offered here, many critics will debate their very existence. Stahl (2004) summed up their skepticism best with the statement that “the most general critique of e-

teaching is that it does not live up to the promises listed in the preceding paragraphs.” With that thought in mind, attention will now be directed toward the persistent criticisms that raise doubts as to the efficacy of online education.

Perceived Disadvantages for Students

Though many different terms have been used to denote the concept of online education, one of the more common is that of “e-learning.” By far the most frequently mentioned shortcoming of e-learning is the diminished interaction between the teacher and the student. Falloon (2011) refers to this perceived shortcoming as a sense of isolation, a disconnect which can adversely impact student performance. This is particularly problematic within the *online community* as this perceived lack of communication has a debilitating impact on satisfaction (Garrison and Arbaugh, 2007). Not only does the absence of a *sense of connectedness* adversely impact satisfaction, it has also been identified as a factor that influences student performance (Bain, Fedynich, and Knight, 2010). Of particular note here is the fact that it has been documented that female students are more concerned about the lack of communication with their professors than are their male peers (Borstorff and Lowe, 2006). Perhaps it is this disconnect which has led to higher failure and dropout rates for those students enrolled in online courses (Capra, 2011). Furthermore, as a consequence of the impersonal nature of online classes, students are required to exhibit a greater level of motivation so as to truly learn the material being disseminated online (Dale and Spencer, 2001). While acknowledging that the synchronous components of WBI have enhanced the ability to generate real-time feedback and discussion, there are still commonly used *asynchronous* components which hinder the ability of these individuals in the virtual classroom to engage in the important interaction that has long been the hallmark of the traditional classroom (Wegerif, 1998). This reality was starkly documented in a study that compared pairs of classes taught using synchronous components and those employing a completely asynchronous format. In almost every case, the level of satisfaction was significantly higher in those classes with some form of real-time communication. It was also concluded that it made no difference as to whether this synchronous component was done in an occasional face-to-face classroom session or via the utilization of some form of web-based chat room (Gregory, 2003). Consider the following citations which support Marks, Sibley and Arbaugh’s (2005) premise that the reduced level of teacher-student interaction is the most important deficiency endured by students in an online class. In articulating this concern, Mihhailova (2006) indicates her belief that the biggest problem is that there is “no direct contact” and further notes the “loss of the teacher’s aura” that is associated with online education. Navarro (1999) indicated the same concern that WBI “may eliminate” the sought interaction. While Navarro’s assertion is somewhat dated, especially for an environment marked by rapid advances in technology, it is evident that some of the more recent research has continued to put forth this concern. For example, in comparison to traditional classes, interaction in the virtual classroom has been characterized as lower (Vamosi, Pierce and Slotkin, 2004), much lower (Chyung and Vachon, 2005) and weak (Rahm and Reed, 1997; Sonner, 1997). But even though synchronous components are more commonplace in many online classes today, it has been stated that a student’s physical distance from the university is inversely related to the student’s level of satisfaction (Beqiri, Chase, and Bishka, 2010).

Compounding the problem of reduced teacher-student interaction is the reality that demands for immediate feedback have created unrealistic expectations on the part of students, especially in light of the fact that asynchronous components such as e-mail and threaded discussions still play a key role (Tricker, et al., 2001). Two articles indicated that many students expect to have access to their teachers 24/7, an obviously unrealistic expectation, yet one that can lead to dissatisfaction (Greco, 1999; Banas and Emory, 1998). Furthermore, when immediate feedback is available via synchronous components such as Web casts and chat rooms, some students are simply reluctant to participate (Siritongthaworn and Krairit, 2006). Interestingly, a recent Internet posting by California Miramar University noted that students without solid communications skills may struggle with online classes as they may experience difficulty in their efforts to engage in communications efforts requisite to receiving feedback from their instructors – and presumably their peers (California Miramar University, 2012).

As just noted, a second aspect of interaction is that which occurs among the peers in the class. Thus, another criticism that surfaces is the reduced level of student-to-student interaction. Although this concern is not as pronounced as it is with regard to the student-teacher relationship, it is still viewed as a potential problem that serves to make WBI less meaningful to students (Sitzmann et al., 2006). These findings are consistent with earlier studies which tended to characterize this form of interaction as weak (Rahm and Reed, 1997; Sonner, 1997).

The third disadvantage is related to the first two. Many authors decry what might be deemed the lack of human touch. A recent study captured the essence of this dilemma by differentiating between *high-tech* and *high-touch* education (Kulchitski, 2008). Perhaps at the forefront of this concern is the reality that asynchronous communication is still widely used as part of the delivery process (Demirdjian, 2002). Again, there is mention of the absence of live interaction and the “lack of personal contact” (Carr-Chellman, 2000). Even more compelling are the depiction of the students’ “isolation” (Gregory, 2003; Banas and Emory, 1998) and the “dehumanization” of the process that is characterized by repetition, delayed feedback, and the loss of student focus (Demirdjian, 2002). Other concerns that emanate from the lack of direct supervision include the unethical acts of plagiarism and cheating (Simonsen, 2012). Another reality is that no form of distance learning is deemed appropriate for courses which demand human intervention in a personal manner (Mihhailova, 2006). Examples of this unsuitability could be courses such as personal selling and music. Further compounding this problem is the belief that the lack of human touch may result in a lack of commitment on the part of the student (Carr-Chellman, 2000) thereby resulting in a negative impact on learning. Perhaps some of the concerns regarding the lack of a human touch are being dispelled by the improved synchronous technology which creates opportunities for real-time interaction among all members of the virtual classroom.

Given the self-directed nature of distance learning, it is evident that more pressure will be placed on students regarding time management. An early study of student preferences indicated that students preferred the traditional classroom setting because WBI was deemed to be less efficient (Welton, 1997). In fact, a second article indicated the students’ belief that they are required to invest more time for an online course than they would for the same course taught in a traditional classroom environment (Oliver and Omari, 1999). Vamosi, Pierce and Slotkin (2004) noted the

students' belief that time management was an issue that created inefficiency in the learning process, perhaps related to the assertion that it is easy "to be lazy" when taking an online course (Mihhailova, 2006). Anecdotally speaking, members of the author's own department have been heard articulating that same concern for the professors, that there is more of a time commitment on their part than with comparable traditional formats and that time management is a critical issue.

With greater connectivity, faster transmission speeds, more user-friendly software and hardware, one might expect technology issues to be a non-factor today. Unfortunately, the review of the literature reveals more concerns to have been recently put forth in comparison to the early days of WBI. Early on, it was duly noted that students had to possess a specific set of technical skills in order to be able to take full advantage of this form of delivery (Banas and Emory, 1998). Perhaps even more problematic was the fact that when the inevitable technical glitches occurred, students often had no single point of contact where they could go to seek resolution (Banas and Emory, 1998). Sitzmann et al. (2006) also recognize the issue regarding the students' technology skills. Also, with today's streaming capabilities, questions are being raised about the existence of sufficient bandwidth for the transmission of large files in a timely manner (Schweizer, 2004; Sitzmann et al., 2006). Within this context, Siritongthaworn and Krairit (2006) questioned the efficiency of today's operating systems as students seek faster connections to facilitate the opening of documents as well as the uploading and downloading of data files. As a rejoinder of sorts, it should also be noted that there is a belief that more recent advances in technology have enhanced the ease of use for today's students (Imamoglu, 2007). Still, in light of increased usage and more reports of hackers, there is a legitimate concern as to potential breaches of security that might result in the compromising of personal information (Ramim and Levy, 2006).

Of course, the key consideration regarding online education involves employers' perception. In this regard, a recent study indicated that some employers view candidates whose degrees were earned via an online alternative less favorably than they view the students graduating with a more traditionally delivered degree (Linardopoulos, 2012). Specifically, it has been reported that employers have expressed concerns regarding the lack of academic rigor, insufficient face-to-face interaction, opportunities to cheat, and a perceived lack of commitment on the part of the student (Columbaro and Monaghan, 2009). Along those same lines of thinking, Kohlmeyer, Seese, and Sincich (2011, p. 156) documented a "strong preference" for traditional students because of the online students' deficiencies in the area of interpersonal experience and a perceived lack of rigor in their degree program. Yet some of this concern may have emanated from these employers' uncertainty regarding the reputation of online institutions and their lack of familiarity with online instruction in general. Conversely, two more recent studies of employers of Information Systems graduates did not view students with an online degree as any different from their peers with a traditional degree (Tabatabaei and Gardiner, 2012; Metrejean and Noland, 2011). So perhaps the concerns regarding the efficacy of an online degree are changing in light of the increased number of graduates who have acquired some of their knowledge and skills via online education.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

From a pragmatic perspective, the primary objective of this research is to answer three questions in such a way so as to provide clarity regarding marketing students' attitudes and opinions about online education. They are:

- What are the students' positive perceptions on online education?
- What are the students' negative perceptions of online education?
- How do students' attitudes differ based on their experience with online classes?

By answering these three questions, this research should provide an unambiguous overview of the attitudes and opinions held by today's university students.

METHODOLOGY

A self-administered survey was distributed to students in select marketing classes at four universities in the United States. The classes included but were not limited to the principles of marketing class; consequently, they provided access to students across an array of majors. The survey included three multiple-choice questions that addressed the respondent's current status at the university and four questions regarding prior (and current) enrollment in online classes. For those who had taken one or more online classes, a six-point scale was used to assess their overall level of satisfaction. Next, the survey used 20 statements to measure student attitudes on an array of considerations. The balanced, six-point Likert scale was anchored by *strongly agree* and *strongly disagree*. These 20 items focused on issues such as quality, selection, convenience, cheating, hybrids, interaction, grading, work-load, multi-media, and the desire to take more online courses. Because of potential response problems associated with anonymous student surveys, an internal check was used in an effort to validate each participant's responses. Within the set of 20 items, one was essentially repeated. With only one word changed – from *more* to *less* – the two responses afforded the opportunity to evaluate each completed survey. Surveys which included logically flawed answers on these two items (e.g. strongly agreeing with both of the validation questions) were excluded from the analyses in their entirety. Furthermore, in light of the redundancy of the two validation questions, one of those was omitted from the analyses of the 304 retained cases; therefore, the final set under scrutiny comprised 19 statements.

The first two research questions were answered by using descriptive statistics for each of 19 items deemed relevant in answering those questions. To assess differences in attitudes based on experience, the students were placed into two distinct categories: those with no online course experience and those with any online courses completed. Using these two groups, the standard t-test was used to identify differences for each of the 19 items used to assess their attitudes.

RESULTS

The data collection process resulted in an initial sample of 329 respondents. A cursory examination to identify obvious response inconsistencies (e.g. all sixes on the 20 rating scales)

resulted in the elimination of seven questionnaires; the cross tabulation of the two internal check questions identified 18 additional surveys that were characterized by an illogical response pattern. Thus, the net sample retained for analysis comprised 304 respondents. Furthermore, the demographic makeup of the sample was also determined to closely approximate that of the target population. With these checks in order, attention was turned to the three research questions delineated earlier in the *Research Objectives* section.

The first two objectives focus on overall opinions held by the population of marketing students, irrespective of their online course experience. The rationale for the inclusion of the non-experienced segment is much as it would be for any product. Members of this segment have opinions, and these opinions likely impact their propensity to enroll in online classes in the future. It also impacts the word-of-mouth (WOM) information articulated by those in that segment. Therefore, their opinions have the potential to impact others' attitudes and decisions regarding online classes. This is analogous to the situation where people who do not own a foreign car have attitudes about foreign cars and are prone to express these attitudes to other consumers. So while it was deemed important to measure the attitudes of the entire target market, irrespective of experience, it was also essential to delineate any differences between the two segments that could be characterized as adopters and non-adopters. Another way to differentiate between the two groups is predicated upon a basic premise of social identity theory – in-group and out-group membership in particular (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). This assessment is the basis for the third and final research objective germane to this study.

Our attention is now directed towards the aggregate sample in an effort to assess the opinions held by the population of marketing students – regardless of their experience with online classes. Based on the results derived from the assessment of this sample, the initial research question was able to be answered. Specifically, question one involved the identification of issues for which students exhibited a positive perception. These were identified by virtue of their adjusted means falling on the positive side of the six-point scale's mathematical midpoint of 3.50. Means for some items were adjusted to reflect the reverse scoring required because of their wording. This coding adjustment was essential because of the way that wording was alternated in an effort to minimize the halo effect often associated with surveys that pose the entire set of questions from either a positive or negative perspective. Thus, the lower the *adjusted* mean is, the more positive the perception of the 19 items under scrutiny.

There were a total of ten items for which a positive outcome was in evidence. The adjusted means for these items ranged from a low of 1.76 to a high of 3.45. The most positive outcome involved support for the belief that online courses provide flexibility that benefits students. With a mean of 1.76, it is apparent that this benefit is strongly embraced. The remaining nine positive outcomes, listed in descending order were: the ability to take classes offered at other universities; that students are comfortable with the technology required to operate within the virtual classroom; that online classes eliminate some of the time and costs associated with commuting; that online offerings add to the array of desirable courses at one's own university; that online courses allow students to enroll in courses offered by other universities; that online courses offer additional convenience to the students; that the lecturers in online courses are just as good as those in the traditional classroom environment; that advisors do not tend to discourage students

from enrolling in online courses; that it is not easier to make a good grade in an online course; and that they would like the opportunity to take more classes in an online format. With a mean of 3.45, the aggregate sample demonstrated its ever-so-slight agreement that they would like to take more online courses. Overall, these findings are generally quite consistent with the results of earlier studies that were documented in the literature review. Table 1 provides an overview of the ten items for which the students exhibited a positive perception. In examining Table 1, it is important to recall that lower means on the six-point Likert scale represent more positive outcomes and that the scale's midpoint is 3.5.

Table 1
Positive Perceptions of Online Classes

Rank	Adjusted \bar{x}	Issue
1	1.76	Online courses provide flexibility for students
2	1.99	Students are comfortable with requisite technology
3	2.10	Online courses reduce commuting time and costs
4	2.44	Add to the array of student choices
5	2.48	Allow student to take courses at other universities
6	2.73	Online courses are more convenient
7	2.74	Lecturers just as good as those in traditional courses
8	2.96	Advisors do not discourage enrollment in online courses
9	3.22	Not easier to make a good grade in online class
10	3.45	I would like to take more online courses

The second research question involved the antithesis of question one; specifically the focus shifted to the identification of the issues for which students expressed a negative opinion regarding online education. Nine items exhibited adjusted means exceeding the 3.50 scale midpoint, thereby reflecting a negative perception of online education. The greatest concern articulated by this sample mirrors the results of previous studies that were cited in the literature review. With an adjusted mean of 5.01, the respondents solidly supported the premise that the absence of direct interaction between the student and the teacher represents a profound shortcoming of Web-based instruction.

Respondents also indicated that online courses should not be stand-alone courses (but should incorporate a variety of supporting presentation media); that when given an option of taking a course using either the traditional format or an online format, they would prefer the traditional form of delivery; that distance learning which uses real-time video display and synchronous communications capabilities with the instructor in a remote location is superior to the DEO format; that hybrid courses which incorporate some traditional classroom meetings are superior to those delivered entirely online; and that it is easier for the student to cheat in an online course.

Perceived shortcomings that were not as strongly criticized include the belief that online courses generally involve more work than do their traditional counterparts; that an online degree is inferior to one earned where all courses are taken in the traditional classroom setting; and that students learn less in online courses. Concerning the issue of how much is learned, it should be noted that with an adjusted mean of 3.67, this outcome is only slightly above the scale's midpoint of 3.50. Thus, while it is a perceived shortcoming, it is not viewed as a major point of contention by students. Table 2 provides a summary of the nine items for which negative perceptions of online education were documented. The issues are listed in descending order based upon the magnitude of the negative perception held by the respondents.

Table 2
Negative Perceptions of Online Classes

Rank	Adjusted \bar{x}	Issue
1	5.01	Absence of student-teacher interaction
2	4.66	Should augment with variety of media (not stand-alone)
3	4.45	Would choose traditional over online version of a course
4	4.38	Video-based DL w/ direct feedback superior to DEO option
5	4.28	Hybrids incorporating face-to-face meetings superior to DEO
6	4.19	Easier to cheat in an online course
7	3.97	Online degree is inferior to a traditional degree
8	3.92	Online courses involve more work than traditional courses
9	3.67	Students do not learn as much in online courses

Next, question three focuses on how attitudes differ depending upon the students' experience with courses to this point in their studies. The sample included a meaningful segment (40.13%) that reported some experience with online education. However, for those who had taken at least one online course, their experience tended to be quite modest. Consequently, in addressing this question, the overall sample was segmented into only two groups: those with no online course experience and those who had completed one or more online courses. Despite the rudimentary groupings used in this study, some meaningful differences of opinion were found.

In many regards, this distinction is consistent with the concept of social identity theory. While the two segments are not differentiated on the basis of some socioeconomic criterion, they do essentially represent two strata that can be characterized as in-group and out-group. In this study, the in-group segment comprises those students who have taken one or more online classes whereas the out-group is obviously populated by those students who have yet to participate in an online class. According to Tajfel and Turner (1986), membership in the out-group may lead to prejudices against members of the in-group and vice versa. A consequence of this phenomenon may well be that assessments are biased. Conversely, the differences may well be predicated upon the true feelings of the two groups. Though not related to the educational process, a recent study characterized an "online brand community" as a form of social group (Wang, Butt, and Wei, 2011, p. 45). The underlying premise of that study was that members of this group tend to

share information, knowledge, experience and identity. Within that context, it has been stated that members of a particular online community tend to maintain and express a positive perspective in regard to their group. The result of this collective in-group mindset contributes to the members' efforts to foster a positive image (Wang, Butt and Wei, 2011). Extending this premise to the out-group, one could presume that those non-members might be inclined to denigrate the in-group as a way of differentiating themselves in a positive way.

The null hypothesis of equal means for the two groups was rejected for only four of the 19 items. Perhaps the most predictable of the significant differences was for the statement that the student would prefer to take classes in a traditional format. Not surprisingly, the group comprised of those who had never taken an online course exhibited a much stronger level of agreement with that statement. There was a discernible difference in the students' perception that they are comfortable with the technology required to successfully complete a WBI course. While both groups did agree with the statement, those with experience in online courses possessed a much stronger belief that the technology would not be a barrier. Another difference of opinion involved the two groups' level of agreement with the statement that online courses are more convenient than are courses offered via the traditional classroom format. Both groups again indicated their agreement with this premise. But as one would likely anticipate, the statement was more strongly embraced by the students who had previously completed one or more online classes. The final difference was documented for the statement that the student would like to take more online courses. Neither group expressed strong sentiment, but the difference is as might have been anticipated. Experienced students indicated slight agreement with the statement that they would like to take more online courses while the inexperienced group slightly disagreed with that statement.

Some additional findings regarding the experienced group are also noteworthy. Fully 60.4 percent of the group who had taken online courses indicated some level of agreement with the statement that they prefer to take a traditional course over the same course taught using an online format. More compelling was the fact that only 12 percent of the experienced group disagreed with the assertion that the lack of student-teacher interaction is a weakness of online classes, and 51 percent indicated their belief that students do not learn as much in online classes as they do in a traditional face-to-face course. A somewhat compelling finding is that 38.9 percent of the experienced group indicated some level of disagreement with the statement that they would like to take more online classes. While substantial, it pales in comparison to the group of students who have not completed at least one online course with fully 56.7 percent of that segment indicating some level of disagreement with the statement that they would like to take more online classes. Results such as these imply that there may be a substantial gap between what the students expect and what they feel they receive. So, while many have tried the virtual classroom, some appear reluctant to fully embrace it. A summary of the experience-based differences is provided in Table 3.

Item	Exp. \bar{x}	Inexp. \bar{x}	sig.
Comfortable with online technology	1.78	2.31	.0002
Online courses are more convenient	2.54	3.02	.0002
Prefer traditional class over online class	2.79	2.18	.0004
Would like to take more online classes	3.19	3.85	.0002

DISCUSSION

The results clearly identify the need to address concerns regarding the absence of meaningful interaction within the virtual classroom. More emphasis on synchronous components is a start, but those teaching Web-Based Instruction classes would be well advised to incorporate mandatory activities that represent meaningful components of the students' final grades. By doing so, concerns about both student-teacher and student-student interaction can be eased. Institutions, instructors and students would all benefit from an investment in the resources required to incorporate a variety of supplemental media into the virtual classroom. Where plausible, they should also consider moving from a delivered-entirely-online format to a hybrid or so-called blended model that incorporates at least a modest level of direct face-to-face contact in a traditional classroom environment. The potential impact of synchronous components cannot be overlooked or overestimated.

The requisite technology skills need to be given adequate consideration. What is required to facilitate effective communication? The skills required of the faculty cannot be ignored. Even a teacher with a wealth of knowledge on a particular subject can be rendered ineffective when there is a breakdown in the communications process. Instructors also need unencumbered access so as to be able to quickly update the material to reflect current or otherwise newsworthy issues in their discipline; this requirement includes both the hardware and the software. Another key component is the availability of technical support for both the students and the faculty. Glitches are inevitable, and they must be corrected in a timely manner or else student learning and satisfaction will suffer.

Educational institutions need to do a better job of articulating the positive aspects of online education. Students who have taken these classes report an overall level of satisfaction. Furthermore, it has been reported that students completing an online course learn as much as do their peers in a traditional class (Wagner, Garippo, and Lovass, 2011). Marketing efforts need to emphasize the strengths as well as the positive outcomes. Perhaps promotional efforts that incorporate testimonials of students and employers could be effective. Like any new product, trial is the precursor to adoption. If institutions can increase the number of students who take their first online course, then the momentum will build and demand will increase accordingly.

While acknowledging the positive considerations, students are clearly concerned about a number of aspects associated with online education. Perhaps some of these concerns are unwarranted. Independent accreditation could conceivably help alleviate some of these concerns. As such, the various accreditation bodies may need to evaluate the online components of any degree program separately. Students and their prospective employers need to believe that the education received is as meaningful as that which is attained in the traditional classroom. As of today, both groups have their doubters.

There are some distinctions that can be drawn regarding the attitudes held by those who have completed one or more online courses and those who have not. It is important to acknowledge that those students with no online class experience certainly possess attitudes that they have formulated from the acquisition of information from a litany of sources. These negative

perceptions have the potential to impact behavior and word-of-mouth. So any negative attitudes should not be ignored. Fortunately, significant differences were documented for only four of the issues under scrutiny. And while some of this might be attributable to the in-group/out-group phenomenon, it should not be ignored. Marketing efforts which dispel the negative perceptions while accentuating the positive perceptions could contribute to a greater propensity on the part of those in the out-group to reconsider their previous decisions to shun online education.

There are a myriad of opportunities for educational institutions to reach target markets that had previously been elusive. Beyond the occasional course or even the complete degree program offered to university students, there are non-traditional markets to explore. Life-long learning is a key initiative. Consequently, adult education, non-degree programs, professional seminars, and continuing education are but a few examples of these emerging opportunities. Administrators are also likely to view online education as a tool for reaching global markets, but they must be cognizant of the fact that cross-national differences exist and that what works in their home country may fail to resonate with students in other countries.

Differences within and across previous studies indicate how attitudes are changing. Universities need to recognize this continuous evolution and constantly query their students regarding their education. This could easily be incorporated within the traditional end-of-semester course evaluations. The reality is that we are in the midst of a significant paradigm shift; online education is not simply going to vanish because some students and faculty oppose it. Thus, the task is one of making it fit within the educational portfolio such that the various constituencies of the educational community view it to be a viable approach for students who seek to acquire knowledge about their chosen field of study. Yet at the same time we must also understand that not every field lends itself to online classes. Efforts to use online education in those subject areas deemed incongruent with this form of delivery will simply lead to lower levels of learning achievement and diminished student satisfaction thereby exacerbating the negative perceptions held by students who enroll in courses for which online delivery does not represent a good fit. And we know, dissatisfied consumers are among the most vocal, thus the potential negative word-of-mouth emanating from dissatisfied students would most assuredly be a barrier to growth. Furthermore, even in those fields where it is a viable form of delivery, some student segments will simply choose to avoid it. Like the typical one-size-fits-all garment, online education does not fit everyone well. And university administrators and faculty should not endeavor to make it something that it is not. Yet it is evident that online education is much like most other products. As we scrutinize the adoption curve, it is evident that there are innovators and laggards – and everything in-between.

CONCLUSIONS

Many universities across the globe have instituted online alternatives for their classes without fully understanding the attitudes and behavioral intentions specific to this pedagogical alternative (Bhrommalee, 2011). Marketers often cringe at the idea of introducing new alternatives without soliciting pertinent information from their prospective customers. Yet those of us with the assigned task of marketing educational products too often adopt this philosophy and engage in what is tantamount to a production orientation. It may have worked for Henry Ford 90 years ago,

but as was more recently stated in regard to online education, there is no guarantee that if we build it, the students will come (Kyle and Festervand, 2005).

In this study, marketing students were questioned in order to determine their attitudes and opinions regarding online education. The array of positive perceptions articulated closely coincided with those commonly discussed in the literature with the greatest support offered for scheduling flexibility, comfort with the requisite technology, the elimination of some of the time and cost constraints that are associated with commuting, augmentation of the array of student choices at their current university, and the opportunity to take classes offered by other universities. The negative issues expressed by the respondents also closely mirrored the literature. Most problematic was the absence of student-teacher interaction. Traditional and hybrid offerings that feature direct interaction among the students and with their teachers were both deemed superior to the “delivered entirely online” format. Students also expressed their belief that it is easier to cheat in an online course.

Just like any other product, not everyone wants the same thing. As we acquire more information about individual preferences, these segments will get smaller and smaller because of the more exacting delineation of an increased number of homogeneous groups. The educational institution that does the best job of matching its capabilities with student needs, and is able to articulate its superiority to prospective students, has the most to gain. Thus the marketers’ tasks today are simple – stimulate the positive perception regarding online classes and speed up the adoption process. As stated by Tanner, Noser, and Totaro (2009, p. 37), “online learning may not be for everyone – including both students and faculty – but a clearer grasp of student and faculty perceptions by administrators may go a long way in contributing to making the online experience a more positive one for all who pursue it.” The last words to consider: the role of marketing for the online educational product is significant, and it should not be underestimated.

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