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A qualitative investigation into the contributing factors of student consumerism. With a specific focus on international students in the University of Oxford.



Dissertation submitted for Master of Science (MSc) in Education (Higher Education)

at the Department of Education, University of Oxford

Written by **Qinfang Luo** (St. Anne College)

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Abstract

Increasing competition among higher education institutions (HEIs) in the global market continues to shape the functions of higher education (HE) and influence students' HE experiences. This study, which focuses on students at a selective research-intensive university in the UK, seeks to identify contributing factors that drive students to adopt consumer attitudes. Previous studies on the student-as-consumer (SAC) approach indicated students' complicated and ambivalent attitudes toward the consumerism of HE. Therefore, this study also aims to explore the interconnections among these influencing factors and better explain students' inconsistent attitudes toward student consumerism.

The first part of the study focuses on the concept of student consumerism and reviews literature on this topic, leading to the research questions, and the research focuses. The study then draws data from 20 semi-structured interviews to explore the processes of identity change and formation that occur during students' higher education experiences. Of the sample 70% of students identified themselves as consumers of higher education and 30% of students held mixed and conflicting attitudes. A thematic analysis was conducted on their narratives. The findings suggest individual differences (students' previous life experiences; age; motivation for participating in HE and various university activities; social and cultural backgrounds), group differences (fee differences between international students and local students; adaptation of international students), and perceived differences (students' expectations that underpin their (dis)satisfaction) that are associated with consumer identity adaptation. The discussion of the interactions between these driving factors, as well as the influence of the neoliberal knowledge economy and globalisation of HE, which underpins the marketisation of HE, suggests that all actors in HE should be aware of the cognitive and behavioural changes caused by the inculcation of a neoliberal and capitalist mindset, which has negative implications such as reduced attention to knowledge and the learning process, and the adoption of patriarchal values. To avoid the adaptation of the consumer identity, with all the limitations on the student experiences that this imposes, governments and HEIs should stop positioning students as consumers driven only by an assumed need to maximise their financial self-efficacy.

Key words: International students, University of Oxford, students as consumers, tuition fees, purposes of higher education

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements 5

1. Introduction 6

2. Literature Review 8

2.1. Student Consumerism 8

2.2. The student-as-consumer approach (SAC) in HE 11

2.3. The focus of international students 14

2.4. The institutional difference: the University of Oxford 17

2.5. Research question & rationale for the importance of this research topic 18

3. Methodology and theoretical frameworks 20

3.1. Introduction 20

3.2. Research design 20

3.2.1. Qualitative approach: Semi-structured interview 20

3.2.2. Sampling and data collection 21

3.2.3. Ethics 24

3.3. Content analysis 25

3.3.1. Transcription and coding 25

3.3.2. Analysis and theoretical frameworks 26

3.4. Limitations 29

4. Findings 32

4.1. Individual differences 32

4.1.1. Previous life experience 33

4.1.2. Age 33

4.1.3. Motivation 35

4.1.4. Social and cultural backgrounds 38

4.2. The differences: International students vs. local students 40

4.3. The differences: Students' expectations vs. students' HE experiences 42

4.4. Summary of findings 43

5. Discussion and Conclusion 44

5.1. The interactions between various driving factors 44

5.2. Who/what is responsible for student consumerism? 46

5.3. Implications 50
5.4. Limitation and further research 51
References 52
Appendices 59
Appendix A: Interview Questions 59
Appendix B: Participant information sheet 61
Appendix C: Consent form 64
Appendix D: CUREC 1a approval confirmation 66

List of Figures

Figure 1. The theoretical frameworks in the analysis and the cycle of the processes involved in the adoption and formation of consumer identity. 29

List of Tables

Table 1. Description of Sample: Interview participants 23

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1. Introduction

Consumerism is closely associated with a broader policy shift to a new settlement based on neoliberalism which introduced mechanisms of free market and new managerialism into HE (Naidoo et al., 2005; Harvey, 2007). The development of quasi-markets related to managerial principles in HE has changed relations within and between institutions as well as the nature of HE (Naidoo et al., 2005, Naidoo & Williams, 2015; Williams, 2014). HEIs in England have become increasingly subject to commercial pressures since the Dearing Report (Dearing, 1997) first identified students at universities as customers following the introduction of student tuition fees. An increased number of performance indicators have been implemented to enhance the responsiveness of HE and increase the influence of students on their university experience (Alves & Raposo, 2007; Naidoo & Williams, 2014; Tomlinson, 2016). The increased marketisation of HE has increased student consumerism (Molesworth, Scullion & Nixon, 2011). Students identify themselves as paying customers of universities and adopt instrumental learning methods (Molesworth et al., 2009; 2011; Naidoo & Williams, 2014; Nixon et al., 2018; Tomlinson, 2014; 2016). The HE experience has commonly understood as a temporary lifestyle choice before a comfortable life provided by a high-paid graduate job. Students have equalised teaching time to monetary value, calculating how much fee they paid for one lecture (Nixon et al., 2018).

As a student, a citizen, and a person raised in a Confucius cultural background where knowledge, teachers, and educational institutions are traditionally highly respected by the general population, this has been deeply shocking to me. After witnessing all these behaviours and attitudes in my own educational experience, I can't help but wonder why. What causes this? What exactly is the source of consumer identity? There is literature on the extent to which students perceive themselves as consumers, the variety of consequences caused by consumer identity, and the interaction between consumer identity and other identities. But, before we question those, isn't it more important to ask why students identify as consumers in the first place? I personally think so.

Therefore, this study attempts to answer the question and contribute to filling this gap in the literature. There are five chapters in this study. Besides the current chapter, chapter 2 introduces the research topic, student consumerism, in more detail, and builds on literature

on the student as consumer (SAC) approach explaining why international students enrolled in the University of Oxford are the focus of this study. Chapter 3 provides the methodology and theoretical framework utilised to answer the research questions. Chapter 4 presents the findings of this study and identifies influencing factors in the formation and adaptation of student consumerism in HE. Chapter 5 discusses the interactions between those factors and attempts to illustrate who/what is responsible for student consumerism.

2. Literature Review

This chapter is divided into five sections. It begins by introducing the topic of this paper: student consumerism. Following that, the student-as-consumer approach (SAC) will be discussed. Then, the reasons for the focus on international students and the University of Oxford in this paper will be explained in the third and fourth sections. And in the fifth section, the research questions for this paper, which emerged from student consumerism and previous studies, will be proposed, along with explanations of why the research questions are important.

2.1. Student Consumerism

Consumerism is regarded as part of a larger policy shift away from the Keynesian welfare state settlement and toward a new settlement based on neoliberalism, which introduced market mechanisms and new managerialist principles into higher education (HE) (Naidoo, Shankar & Veer, 2011). Under the trend of deregulating centralised control and enhancing individuals' freedom of choice (Harvey, 2007), student consumerism has emerged as the times require. Student consumerism refers to a variety of beliefs and behaviours (Plunkett, 2014). For example, HE is seen as 'an input–output system which can be reduced to an economic production function' (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 324). Students regard education as a service for which they have paid and for which they demand academic success regardless of their actual learning or responsibility (Cain et al., 2012; Tomlinson, 2016).

Meanwhile, student-consumer behaviour encompasses all the mental and physical activities that traditional consumers engage in. Consumers exchange scarce resources such as money and time for valuable items in the marketplace. During the exchange, consumers search for, evaluate, purchase, and use products and services (Cole, 2007). Because tuition fees and time are what students mainly exchange in HE, the introduction and increases in student tuition fees (Dearing, 1997; Browne, 2010) represent advancements in the conceptualization of students as HE consumers (Bunce et al., 2017). And students compare course lengths across countries and programmes. They tend to choose courses with the shortest length of study to gain an age advantage in their future work after graduation (Zhu &Reeves, 2019). Global university rankings (GURs) are widely used by students in the process of searching for and evaluating universities due to their significant feature of being simple and completely visible

(Marginson, 2007). Regardless of the validity of the rankings or the conflicts of interest built into the ranking system (Chirikov, 2021), rankings assist them in investing in universities that have the best reputation and market value. And students enter the HE environment with service-user attitudes, forcing universities to respond to their various demands by reporting their dissatisfactions and complaints (Nixon et al., 2018).

Furthermore, student consumerism is intrinsically associated with the marketisation of HE. And the marketisation of HE can be attributed to two interconnected forces: the neoliberal knowledge economy and the globalisation of HE. Knowledge as capital has commercial value and should be exploited for profit and gaining competitive advantage is the most remarkable material change that underpins contemporary neoliberalism (Olssen & Peters, 2005). For example, as the UK government's framework, the Higher Ambitions (BIS, 2009) stated: ‘we are determined that no stone should be left unturned in maximising the economic potential of higher education for this country’ (BIS, 2009, p. 41). In the neoliberal age, the best knowledge for an individual is that which can be used to gain a competitive advantage in labour markets (Bartram, 2017). And the so-called ‘earnings premium’ from a degree – i.e., graduates’ higher salaries, justifies the implementation of tuition fees by creating a direct link between educational achievements and employment advantages.

Meanwhile, as technology enables people, information, and resources to traverse the globe in shorter amounts of time, the world has become increasingly connected (Bartram, 2017). Drawing from Martin Heidegger’s (1996) existential concept of de-severance, as Marginson (2011, p.26) describes, we "de-sever," interacting freely between local and global, and all places are within our imagined proximity. we are approaching “synchronise” globally because people want to form sustainable connections with others across distances of place, nation, and culture (Marginson, 2011, p.26). Furthermore, its impact on HE is not homogeneous, either within or between countries (Dale & Robertson, 2002).

However, when we focus on the globalisation of HEIs, increased market competition across different universities is the primary consequence. The growth of the global economy and the pressure of national and international competitions forced and encouraged HEIs to resort different financial resources (Askehave, 2007; Osman, 2008). HEIs have been centred on a new mode of service responsiveness that demands competitiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction to attract fee-paying students, compete for research grants, and advance marketable products

(Askehave, 2007; Bunzel, 2007; Clarke et al., 2007; Middleton, 2000; Tomlinson, 2016; 2017; Zhang, 2017). Consequently, the process of marketisation of HE started and universities took a market-oriented management and changed to “corporate universities” (Jarvis, 2001) and became quasi-markets (Marginson, 2018).

Underpinned by narrow notions of institutional excellence, universities’ performance is constantly measured and monitored by various performance indicators (Naidoo & Williams, 2015). Universities divert their attention and investments away from intellectual innovation and toward a variety of commercial activities to maintain their prestige (Costa, 2021; Olssen & Peters, 2005). For example, universities pay ranking companies for their consulting, analytics, and advertising services (Chirikov, 2021) and spend millions of pounds on building a new, fancy sports centre while most of their teaching staff are on insecure contracts (Chakrabortty & Weale, 2016). The process of marketisation has had a negative impact on academics' identity. When universities act like corporates and quasi-markets, *Homo Academicus* (Bourdieu, 2008) is increasingly supplanted by *Homo Economicus* (Costa, 2021). Academics' traditional social position as a symbol of wisdom has been neglected, and the role of the teacher has been diminished in favour of a “preferred teacher” who is dutiful, obedient and market-sensitive (Smyth, 2011). This has hampered teachers' creativity and jeopardised knowledge-growth processes (Costa, 2021).

The marketisation of HE in the UK is not unique, it is part of a global change in public sector management (Williams, 1997). For example, the governments of New Zealand and Australia have implemented similar policies since 1988 (Chubb & & Watermeyer, 2017; Roberts, 1999; Williams, 1997), actively promoting knowledge economy and market competition in order to maximise the economic potential of HE for the countries. And HE in the People's Republic of China have been significantly reformed by the globalized marketisation process, integrating diversified corporate practices into the operation of HEIs, which have impacted both the employment of graduates and the funding mechanism of HE (Williams et al., 1997; Zhang, 2017).

2.2. The student-as-consumer approach (SAC) in HE

The SAC approach represents a power shift from provider to consumer in HE (Tomlinson, 2014), as universities are accountable for seeking student evaluations and sharing adjustments that have been made based on student expectations and demands (Tomlinson, 2014; Williams & Cappuccini-Ansfield, 2007). Literature on the SAC approach shows the connections between consumer identity and students' educational experiences in marketised HEIs.

Finney and Finney (2010) conducted one of the first empirical studies to investigate the relationship between students' perceptions of themselves as university customers and their educational attitudes and behaviours by surveying 1,025 students at a medium-sized university in the southern United States. According to the findings, students who perceived themselves as customers were more likely to feel entitled to positive outcomes and to perceive complaining as beneficial, but they were not more likely to engage in their education. This challenges the model of students as co-producers of knowledge, which emphasises the cooperative interactions between the student, tutors and others who assist the learning process during the production, dissemination, and application of knowledge (McCulloch, 2009). Meanwhile, Finney and Finney (2010) found that age, rather than the percentage of university costs paid by parents or guardians, was a significant predictor of student-as-consumer perception. Older students were more likely than younger students to regard themselves as customers of the university. This contradicts the finding that younger students are more consumer-oriented than mature students (Bunce et al., 2016). Despite the difference, neither study was able to explain the correlation between age and consumerism orientation. Furthermore, the lack of a link between investment input and student perception as a consumer is inconsistent with the analysis of the effect of tuition fee increases on students.

To explore the relationships between consumer orientation and fee responsibility. Bunce et al. (2016) surveyed 608 undergraduates at HEIs in England, 80% of them were responsible for paying the tripled tuition fees, £9000, as the result of The Browne Review (Browne 2010). Participants were asked to respond to 15 consumer statements and 20 learner statements on a 7 point Likert-type scale (0 = strongly disagree, 3 = neutral, and 6 = strongly agree), such as: “The main purpose of my university education is to maximise my ability to earn money’ and ‘I

think of myself as being at university to learn'. Results showed that fee responsibility was positively correlated with consumer orientation. The researchers attribute this correlation to a sense of consumer entitlement emerging from paying money in exchange for a service. However, the mean consumer orientation score in that large scale survey was only 2.53 (SD = 0.85), indicating that students tend to disagree or be neutral towards the consumer statements. When the majority of participants pay £9000 tuition fees but identify as learners, the link between fee responsibility and consumer orientation becomes less convincing. And Tomlinson (2017) suggested that tuition fee increases influenced students' attitudes and identities by reinforcing their higher overall expectations that institutions were 'providing' a standard and quality that matched their financial contribution. This 'value for money' concern drove students to demand greater transparency from institutions and to challenge practises and modes of delivery that were not in line with increased personal contributions.

Furthermore, Bunce et al. (2016) found that course choice is associated with consumer orientation and studying a STEM subject was associated with a higher consumer orientation. This and the phenomenon that more young people are studying STEM subjects at university than ever before are primarily because STEM graduates typically have access to a higher starting wage and earning potential (Conlon & Patrignani, 2015). And the critical role that STEM workers play in raising a university's global ranking and driving economic growth for a country is well acknowledged (Atkinson & Mayo, 2010; Drew, 2011; Naidoo & Williams, 2015). Meanwhile, Bunce et al. (2016) discovered that students with a lower learner identity may develop a consumer orientation because they do not strongly identify as learners, rather than because they come to university with a pre-existing higher consumer orientation. Therefore, even if individuals with certain traits are more likely to identify as consumers, detectable identity change and formation should occur during students' HE experiences, and the HE environment should play a role in these processes.

To explore student perceptions of themselves as consumers of HE, Tomlinson (2017) interviewed 68 undergraduate students from seven UK HEIs who started their studies before and after UK tuition fees tripled. Interview questions covered students' attitudes toward fees and the marketisation of HE, their previous educational experiences, goal and motivations, evaluations of teaching and learning, the challenges and pressures of studying in HE and future orientations. And both group and individual interviews were conducted. According to the

results, some students showed active service-user attitudes that identified themselves as paying customers and adopted instrumental learning methods. Most students expressed ambivalent attitudes toward the consumerism of HE. They recognized the limitations of the consumer-oriented approach but became less tolerant of educational practices and adopted a greater propensity for a beneficial service. These are consistent with Williams' (2013) findings that students appear to be juggling complex identities, rejecting the concept of buying a diploma, while also accepting that they pay for it. However, rejecting the "consumer" label does not imply rejecting consumer behaviours. It appears that some students have acted as cannier consumers by rejecting the label of 'consumer' in order to protect the exchange value of their degree in the post-graduation labour market (Williams, 2013). Therefore, instead of focusing solely on students' perceptions of themselves as consumers, student behaviours such as educational engagement may be beneficial in indicating their perceived roles and identities. Meanwhile, inconsistent results among participants may be due to tuition fee differences (£3,250 vs. £9,000). And people conform when circumstances are ambiguous because they believe the group has the correct information (Morgan et al., 2012), focus group interviews may also amplify the influence of social conformity.

Nixon et al. (2018), like Tomlinson (2017), conducted interviews with full-time undergraduates at a research-intensive university in England. With their much smaller sample (22 participants), they examine students' narratives as symptomatic of irrational instincts and socio-psychodynamic processes to illustrate deeper meanings in the increased marketisation of HE and empirically analyse the student-consumer position. Using Freud's (2001) conceptualisation of narcissism as the analysis framework, the satisfaction of narcissistic individuals during commodity consumption stems from their recognition of the deprivation and suffering of others in the production process, and the interplays between narcissistic desires and defence mechanisms. They concluded that the student-consumer identity magnifies and justifies expressions of deeper narcissistic desire and aggressive instincts that lie at the root of student satisfaction and dissatisfaction. And the marketised HE context shapes student experiences so as to be based on a highly idealised consumer sovereign in which narcissistic desires and wants are promoted and fulfilled. Therefore, the marketisation of HE works on narcissistic characteristics to create the student-consumer. This provides a lens to explore multiple layers of soft power in institutional structures and cultures that impose

the student subjectivity on students' perceptions and attitudes. However, given that Freud's concept of narcissism is essentially embedded in attachment relationships from infancy, it is unsurprising that Nixon et al's analyses have largely been limited to transactional and contractual pedagogic relations, specifically the relationship between student, tutor, and subject.

2.3. The focus of international students

Different groups of students may react differently to fee-paying and consumer status (Williams, 2013). As previously stated, the connection between fee responsibility and consumer orientation has been emphasised in the literature on student consumerism (e.g., Bunce et al., 2016). International students usually devote more money to their HE than domestic students. In most main net host countries such as New Zealand and the US, international students pay on average twice or more tuition fees than domestic students (OECD, 2021). And the rapid growth in the number of international students enrolled in universities worldwide has been reported in many studies. According to the OECD (2021), there were 6.1 million tertiary students from around the world who crossed borders to study in 2019. The economic impact of international students cannot be overstated. Since the Thatcher government's accession, international students have primarily been viewed as a source of revenue in England (Bolsmann & Miller,2008). And international students contributed more than $45 billion to the US economy in 2018 and indirectly supported over 450,000 jobs (Dennis, 2020).

Though few studies directly ask students to describe the purposes of HE, Brooks et al. (2020) interviewed 295 undergraduate students across six European countries and found three general responses: preparation for the labour market, personal growth, and societal development. Aside from the majority of students believing that the primary purpose of HE is to prepare them for labour market entry, what's interesting about the findings, is that students from countries that request more personal financial contribution to a degree placed stronger emphasis on the labour market preparation. Brooks et al. (2020) discussed how the UK government explicitly positioned HE as an individual investment by demanding a high level of fees causing students to focus more on the instrumental value and economic outcomes of their HE experiences. However, they only included national students. Given that international students pay significantly higher tuition fees and are identified as a source of revenue for the

English government, it is reasonable to assume that they are more likely to associate HE with economic gain and labour market participation. Furthermore, if fee responsibility is the factor influencing students' attitudes, would international students in the UK from countries with high tuition fees, such as the United States, perceive the purpose of higher education in the same way as students from countries with low tuition fees such as China, or even no tuition fee such as Germany? Fundamentally, high and low prices are relative concepts, and it is necessary to consider the differences among international students in terms of their motivations and expectations of studying in the UK. Meanwhile, in the face of intense competition for international student recruitment, universities adopt both competitive (as opposed to co-operative) and strategic (rather than ad hoc) approaches towards internationalisation (Bolsmann & Miller; 2008; Cantwell et al., 2018).

Naidoo and Wu (2011) identified and tested a conceptual model on 570 mid-level international marketing managers by employing a mixed-design methodology on universities in the UK, US, Australia, and New Zealand. Results showed that commitment elements were critical to strategic implementation, with both strategic commitment and role commitment found to be positive and significant in influencing role performance. Varies strategies have been applied to ensure universities to attract international students and to meet their demands and expectations (for example, Edwards & Ran, 2006). However, as previously discussed, enhancing student choice and control may satisfy their narcissistic desires and wants, thereby causing ideological changes.

Aside from monetary investments in expensive tuition fees and living expenses, international students tend to devote additional time and effort to cope with or adjust to the host country culture. Language and cultural factors, such as different food tastes, limited support services from host universities, homesick are all possible contributors to this (e.g., Lee & Rice, 2007; Wilton & Constantine, 2003). International education requires students learning about a new country at a rapid pace (Marginson, 2014), and yet international students arrive in their host country generally deprived of social capital (Neri &Ville, 2007). The renewal of social capital should influence their adjustment and adaptation to a new environment.

One of the unavoidable consequences of international students' immersion in the host country is the process of acculturation (Sam, 2006). Aside from the various psychological ramifications such as depression and anxiety (Organista et al., 2003), it is critical to recognise

that people from certain cultural backgrounds may find the cross-cultural adjustment process more difficult (Zhou et al., 2017). The dual process of cultural and psychological change is closely related to the self, which has culturally specific forms and functions in various psychological processes such as expectations and interpersonal relationships (Markus & Kitayama, 2010). In general, social interdependence is emphasised in some cultures, whereas social independence is emphasised in others. Interdependence results in the ideology that individuals are inherently connected and made meaningful by interactions with others, emphasising the dynamic whole and common good. And independence implies that social relationships are built upon the instrumental goals and interests of the individuals involved and that they expect rewards proportionate to costs (Fiske, 2001; Johnson & Johnson, 2001). Given the increased impact of marketised HE, competition and instrumental outcomes got actively promoted and advertised, influencing students' expectations and demands. It is understandable that students from a culture emphasising social interdependence may have stronger culture shock and have a relatively harder time during cultural adjustments. And students from a culture that values social independence may also resonate with the student-consumer identity more.

Meanwhile, the finding that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly reduced international student mobility (Mok et al., 2021) may also be explained in terms of how people from a socio-cultural background that values the dynamic whole and common good responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Marginson and Xu (2022) pointed out that during the pandemic, East Asian societies have prioritized the welfare of the public and community, and demonstrated willingness to sacrifice personal interests for the larger collective good. On the one hand, students from those countries faced greater health risks when they chose to study abroad because their home countries were relatively safe due to the government's emphasis on human well-being. On the other hand, leaving family during such a different time, maybe especially difficult for individuals raised in collectivist cultures that value collective efforts and unity during challenging period. Not to mention the fact that the pandemic's significant financial changes severely disrupted families' and countries' ability to invest in international education (Mok et al., 2021).

Therefore, given the relatively high fees paid by international students, the additional emotional and financial burdens that international students face as a result of the Covid-19

pandemic and other associated costs such as airplane tickets, focusing on international students' attitudes toward student consumerism would contribute to the literature on student mobility and student consumerism, particularly in terms of the connections between consumer identity formation and financial, cultural, and emotional factors.

2.4. The institutional difference: the University of Oxford

The Brooks et al. (2020) study identified institutional differences as well as national differences. Across most sample countries, the purpose of HE was thought to differ depending on the status of the institution in which students were enrolled. Results suggested that participants believed that prestigious universities have better labour market returns. And student from lower status institutions tend to concern more about the labour market outcomes. This could be explained in terms of the different levels of social and financial risk that students from various social classes face when they enter HEIs. Harris et al.'s (2020) discussion of symbolic violence within loan system is particularly helpful here. The loan system causes psychological ramifications for some students. And while students from more affluent backgrounds have more social, cultural and economic capitals (Bourdieu, 2021), which allow them to gain high status in society, students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are more vulnerable to the effects of symbolic violence because it is seen as necessary and unavoidable for students to take out student loans and suffer the collateral damage of student debt, such as anxiety and academic guilt caused by having their study time compromised.

Meanwhile, using Bourdieu's framework, Naidoo (2004) conceptualised universities as fields embedded in complex power relations with other universities and the wider society. She compared two African universities under the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM). Results showed that while the elite university distanced itself from the political field and issued its own admission policy, the university in a subordinate tier was subject to direct state control. It is clear that different institutions have varying degrees of resistance to socio-political and economic forces. While high-status universities are more able to preserve their own organisational culture and scientific capital, universities with limited resources or low reputation are less likely to resist external political and economic determinants. The objective positions occupied by the institution under socio-political and economic changes are associated with their possession of determinate quality of specific capital (Bourdieu & Johnson, 1993). Institutions in high positions of hierarchy and status have more reputational

and other resources to resist market forces (Naidoo & Williams, 2015). As one of the world's oldest, most prestigious, and highly ranked universities, the University of Oxford has not been influenced by the expansion of HE in the same way that other mass universities have (Raffe & Croford, 2015). Given the results of various rankings and surveys, it is understandable that the University of Oxford has always maintained a high level of competitiveness in global markets. Moreover, the increased demand for study in it added prestige and value to its marketable educational products and positional goods (Naidoo, 2004; Marginson, 2006).

Therefore, the focus of University of Oxford in this paper would be beneficial in illustrating the mechanisms/structural positions by which universities appropriate the marketisation of HE to advance their competitiveness and efficiency in the global market while preserving and reproducing its social and cultural capitals. More importantly, this would help us understand how these mechanisms interact with and influence the development and adaptation of student consumerism.

2.5. Research question & rationale for the importance of this research topic

Overall, previous research has demonstrated that the consumerist turn in the UK caused and heralded many negative consequences, both at the micro (students, families), meso (HEIs), and macro (nations) levels. And despite the conflicting results about the extent to which students perceive themselves as consumers of HE, studies have shown that the SAC approach has significant impacts on students' experiences at British universities (e.g., Tomlinson, 2016). However, research on the influencing factors of the formation and adaptation of student consumerism in HE is still lacking. And the reasons for students' inconsistent and ambivalent attitudes toward student-consumer identity have not been adequately explained.

This suggests the following research questions for the study:

> **RQ1.** What are the factors that drive UK-based international students in one university to adopt the consumer identity?
>
> **RQ2.** How do those factors work? Separately or in combination? How did they lead to the different levels of adaptation or conformity?

This research aims to identify the key contributing factors that drive students to adopt consumer attitudes. In this vein, this research also attempts to explore the interconnections among these factors and better explain the complicated and ambivalent attitudes towards the consumerism of HE found in previous research.

To achieve these aims, this research has set out to investigate main features of the international students' experience, and analyse to what extent these experiences indicate identification with the students as a consumer of educational services.

The attempt to identify the key contributing causes, contexts, and conditions that cause student consumerism could be helpful in the development of an implication that governments and universities should resist conceptualising students as consumers in the first place. Meanwhile, a clear picture of the correlation and causation between the discourses and practises in global marketised HE and student consumerism should provide a potential strategy for improving student experience and learning outcome.

3. Methodology and theoretical frameworks

3.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodology used to conduct this research and the theoretical frameworks related to the chosen research methodology when answering the research questions:

> **RQ1.** What are the factors that drive UK-based international students in one university to adopt the consumer identity?
>
> **RQ2.** How do those factors work? Separately or in combination? How did they lead to the different levels of adaptation or conformity?

It starts with the study design, justifies the use of semi-structured interviews, and then illustrates the sampling and data collection methods used in this study. The analytical and theoretical framework employed in this study will then be explained, followed by a discussion of the limitations of the research methodology.

3.2. Research design

3.2.1. Qualitative approach: Semi-structured interview

As Cohen et al (2011) stated:

"Quantitative data may be useful for identifying the 'what' of causation – what causes an effect – but qualitative data are pre-eminently useful for identifying the 'how' of causation – how causation actually works, the causal processes at work." (p. 95).

To investigate how various factors affect student identity, influencing the formation and adaptation of student consumerism, this study utilized a qualitative approach. Meanwhile, since the factors that drive UK-based international students in one university to adopt the consumer identity remain unclear, and student experience inherently includes a variety of economic, social, and cultural forces, it is more useful and practical for the researcher to focus on causal processes rather than a single factor. Thus, to explore the processes of identity change and formation that occur in students' higher education experiences, this study utilized semi-structured interviews.

Using this format, the interview questions were supplemented by additional follow-up questions as they arose, which allows the researcher to collect detailed information while going beyond abstract attitudes to develop a deep understanding of students' thoughts and feelings (Thompson et al., 1989). Meanwhile, depth interviews create an environment in which participants can provide “intimate stories of problematic life lived up close” (Denzin & Lincoln 2003, p. 464). For instance, interviewees were asked to elaborate on some specific phrases and metaphors they utilised, such as "I really own this university". Furthermore, narrative is useful not only for understanding the consistency of an individual's perception of identity but also for recognizing the change in perception of identity over time (Elliott, 2005). Semi-structured interviews provide the researcher with rich narratives to investigate the dynamic interplay of influential factors and students' identities.

3.2.2. Sampling and data collection

20 Participants (9 females, 11 males, mean age = 26.95) were recruited through both in-person approach and snowball sampling. As stated in the previous chapter, the criteria for participants selection were: International student at University of Oxford. Based on student consumerism that students regard education as a service for which they have paid and for which they demand academic success and enhanced economic returns (Olssen & Peters, 2005; Tomlinson, 2016). International students at the University of Oxford are suitable participants because they pay twice or more tuition fees than local students (OECD, 2021) and benefit from the potential future economic exchange value provided by the university. Meanwhile, given that student-consumers tend to choose courses with the shortest length of study to gain an age advantage in their future work after graduation (Zhu &Reeves, 2019), the target sample of this study was further narrowed to international students that enrolled in a one-year master course at the University of Oxford. This also enabled a high degree of similarity in relation to educational experience, within the target group.

Participant recruitment started with the researcher reaching out to students at St Anne's College where the researcher is a student.

In order to identify qualified participants, in-person conversations took place at St Anne's College's MCR (middle common room), dining hall, and a nearby bus stop, during which subjects were asked about their majors and nationalities.

At the time subjects were identified as qualified participants and showed a willingness to accept the interview, their contact information were obtained for the later discussion of interview time and receipt of the Information sheet and Consent form (See Appendix B and C). Participants were also asked to suggest others who met the selection criteria and who might be interested in participating. They often recommend fellow students from their respective departments. Therefore, the study sample included participants from seven other colleges in addition to St Anne's. To gain access to a diverse range of student experiences, the researcher attempted to involve students of various ages, majors, and nationalities. When males were over-represented in the sample, the researcher began recruiting only female students.

Overall, the researcher managed to obtain a relatively diverse and gender-balanced sample (See Table 1 for participants details). Ethical approval for the study was received from the Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) (See Appendix D)

Table 1. Description of Sample: Interview participants						
Pseudonym	**Age**	**Sex**	**Degree**	**Nationality**	**Religious affiliation**	**Interview length**
William	24	M	MSc in Mathematical and Computational Finance	Chinese	None	01:07:25
Oliver	24	M	MSt in Ancient Philosophy	Georgian	None	01:38:42
Noah	27	M	MSc in Pharmacology	Bangladeshi	None	01:33:06
Harry	23	M	MSc in Mathematical Sciences	Irish	Roman Catholic	00:54:53
Sophia	22	F	MSc in Theoretical and Computational Chemistry	Chinese	None	01:35:27
Arthur	32	M	MSc in Global Health Science and Epidemiology	Bulgarian	Atheist	01:32:26
Jack	25	M	MSc in Japanese Studies	American	None	00:49:00
Nora	19	F	MSt in Greek and/or Latin Languages and Literature	American	Jewish	01:00:52
Lucas	30	M	MSc in Education	Chinese/Hon-gkongese	None	00:46:51+ 00:39:45
Max	25	M	MSc in Mathematical and Computational Finance	Chinese	None	01:47:16
Teddy	22	M	MSc in Education	Japanese	None	00:57:20
Helen	41	F	MSt in Medieval Studies	American	Buddhist	01:15:52
Ethan	30	M	MSc in Refugee and Forced Migration Studies	Sudanese	Christian	00:52:03
Emma	22	F	MSc in Japanese Studies	Chinese	None	00:39:09+ 00:51:30
Lily	35	F	MSt in Diplomatic Studies	Canadian	None	00:54:40
Mia	27	F	MSc in Nature, Society and Environmental Governance	Indian	Hindus	01:41:34
Charlotte	25	F	MSc in Sustainability, Enterprise, and the Environment	American	Agnostics	00:54:53
Isabella	25	F	MSc in Nature, Society and Environmental Governance	American	Catholic	01:03:25
Susan	29	F	MSc in Nature, Society and Environmental Governance	South Korea	Buddhist	01:01:06
Daniel	32	M	MSc in Environmental Change and Management	Japanese	None	01:04:02

Individual Interviews were conducted in a study room at St Anne's college or online using Microsoft Teams Online Meetings (for the 3 participants who were unable to make in person). During the interviews, the researcher took notes to record the participants' body language and nonverbal emotional responses, as well as the researcher's own thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and insights. The notes provided a rich source of data for examining the meaning of participants' words in their context during the subsequent data analysis. Compared to in-person participants, the researcher gained fewer nonverbal cues from participants who received the interview online. It might be because nonverbal cues were more difficult for the researchers to detect in online settings. All participants gave their informed consent before

the interview started. Anonymity was guaranteed and all the names that appear in this study are pseudonyms. The right to withdrawal was emphasised throughout the data collection process.

The 33 interview questions were predesigned by the researcher covering followings thematic areas: Students' motivations and goals for pursuing a master degree and studying abroad; students' decision regarding university and major selection; educational biographies and trajectories; students' expectations of HE; challenges and pressures of studying abroad; students' future interests and orientations; attitudes toward student loan and its impact on thinking towards HE; students' perceptions of their roles in higher education; student evaluations of various aspects of their HE experience, such as teaching quality and living environment (See Appendix A for interview questions). The interviews lasted from 49 minutes to 101 minutes, were recorded and stored on a password-protected mobile device and were then transcribed and analysed using qualitative analysis software: NVivo. It is also worth noting that three participants supplemented their responses after the interview by messaging the researchers. Those messages were also included in the transcripts for analysis.

3.2.3. Ethics

In-person recruitment may have put participants under social pressure. After being determined to meet the selection criteria, all potential participants reached through in-person recruitment agreed to participate in the research. Some participants may feel obligated to do the researcher a favour after one-on-one conversations about each other's majors, nationalities, and dissertation workloads. If an individual is identified as an eligible participant but refuses to participate without giving an objective reason, and is likely to see the researcher in the college common area on a daily basis, there will be a lot of social awkwardness. Therefore, some participants may have participated due to social pressure or a desire to avoid future social awkwardness, rather than because they were truly voluntarily.

The power relation between the interviewer and the interviewee in qualitative research interview methodology may have also disadvantaged the participants. The qualitative research interview has an asymmetric power distribution between the interviewer and the interviewee, with the interviewer having more power in influencing the rules of the situation and constraining the interviewee's views (Anyan, 2013; Lukes, 2005). The in-depth interview

process can also be oppressive and invasive as if the life of the interviewee waiting to be described and interpreted (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). As demonstrated in the interview lengths shown in Table 1, only two participants requested pulse recoding for a break or to handle other emergencies. The remaining 18 participants had all gone through long interviews without stopping until all the questions were asked. However, some participants informed the researcher of their impending departure before the interview began, and some participants also checked the time on their phone or watch. This indicates both that the power relation influenced the interview and interviewees also can shift the dynamic power relation.

3.3. Content analysis

3.3.1. Transcription and coding

Following the data collection, the researcher transcribed the interview records verbatim (exactly word-for-word). However, given the interview length, the researcher usually could only finish one transcription in a day. Since the 11th transcription, the Microsoft Office Word transcription tool was adopted to make the process faster. It is worth noting that the first half of the transcription did not include only the first ten participants due to the random order. The randomization was used to reduce the impact of the bottom-up approach used in the data analysis, which will be explained further below. The initial transcript was then revised to correct minor flaws such as typos and to include nonverbal expressions recorded by notes.

Transcribed interviews were analysed by generating a list of thematic codes. A list of thematic codes was created based on the initial thematic topics used to develop the interview questions. Meanwhile, the codes were modified, and new codes were added as the researcher reviewed and rethought the data in the manner described as open and axial coding by Corbin and Strauss (2008). Following the coding of all transcripts, the researcher identified 3 broad themes from 42 nodes after coding all transcripts, which will be reflected in the findings.

Thematic analysis was chosen as appropriate because it is a commonly used method for describing, analysing, and reporting themes and patterns in diverse, complex and nuanced data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The flexibility of thematic analysis allows the data to be analysed under several qualitative frameworks, and in this instance, both bottom-up (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and top-down (Boyatzis, 1998) approaches were utilised to identify themes. Using a

bottom-up approach, responses to pre-designed questions from previous interviews informed new focuses and follow-up questions raised in future interviews as the interview progressed. The questioning of the data began before the coding, with the data collection. Multiple identities and the social and political context of the study, the community, the organisation, or the participant group inform the researcher's positioning (Collins, 1993; Kezar & Lester, 2010), enabling particular probe questions and provisional answers to emerge alongside the interviews. This constant questioning and attempting to understand the data influenced coding. As some of the new focuses and codes appeared only in later interviews, the order of interview transcription and coding were randomised to reduce the impact of researcher positionality on data analysis and representation, particularly as the researchers' familiarity with the data increased. Meanwhile, the top-down approach was chosen because it prompted a rich theoretical thematic analysis.

3.3.2. Analysis and theoretical frameworks

This dissertation employs the experiential continuum (Dewey, 1963), social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel et al., 1979), the conceptualisation of governmentality (Foucault, 2007), and the notion of gender performativity (Butler, 1994) to identify the contributing factors of student consumerism and demonstrate how those factors influence students' adoption of a consumer identity. The theoretical frameworks applied in the analysis are summarized in Figure 1. The analysis was structured around sets of dominant and subsidiary themes that emerged from the data, allowing for the identification of both unified responses that cut across the entire sample and variations and nuances within the sample that helped capture and demonstrate a variety of influencing factors.

The principle of the experiential continuum emphasises the fundamental attribute of habit. Every experience that has been implemented and undergone modifies the individual who acts and undergoes (Dewey, 1963). Based on the inherent value of various experiences, especially the discriminations between educative experience and those which are miseducative, Dewey proposed that the form and characteristics of previous experience also provide standpoint for connecting it with subsequent experience (Dewey, 1963). Previous experience also influences individuals' basic sensitivities and ways of meeting and responding to all of life's conditions, thereby influencing the formation of subsequent experience (Dewey, 1963). In other words, experience influences the formation of attitudes of desire and purpose. Meanwhile, every

genuine experience acts as a moving force that alters the circumstances under which further experiences are gained (Dewey, 1963). Drawing on this, the investigation of students' educational biographies and trajectories should aid in the discussion of the interactions between students' prior experience, their current HE experience, and the adaptation and formation of consumer identity.

Meanwhile, all human experience is ultimately social in the sense that it involves interaction and communication between internal states and external environments (Dewey, 1963). According to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), people actively engage in comparison to others, which as a main component of self-evaluation, influences individuals' motivation, attitudes, and behaviours. More importantly, people commonly compare themselves to those in their peer group or with whom they share characteristics (Kesici & Erdoğan, 2010). Therefore, it is critical to consider how groups promote social comparisons that are inextricably linked to identity validation as part of our identity and self-esteem (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel et al., 1979). And in this instance, examining the social cognitive processes by which international students compare themselves to local/European students, as well as older students compare themselves to younger students, should aid in the investigation of their attitude change and identity formation.

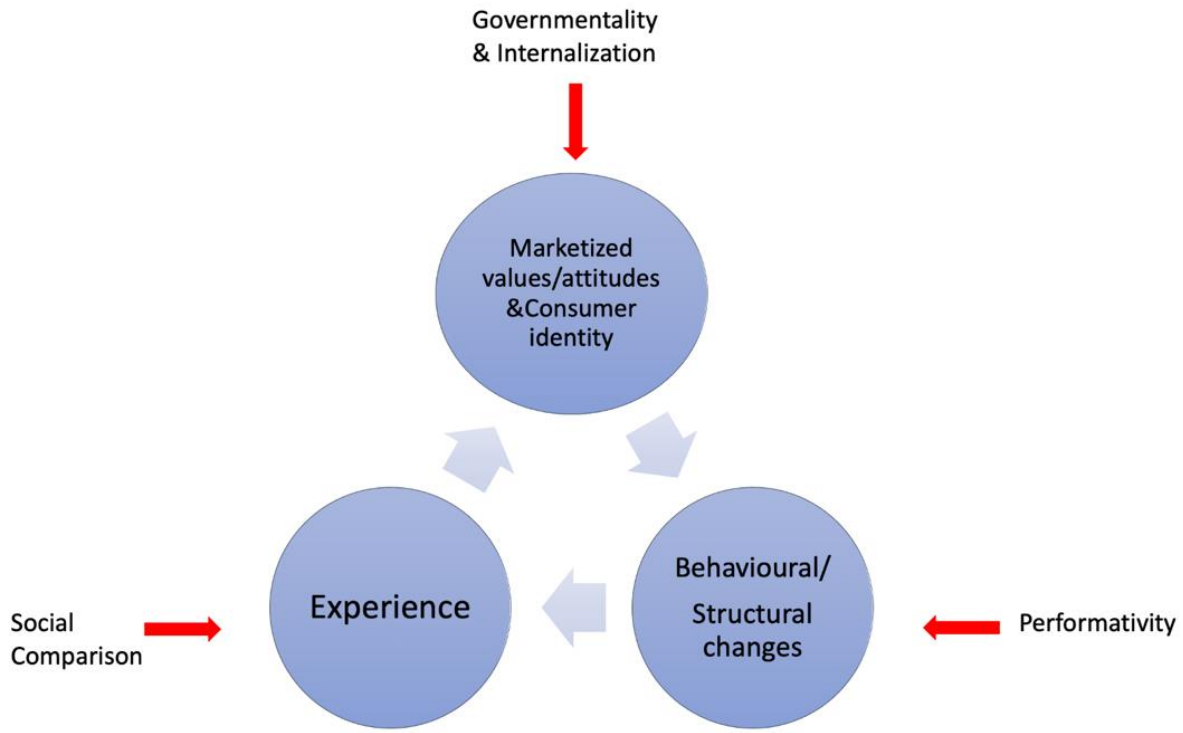
In addition to social comparison, this paper employed Foucault's (2007) concept of governmentality to investigate the possible mechanism by which students internalise the market value of universities during their HE experience. Foucault (2007) suggested that disciplinary institutions, such as schools and prisons, exist to produce individuals who internalize disciplines and regulate themselves in accordance with those principles. Under the force of various market mechanisms, multiple implicit empowering techniques operate in the HE environment to encourage individuals to govern themselves using student rights, entitlements, and the instrumental values of HE education that HEIs strive to advertise. Significantly, disciplinary power is embedded in simple instruments that students encounter on a daily basis (Foucault & Sheridan, 1991). For example, student punishments and rewards, as well as university rankings, are fabricated to justify and reinforce certain subjective judgments and are under constant observation and monitoring. The concern about 'value for money,' as well as the emphasis on the university brand and the importance of receiving a

distinction (Bunce et al., 2016; Finney & Finney, 2010; Tomlinson, 2017), should all be useful in indicating the process of students internalising market values of HE.

Narratives about how students at Oxford University and other top-ranked universities are thought to be intelligent and have high status, and how graduating with a distinction means an individual has fulfilled their potential and tried their hardest, vividly reflected what Ball (2019) proposed about how the rationality of performativity is regarded as the common sense, as something perfectly logical and desirable. Therefore, the concept of panoptic performativity, which states that the purpose of education has shifted to achieve performance indicators under various surveillances such as GURs (Perryman, 2006), is used in this paper to explain the behavioural and structural changes occurring in HE actors as they internalize the market value of HE. Students set their goals and behave in a manner that the "dark central tower" is constantly watching (Perryman, 2006). And the tangible and quantified forces of the "dark central tower" are explicit assessments such as getting a high score, and implicit social perceptions such as being a graduate who owns a diploma from Oxford University is the preferable social identity worth gaining.

Meanwhile, in order to illustrate how performativity not only impacts individual behaviours but also reproduces and perpetuates itself during individuals' daily interactions with their surroundings, Butler's (1994) ethos on gender performativity was supplemented with social comparison theory and Foucault's (2007) concept of governmentality. Just as gender identity emerges from the repetition of gendered acts (Butler, 1994), students' consumer identities should originate from certain consumer-oriented behaviours and tendencies. And because the level of repetitiveness is directly linked to the identity (Butler, 1994), consumer identity is constantly manufactured and negotiated (Little et al., 2009). This is helpful in identify the causality between external factors that encourage and cause consumer-oriented behaviours and the adoption and formation of a consumer identity. More importantly, as previously stated, people actively evaluate and regulate themselves based on the behaviours and perceptions of others. Consumer-oriented behaviours influenced by marketized mechanisms are socially constructed and reinforced in the process of achieving performance indicators and advancing market competitiveness.

Figure 1. The theoretical frameworks in the analysis and the cycle of the processes involved in the adoption and formation of consumer identity.



3.4. Limitations

While the semi-structured interview is pre-eminently useful for identifying how various factors influence student identity and drive the formation and adaptation of student consumerism by illustrating the causal processes displayed in students' personal higher education experiences, this approach has some shortcomings.

The sample size was small, and all participants were from Oxford University. As previously stated, focusing on this specific university benefits investigations into how the university's position within the marketisation of HE interacts with the development and adaptation of student consumerism. Even though the institution is representative of international students' experiences, students from the University of Oxford may share more in common with students from similar universities in terms of personal characteristics, backgrounds, and identities. Differences in institutions may limit the generalizability of this study.

Because the interviewer is known to nearly half of the participants and one of the interviewees is the researcher's classmate with fair knowledge of the research topic, researcher bias should be considered (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Frey, 2018). Meanwhile, just as Nixon et al.

(2018) had to clarify several times in their paper that their investigation of student consumerism did not seek to blame students for the marketisation of HE, there is a tendency to attribute modifications in the role and purpose of universities, and the privatisation of HE to specific HE actors (Molesworth et al., 2011). Participants may reject the "consumer" label to avoid presumed judgements about consumer identity. As mentioned before, investigating student behaviours can help determine whether they conform to the consumer identity. Therefore, participants were asked questions about their educational participation, such as Q21: “How many lectures/seminars do you usually attend per week?” Also, Q22: “How many formative and summative assignments you have completed so far?” However, the attempt to align narrative materials to the event while maintaining a strict distinction between referential and evaluative notes is frequently problematic in dialogic approaches to the self (Andrews et al., 2008). The investigation of students' behaviour through their reviews and descriptions cannot be as direct and accurate as observation. This could defeat the validity and reliability of this study. At this point, the researcher's effort to analyse participants' nonverbal emotional responses should help to reduce the disparity between the stories participants tell about themselves and their responses to each question. However, as previously stated, the positionality of the researcher can have an impact on data analysis and representation as well.

It was almost impossible for a researcher to be completely neutral and objective in an interview. Attitude formation is an intellectual and moral growth that embodies our basic sensitivities and ways of meeting and coping with all the situations we encounter in our daily lives (Dewey, 1963). Not only can the researcher not be a completely objective interviewer, making sense of what the interviewee says without referring to their own attitudes and knowledge, but the researcher must also make some judgmental decisions on how to respond to the interviewee's answers and what subsequent questions to ask in order to obtain more information within the time limit of the in-depth interview. Researchers can actively practice self-reflectivity to avoid or reduce the impact of their positionality during the data collection and analyse (Pillow, 2003). However, what to reflect on, when to reflect, and to what extent, still depend on the researcher's subjective judgement. The researcher's positionality is embedded in the power the researcher holds and exercises an influence in the conversational space (Pezalla et al., 2012), so it cannot be completely eliminated.

As stated in the introduction to this dissertation, I see myself as a student and a citizen rather than as a consumer of or investor in higher education. I am also a person raised in a Confucius cultural background where knowledge, teachers, and educational institutions are traditionally highly respected by the general population. The full idea of student as consumer is shocking to me. However, I believe that was able during the study to investigate and discuss the consumer idea without prejudice or judging individuals who identified with that idea, because I was equally curious about the beliefs held by all interviewees.

Moreover, semi-structured interview allows participants to provide greater breadth and depth information in their own words and discover their interpretations of reality (Klandermans & Staggenborg, 2002). However, as indicated by the 33 interview questions in Appendix A, the researcher initially proposed the terms "consumer" and "consumer identity" during the interview. Given that four participants stated clearly that they "never thought" about being a consumer or about students' consumer identity, it is reasonable to consider whether leading questions such as "Do you think students are university consumers?" might have oriented participants' ideas, thoughts, and memories to the consumer-oriented approach. However, because of the narrative interview setting, participants were able to interpret the terms "consumer" and "consumer identity" in their own ways, and they were able to take their time responding to those questions in the styles they preferred.

They were provided with a relatively safe and comfortable interview environment in which they could express how they believe the consumer is a misnomer, if they chose to do so, and provide other alternatives they thought were more appropriate to describe their role at the university, such as "member of a community or a club." Meanwhile, due to the order of the 33 interview questions, participants were able to express their consumer-oriented attitudes and behaviours before the potential influence of the specific terms "consumer" and "consumer identity" had any effect on their narratives and responses. Participants also stated that the leading questions with those specific terms assisted them in reflecting on their HE experiences and that the terms "consumer" and "consumer identity" were actually reasonable and accurate in use.

4. Findings

The interviews revealed mixed and variable levels of identification with the notion that "students are consumers of the university experience". While participants' perceptions of what they specifically consume at university varied, 14 of the 20 (70%) participants believed students are consumers of university and considered themselves to be consumers of the University of Oxford. 6 (30%) participants expressed a mixed and ambivalent position on the consumerism of HE.

Participants who identified themselves as consumers explicitly stated that they consume education/knowledge (5 participants), university services and resources such as the library (7 participants), social capital/the brand of the university (7 participants), HE experiences (3 participants), and the university as a whole (4 participants). While all five participants who indicated they consume education and knowledge also mentioned they consume services and resources, four of the seven participants who asserted they consume services and resources stated that education and knowledge are not consumer goods.

In order to answer the research questions:

> **RQ1.** What are the factors that drive UK-based international students in one university to adopt the consumer identity?
>
> **RQ2.** How do those factors work? Separately or in combination? How did they lead to the different levels of adaptation or conformity?

The narratives from participants who identified themselves as consumers and from those who expressed a mixed and ambivalent attitude to student consumerism were integrated. The analysis of interview data revealed three themes: Individual differences; the differences between international students and local students; the differences between students' expectations and their HE experiences.

4.1. Individual differences

Individual differences in previous life experiences, age, motivation for participating in HE and various university activities, as well as social and cultural backgrounds are associated with students' consumer identity.

4.1.1. Previous life experience

Students' previous educational and work experiences were associated with consumer identity adaptation. Participants who previously completed degrees in social science such as politics stated they preferred majors that "with a clear career progression path." (Arthur) They believed majors such as pharmacology and finance can provide them with "skills that can be utilised to allow [them] to have a comfortable lifestyle." (Lily) They explained that majors in which they are interested but lack specific skills have left them feeling "soul searching and directionless." (Arthur) And the only solution was to obtain a degree that guaranteed "a clear progression path." Given the shifts in course selection, previous educational experiences were linked to the rise of instrumental and utilitarian attitudes towards HE. On the contrary, participants who returned to university to pursue their interests after leaving work positions that required specialised skills chose social sciences, such as history, even if their families were not entirely supportive of their choices. Thus, they showed a mixed and ambivalent attitude toward the consumer role.

Meanwhile, previous work experiences play a significant role in the meanings that students attribute to their academic pursuits and career paths. Certain work experiences, such as social work, influenced some participants' value systems by reminding them of their responsibilities to vulnerable people, public institutions, and the knowledge community. And that sense of responsibility diminished their roles as consumers while strengthening their roles as learners.

Perceived differences between work experiences and research experiences also influenced students' perceived role and identity at university. They felt their work experiences were not valued as highly as research experiences possessed by university staff. Therefore, their previous work experience caused a "culture clash" (Lily) with their tutors and hampered their academic engagement. This gave rise to the perception that since they were students who returned to academia from workplaces, their roles within the university must be different. And, as a prerequisite, when combined with other influencing factors, they were more likely to adopt the consumer identity.

4.1.2. Age

Age was associated with students' consumer identity. 6 of the 8 (75%) participants who were older than average (mean age = 26.95) stated unequivocally that they were consumers of

university, whereas 8 of the 12 (67%) participants who were younger than average identified themselves as consumers. Three sources contributed to mature students' consumer identity: That they had a more difficult time adapting to the HE environment; additional family responsibilities; different dynamics between older students and their tutors.

Mature students reported more difficulty adjusting to the educational environment than younger students. They compared themselves to their younger classmates, suggesting that they spent more time and effort adapting to the workload and achieving the same results. Furthermore, they felt they were unable to fully participate in social life at university due to the age difference. Therefore, when they focused on the fact that they paid the same as younger students for HE but faced additional challenges, they were more inclined to evaluate the costs and gains as consumers and complain about the poor value for money.

Furthermore, having more family responsibilities than younger students not only distinguished mature students' HE experiences but also drove them to pursue economically advantageous outcomes, which the narratives of the following mature student very much illustrate. The student had expressed genuine enthusiasm for balancing her roles as a mother of a 15-month-old and a student returning to university after a 10-year stint working in government. She did, however, state that only the reputation of the best university could justify her decision to take a year off from her career, and she believed that this one-year experience would result in more financial benefits than what she had given up:

"So, I've been trying to negotiate a new job. Uh, as a result of being here, so my excuse was I'm taking a year to do research in this new area and there and I want to apply those skills in my new job. Will... see it's very hard to move around to the government right now... But long term, I think there's potential benefit of having been at Oxford if I wanted to move into the private sector or go into, say, consulting." (Lily)

In addition to caring responsibility, a sense of responsibility to relieve their parents' worries and economic pressures drove mature students to focus on the economic exchange value of their degrees. There was a perception that it was unrealistic for them solely focus on the educational value of HE while having their retired parents and caring responsibilities.

Furthermore, mature students suggested that because they had some professional experience themselves and were usually around the same age as their supervisors, it was easier to

establish an equal power dynamic with them. However, as previously stated, some mature students with years of work experience disassociated themselves from student identity, Given this factor, and also their personal financial contributions towards their HE, they felt more entitled to act as active consumers and viewed their supervisors as service providers. This was also related to a high level of concern about the utilitarian value of HE, as Lily illustrated when discussing her supervisor and the feedbacks she had received from her:

"...And she's like Oh well, you have a really interesting idea, but, and also like you should consider this this this. And BUT BUT BUT ...I was like I just need to finish this project... I've had to emphasise a few times like this is such great feedback and it's really interesting and I love like the scope of your thinking. But I just really need to finish and go back to work. (Lily)

4.1.3. Motivation

Students' motivations for participating in HE and various university activities, as well as their understandings of the purpose of HE, impacted their perceived role and identity at university. Students who emphasised the utilitarian value of their degrees in turn perceived themselves as consumers demanding an enhanced service and expecting improved socioeconomic outcomes from the university. Consumer identity was not directly related to how students positioned universities as service providers. They equated the value of universities with how effectively they delivered services, provided a positive experience, and promoted favourable future outcomes as they actively advertised themselves. However, when they began to question the worth of their HE experiences, wondering whether they were getting 'good value' out of it, especially after they forewent other options, in this case, offers from other universities or a job, they began to identify as consumers because they felt more empowered to express their demands and complaints.

One participant, who differentiated master's study based on how it would benefit his future career better than undergraduate study, described how he turned down the opportunity to go to another university to study a course he was interested in because it would not benefit his career prospects as much as a degree from Oxford would. And he went on to talk about how he preferred to identify as a consumer when it helped him achieve his goals:

“I mean, I don’t care if we are consumers or not. I mean STUDENT is a better, better identity compared to CONSUMER in my opinion because being a student comes to some better benefits and in some shops, we had 10% discount, like in some Chinese restaurant and then... But as a consumer, I consume the resource, the resources right, for example, when I need reference, I would think about the resources from university... I don’t care about what people call this actually, it doesn't matter. I just care about what I get from the service.” (Max)

When students viewed their HE experience through an instrumental and utilitarian lens, they were more inclined to adopt the consumer identity to determine whether their purposes for participating in HE had been met. In addition to viewing a degree from Oxford as a gateway to high-paying jobs, participants also described how they viewed it as “social capital” (Arthur), as a “platform” (Sophia) to enter other prestigious universities, and as a "buffer zone" (Emma) to help them step into society, even as a “guarantee for obtaining a visa” (Susan). In this sense, consumer identity is a tool to assist them in judging the effectiveness of their HE participation in light of their motivations, as student identity precludes this function. In other words, the consumer identity was formed during a type of empowerment in which the purpose of HE is more than just knowledge production, implying that students are more than just learners.

Narratives indicated three forces that contributed to this empowerment: Demand in the labour market; the University of Oxford's halo effect; that universities must stay competitive in the global HE market. All participants admitted that “the brand of Oxford” (Teddy) increased their competitiveness in the labour market. One student mentioned that his company has a job website specifically for Oxford and Cambridge graduates. Students were in demand regardless of their actual learning outcomes, as long as they had their diplomas. This was connected to the halo effect, in which the general population was divided into “people who went to Oxford and those who did not go to Oxford," (Lily) and students from Oxford were considered smart and "high-quality students capable of learning on their own." (Max) There was less importance placed on students' learning outcomes, while the university's role as a knowledge provider was diminished. Moreover, the need for universities to remain competitive enhanced the empowerment in which students as consumers emphasise the utilitarian value of their degrees and demand enhanced services and desired outcomes. And as a student illustrated the prestige of university was constantly reinforced and perpetuated:

"...because I wonder, even if like even if the quality of teaching was, like bad compared to other universities. Would it still maintain their reputation, because people don't want to talk down the value of their degree so it almost has like reached a pinnacle where it will self-perpetuate until like forever! I really feel like, even if it was going downhill. Well, that people don't want to shoot themselves in the foot by saying, oh. Yeah, I went to Oxford, but it was crap. So, it almost is reached a point where like itself are perpetuating." (Lily).

Therefore, it appeared impossible for the University of Oxford and its students to avoid or mitigate the effects of this integrated influence from those three forces.

While adopting the consumer identity assisted students in legitimising their instrumental and utilitarian motivations, students who focused on personal and societal developments for their HE participation appeared to actively distance themselves from this approach. Even though some students acknowledged their personal financial contributions to their degrees, they emphasised that many aspects of the HE experience were not comparable to typical consumer-based activities. And they actively associated their HE experiences with self-development, personal growth, and the contribution to public good. They were aware of their personal responsibility within the process, and they acknowledged that their experience should not be evaluated solely in terms of their cost value. These were all underpinned by students' awareness of the critical role universities play in knowledge production and assimilation, as well as their vigilance against the consequences of the marketisation of HE system.

One participant expressed the sense of belonging and the responsibility they have toward the university and the knowledge community:

"Students are supposed to take in the academics' knowledge, it is a form of spreading the academics' knowledge that you are a cog in that machine too". (Harry)

Bourdieu (1996) also used the metaphor of higher education being like a machine to illustrate the function of HE. While Bourdieu concentrated on how HE contributes to social classification as a sorting machine that selects students based on an implicit social classification and reproduces the same students based on an explicit academic classification, which in reality is very similar to the implicit social classification (Bourdieu, 1996), participants emphasised the

educational function of HE communities and institutions in relation to their own responsibilities.

Subject choices were related to students' motivations for participating in HE and their understandings of the purpose of HE, and was thus an indicator of consumer identity. As previously stated, some students believed that subjects such as pharmacology and finance, as opposed to social science, could lead to better jobs and higher potential earnings. One participant, Max, passed up the opportunity to study his favourite course in favour of a subject with better career prospects. Most participants who emphasised the utilitarian value of higher education were from STEM subjects such as chemistry, while students from other subjects such as language studies focused more on their personal growth. Particularly, another participant from the same major (MSc in Mathematical and Computational Finance) as Max also actively adopt to the consumer identity and talked their course:

"I think the main function of the degree here is to help me get a high-paid job." (William)

Moreover, William and Max's narrative revealed a consensus that the university is promoting a consumer-oriented approach in which higher potential income justifies the increased tuition fees. They listed two pieces of evidence: The tuition fees for their course were even higher than other postgraduate courses provided by their department; And students and the university thought it was only fair because graduates from their courses typically earn more than graduates from other courses, even at the entry-level.

4.1.4. Social and cultural backgrounds

Students' social and cultural backgrounds influenced their adaptation of the consumer identity by modifying their perceptions of HEIs' prestige and hierarchy, their motivations for participating in HE, and their sense of social responsibility.

Participants from Bangladesh and Japan described the prestige and hierarchy of a university as highly valued by their societies and families, revealing a perception that themselves and their families were willing to invest money in the opportunity to go to universities with worldwide reputations such as the University of Oxford, and if they were fortunate enough to get into "the best" (Noah) university, then their personal financial contributions were fairly justified. Therefore, rather than adopting the consumer identity to request enhanced services,

they emphasised their own effort and responsibility in this process in the sense of seizing the "once a lifetime" (Noah) opportunity. Specifically, Noah, the student from Bangladesh, illustrated the connection between a country's history and how people in that country perceive the prestige and hierarchy of HEIs:

"...my country used to be a British colony... There is a great influence of the UK in my country. This is why my father has a fascination with Oxford because he has learned a lot of things about Oxford University from his parents, OK? So, I think this is why he loved Oxford, he made a decision that, someday, my daughter or my son, must study at the University of Oxford, I think that was his decision when he was young." (Noah).

However, as discussed earlier, students were more likely to actively adopt consumer identities when their justification for cost responsibility is simply the social capital embedded in the university's prestige. Two participants from China mentioned Chinese cultural notion of mianzi ('face') was the decisive factor in their university and major selection. Gaining dignity and reputation (mianzi) among their social networks was regarded as the most important thing worth a significant financial investment. And a degree from the University of Oxford was equivalent to significant cultural capital, which was "lots of mianzi" that one student and their parents could obtain and thus raise their social standings in comparison to others.

The mere pursuit of cultural capital led to the consumer identity, which the views of the following Chinese student very much illustrate. The student had mentioned that the main reason she chose to study in the UK was the reputation of Oxford, which is more prestigious than any university that the children of her parents' friends went to, and she and her family viewed the reputation of the university as important as her safety when deciding which country to study in:

"...I want to use Oxford as a platform where I can go elsewhere from Oxford University... I wanted to get a distinction at the beginning, but now I don't think I can, because the grading system is kind of weird. And it is like professors are not really giving you high scores. Professors are really mean." (Sophia)

Professors and the grading system were blamed for the failed attempt to obtain more cultural capital.

One student from South Korea suggested that education and employment prospects were significantly related to marriage bargaining potential in their society. Graduation from an elite university would help an individual to find a partner who also possesses adequate social and cultural capitals. However, the influence of having a degree from the University of Oxford can be hugely affected by age in the marriage market, and the student's parents strongly insisted on her accepting an arranged married before she went on doing this degree, but she refused to listen to her parents, so she didn't accept her parents' financial support, and she spent all of her working-life savings to pay the tuition fee. As a result, even though she paid a large amount of money for her degree, the one-year study experience for her was not only to "lead her to a D.Phil. and further research career" but also a way to escape from her "parents' interferences"(Susan), so she was more focused on personal growth rather than achieving a satisfactory return value from the university.

Furthermore, students' sense of social responsibility encouraged them to identify as learners, which reduced the adaptation of the consumer identity.

Participants from Bangladesh and Sudan described how their social and cultural environments taught them to value social bonding, which inspired them to establish a mutually respected relationship with their supervisors in which they acknowledged their responsibility to put effort into their projects and always appreciated the advice their supervisors gave them. More importantly, they believed they had the responsibility to learn as much as possible and improve as quickly as possible in their academic fields. Therefore, they can utilise the knowledge and skills they gained from their HE experience to help vulnerable people, and in the case of the Bangladeshi student, to return to his home country and contribute to the public welfare.

4.2. The differences: International students vs. local students

Perceived differences in HE experiences between international and local students, as well as the adaptation of international students at the expense of additional emotional and financial costs, were crucial factors that drove them to adopt the consumer identity.

Participants frequently compared the HE experiences of international students and local students, revealing that, when compared to tuition responsibility, the fact that "much higher tuition" (Teddy) was a more significant driving force behind students' adaptation of the

consumer identity. While all participants emphasised that international students are subject to much higher tuition fees, many narratives indicated the causal relationship between fee differences and the consumer identity. And the situation that international students had a more difficult time obtaining funding than domestic students further reinforced the causation:

"We (international students) pay more...Sometimes I feel like masters' students and even international students we help the university because the tuition is so expensive and there's no funding. It's not to say that we don't get something out of it. I think we do. And so, it is a trade-off, but it costs a lot of money...So, in that sense, we are, we are (consumers), right!" (Helen)

Participants also mentioned that as international students, they had to pay additional costs: language courses and tests; visa application fees; airplane tickets; and the accommodation for the Covid-19 pandemic quarantine. They discussed how those additional fees were targeted specifically at international students, giving the impression that the university and the UK government had positioned them as consumers. Furthermore, despite having more fee responsibilities, they felt they were not receiving the same experience as local students, prompting them to adopt a consumer identity to evaluate university services and justify their complaints. Students associated the visa rules that they had to report to the local police station when they arrived with the feeling of hostility against international students.

The language barrier and the feeling of being isolated were frequently mentioned when students complained the hard time they had when adapted to the new environment. A student, who took the pre-sessional language course as required by his programme, expressed his consumer identity: "I just paid for passing," and demonstrated the force behind that:

"I have to pay that, which was 3400 pounds, I don't think the courses were that helpful... just was not worth the price. But I have to pass that course to meet the programme requirements...I paid to meet the language requirements." (William)

The additional fee responsibility resulted in the consumer identity, and there was a perception held by some international students that given they paid more, it was only reasonable for them to receive more attention from the university. And the discrepancies between this

expectation and the feeling of being isolated encouraged them to identify themselves as consumers and complain about poor value for money.

4.3. The differences: Students' expectations vs. students' HE experiences

The differences between students' expectations and their HE experiences were linked to their (dis)satisfaction, thus, impacting students' perceptions of their roles and identities. Students frequently mentioned their expectations when asked to evaluate their HE experiences. Students' expectations for the university, the people they expected to interact with at Oxford, the learning style, the teaching quality, and the living environment were associated with their satisfaction, which influenced their adaptation to the consumer identity.

The university of Oxford was expected to be diverse and exclusive, attracting many intelligent scholars and students from all over the world. While some students found that their expectations were fulfilled, others reported a misalignment between how the university advertises them and what they actually are. The phrase: "Universities are all branding themselves as... whereas the reality..." (Oliver), was extensively used. Students' dissatisfaction with the disparities led them to portray themselves as victims of the marketing techniques used by HEIs to attract international students. Thus, they were more inclined to evaluate the university and their HE experiences as a consumer.

Participants described how they expected their supervisor to be "supportive" (Emma) and "of high quality" (Max), and whether a tutor possessed those qualities was primarily determined by students' subjective judgments, which were closely related to their undergraduate experience and preferred learning style. While some students complained about their supervisors asking them to find certain study materials on their own, one student was also dissatisfied with her supervisor's tendency to provide her with detailed and sophisticated feedback, which was more than she needed to get passed. Students who expressed satisfaction with their supervisors and the learning environment were more inclined to emphasise their role as learners and were more conscious of the consequences of a marketised HE.

Personal financial contributions were linked to student expectations of the living environment. Participants complained that their colleges charged the same amount for

accommodation but provided postgraduate students with buildings in poorer locations and with older facilities. This gave rise to the impression that postgraduate students were treated as a source of "revenue" and "funding for undergraduate students. And participants reported that being treated as consumers made them feel more comfortable with the consumer identity.

Overall, students' satisfaction was underpinned by their expectations which vary from person to person depending on their previous experiences and impacted by a strong sense that their personal financial contribution needed to be matched by the services and outcomes provided by the university.

4.4. Summary of findings

The three themes of the findings together suggest seven factors that drive UK-based international students in the one university to adopt the consumer identity:

1. Students' previous life experiences;
2. Age;
3. Motivation for participating in HE and various university activities;
4. Social and cultural backgrounds;
5. Fee differences between international students and local students;
6. Adaptation of international students;
7. Students' expectations that underpin their (dis)satisfaction.

The interactions between these seven factors are important to be known for revealing the correlation and causation between the discourses and practise in the marketisation of HE and student consumerism, and, more importantly, to explain the different levels of adaptation or conformity to the consumer identity. These interactions are discussed in the next section.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The two questions this study attempted to answer were:

> **RQ1.** What are the factors that drive UK-based international students in one university to adopt the consumer identity?
>
> **RQ2.** How do those factors work? Separately or in combination? How did they lead to the different levels of adaptation or conformity?

One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 international students that enrolled in a one-year master course at the University of Oxford. In the sample of 70% students who identified themselves as consumers of HE and 30% of them who held a mixed and conflicting attitude, the beliefs and behaviours reflected in their narratives are consistent with the prior literature on student consumerism (e.g., Finney & Finney, 2010; Tomlinson, 2014). More importantly, the resulting thematic analysis identified individual differences (students' previous life experiences; age; motivation for participating in HE and various university activities; social and cultural backgrounds), group differences (fee differences between international students and local students; adaptation of international students), and perceived differences (students' expectations that underpin their (dis)satisfaction) are associated with consumer identity adaptation.

5.1. The interactions between various driving factors

According to Dewey's (1963) principle of the experiential continuum, the form and characteristics of previous experience influences the formation of attitudes of desire and purpose as well as individuals' ways of meeting and responding to all of life's conditions. The findings from this study vividly illustrate the link between students' previous life experiences and the rise of instrumental and utilitarian attitudes towards HE, as well as the shifted value system regarding their responsibilities. In light of the student-teacher relationship, students with years of work experience tend to disassociate themselves from the traditional student role. Meanwhile, the instrumental attitudes towards HE is related to students' limited educational engagement (Finney & Finney, 2010) and their obsession with graded performance (Bunce et al., 2017; Tomlinson, 2014). Therefore, it is understandable that

certain work and educational experiences encourage students to adopt the consumer identity, demanding enhanced services and better labour market returns.

Students' sense of social responsibility, which is based not only on their sociocultural backgrounds but also on their prior life experiences, is linked to their learner identity (Ramsden, 2003), which emphasises the intrinsic value and benefits of learning, as well as personal responsibility within the process. Certain life experiences and sociocultural backgrounds can thus enhance students' perceived role as university students, reducing the adaptation of consumer identity and leading to ambivalent attitudes toward student consumerism. This resonates with Bunce's (2017) finding that learner identity is negatively associated with consumer orientation.

In line with Dewey's theory (1963) that experience acts as a moving force that alters the circumstances under which further experiences are gained, students' prior educational experiences also impact their expectations and evaluations of their current HE experiences. Dissatisfaction stemmed from perceived disparities between students' expectations of their higher education experiences, which are primarily based on their undergraduate lives and information obtained from social media and social connections, and the actual experience. Moreover, dissatisfied students tend to adopt the consumer identity to empower and justify their complaints and demands. Students who believe their role to be that of a customer are more likely to complain about their course and view complaining as a means of improving it (Finney & Finney, 2010).

Previous research has shown that age is a significant predictor of student-as-consumer perception, with older students more likely than younger students to regard themselves as university customers (Finney & Finney, 2010). Consistent with this finding, this study provides insights into the correlation between age and consumerism orientation by identifying three specifical age-related factors in driving mature students to adapt to consumer identity: That they had a more difficult time adapting to the HE environment; additional family responsibilities; different dynamics between older students and their tutors. It is straightforward that perceptions of "more difficult time", "additional responsibilities", and "different dynamics" are all outcomes of social comparison. Throughout their college experiences, older students actively compare their advantages and disadvantages with younger students. In line with people's tendency to compare themselves to those in their peer

group or with whom they share characteristics (Festinger, 1954; Kesici & Erdoğan, 2010), the same fee responsibility underpins social comparison and contributes to dissatisfaction with their disadvantages.

As consumer behaviour theory (Cole, 2007) suggests, students expect satisfactory service and desirable outcomes in exchange for their economic contribution. Fee responsibility has long been associated with consumer orientation (e.g., Bunce et al., 2016). Tuition fee increases are positively correlated with enhanced consumer attitudes (Tomlinson, 2017). However, the findings of this study suggest that it is not fee responsibility per se, but the fee difference between international and local students that drives international students' adaptation of consumer identity. The similar inter-group comparison (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel et al., 1979) that older students use to compare themselves to younger students enables this identity validation. International students are dissatisfied with the fact that they must pay higher tuition fees than local students and bear additional emotional and financial burdens during the acculturation process. Meanwhile, they are dissatisfied with the gap between their actual HE experiences and their expectations.

Consumer values appear to be a by-product of students' increasingly transactional relationships with their institutions, which have also raised expectations about higher value-added products and services provided by their HE experiences (Tomlison, 2017). Students' adaptation of consumer identity justifies their expectations and subjective judgments about the service-based activities and instrumental outcomes advertised and promised by the university. Thus, the fee differences between students who began their studies before and after UK tuition fees tripled, may explain students' inconsistent attitudes toward student consumerism found in Tomlinson's (2017) research.

5.2. Who/what is responsible for student consumerism?

After discussing how these individual and group differences drive the adaptation of the consumer identity, it is important to clarify that students should not be blamed for student consumerism. The perception that the university and the UK government have positioned students as consumers is a significant factor driving them to adopt the consumer identity. Under the influence of neoliberalism (Harvey, 2007), student consumerism is proposed by its proponents as deregulating centralised control and enhancing individuals’ freedom of choice

(van Zanten & Kosunen, 2013). Students are positioned as consumers driven only by an assumed need to maximise their self-efficacy (Molesworth et al., 2011).

Since the Thatcher government's accession, international students have primarily been viewed as a source of revenue in England (Bolsmann & Miller,2008). Fee responsibility enhances the association between a degree and labour market preparation (Brooks et al., 2020). Tuition fee increases further reinforce students' overall expectations that institutions were 'providing' a standard and quality that matched their financial contribution. The 'value for money' concern encourages students to demand greater transparency from institutions and to challenge practises and modes of delivery that are not in line with increased personal contributions (Tomlinson, 2017).

Students internalise their consumer rights and entitlements. Therefore, they demand enhanced services and more economically advantageous outcomes, as well as express their dissatisfaction and complaints when their HE experiences fail to meet their demands and expectations. In addition to selecting subjects with the highest market values over those they found most interesting, the obsession with graded performance is also a significant indicator of how the internalisation of their consumer roles changes students' attitudes and behaviours. Performativity functions as a moral system to motivate people to work more efficiently and competitively as part of the sense of personal worth and the worth of others (Exley & Ball, 2014). Students as consumers conform that courses and individual supervisors must best facilitate desired outcomes and meet the increased number of performance indicators (Tomlinson, 2017). As the findings demonstrate, when a student fails to receive a distinction, they automatically question the authority of their supervisor and the grading system. The manifestations of governmentality that promote neoliberal discourses discipline and assessment indicators reach the deepest parts of our being and create a new moral environment (Ball, 2003; Exley & Ball, 2014; Shamir, 2008).

Molesworth et al. (2011) discuss who or what is responsible for the marketization of HE by identifying who or what benefits from it. In this vein, to illustrate why the university and the government should not be blamed for student consumerism, it is necessary to consider how they have not benefited from it. The operation of consumerism in HE has forced HEIs to operate to remain competitive and attract student customers. Universities' performance is measured multidimensionally by various performance indicators (Naidoo & Williams, 2015).

To maintain their competitiveness, universities divert their attention and investments away from intellectual innovation and toward a variety of commercial activities (Costa, 2021; Olssen & Peters, 2005). Student satisfaction with the 'service offering' becomes critical, an organisational reality driving growing scholarly interest in student dissatisfaction and complaints (Alves & Raposo, 2006; Nixon et al., 2018). Universities actively employ their own student surveys and promote alternative arrangements that have been made as a result of students' opinions (Williams & Cappuccini-Ansfield, 2007). In line with the concept of panoptic performativity (Perryman, 2006), as the global economy grows and national and international competitions increase, institutions and governments internalise external market pressures and demands, becoming self-disciplined, feeling obligated to respond and make changes to survive or advance, depending on the reactive measures deployed by various performance indicators.

The power of this pantropic performativity can be attributed to a variety of affects created by the two interconnected forces underpinning the marketisation of HE: the neoliberal knowledge economy and the globalisation of HE. Shajahan et al. (2020) suggest that performance indicators, like GURs, function as the representational infrastructures construct and mobilise emoscape, such as precarity, which forces HE stakeholders to individually feel fear, uncertainty, or anxiety over one's futurity. As the findings demonstrate, regardless of the course content, some students feel lost and insecure because their subjects have limited career opportunities. This sense of precarity produce HE actors who internalize disciplines and regulate themselves in accordance with neoliberal market principles. Students conform to the ideology that knowledge as capital has commercial value and the purpose of HE is to maximise their economic potentials, therefore, they tend to choose prestigious university and course that provides more career opportunities. Knowledge is quantified and evaluated in terms of its value in labour markets (Bartram, 2017). Considering the finding that some students believe they consume knowledge in the university. Their dissatisfaction may stem not only from differences between their actual HE experiences and those advertised in the international student market but also from the realisation that knowledge, unlike other products, requires effort to obtain.

Students and HEIs seek to alleviate their sense of precarity by increasing their economic and social capital while improving their competitiveness in the increasing marketised HE

environment. However, neoliberal competition further exacerbates the sense of precarity. One of Confucius' (2016) significant metaphysics propositions, "不患寡而患不均，不患贫而患不安。Not fearing deficiency but enequalization, Not fearing poverty but unrest.", emphasises the virtue of "enequalization", and the importance of being cautious about the "unrest" situation. Rather than referring to an equalised distribution in the material world, "enequalization" is regarded as the prior principle in the mortal universe, implying a fair and impartial environment (Zhang, 2006).

While in England, student loan borrowers are motivated by languages such as "choice" and "ambition" promoted by prevailing public discourses champion, HEIs play a significant role in excluding and reproducing social class inequality through connecting cultural capital to stratified outcomes (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Lareau & Weininger, 2003). The neoliberal celebration of identity promotes the internalisation of neoliberal market principles while undermines our ability to recognise structural oppression, shifting the burden of risk from social crisis phenomena to individual empowerment. As a result, individual actors in HE are blamed for their disadvantages and low competitiveness in the market competition. The progressive-neoliberal agenda intends to diversify rather than abolish social hierarchy. The meritocratic ideal, 'get people to think they can all the way to the top' (Roberts et al., 2021), fosters the illusion of manageable success by promoting neoliberal legitimation (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Mijs, 2015).

Therefore, in the face of intense marketized competition, individual actors constantly feel a sense of precarity, urging them to internalise neoliberal market principles to achieve certain performance indicators. Fear of loss or the desire to "make it all the way to the top" in never-ending competitions drives them to engage in certain behaviours or actions. In this case, students actively adapt to the consumer identity by making demands and pursuing instrumental outcomes, while universities increasingly engage in commercial activities that professionalise their roles as service providers. And consistent with Butler's (1994) ethos on gender performativity, the repetitive exercise of market-driven behaviour and managemental strategy normalizes neoliberal market principles and competition, further reinforcing and perpetuating the marketization of HE and student consumerism.

Literature on the SAC approach suggests there is a power shift from the provider of HE experiences to the consumer, because universities are obligated to student evaluations and make adjustments accordingly (Tomlinson, 2014; Williams & Cappuccini-Ansfield, 2007). However, the causal and reinforcement loops between students' empowerment, consumer identity, and behavioural change demonstrate that they have no control over the external forces modifying HE. Neither do HEIs. Considering capitalism and neoliberalism based on zero-sum and endless market competitions among global HEIs may provide some insights into the power dynamics in student consumerism.

Neoliberalism, in conspiracy with patriarchy and capitalism, mobilises and reinforces a widespread precarity while marketing a false sense of security. Based on the narratives of the Korean participants about how the age and educational backgrounds of females are evaluated in her society, it is fair to state that capitalism is structured indifferent to gender. While age only impairs a female's cultural capital, making her educational achievement less appealing in the marriage market, this female must also face the pressure and precarity of defying her parents' decision and spending all her savings on pursuing her HE, which her brother does not have to face. This capitalist patriarchy nexus is also vividly illustrated in Bieler and Morton's (2021) discussion of female social property relations within various labour and commercial markets. In addition to marriage, there are judgments about one's cultural capital and market competitiveness in a broader structure of social relationships. In Chinese culture, mianzi (literally meaning ‘face’) is a “code of honour” (Gries, 1999) that reparents cultural capital based on class and social status. Higher educational achievements, as a state of cultural capital, have become increasingly significant indicators for gaining mianzi in Chinese society (Guan & Ploner, 2020). As the findings indicate, an individual's and their parents’ mianzi-oriented expectations impact their educational aspirations and experiences. And the various affects mobilised by comparing one's own cultural capital with other people from the family and social networks underpin those expectations, as parents feel proud or embarrassed when sharing stories about their children’s educational successes or failures with others (Guan & Ploner, 2020). -- Neoliberalism, in conspiracy with capitalism and patriarchy, promotes and reinforces anxiety while marketing a false sense of security.

5.3. Implications

The results from this study reveal several significant factors that drive student to adopt consumer identity. And the interactions between students' individual differences, group differences, and perceived differences highlight the influence of the neoliberal knowledge economy and the globalisation of HE, which underpins the marketisation of HE. All actors in HE should be aware of the cognitive and behavioural changes caused by the neoliberal, patriarchal, and capitalist conspiracy. Meanwhile, given the impact of perceived roles on students' identity adaptation, policymakers and HEIs must consider the consequences of providing messages to students about their consumer role in and response to a system offering to bestow significant future advantages. The marketing strategies and even false promises that HEIs employed under commercial pressures drive students to adopt the consumer identity when they are dissatisfied with their actual higher education experiences. Which will further enhance the marketisation of HE. Therefore, in striving to achieve various performance indicators, HEIs should be aware of the profound consequences. The increased fee responsibility and fee differences between international students and local students raise "value for money" concerns. Therefore, even if free HE is absolutely impossible in the UK, providing a reasonable explanation for these charges and implementing practical policies to monitor their further fluctuation is the least the government can do rather than propagating the instrumental outcomes of higher education to justify their capitalist interests.

5.4. Limitation and further research

This research has limitations, that is this research was conducted in a small setting, so for future research, it would be advantageous to have a larger setting and more participants especially from other HEIs. There is no clear association between students' religious beliefs and nationalities and consumer identity adaptation. The broad influence of capitalism and neoliberalism underpinning the marketisation of global higher education on global citizens' ideology could be one reason. But this could also be due to the small setting. Therefore, larger experimental groups should be used in future studies to better analyse and compare the impact of each specific personal characteristic. Further research on each of these seven influencing factors should also be conducted to identify other influencing mechanisms. This would also be beneficial in getting a broader perspective of the constant interaction between the external environment and an individual’s identity.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Why did you choose the UK as your destination for study abroad? Why the University of Oxford? Why did you go about choosing the specific research area/ programme/ module? [And could you tell me more about that?] (Motivation)
2. Do you think the World University Rankings/ GURs influence your choice of university/ discipline? [Have you compared Oxford to other universities?] (Decision making)
3. Did you seek advice from others when deciding on a university or degree? And what role did your parents/families play in your decision? (Decision making)
4. What do you hope to achieve? Did you set any short-term or long-term goals for yourself before coming to Oxford? (Purpose)
5. Does the study life in Oxford meet your expectations? Regarding city safety, its openness to international students, the quality of your department's teaching and research, and your college life? (Expectation & Evaluation)
6. Have your expectations and goals changed? [if so, or not, why?] (Expectation & Reality)
7. What do you think is the most challenging part of your study life, and why? (Experience)
8. Have you had any experiences that really surprised you? (Experience)
9. As an international student, how do you think your experience in Oxford is different from the experiences of other students (disadvantage/ advantage)? (Experience & Comparison)
10. Have you ever experienced any racism or discrimination? What are your thoughts on that? [If you have experienced this, how has it affected/changed you?] (Experience)
11. Do you think the university has provided sufficient support for international students in relation to economic/ academic/ mental health support? (Optional)
12. If you studied in your own country, in what ways, and to what extent, would your life/HE experience have been different? (Experience)
13. Has the Covid-19 pandemic influenced your HE experiences? [How and how much?] (Experience)
14. And how would you evaluate the University's response to the Covid-19 pandemic? (Experience & Evaluation)
15. What are your plans after graduation/obtaining this degree? (Motivation & Expectation)
16. Do you think this degree will help you in your future career? (Career)

17. Has your plan for the future changed? Why and in what ways? Has your plan been influenced by your journey/experience here? (Experience & Expectation)
18. What are the economic benefits of obtaining your degree? (Evaluation)
19. Have you ever felt disadvantaged in terms of academics, finances, age, gender, or any other aspect? (Experience)
20. Have you ever taken out a student loan? [Do you have any thoughts on the student loan system?] (Experience)
21. How many lectures/seminars do you usually attend per week? (Behaviour)
22. How many formative and summative assignments you have completed so far? [Do you think they are necessary or beneficial to study?] (Experience)
23. Have you participated in any societies, clubs or volunteer activities?
24. How is your relationship with your supervisor/tutor? What are your thoughts on your daily interactions with your supervisors/tutors? (Experience & evaluation)
25. Do you think that student surveys are helpful in improving your HE experiences? (Experience & evaluation)
26. What do you believe/think your role is within the university? And what are the roles that you play in your life? [How do you think the various roles you're playing interact with one another?] (Identity)
27. Do you think students are consumers of the university? How? Why? Can you tell me about a specific time when you felt like that? What happened? (Experience & evaluation)
28. What do you think is the meaning of 'value for money'? Do you think that your course provides good value for the money you pay? (Experience & evaluation)
29. How important is consumer identity to you? (Identity)
30. Your opinion on the degree classification? Do you have a goal for your final degree classification? Which final degree classification you hope to graduate with? (Expectation & Evaluation)
31. Do you think a 1st or 2:1 degree will help you in your future career? (Identity & Evaluation)
32. Currently, do you and your family have any concerns about your career prospects or your employability, regarding your experience at Oxford? (Evaluation & Career)
33. Is there anything else you want to say about your experiences as an international student? (Experience)

Appendix B: Participant information sheet

What are the contributing factors of student consumerism?

CUREC Approval Reference: [CIA-22-081]

You are being invited to take part in a study that I am conducting as part of my MSc dissertation project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please get in contact if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

Why is this research being conducted?

Through interviews with international students, this research aims to identify the key contributing causes, contexts, and conditions that develop consumer attitudes in students, and explore and explain people's complicated and ambivalent attitudes towards consumerism in higher education.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You are invited because this study focuses on international students that have enrolled in a master course at the University of Oxford.

Do I have to take part?

Your participation is voluntary, and you do not have to agree to take part. If you do agree to take part, you can withdraw yourself from the study, without giving a reason.

If you wish to withdraw your data before the end of the interview, you can simply ask the researcher to do so, and your personal information and conversation records will not be saved. You can also withdraw your data during the data transcription and analysis. Permission will be obtained before using direct quotes from interviews. After the end of the project, you will not be able to withdraw your data as the research would become invalid.

What will happen to me if I take part in the research?

If you agree to take part in the study, you will be interviewed one-to-one in a study room at St Anne's college. The interview questions will cover several thematic topics related to your university experience, and you can omit any questions you do not wish to answer. You can also ask to pause or stop the interview at any time. The length of conversation varies from person to person. The interview could last between 30 minutes and 90 minutes, though a very long interview is unlikely. With your consent, there will be audio recording to capture your thoughts more accurately during the interview. Following the first interview, you may be re-recruited for an additional interview, if you want to do this.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?

It is possible that negative memories could be triggered during the interviews. You can omit any questions you do not wish to answer, and you have the right to pause or stop interview at any time. No real names are recorded. Pseudonymised names will be used, in data records any publications. No identifiable data will be retained. The anonymised data will be deleted after three years.

Are there any benefits in taking part?

The benefit of participating is the opportunity to reflect on your college experience. As a participant in this dissertation study, you are contributing to understand how practitioners and policymakers can better improve the student experience and learning outcomes.

What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research objectives?

The interview audio will be recorded and stored on a password-protected mobile device. Once the transcription is generated, the recording will be deleted. Transcripts of audio recordings will be used for thematic analysis. The transcriptions, interview notes, and other relevant documents, such as consent forms will be stored on a password-protected laptop. No identifiable data will be retained. Anonymised data will be deleted after three years.

Will the research be published? Could I be identified from any publications or other research outputs?

The findings of the research will be written in my dissertation. It will not be published and will not be used for other purposes. I would like your permission to use direct quotations, but without identifying you, in my dissertation writing.

Data Protection

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the study. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available at https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights.

Who has reviewed this study?

This study has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. (Ethics reference: CIA-22-081).

Who do I contact if I have a concern about the research or I wish to complain?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please contact Qinfang Luo, qinfang.luo@st-annes.ox.ac.uk or Professor Simon Marginson simon.marginson@education.ox.ac.uk, and we will do our best to answer your query. I will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be

dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible:

Social Sciences & Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee; Email: ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk; Address: Research Services, University of Oxford, Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2JD **OR** Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) Email: student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk

Further Information and Contact Details

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

Qinfang Luo

Department of Education

University email: qinfang.luo@st-annes.ox.ac.uk

Appendix C: Consent form

What are the contributing factors of student consumerism?

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) approval reference: **CIA-22-081**

Purpose of Study: This research aims to identify the key contributing causes, contexts, and conditions that drive students to adopt consumer attitudes, and explain the formation of complicated and ambivalent attitudes towards the consumerism of Higher education.

	Please initial each box if you agree with the statement
I confirm that I have read and understand the information for the above research. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any point, without giving any reason, and without any adverse consequences or penalty, and that I may withdraw all data collected.	
I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	
I understand that I will not be identifiable from any publications or other research outputs.	
I consent to being audio recorded.	
I understand how audio recordings will be used in research outputs.	
Use of quotations: Please indicate your preference (circle/tick your answer): a) I do not wish to be quoted. **or** b) I agree to the use of quotations in research outputs if I am not identifiable.	
I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.	
I agree to take part.	

_____	dd / mm / yyyy	_____
Name of participant	Date	Signature
_____	dd / mm / yyyy	_____
Name of person taking consent	Date[1]	Signature

[1] To be signed and dated in the presence of the participant. Once this has been signed by both parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form. The original signed and dated consent form should be kept with the project's main documents, which must be kept in a secure location.

Appendix D: CUREC 1a approval confirmation

From: Pinar Kolancali

Date: 11 February 2022 20:51

Subject: Ethics Approval CIA-22-081

Dear Simon and Qinfang,

'A qualitative investigation into the contributing factors of student consumerism. With a specific focus on international students in the University of Oxford.'

The application for the above study has been considered on behalf of the Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the procedures laid down by the University for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to inform you that, based on the information provided to DREC, the proposed research has been judged as meeting appropriate ethical standards, and accordingly, approval has been granted. I would like to inform you that you will be required to update us on any amendments to your study should you need to change your research methods and may need to complete a data protection impact assessment if you use online platforms to conduct and record interviews. There is an application for this, and it is kept separate from the ethics committee. Please see the link below for more information.

https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/policy/data/checklist

Please continue to follow all current guidance issued by CUREC during the pandemic, notably COVID-19: CUREC guidance on research involving human participants, https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/coronavirus

If needed, please follow the guidance on online data collection and research methods issued by the University,

(1) https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/covid-19/data#collapse2299911

(2) https://infosec.web.ox.ac.uk/article/guidelines-for-using-zoom

If relevant, please also check the CUREC website for their best practice research guides, https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/bpg

Yours sincerely,

Pinar

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Postdoctoral Researcher
Departmental Research Ethics Committee Member
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