

STUDENTS AS CONSUMERS: USER RESPONSES TO MONEY-BACK GUARANTEES IN HIGHER EDUCATION ON REDDIT

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Abstract: There has been an evidenced growth of student consumerism in the industry of higher education. This consumer-oriented perspective leads to increased levels of student entitlement, directly impacting students' expectations for the learning environment. The present study employs thematic analysis procedures to explore students' reactions to an offer by Udacity, an online provider of massive open online courses (MOOCs), to provide money-back guarantees to students who fail to obtain a job after graduation. Implications for growing levels of student entitlement, as well as strategies to combat them, are discussed.

Keywords: consumerism, education, entitlement, Reddit, Udacity

INTRODUCTION

Consumers are all too familiar with the intrigue, and sometimes caution, associated with a money-back guarantee. However, this advertising tool has extended beyond cheesy, late-night infomercials, or robotic salespeople on home shopping networks, and entered an unlikely setting: online education. Udacity, an online provider of massive open online courses (MOOCs) based in Silicon Valley, recently announced plans to offer a select group of students a money-back guarantee that they will receive a job within six months of graduation (Ruff, 2016). This pioneering educational enterprise strives to bring "accessible, affordable, engaging, and highly effective higher education to the world" through the use of nanodegrees - online certifications that can be earned in 6-12 months (10-20 hours/week) for \$200/month (Udacity, 2016, para. 1). Despite the simplicity surrounding this enterprise, existing research suggests that employers are more willing to hire employers completing degrees in the traditional collegiate setting rather than fully or partially online (Adams & DeFleur, 2006). As such, this development in online higher education has unsurprisingly brought about heated conversation in the media and among educators (e.g., Metz, 2016). Specifically, this pronouncement has prompted dialogues surrounding the rising cost and risk of investing in online education (D'Onfro, 2016) and the potential future of the education system (della Cava, 2016).

Of particular importance to the instructional communication community is the larger metaphor that this guarantee perpetuates: the student as a consumer (McMillan & Cheney, 1996; Penn & Franks, 1982; Woodall, Hiller, & Resnick, 2014). Universities are witnessing a trend towards commercialization of the higher education experience (Bok, 2009). Given the worldwide advances and expansion of higher education within the past century (Schofer & Meyer, 2005), administrators and faculty are being faced with growing pressure to educate students for their careers in a cost-effective manner (Carlson & Fleisher, 2002; Eagle & Brennan, 2007). Consequently, some institutions have adopted innovative business models, reevaluating how the university system is funded and managed, to remain competitive in a consumer-oriented market (Deem, 2004; Katz & Oblinger, 2000). As some research suggests imagining students as customers lessens the rigor of curricula and teaching methods at universities (e.g., Carlson & Fleisher, 2002), research uncovering the growing consumerism of students is paramount for preserving the future of student learning. Thus, the present research uses Udacity's money-back guarantee as a means for examining student consumerism in higher education; a thematic analysis of Reddit user comments concerning Udacity's announcement of this initiative functions as an illustrative context for the investigation of this metaphor.

STUDENTS AS CONSUMERS

Students are often described as consumers within the classroom (McMillan & Cheney, 1996; Penn & Franks, 1982); endeavors of education are tailored and directed towards students who have the decision to participate in or purchase from a particular enterprise (i.e., university). In this way, efforts of an organization are centered around targeting customers to influence consumption (Tight, 2013). First, it is important to note that, "as with most metaphors, there is nothing inherently wrong" with considering students as consumers (McMillan & Cheney, 1996, p. 4). For the benefit of the education system holistically, just like a business or organization, educational institutions should be held responsible and accountable for the services and goods they provide to students (McMillan & Cheney, 1996). This encompasses, but is not limited to, specifying outcomes (i.e.,

learning and professional objectives), publicizing prices of goods and services (e.g., cost per academic hour, textbooks, parking), and providing channels for customer complaints (e.g., student teacher and course evaluations; Rice & Stewart, 2000).

However, there are evident limitations and negative implications associated with embracing this metaphor. In the case of Udacity, this consumer-centered approach may cause educators to “become vendors hawking their wares,” begging the consumers with pockets full of change to invest in their enterprise (McMillan & Cheney, 1996, p. 7). If education truly is a product that students purchase, then students may have expectations that model that of a consumer: all things should be tailored for me, in my time, the way I want them. This temporary, purchased student ‘tenure’ places emphasis on what students feel is in their best interest. As many educators can attest, this can be wearisome given the inherent preparatory and prudent role that instructors and administrators are expected, both normatively and structurally, to fill. Furthermore, students may often have a misguided awareness of the processes that will help them meet their educational goals, which could be further related to students’ dissenting (Goodboy, 2011) or challenge behavior (Simonds, 1997). Thus, the metaphor of the student as a consumer serves as an appropriate tool for understanding reactions to and impacts of Udacity’s controversial marketing ploy. While this company’s financial decision may impact their organizational future, this example may be representative of a broadened consumerization of higher education in the *future*. With this in mind, understanding the implications, successes, or downfalls associated with this model will benefit the larger academic community.

As a result of their consumer orientation, students may also exhibit increased levels of entitlement. In educational literature, academic entitlement can be understood as “the tendency to possess an expectation of academic success without taking personal responsibility for achieving that success” (Chowning & Campbell, 2009, p. 983). Entitled students expect to participate in instructional processes according to their preferences (Cain, Romanelli, & Smith, 2012), such that students expect course policy and procedures to be malleable (Miller, 2013). Stout (2000) also advocated that diminishing educational standards have given rise to a generation of students who are unhappy when their expectations for grades are unmet, as they have come to expect high grades for low performance. Additionally, entitled students expect to receive material rewards when they perform well (Greenberger, Lessard, Chen, & Farruggia, 2008), which can be likened to the prospect of being promised a job upon graduation.

Given the argument likening the student-as-consumer metaphor to Udacity’s money-back guarantee, the aforementioned literature serves as an appropriate sensitizing lens for understanding students’ reactions to Udacity’s divisive educational enterprise (Ruff, 2016). Thus, the following research question is posed:

RQ: What consumer-oriented reactions are provoked by Udacity’s introduction of a money-back guarantee?

METHOD

Method Description. The researcher conducted a thematic analysis of Internet users’ responses to Udacity’s promotion as a means of investigating the phenomena of students as consumers (Owen, 1984). Specifically, the study evaluated user posts from the news aggregate website Reddit.com. Reddit.com is one of the most viewed sites on the web, with six percent of online adults being Reddit users (Duggan & Smith, 2013). This social voting site often refers to itself as “the voice of the internet,” using aggregate wisdom of Reddit’s votes to highlight notable user posts (“About Reddit”, 2016). Users, or Redditors, can submit links and comments about an endless possibility of topics, and posts are subsequently appraised by users using “karma” through endorsement with an “upvote” and disapproval with a “downvote” (Bergstrom, 2011). Since its creation, Reddit has evolved into a vibrant, ever-changing online community, connecting users across the globe to cultivate discussion around shared interests (Van Mieghem, 2011). Given the broad range of opinions expressed on this site, the Reddit userboard, “Udacity guarantees job for Nanodegree graduates, or money back” (2016), served as the context of analysis for this inquiry. This userboard, created in January, 2016, specifically focuses on user thoughts and opinions related to Udacity’s money-back guarantee. Drawing from existing literature regarding analytic procedures of similar discussion-based, online forums (see Smedley, Coulson, Gavin, Rodham, & Watts, 2015), each message post was selected and included within the analysis ($N = 156$). If a message occurred within the context of a previous post, the analysis relied on messages outside of the data set to aid in the interpretation of the unit.

Participants. The sample of user posts consisted of all individuals posting to the discussion board prior data collection. Due to the nature of Reddit.com, user demographic data was not readily available for the analysis. Additionally, because Reddit.com is a non-restricted, public access website, individual usernames were retained

from the original posting. The researchers also noted that comments were not restricted based on geographic location, gender, identity, or race, considering the individual was aware of the requirements for using the medium. Finally, research has suggested that the driving force behind Reddit's popularity comes from young men and women ages 18-29 (Duggan & Smith, 2013), leaving the website to lag in comparison to more popular social media like Facebook (62% of entire population; Duggan, 2015) and Twitter (20% of entire population; Duggan, 2015). Thus, the researchers feel that sample was not restricted by any type of demographic data.

Data Analysis. This study used open and axial coding to identify key concepts, themes, and topical markers from user comments on Reddit (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). First, comments were read in their entirety twice, first to gain a holistic viewpoint and second to note obvious themes (i.e., open coding; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Next, prominent segments of the data were copied into a spreadsheet based off notable, meaningful connections. Then, through the process of comparison, reorganization, and revision, data were organized into larger, overarching themes (i.e., axial coding; Strauss & Corbin, 2008). More specifically, the process of axial coding was completed using Owen's (1984) thematic analysis technique. Owen outlined three primary criteria for a theme to be present in a data set: (a) recurrence (i.e., multiple accounts have the same thread of meaning), (b) repetition (i.e., the same wording is duplicated), and (c) forcefulness (i.e., emphasis or stress place on some ideas over another). Ultimately, the goal was to synthesize categories found during open coding to identify salient themes illuminated by participants' responses (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Throughout the analysis, relevant literature concerning students' consumerism and entitlement served as a sensitizing lens for understanding user comments, assisting in the formulation of appropriate naming conventions for salient categories.

FINDINGS

The purpose of the present research was to explore Reddit users' reactions to Udacity's job placement guarantee. Analysis revealed three salient themes regarding users' consumer-orientated reactions: (a) the future of education, (b) university selection as shopping, (c) and job preparation and placement expectations.

The Future of Education. The first major theme reflected the possibility of considering Udacity's money-back guarantee as a paradigmatic shift in higher education (Harasim, 2000). While online degree programs and MOOCs are not new (Allen & Seaman, 2007; Alraimi, Zo, & Ciganek, 2015), the theme revolved around the notion that many users recognized the differential educational system being presented through Udacity's changing enterprise in comparison to their own experiences. With the advent and implementation of new technology, westernized educational systems have experienced rapid transformations, with future possibilities constantly expanding (Kaufmann, Tatum, & Frey, in press). Users appeared to envision a changing landscape that more coherently acknowledges the intersection of both shifting technologies and students in education. Redditors participating in the conversation recognize that new opportunities can be created through existing educational systems like MOOCs; however, these reflections occur in conjunction with the idea that institutions like Udacity may be finding new ways to use technology to better reflect the needs of potential students.

Responses illustrated this line of thinking by demonstrating, in numerous ways, how the idea of the future of the educational system represents a shift from their own nostalgic perspective and understanding. Simply, spalunk suggested, "This is the future." Iamthebetamale, along with other users, echoed this projection, writing "This is the future of post secondary education. Not that college is going anywhere, but stuff like this is the future for many." Moreover, these user comments reflect the novelty of the money-back guarantee as an educational concept. Baconmaster also provided some insightful speculation about the nature of this development:

I'd say it's a symptom of a problem. A (possible) solution to the problem that is overpriced university tuition. It's ridiculous that tuition at my local state colleges for a full time load is starting to creep up closer and closer to the price of a compact car. I always said that bubble that is university tuition was going to pop soon. But thinking about it now, I would not be the least surprised if this were to become a new trend.

Perhaps, as baconmastah and others forwarded, rising tuition costs create financial instability for students, making money-back guarantees particularly attractive for students concerned with establishing a stable fiscal future. This makes sense in light of the student-as-consumer metaphor. Despite the lack of legitimacy surrounding many online degree completion programs (Adams & DeFleur, 2006), some users share the perspective that simply paying money for an educational experience guarantees success. Consequently, if that success is not readily achieved, by fault of the student or institution, then retrospective action should be taken. While the notion of ensuring a financially stable future is also not new to modern students, maybe the novelty of Udacity's marketing ploy comes a shift to meet the needs of today's students in conjunction with shifting technologies. The emphasis placed on the cost of education is further echoed in the second salient theme.

University Selection as Shopping. A second prominent simile permeating Reddit users' responses was the idea that selecting a university is like shopping. For decades, higher education literature has emphasized the contending factors students must consider when choosing potential schools (Erdmann, 1983; Hagedorn, Maxwell, Cypers, Moon, & Lester, 2007). An analysis of user comments revealed three primary subthemes that may influence students' shopping decisions when considering programs like Udacity as consumers: 1) cost, 2) quality, and 3) time.

Cost. The price of higher education is undoubtedly rising (Archibald & Feldman, 2008), and tuition prices are playing an increasingly important role in students' decision making processes (Heller, 1997; Leslie & Brinkman, 1987). In response to Udacity's overall cost and guarantee, Beniskickbutt explained, "You can get through universities fairly cheap if you shop around." In this way, Beniskickbutt is framing a potential degree as a product, wherein one can explore various buying options to find the most economical choice. Reddstudent emphasized the comparative cost of enrolling in Udacity, explaining the company's degree is "wayyyy cheaper" than other options because results are "guaranteed and frugal." Other users used similar language in an exchange focused on the competing costs and benefits of various degree choices.

Past a simple comparison of prices, users integrated additional fiscal concepts to describe the value of degree pursuit. For instance, several users described the value of a degree through an 'investment' metaphor; baconmastah claimed that although attaining a degree through a provider like Udacity may be initially costly, "it's an investment that pays off with time." So, while considering the primary cost of degree is important, individuals should also consider the long-term value of educational decisions. Other users, like lolRedditor, highlighted the importance of a degree's "supply and demand" in the larger market of MOOCs. Under this reasoning, the price to obtain a degree varies as a function of the need in the market for trained individuals holding a certain set of knowledge and skills. Altogether, a degree's cost played a pivotal role in influencing students' shopping decisions. Despite this, as iamthebetamale noted, "Price is only part of the problem, though."

Quality. In addition to cost, users also considered the quality of various degrees in their shopping decisions. Slyfox divulged this criterion distinctly:

I feel a lot of this depends on the quality of the college courses as well. So many people go through a full 4 year CS [sic] curriculum and still aren't ready for a real job in programming. I'm not saying all curriculum are like this, but a good number of them seem to be really behind the current trends and modern tech stacks that are used at your typical job.

Thus, what differentiates students when entering the workforce is not only their attainment of a degree, but also the quality of the degree that they obtain. Reatest suggested this degree quality predicts the "quality of work" that employers can expect from graduates. Because of this, the quality of a given degree should be an important factor to consider when shopping for potential programs.

However, this theme cannot be considered without the suggestion that Udacity believes they are delivering a competent, high-quality degree. Contrary to existing research and stereotypes concerning online degree completion programs, the narrative spun by Udacity runs counter to the notion that such degrees have a lower reputation (Adams & DeFleur, 2006). Perhaps for-profit institutions like Udacity, who craft messages signaling a willingness to part with compensation in favor of degree quality, gain attraction through the confidence they have in their own curriculum.

Time. The last salient shopping criteria pertained to temporality. Namely, the amount of time it takes to complete a degree surfaced as a major deciding factor for many students. User iamthebetamale commented,

The time investment is as much of a deterrent to many as the money. We need a lot more postsecondary education options that can be completed in less than 12 months. In other words, we need to expand the vocational school model into a lot more, if not almost all other, fields.

Users expressed opposing opinions when evaluating the amount of time it takes to complete a given degree. As might be expected, users seemed to value the compacted nature of many MOOCs like Udacity. For example, salgat anticipated condensed degrees represent a "legitimate alternative to 4 year universities" for students who desire a "traditional . . . program," while ng731 explained nanodegrees are useful for fast employment.

However, some users were weary of the effectiveness of such shortened programs. AStudyInScarlet criticized the longevity of Udacity's degree, forwarding,

I don't think you can compact something as valuable as a CS [sic] education at a good university down into 12 months. The rate at which I learn at my school is ludicrous. Each semester I become more powerful than I could possibly imagine.

Other users, such as *bvcxy*, echoed that “12 months is not enough” given the information that needs to be covered in order to gain competence in a certain area. These competing evaluations suggest that students are attracted to programs that can be completed speedily, as long as the quality of the education is not diminished.

Job Preparation and Placement Expectations. The third theme centered around the discussion of universities' role in preparing students for careers. There was an apparent divide among users' beliefs regarding whether a university was responsible for fully preparing students for the job market. This is consistent with existing research cautioning students and educators when it comes to using online resources and programs to replace traditional classroom learning (Bejerano, 2008). *Baconmastah* expressed their expectant outlook vehemently, noting that universities like Udacity are:

Putting their money where their mouths are. If this takes off and gets respectable hiring upon graduation stats and becomes a new trend, *burden's* gonna be on universities to start doing something they haven't been doing a very good job of doing for the money they charge actually training college grads for the goddamn workforce!

Basically, when it comes to preparing graduates to be competitive applicants in the workforce, users like *isdevilis* think universities “don't do squat.”

However, some users opposed the idea that universities have the burden to fully prepare students to be competitive applicants. *Farobek* noted that “unis were never built with the intention to be training centres, it's only recently that there has been a shift towards employability.” Instead, [deleted] rationalized that “the point of a university is to get an education,” not get a “vocation.” In this way, if a student finds it difficult to get hired upon graduating, *isdevilis* believed,

That's not the university's fault because that's not the point of a university. It'd be like blaming a school for not having a "Life Finances Class" wherein you learn how to do your taxes and learn about basic interest rates, etc. because that's not the job of the school, that's the job of your parents.

Summatively, users had mixed opinions surrounding what burden universities have in preparing students for success on the job market. However, students' lack of success on the job market may instead be a result of unrealistic standards.

Unsurprisingly, users were skeptical of the “money back guarantee” offered by Udacity. Even though the guarantee is limited based on several noted contingencies, many users perceived the promise as too good to be true. *Tattoo189* humorously questioned the viability of Udacity's claim, asking, “What kind of job? Does McDonald's count? I want to see the terms.” User *epiplus1is0* repeated this cynicism, posting that “cs [sic] jobs are not hard to find. good cs jobs are.” Countless user anecdotes detailing difficulties in obtaining desired positions further crystalized the overarching student goal of obtaining a well-paying, conveniently located job. *EndsInATangent* boldly, albeit sarcastically, challenged users by suggesting their job placement difficulty might be because their “standards are too high.” Students may be unhappy with the professional outcomes of their education because they expect better jobs, higher returns, and more money to come from less experience, minimal effort, and little sacrifice.

DISCUSSION

In response to Udacity's recent money-back guarantee, the present research employed a thematic analysis approach to assess consumer-oriented reactions via Reddit. Analysis revealed three salient themes regarding users' consumer-orientated reactions that articulated changes, perceptions, and expectations of online education systems, particularly for-profit institutions. First, users speculated that this case could represent the future of higher education. Given the rapid development of new technology in higher education, and the increased emphasis placed on job placement, comparable guarantees may represent a new paradigmatic shift for universities. Second, users consistently described selecting an appropriate university as it related to shopping based on the cost, quality, and time of the product being purchased. Third, users discussed whether higher education was burdened with equipping students for the job market. Importantly, several users suggested graduates are unhappy with their initial career success because their expectations are too high. Ultimately, the analysis reveals that consumeristic and entitled perspectives on Udacity's guarantee are conspicuous throughout

user comments. Implications for these findings pre-enrollment, during enrollment, and post-enrollment are discussed below.

First, users exhibited a consumer-oriented perspective *pre-enrollment*. Student's consumer-oriented perspectives are arguably most present in the conceptualization of university selection as a form of shopping. Concerns regarding affordability, quality, and timeliness highlighted users' desire to have tailored educational experiences. Udacity's guarantee seems to speak directly towards this appeal, using a common sales tactic to target customers to increase consumption (Tight, 2013). In some ways, this expectation represents an inversion of the traditional college application experience, wherein the role of the students choosing a university is more central than the role of universities choosing students. This perspective could relate directly to students' entitled attitudes in the classroom. As previously explicated, entitled students expect to participate in the classroom according to their preferences (Cain, Romanelli, & Smith, 2012). If students are demonstrating entitled outlooks prior to even entering the classroom, it seems unlikely that similar expectations would not permeate actual instruction. So, the observed increase of students' academic entitlement (Boswell, 2012) could in part be due to increased levels of entitlement in selecting universities.

Second, this consumer orientation was also apparent in users' expectations for universities *during enrollment* regarding job preparation and placement expectations. Users differed on their opinions of whether it was the burden of universities to equip students for success on the job market. Users' differing opinions can undoubtedly be explained due to their varying orientations toward entitlement. Several users placed the burden of their career success directly on their university, implying little personal responsibility for their own preparedness. This speaks directly to conceptualizations of academic entitlement, wherein students hold an expectancy for success without taking personal responsibility (Chowning & Campbell, 2009). Inversely, when students consider job preparation their burden, they are placing less responsibility on external parties, and in turn displaying less entitlement. This explication moves entitlement beyond the confines of the classroom to describe student attitudes for the larger education system, unique from previous research exploring this concept.

Third, users even hold consumeristic views *post-enrollment*. Interestingly, analysis revealed students likely hold entitled, consumeristic attitudes after graduating with a degree. Rather than being happy with *any* job post-graduation, users discussed their interest in getting a respectable job, not just an average job. As EndsInATangent suggested, this dissatisfaction may be a result of unrealistic standards for career outcomes. Stout (2000) provided evidence for how these expectations could be a product of entitlement, as students have come to expect high grades for low performance. In the same way, students may have come to expect high-level jobs for low-level qualifications. Thus, students' entitled behavior within education may directly impact their occupational expectations when entering the workforce.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As with all research, the present study was not without limitations. While the chosen methodology may offer an in-depth exploration of a particular context, there are evident limits to the generalizability of the present findings. Particularly, the characteristics and attitudes of the MOOCs consumer base likely differs from that of a typical four-year university, as evidenced by several users herein. While the explication of consumerism in this context is advantageous, similar research should be conducted to examine manifestations of student consumerism in additional educational contexts. Next, comments on discussion boards often represent the ideas of outspoken, opinionated users. Because of this, more moderate user opinions may not be represented by the available units of analysis. To elicit a broader range of opinions, focus groups or in-depth interviews may be an appropriate means for collecting even richer, or more diverse, user opinions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). This additional data could then be triangulated with the existing analysis to further corroborate findings, as Yin (2009) suggests collecting data from various sources strengthens the validity of case study findings.

CONCLUSION

Udacity's progressive guarantee may represent the inevitable future of higher education given the increases in the consumer-orientation of students evident in the current case study. As such, understanding students' consumeristic and entitled learning may help higher education institutions best interact with students pre-enrollment, during enrollment, and post-enrollment. Research should continue to explore the shifting, and often entitled, preferences of Millennial students in the classroom.

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