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Unpacking the value sought by Chinese international students in UK higher education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to offer multi-dimensional insight into notions of value sought by Chinese international students (CIS), the UK higher education sectors largest overseas student body. Value in the context of student recruitment is often discussed one dimensionally, often as an input-output calculation. Following calls for higher education institutions to better understand the needs and expectations of international students and to adopt strategic management and marketing theory we examine the push and pull factors for Chinese international students drawing on concepts from within the Service-Dominant Logic paradigm such as 'value-in-context' and 'value-in-social-context' to offer a more nuanced view of value sought. We conduct a qualitative study of 20 Chinese international students, a mix of undergraduate and postgraduate and from a range of subject areas. Our findings highlight a number of different value types sought by Chinese international students each of which can be linked to the development of identity and the key consumer value types of 'esteem' and 'status'. With a greater understanding of the value sought by Chinese international students universities will be better able to develop their recruitment strategies and their provision and support for Chinese international students in order to more effectively co-create that value.

Introduction

This article proposes a novel taxonomy of value co-creation between the UK economy and Chinese international students (CIS). The contribution made provides multi-dimensional insight into notions of value sought by CIS and extends beyond ideas of psychological contracts and expectations to consider 'value-in-context' for CIS. International students have been defined as those 'who have crossed a national or territorial border for the purpose of education and are now enrolled outside their country of origin' (UNESCO 2022). In 2021/2022 the UK economy benefitted to the sum of £41.9 billion from just one year's intake of international students through a combination of tuition fees and other expenditure (Cannings, Halterbeck, and Conlon 2023). The bulk of this was generated from non-EU students – £37.6 billion, as opposed to £4.3 billion for EU students (Cannings, Halterbeck, and Conlon 2023). In 2021/2022 the number of international students in the UK was 679,970 with the biggest cohort being those students originating from China, numbering 151,690

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(Universities UK 2023). In 2020 the UK overtook the US to become the preferred study destination for CIS with 41% studying or planning to study in the UK in 2022 (Sohu 2022). International students are not just a source of income for higher education (HE) institutions (Altbach and Knight 2007; Choudaha 2017), they also provide a number of other benefits. For example, they help domestic students develop inter-cultural experience, better enabling them to operate in different cultural settings and compete successfully in international labour markets (Marshall, Fry, and Ketteridge 2002). They inspire challenge to domestic pedagogy (see Elliott and Reynolds 2014) and approaches to diversity and inclusion (see De Leersnyder, Gündemir, and Ağırdağ 2022) which can lead to improvements in teaching and learning. They are also a significant factor in enabling universities to improve their 'international outlook' criteria, through higher ratios of international staff and students, an important factor in advancing in world university rankings (Jin and Cortazzi 2017).

The importance of studying international students and their experience of higher education is well established (Ammigan, Veerasamy, and Cruz 2023; Arkoudis and Tran 2007; Ganotice Jr et al. 2022; Hemsley-Brown 2012; Naylor, Bird, and Butler 2021) and the distinctive importance of Chinese students in the context of European and American higher education has been recognised in academic research (Arkoudis and Tran 2007; Choudaha 2017; Heng 2018). However, there still remain significant opportunities to improve the theoretical understanding of the 'psychological underpinnings of international students' (Bordia, Bordia, and Restubog 2015, 212) and their expectations of overseas study, an understanding of which is an important foundation upon which a positive educational experience can be built (Bordia et al. 2019). Attempts have been made to examine these underpinnings through the lens of psychological contracts and expectations of international students (Bordia et al. 2019; Bordia, Bordia, and Restubog 2015; Dash and Gupta 2023; Knapp and Masterson 2018; Koskina 2013; Kramer 2022). We believe these underpinnings can be further illuminated by consideration through the lens of value and value co-creation.

Value in the context of student recruitment is too often discussed one dimensionally, often as an input-output calculation made between educational supplier and consumer. The development of market mechanisms within higher education and the increasingly common view of students-as consumers (Jabbar et al. 2018; Naidoo, Shankar, and Veer 2011; Natale and Doran 2012; Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn 2018; Woodall, Hiller, and Resnick 2014) has led to suggestions that HE institutions need to adopt a more strategic and agentially focused view of consumer needs and wants (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006; Ng and Forbes 2009; Tan, Muskat, and Zehrer 2016). To date, only a minority of studies in higher education have adopted a strategic agency view of students as they adapt to their host country environment (Arkoudis and Tran 2007), but these studies are largely bounded within the context of an education setting rather than their broader agency in the national host-country environment. There have been a number of calls for concepts such as value co-creation to be applied to higher education (Naidoo, Shankar, and Veer 2011; Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn 2018; Thomas and Ambrosini 2021). However, Woodall, Hiller, and Resnick (2014, 49) note that in the context of HE:

> What value is, and what it is not, is hard to decipher, and the literature, generally, demonstrates how slippery this is perceived to be, irrespective of context.

Value is not always easily differentiated from other terms such as 'quality' (Zeithaml 1988) and 'satisfaction' (Woodruff 1997) which has led to these terms being easily conflated within the value domain (Woodall, Hiller, and Resnick 2014). There have been numerous studies of the HE sector in relation to quality (Barnes 2007; Mandernach 2015; Prakash 2018; Simpson and Tan 2008; Tan, Muskat, and Zehrer 2016) and to satisfaction (Alves and Raposo 2007; Arambewela and Hall 2009; Arambewela, Hall, and Zuhair 2006; Bianchi 2013; Douglas et al. 2008; Santini et al. 2017), and there are also studies that relate to value and HE (Dollinger, Lodge, and Coates 2018; Gallarza, Seri, and Cuadrado 2017; Ledden, Kalafatis, and Mathioudakis 2011; Ledden, Kalafatis, and Samouel 2007; Ng and Forbes 2009; Thomas and Ambrosini 2021; Woodall, Hiller, and Resnick 2014) and value co-creation between stakeholders and HE (Cavallone et al. 2021; Dollinger,

Lodge, and Coates 2018; Fagerstrøm and Ghinea 2013). What we find lacking though is a study that attempts to look at the dimensions of value sought in the context of international students' motivation towards overseas study, and which can be used to explain their motives, expectations, and their psychological underpinnings. Put another way, we identify a lack of understanding of the specific types of value that Chinese international students (CIS) seek to co-create not just in partnership with higher education institutions, but with the UK context more broadly. In particular, we fail to identify a study that clearly differentiates reasons for overseas study (push factors) and reasons for choice of a particular national overseas higher education sector (pull factors) in the context of value.

The aim of this paper is therefore twofold. First, to unpack the notion of 'value' beyond a naïve consumer-HE provider transaction and as purely expectations that precede consumption. It is our contention that CIS' value-seeking behaviour and motives for study destinations extend beyond the education product itself and remain contextually driven containing both push and pull factors. Our second aim therefore is to break with the deterministic notion of value provider and consumer and instead consider the extent to which value is an emergent and agentially created property arising from the overall overseas study experience.

Conceptual background

Psychological contracts

Psychological contracts (Argyris 1960; Rousseau 1989) have been defined as 'the subjective sense of expectations and obligations in a relationship' (Bordia et al. 2019, 1488) and exist when 'individuals infer promises that give rise to beliefs in the existence of reciprocal obligations' (Rousseau and Tijoriwala 1998, 680). They include both overtly made and implicitly derived promises (Bordia et al. 2019). Studies have considered how psychological contracts might be applied to the higher education setting (Koskina 2013) and to international students in particular (Bordia et al. 2019; Bordia, Bordia, and Restubog 2015) and have highlighted the benefits of their use as a way of considering the expectations surrounding the needs of students as 'knowledge of what international students want is the first building block towards providing them with a positive educational experience' (Bordia et al. 2019, 1489). However, we perceive the dyadic consumer-provider notion of higher education studies as deeply constraining. Koskina (2013) seems to share this thinking when examining the psychological contract and illuminate the potential for expectation of reciprocal obligations from the overseas student beyond this dyad when they state that 'three quarters of the participant students included in their list of implicit expectations, the opportunity to "make new friends", and "have new experiences"' (Koskina 2013, 1029). Knapp and Masterson (2018, 651) also recently stated that:

> Surprisingly, even though we intuitively know that multiple exchanges exist, it remains unclear how many exchange relationships students perceive, who (or what) the perceived exchange partners are, and what the perceived terms of those exchanges are.

When considering student expectations, it is therefore important to make a distinction between psychological contracts and a broader notion of expectations which may be regarded as non-promissory in contraposition to the promissory elements of psychological contracts (Rousseau and Tijoriwala 1998). We suggest that the concept of value would be helpful in determining students' expectations which clearly extend beyond an educational product and to a broader notion of value co-creation with the host environment. Value co-creation would consider value that emerged during the study sojourn not just that which was promised or expected before it commenced. From the perspective of value co-creation, we suggest that the idea of psychological contracts impose a passive stance of the value seeker rather than as an active co-creator of value and suborns the agency of the overseas student as a creator of their own value in use. We therefore next turn to introduce and juxtapose literature on value and value co-creation to the discussion on expectations and psychological contracts.

Value

Value is an essential element of any marketing activity (Holbrook 1999) and there have been many studies on this particular concept within the marketing subject area. These can be broadly categorised into three streams: Value as means-end, in which products or services are consumed in order to achieve particular desired end states such as happiness, security of accomplishment (e.g. Gutman 1982; Vinson, Scott, and Lamont 1977; Young and Feigin 1975); value as benefits vs. sacrifices, whereby consumers make an assessment of the overall utility of a product based on their perceptions around what is received and what is given (e.g. Day 1990; Huber, Herrmann, and Morgan 2001; Zeithaml 1988); and value as experience which evolved from Holbrook and Hirschman's (1982) observation that important experiential aspects of consumption, such as the symbolic, hedonic, and aesthetic, were being neglected (e.g. Babin, Darden, and Griffin 1994; Batra and Ahtola 1990; Chiu et al. 2005; Overby and Lee 2006; Sheth, Newman, and Gross 1991a; 1991b; Sweeney and Soutar 2001). Holbrook (1999, 8) defines consumer value as something which 'resides not in the product purchased, not in the brand chosen, not in the object possessed, but rather in the consumption experience(s) derived therefrom'. He suggests that those consumption experiences might involve one or more of the eight different value types: efficiency; excellence; status; esteem; play; aesthetics; ethics; and spirituality.

The concept of value has become more prominent in recent years with the arrival of Service-Dominant Logic (S-D Logic) (Vargo and Lusch 2004) which has had a significant impact on business market research (Cova, Ford, and Salle 2009). One of the foundations upon which S-D Logic rests is that value is always co-created between multiple stakeholders, generally referred to as 'actors' in S-D Logic, with value simply defined as something that is created when a particular actors wellbeing is improved (Lusch and Vargo 2014; 2019; Vargo and Lusch 2008). Value is specific to each individual actor though and is uniquely and phenomenologically determined by that individual (Vargo and Lusch 2008; 2016). According to Gummerus (2013) this phenomenological view of value provides a deeper insight into the lived experience around value.

The importance of context in value creation has been widely discussed (e.g. Bolton and Drew 1991; Holbrook 1999; Zeithaml 1988) but this importance was elevated within S-D Logic with the introduction of 'value-in-context' (Chandler and Vargo 2011; Vargo 2009), highlighting the need to consider service relationships at both the micro and macro levels, and 'value-in-social-context' (Edvardsson, Tronvoll, and Gruber 2011) which suggests that value co-creation is significantly influenced by social forces around the setting in which value co-creation takes place. Helkkula, Dube, and Arnould (2019) draw on Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) research (see Arnould and Thompson 2005), which considers the influence of culture on marketplace activities, and suggest that culture might be considered as context for value creation. This view links with that of Rokeach (1973, 24) who suggests that a person's values are assumed to come from multiple epistemological dimensions such as 'culture, society and its institutions, and personality'. The value that consumers seek from products or services are, in turn, influenced by their values (Holbrook 1999; Rokeach 1973; Vinson, Scott, and Lamont 1977). It is therefore important for higher education scholarship and practice to understand the cultural context around which value co-creation is taking place, particularly with the increasing recognition of students as consumers (Arena, Arnaboldi, and Azzone 2010).

One way to consider culture might be with the use of one of the national culture models often used within business research which delineate cultural groups by national border (De Mooij 2019). Within cross-cultural research it is Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions model and its developments that have had the most significant impact (Beugelsdijk, Kostova, and Roth 2017) and the relevance of these dimensions in the context of psychological contracts in higher education have been well recognised (Bordia, Bordia, and Restubog 2015). However, there are criticisms around the use of national culture models which are considered by some to be too essentialist and unable to account for the complexity of individuals (Dervin 2011) or the different layers that occur within

national cultures (Steenkamp 2001). One aspect of this relates to generational differences which are common within most cultures with older generations more likely to embrace their heritage whilst younger generations are subject to more global influences (Asgary and Walle 2002). Whilst national culture models might not prove useful for this research, previous studies on international student mobility, in particular those based around Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) 'push/pull' model, which considers students to be 'pushed' from their home countries and/or 'pulled' to study overseas for a variety of reasons, can provide some useful cultural context.

Factors influencing Chinese overseas study

The factors influencing Chinese overseas study have been the focus of a number of studies which have suggested a range of possible 'push-pull' factors (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002). Possible 'push' factors for Chinese overseas study include the perception that overseas programmes are better than those of their own country (Altbach 2004; Bamber 2014; Mazzarol and Soutar 2002); difficulties gaining access to a Chinese university due to competitive entry requirements (Altbach 2004; Azmat et al. 2013; Brandenburg and Zhu 2007; Mazzarol and Soutar 2002; Xu 2017); increasing prosperity and concentration of resources on the 'only child' due to China's One-Child Policy (Azmat et al. 2013; Fong 2011; Li and Bray 2007; Xu 2017); and high unemployment rates among Chinese graduates which leads students to choose overseas postgraduate study to improve their job prospects (Azmat et al. 2013; Brandenburg and Zhu 2007; Leung 2008; Melvin 2006).

Previous research has also identified a number of potential 'pull' factors that include: the strong academic systems of countries like the US and UK (Altbach 2004; Azmat et al. 2013; Bamber 2014; Barnes 2007; Li and Bray 2007; Mazzarol and Soutar 2002; Xu 2017); the cultural enrichment to be gained from studying in a foreign country (Azmat et al. 2013; Fong 2011; Mazzarol and Soutar 2002; Wu 2014; Xu 2017); that for many Chinese overseas study is seen as 'the first step in a student's life towards becoming independent' (Wang, Harding, and Mai 2012, 637); and the extensive use of marketing recruitment agencies by universities to attract international students (Huang, Yuela, and Raimo 2016).

The 'pull' factors identified are potential indicators of the value that Chinese international students (CIS) are seeking from their overseas study experience with the 'push' factors providing a contextual foundation for CIS' value seeking behaviour. An overview of the key studies identified can be found in Figure 1. These studies were important in developing a pre-understanding of potential factors that might be important to CIS in preparation for interviews with participants.

Method

Participants

Twenty Chinese international students (CIS) were interviewed. These students were a mix of undergraduate and postgraduate and from a range of subject areas. The sample included students who had studied in the UK for different lengths of time and we encouraged them to provide retrospective accounts of their experiences (Golden 1992; Golden 1997). We drew on the accounts of participants who were relatively new to the UK and of those who had been more exposed to the UK and to UK HE institutions. This proved useful because, as Gadamer (1979, 60) points out, experience has an immediacy which initially eludes meaning and it is only through reflection that the meaning of experience can be grasped. Those students who had lived with their experience longer were able to provide more profound, reflective thoughts on their experience than those relatively new to the UK.

A list of anonymised participants, alongside details of subject area, level of study, and approximate time in the UK can be found in Table 1.

When referring to participants in the findings section, in addition to using pseudonyms we also provide details, in brackets, of Participant Number, whether they are currently studying at bachelors
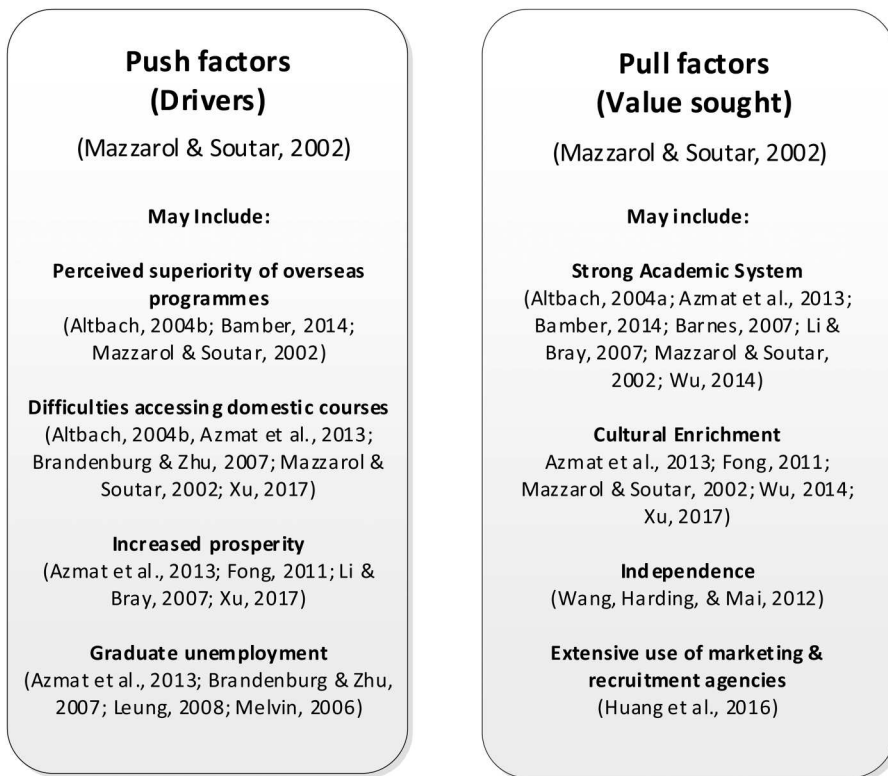
Push factors (Drivers) (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002)	Pull factors (Value sought) (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002)
May Include:	**May include:**
Perceived superiority of overseas programmes (Altbach, 2004b; Bamber, 2014; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002)	**Strong Academic System** (Altbach, 2004a; Azmat et al., 2013; Bamber, 2014; Barnes, 2007; Li & Bray, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Wu, 2014)
Difficulties accessing domestic courses (Altbach, 2004b, Azmat et al., 2013; Brandenburg & Zhu, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Xu, 2017)	**Cultural Enrichment** Azmat et al., 2013; Fong, 2011; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Wu, 2014; Xu, 2017)
Increased prosperity (Azmat et al., 2013; Fong, 2011; Li & Bray, 2007; Xu, 2017)	**Independence** (Wang, Harding, & Mai, 2012)
Graduate unemployment (Azmat et al., 2013; Brandenburg & Zhu, 2007; Leung, 2008; Melvin, 2006)	**Extensive use of marketing & recruitment agencies** (Huang et al., 2016)

Figure 1. Factors influencing Chinese overseas study (Source: Authors).

Table 1. List of participants.

Participant	Participant name (m/f)	Subject area	Study in the UK			Approx. time in the UK
			Bachelors	Masters	PhD	
1	Wang (f)	Hospitality and tourism		✓		1
2	Li (f)	Hospitality and tourism		✓		1
3	Zhang (f)	Hospitality and tourism	✓	✓		2
4	Liu (f)	Business and management	✓			1
5	Chen (f)	Business and management	✓			1
6	Yang (f)	Business and management	✓			1
7	Huang (m)	International business	✓			2
8	Zhao (f)	Education		✓	✓	4
9	Wu (f)	Media studies	✓	✓	✓	4
10	Zhou (f)	Education		✓		1
11	Xu (f)	Education		✓	✓	5
12	Sun (m)	Engineering			✓	3
13	Ma (m)	Engineering			✓	2
14	Zhu (f)	Accounting		✓		2
15	Hu (f)	International business		✓		1
16	Guo (m)	Engineering			✓	1.5
17	Ho (m)	Engineering			✓	2
18	Gao (f)	Education		✓	✓	5
19	Lin (f)	Education		✓		1
20	Luo (f)	Engineering		✓	✓	5

(b), masters (m), or PhD (p) level, and also the approximate length of time they have been in the UK. Therefore, Participant #1, for example, will be referred to as Wang (p1m1) and Participant #2 as Li (p2m1).

Data collection and analysis

Initially, semi-structured interviews were conducted by the lead author who shared his experience of living and working in Beijing for six years to help build rapport which, according to Hunter (2015), is a good way to gather 'revelatory data'. Interviews were conducted in English with the interviewer first using simple and short language as recommended in intercultural interviewing (Torres De Oliveira and Figueira 2018, 127). However, as interviewees were studying in a UK higher education setting their level of English was sufficient to participate fully in the interview discussion. Initial interviews were guided by a series of questions such as: Why did you choose to study in the UK? What were you most looking forward to? What are the best things about your stay in the UK? After the first five interviews a less rigid approach was adopted and, after a short introduction to the main purpose of the interview, i.e. to get an understanding of what the interviewee was hoping to gain from their time in the UK, a more conversational approach was adopted. This resulted in a more natural type of interaction akin to phenomenological inquiry wherein the discussion is led not so much by the researcher as by the participant (Laverty 2003) and led to some very rich, descriptive data. Eighteen interviews were conducted in total with two sets of participants choosing to be interviewed together. With the permission of the participants all interviews were recorded and were subsequently transcribed by the lead author. The average time for interviews was 50 minutes.

A hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Laverty 2003) to analysis was taken with the lead researcher drawing on his own experience of living and working in China to help interpret the experiences of participants and through reflection attain something akin to a 'fusion of horizons' (Gadamer 1979). The experience of CIS newly arrived in the UK and the more detailed reflections of those CIS who had been in the UK for some time and were, therefore, able to reflect not only on their own experience but act as 'informants' (Fontana and Frey 2008), members of the CIS community able to act as guides and translators of others experience, were considered. This approach facilitated the blending of both emic and etic perspectives – the former representing the understandings that arise from actors themselves and the latter representing observations by scientific observers (Harris 1976) – an important consideration when culture is a significant factor of the research topic (Maheswaran and Shavitt 2000). Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the relationship between the lead author and participants.
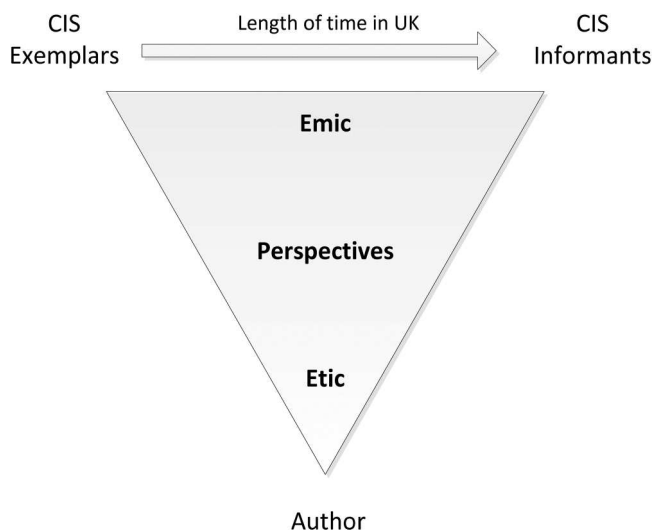

Figure 2. Relationship between lead author, participants, and emic/etic perspectives (Source: Authors).

The lead author used a reflective journal to make observations about potential themes arising from the data. As Van Manen (1997, 125) points out, 'for hermeneutic phenomenological work, writing is closely fused into the research activity and reflection itself'. The reflective journal also enables the researcher to move between the parts and the whole of a text to engage in a hermeneutic circle (Laverty 2003) which is important when considering the contextual nature of value considerations. The findings are presented below.

Findings

The findings are presented below under two main headings, Drivers and Value Sought, an overview of these can be found in Figure 3 with a detailed discussion of each factor below. Figure 3 forms a conceptual frame for our findings and is both theoretically and empirically informed.

Drivers (push factors)

Three main 'push' factors were identified.

The first is that of competition – for university places and for employment. Competition for university places is becoming increasingly intense (Azmat et al. 2013; Brandenburg and Zhu 2007; Hawkins 2023; Xu 2017) and this is most evident in the significance placed on the Gaokao (China's National College Entrance Exam) (see Ash 2016). Studying overseas is considered by some as an easier way of getting a place at university, at least for those families that can afford it:

> I think one important reason is because of the college entrance exam and because there are too many students in China and not everyone can go to a very good university. And we have to take the entrance exam and I would say it is very difficult and a lot of people aren't able to go to a decent university so their parents, if they have money, they would prefer to send them here to the UK. (Ma, p13p2)

Studying overseas can also provide a competitive advantage in terms of the rising levels of unemployment in Chinese graduates (Azmat et al. 2013; Brandenburg and Zhu 2007; Leung 2008; Melvin 2006). Ho (p17p2), for example, stated that 'there are more options for you if you have a language skill'. Language skills aren't the only consideration though and Xu explains how parents are often involved in the decision to select their child's major:
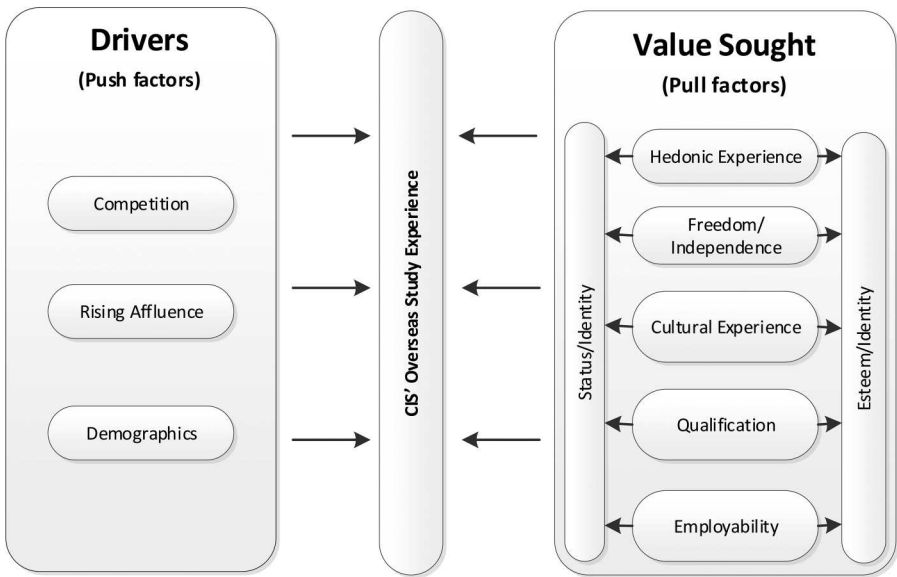

Figure 3. Drivers and value sought from CIS' overseas study experience (Source: Authors).

> … a lot of family I know, they told their children they have to choose business, they have to choose finance, you have to choose maths, because it's easier for you to find a job. (Xu, p11p5)

This appears consistent with Griffiths (2012, 45–6) suggestion that education is increasingly becoming valued for employment and status reasons rather than as something of value in itself.

The second push factor is rising wealth. Ho describes how the rise in 'rich' families increases the options available for study and that 'for the bachelors students, [the] first reason [they choose to study in the UK] is that they have a rich family'. He suggests that for students that are unable to get a high Gaokao score:

> If you have money you can go to the UK. But for these kind of student, they usually can't get to the good universities in the UK, but they can definitely get a better education in the UK than China. (Ho, p17p2)

The suggestion here is that overseas study is considered as something of a fallback position for those students who don't have the academic abilities to get into a good Chinese university but are from families with sufficient wealth to support them overseas. Wu (p9p4) also stressed the importance of wealth suggesting that a family's place in society nowadays very much 'depends on how much money you have' and that being from a family with money 'gives you a good opportunity to have a good chance to receive the good education' and 'to see the world'.

The third push factor was that relating to demographics, in particular the factors relating to the impact of the one-child policy on China's population. Huang certainly believed this to be the case but felt this also had a significant influence on the commitment of CIS:

> … society in China is like two [sets of] grandparents, parents and one child. And everyone is caring about that one child so we don't have to worry about everything, we just need to study, they [CIS] just do whatever they want … at least 40%, 50% of Chinese people that study abroad [do so] just because they can't go to the brilliant university in China they want [to come] here to … I call it 'holiday'. (Huang, p7b2)

This is something that is explored in further detail in the following sections.

Value sought (pull factors)

Whilst there were a number of heterogeneous motivations for each participant's decision to study in the UK there were a number of common themes that emerged and these are discussed in the following sections.

Freedom/independence

For many participants studying overseas meant more freedom and independence, as illustrated by Liu:

> To be honest, it's not about the academic so much, yeah, I think study abroad … the experience is not essential for me … it [is] more dependent on [being] very [far] away from my parents. (Liu, p4b1)

Gao is in the final year of her PhD and has been away from home for a much longer period than Liu, yet she shares similar sentiments about the benefits of being away from parents:

> … it's good to live far away from your parents as well. Thanks to the technology that we can see each other every day but it is good to live, physically, far away from them. (Gao, p18p5)

Another PhD student, Wu (p9p4), felt that she had 'more freedom here because if I stay in Beijing I think my parents will control [me]'. This comment resonates with the work of (Liu 2016) who discusses the rise of the 'priceless child' in China where, as a result of China's one-child policy, parents have shown growing concern for their children and increasing attempts to control them.

There is a sense from many of the participants that their individual freedom was limited in the domestic context and that they need to make the most of time away from societal pressures that face the younger generations in China.

Cultural experience

One of the main benefits of being able to spend time in another country is the opportunity to experience a different culture and previous research has highlighted that gaining cultural experience is a significant pull factor for overseas study (Altbach 2004; Azmat et al. 2013; Fong 2011; Wu 2014; Xu 2017). From the interviews, it became evident that this was a significant factor for many of the participants. Yang, for example, suggested that a reason he decided to study overseas was because:

> I want to know other countries culture and meet some foreigners and to know what they are thinking about China or other countries or the whole things I [am] interested in. (Yang, p6b1)

This need for cultural experience comes not only from students though, Chinese parents are heavily involved in decision making surrounding their children's education (Griffiths 2012; Liu 2016) and their influence was highlighted by a number of participants, including Zhu (p14m2) who said his parents 'told me to go outside and see what the world is like', his partner Ma (p13p2) had a similar experience with her father telling her it was an opportunity to 'see what the world was like'. Guo (p16p1.5), a PhD student studying engineering, was similarly influenced:

> [My parents] encourage me to come to the UK to get a higher view of the world, because in China actually so many people now get the chance to study [abroad] for higher education level. So my parents have so many friends, you know, whose child also study abroad so when they communicate they think that study abroad is a very good experience you know, not only for the technical part but also for the other part like you can learn lots more about different cultures and you can practice your English. (Guo, p16p1.5)

The benefits of experiencing a different culture, whether considered from the student or their parents perspective, are clearly seen as something of value in the initial decision to study overseas.

Hedonic experience

Within the cultural experience that CIS identified there were certain elements that touched on the hedonic which Sánchez-fernández, Iniesta-bonillo, and Holbrook (2009) describe as including elements of both play and aesthetics, two types of value that consumers might experience that were earlier identified by Holbrook (1999).

During some of the interviews, it was suggested that certain CIS don't actually like being in the UK and preferred to occupy their time in ways other than study. Wang (p1m1) for example stated that most of her friends didn't like being here and that instead of studying they preferred to 'drink, have lots of parties, get together, and play games'. Li (p2m1) made similar comments suggesting that there were two types of student those that preferred to study, like her, and those that preferred 'something interesting here like shopping and parties'.

Shopping. We hear many stories about the Chinese love of luxury goods and increasing conspicuous consumption patterns (Huang and Wang 2018). When asked if the opportunity to consume such products was a significant motivator for studying in the UK Huang (p7b2) replied 'you can't say motivation, but it will influence, it will affect the Chinese people' and suggests that some like to use the substantial allowances that many receive from their parents on shopping trips to places like Bicester Village (see Liddell 2018). Ho (p17p2) makes a similar comment, suggesting that whilst it is definitely a factor it isn't a key reason for people to come to the UK for study but goes on to discuss how his wife finds it convenient to shop for cosmetics here.

Zhou (p10m1) has a similar preference for buying cosmetics in the UK, as she explains 'because in China, for me as a girl, I prefer many beauty products, some cosmetics. Many brands in UK are not sold in China so I prefer shopping online and many, many websites [in the UK] have many beautiful discounts'. She goes on to explain that although there are many cosmetic products available in China there is a significant problem with fake products being sold. The issue of fake goods is something that Guo (p16p1.5) also discusses:

> … because [there are] so many fake products [in China] so if we got chance to go to another country we also need to buy several handbags. Not for us but for family … my parents ask me to go to [an] outlet to buy 2 hand-bags and they also send me the picture, the specific brand, a specific colour, and I need to find a shop and I need to say to the shop assistant where is this bag? Yeah, that's a very common phenomena.

This phenomena, as Guo (p16p1.5) describes it, is becoming increasingly common, not only with individuals making purchases for their family but also through professional agents known as 'daigou' (Li, Shao, and Zhu 2018; Parker 2018). Huang (p7b2) describes how some students act 'like a bridge, they are in the UK and there is a huge demand in China and maybe the Chinese people want to buy luxury brand but the price is not that good'. Hu (p15m1) also discusses this in our interview, describing how she and others like her provide this kind of service, she describes two types of people:

> Some people just buy something [for] themselves because they think they like a luxury life, "I need this bag", "I need these high heels", and that is to display [that they are] rich."

This is a clear reference to what Holbrook (1999) describes as *status* value, however Hu (p15m1) suggests that this is not the same kind of value that all Chinese seek when making such purchases:

> … for the other one, they always buy something, but sell something. They use this, in UK this experience is like a plant, overseas shopping, just want to earn money. Actually, I do this … I need to [earn] a living here, I need to earn some money.

The value that Hu (p15m1) seeks from these kinds of purchases would be more economic then and, viewed from a means-end perspective (Gutman 1982; Woodruff 1997; Zeithaml 1988), related to her covering her study related expenses.

Travel. Ho (p17p2) suggested that whilst shopping was not a primary motivation for studying over-seas travel definitely was and Gao (p18p5) describes how the UK is a good base for travel being so close to Europe. Ma (p13p2) and Zhu (p14m2) had suggested that one of the good things about being in the UK was that they had the opportunity to 'play' and explained how 'in UK we went to a lot of places, even Europe' before listing a number of destinations they had explored together. Zhu (p14m2) also describes how she and another friend had twice arranged their own trips to Europe, first Northern Europe and then the Southern part, using a combination of air, rail, and sea. During their last trip they covered six countries in 10 days.

Football. For some CIS football also seems to play a significant part in their time in the UK. Chen (p5b1) for example is a season ticket holder for Manchester City and she and her friend regularly travel by train to watch them play. Ho is also a keen football fan, as he explains:

> I think actually the football is also one reason for me to come to the UK. I like watching football … . I support Juventus, which is an Italian team, but also the Premier League is good. (Ho, p17p2)

Guo (p16p1.5) suggests that football also influenced his decision to come to the UK, as he explains 'I'm quite interested in football so I think when I come, if I got a chance to come to the UK I got the chance to look at some football games'.

Ma (p13p2) and Zhu (p14m2) both discussed how attending football matches had allowed them to mix with local people and Ho (p17p2) describes similar experiences watching matches with locals in the pub near his home. These instances are perhaps good examples of the strength of weak culture which, according to Schultz and Breiger (2010), can act as cultural bridges between otherwise disconnected social groups.

Aesthetics. For some CIS there appeared to be some specific aesthetic appeal associated with British culture. Part of this appeal related to the accent with Zhang (p3m2), after being asked what she had most been looking forward to about coming the UK, replying:

[The] accent. To talk this way. Because usually [I] do look at American TV shows but when I decided to come to the UK I see a lot of UK TV shows, like Downton Abbey, and I really, really enjoy the accent when they talk. So I thought I [would] come here and get a lot of accent experience.

Zhou (p10m1) also made reference to the British accent and seemed to prioritise this over other aspects of her education when she suggested that in terms of her priorities: 'First, [it] must be language, because British English is very beautiful I think. So I want to learn more British English'. TV shows like Downton Abbey and Sherlock, which was extremely popular with Chinese audiences (Ting 2014), seem very influential in helping Chinese form their opinions of what life might be like in the UK.

Qualification

Previous studies have highlighted a perception amongst Chinese that overseas programmes are superior to their domestic counterparts (Altbach 2004; Bamber 2014) as Chen suggests:

In China I have studied for one year but the university is not very good … in one class you have 50 students, it's difficult to learn something and I can't concentrate on what we are learning. And here, maybe 20 students per class, it's easier to understand. (Chen, p5b1)

Whilst there are a growing number of internationally recognised universities in China it is becoming increasingly difficult to gain a place and some students feel the learning isn't always that great:

In Chinese university it is hard, it is really, really hard to enter but it is easy to pass, it is really easy to pass. You just need to submit everything that is all. But in [the] UK it is easy to get in, like, you just pay the tuition fee I will let you study here, that is true. But it is hard for you to get a certificate, you have to be really careful, you have to do the academic stuff, you have to study, you have to pass, you have to do the revision, you have to do the exams, you have to do everything. (Huang, p7b2)

A UK masters qualification can also be gained much quicker than in other countries, which Xu explains is a key benefit:

I've met some of the students here and they say the reason I chose to come to the UK to study is because the master is just cost one year to study so I can just spend one year to get the master degree and then go back to work because they just need the degree, not anything else. (Xu, p11p5)

In situations where a masters degree does not lead to employment, for example in Zhao's (p8p4) case where she returned to China after previously studying in the UK but found it difficult to secure a full-time job, then a UK doctoral level qualification is always a further study option, as she explains:

I don't want to be a housewife, I want to … maybe when I graduate, when I finish my PhD I still cannot find a job, that's possible. At least I'm a doctor.

It seems that in Zhao's (p8p4) case the qualification represents much more than just an opportunity for employment but for some, this is one of the key benefits being sought, as explained below.

Employability

Over eight million students graduated from Chinese universities in 2019 with many of those graduates suggesting it was difficult to find a good job (Monitor 2022). In 2023 that figure will rise to 11.6 million (Hawkins 2023). It is therefore important to differentiate oneself from the crowd and Liu (p4b1) suggests that study in the UK can help students gain a competitive advantage. Xu agrees, suggesting that a degree from the UK can have an impact not only on your salary but also on the type of occupation you can enter:

… with a bachelor degree maybe you have six thousand Yuan per month but maybe if you enter with a [UK] Master's degree [it will be] eight thousand per month and you have [a] better opportunity to go to a better occupation. (Xu, p11p5)

Huang feels that a factor in improving his own employability, and that of fellow students, is through developing a good cultural understanding, as he explains:

> … if you study abroad you will have advantage … like for example you have two people, one is from the university of China, one is the university from England. If I am [an] international trading company [and] everything about [what I do is] international, who will you employ? "Oh, you must have different experience, different ideas and opinions about everything. So I will trust you, I will want you." (Huang, p7b2)

However, Xu (p11p5) suggests that finding a job when returning to China will be much harder because there are a lot of Chinese students returning from the UK, US, Australia, and other locations outside of China. The increasing number of Chinese that return to their home country with an overseas qualification has meant this is less of a differentiator than it was before.

Discussion and conclusion

Our research sought to 'unpack' the value that Chinese international students (CIS) sought in their choice of the UK as a destination for overseas study. Drawing on previous research, including Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) 'push-pull' concept, we identified a number of key value seeking themes. Some of these themes fall predominantly within the influence of higher education institutions, for example the UK qualification and increased employment opportunities, and are thus relevant to the ongoing discussion around the concept of psychological contracts within higher education (Bordia et al. 2019; Bordia, Bordia, and Restubog 2015; Koskina 2013). Yet there were other themes that were linked more broadly to CIS' time in the UK, for example: freedom and independence and the cultural and hedonic experience. When considered as a whole, and by applying the theoretical lens of value to our study, we suggest that each of the key areas highlighted subsequently feed into a need for status and esteem (Holbrook 1999), and ultimately to the formation of an identity, and we contend that this represents the key value sought by many CIS. Liu (2016) argues that the pressure put on Chinese children to succeed academically up to the end of lower-secondary school (roughly age 15) is such that they are placed under considerable stress, find it difficult to pursue their own intrinsic interests, and fail to develop in an all-around way. As such they are unsure about their identity, their own sense of self.

By the time CIS move to university parental pressure is reduced and there is an opportunity for them to start to develop their own sense of self, and this is clearly hinted at by the desire for freedom and independence that was expressed by many of the CIS interviewed. Holbrook (1999) suggests that consumers' choice of the products they consume and the consumption experiences they pursue form a central role in the development of their identities, providing them with a positive sense of self and enabling them to construct a successful persona in the eyes of others. In his Typology of Consumer Value Holbrook (1999) refers to these as 'Esteem' and 'Status'. Gaining their first taste of freedom is therefore a first stage in their search for identity and within the other areas of value sought by CIS, as discussed in the previous section, we see that esteem and status are further important areas of consideration in CISs' motivations to study overseas and in the activities they pursue while they are in the UK.

Let us consider how each of the areas discussed in the previous section might feed into the search for status and esteem starting with the cultural experience that CIS seek, in particular those that might be described as hedonic, such as shopping for example. Solomon (1999) regards status as a motivational construct whereby individuals are influenced by a kind of basic biological drive to remove the gap between their perceived present state and some ideal state. He suggests that this need for status is most evident among the 'nouveau riches' who are most troubled by status anxiety.

We have already discussed how rising wealth has been a driver for overseas study – this is quite a common situation in China, especially in some of the larger Tier 1 cities, as property prices in China have risen considerably in recent years and much of Chinese household wealth is linked to real estate (Bloomberg 2019).

Wealth was a factor discussed by a number of participants, for example by Wu (p9p4) who suggested that a family's place in society depended on how much money they had and by

Huang (p7b2) who talked about the substantial allowances that some students used to fund their shopping trips. In some instances, those shopping trips are perhaps also at the behest of family, as Guo (p16p1.5) explains when he talks about his experience of being tasked to buy a very specific pair of handbags by his parents.

We might also consider the associations with football as another way in which CIS try to form their identity through consumption. Some of the participants viewed football merely as a way of gaining some intercultural experience, for example with Ma (p13p2) & Zhu (p14m2) attending football matches as a way of taking in the atmosphere. However, others seemed to embrace football as a consumption experience, as a platform from which they might communicate things about their identity and the groups for which they wish to belong (Dixon 2016). For example with Chen (p5b1) and her friend for whom football played a much bigger role in their time within the UK through their link to Manchester City and the frequent visits they made to watch games as season ticket holders. Similarly for Guo (p16p1.5) who expressed an affiliation with Manchester United. It is perhaps notable that none of the participants expressed an affiliation for any of the local, lower league level clubs.

Another hedonic area in which status and esteem play an underlying role is related to the desire to travel. Kristensen (2013) suggests that for many younger Chinese exercising free movement through travel is a common way of displaying wealth and distinguishing oneself. The very fact that they are able to spend time in the UK is one way that CIS are able to do this. They further enhance this through more authentic types of travel within the UK and by using the UK as a base from which they can visit many other countries within Europe.

A number of participants referenced 'British' culture as a factor in their choosing to study in the UK. This aesthetic appeal of Britishness that was discussed in the previous section seems to hold some form of status value (Holbrook 1999) around which CIS wish to link their identity.

Apart from the hedonic value (Holbrook 1999) CIS seek there is much about status and esteem (Holbrook 1999) attached to the qualifications aspect of value and there is a belief that the education system in Western countries is in some ways superior to that in China (Altbach 2004; Azmat et al. 2013; Bamber 2014; Barnes 2007; Li and Bray 2007; Mazzarol and Soutar 2002; Wu 2014). For Chinese there is still a significant amount of value to be found in a formal education although today the emphasis is perhaps more on the social status, good jobs, and high salaries to which this translates (Griffiths 2012). The value of a qualification as a social status is perhaps best evidenced by Zhao (p8p4) who seemed to suggest that even if she could not find a job after her studies she would be content because, as she explained, 'at least I'm a doctor'.

Baudrillard (1998, 76–7), writing about the consumer society we now live in, suggested that incomes will lose their value as distinctive criteria and that more subtle criteria will be used as measures of social hierarchy, for example the type of work and responsibility, level of education and culture. For Zhao (p8p4) income is not her major concern, her family appears to have sufficient wealth to support her while she studies in the UK. What is more important for her is that she is not only a housewife or a low-level worker. Regardless of what her studies may or may not bring they will at the very least enable her to use the title 'Dr'.

Theoretical contributions

Given the well-recognised importance of overseas students to many national HE sectors, the paucity of research that considers the contextual nuance of different overseas student cohorts is clearly of concern. Our first contribution therefore builds on existing work exploring psychological contracts and expectations of overseas students in HE (Bordia et al. 2019; Bordia, Bordia, and Restubog 2015; Koskina 2013). Findings offer challenge to the pre-conditional nature of the underlying assumptions of contracts and expectations, and we reveal a more emergent and agential under-standing of value-in-use, value-in-context (Chandler and Vargo 2011; Vargo 2009) and 'value-in-social-context' (Edvardsson, Tronvoll, and Gruber 2011), including distinctive treatment of both

push and pull factors (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002). By extending the analysis of exchange partners beyond the supplier-consumer dyad in HE to include value situated in broader local society, we also respond to Knapp and Masterson's (2018) concerns that the breadth of exchange partners in HE has been underexplored.

Second, whilst the few existing studies on value in HE provide some useful insight into the value that students may seek from their study experience, the epistemological underpinnings we suggest are also open to challenge. We contend that the dominant input-output calculations used in HE in respect of student value sought lacks significant subjective nuance. Value has been widely acknowledged to be socially constructed (Edvardsson, Tronvoll, and Gruber 2011; Helkkula, Dube, and Arnould 2019; Karababa and Kjeldgaard 2014; Peñaloza and Venkatesh 2006) and therefore the complex cultural context of consumption we suggest should be considered in any discussion on value (Akaka, Schau, and Vargo 2013; Akaka, Vargo, and Schau 2015; Helkkula, Dube, and Arnould 2019). Whilst a search for generalizability is attractive, we suggest that value-in-use has high contextual specificity. Our contribution offers analytical generalizability defined as producing 'context-bound typicalities' (Halkier 2011, 787) related to Chinese international students (CIS), but we present a transferable framework for interrogating the psychological underpinnings of any group of overseas students' subjective value consumption, thus offering the possibility of transferability to other national groups of international students and other national HE provider contexts. The promise through this transferability is a nuanced understanding of push and pull factors relating to host and home country factors.

Third, by exploring the well-used idea of value co-creation used by marketers we break down the assumption of separate value creation by educational providers which is delivered and consumed by students. Instead, we consider the two aspects of the dichotomy as interwoven in complex ways. As such, we address the number of calls for value co-creation to be applied within the HE sector (Naidoo, Shankar, and Veer 2011; Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn 2018; Thomas and Ambrosini 2021).

Practical contributions

This study has a number of practical implications for HE Institutions. Specifically, by unpacking the value sought by Chinese international students (CIS) we provide valuable insight for university marketing departments and recruitment agents wishing to develop culturally specific recruitment material. In addition, by developing an understanding of the extra curricula activities that contribute to CIS' value creating behaviour HE institutions may also be able to identify third-party organisations they can work with to co-create that value. Whilst studies have recognised the importance of value co-creation by HE institutions with stakeholders (Cavallone et al. 2021; Dollinger, Lodge, and Coates 2018; Fagerstrøm and Ghinea 2013), our study shows a broader range of stakeholders than has previously been considered that could be used to design value propositions to attract CIS. For example, when considering some of the hedonic aspects of CIS value seeking behaviour, this may include regional tourist boards, local sporting clubs, or even major retail outlets, perhaps from a purely recreational perspective or even academically, as part of course related field trips. More generally, having highlighted the extent to which home country 'push' factors can influence the value seeking behaviour of international students ('pull' factors), we highlight the importance that HE institutions should place on developing a more nuanced understanding of the value that international students seek from their overseas study experience. With an increasing reliance on the income generated from international students it is essential that there is a broader understanding of the various types of value that students may seek to co-create and of the specific types of value being sought by students from particular countries.

Disclosure statement

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