



The Rising Veto Power of the Checkbook: An Empirical Investigation of Parents' Impacts on Their Children's University Enrollment

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ABSTRACT

This study drew on different streams in the literature to theorize a power shift in favor of parents in the post-COVID-19 era. The authors investigated the impact of parents' campus site visits on university enrollment decisions by empirically testing a model that draws on concepts from service marketing and sociology and links university enrollment to parents' evaluative and intentional constructs. Data were obtained from 339 parents of final-year high school students immediately after their campus site visits and analyzed using structural equation modelling. The results indicate that antecedents of parent university satisfaction include human encounters, university reputation, and physical setting. Satisfaction was found to drive intention to advocate to children and brand preference. These two outcomes affected enrollment. The results offer important theoretical contributions to the field of higher education marketing and present managerial implications for university administrators in their quest to augment student recruitment processes.

KEYWORDS

Campus Site Visits, COVID-19, Higher Education Marketing, Parents, Parents' Satisfaction, Power, Student Enrollment, University Brand Preference, University Parent Encounters

INTRODUCTION

The extent of the COVID-19 pandemic's disruption for 1.6 billion students, families, and institutions in 2020 is almost incalculable (Hechinger & Lorin, 2020). Among those disruptions is the increased risk associated with university selection and enrollment within the current turbulent job markets and unpredictable economies (Nanath & Kaitheri, 2021). The extant literature confirms that parents are major influences on their children's educational aspirations and reportedly allow them the freedom to make their university selections (Cho et al., 2008). Return on investment from university learning is commonly reported to be a strong driver of student enrollment (Keane, 2012). Parents are more comfortable with familiar university enrollment decisions and reported experiencing anxiety with some children's enrollment decisions they perceived to be financially precarious (Holmstrom et al., 2011), especially during troubling economic times. Parents reportedly experience increased anxiety

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in uncertain environments when facing economic and societal pressure and accordingly increase their involvement in their children's decisions (Holmstrom et al., 2011). The contextual environment caused by COVID-19 is possibly changing the relationships and roles between parents and students. The pandemic has ushered in an age of economic difficulty for many segments of society across the world and has also exacerbated the student loan crisis and increased the difficulty of finding work-study opportunities (Crew & Manager, 2020).

The East and West are undoubtedly experiencing an unprecedented shock due to the greatly accelerated changes caused by COVID-19. Individuals have experienced non-reversible negative effects, such as emotional breaks in personal relationships due to prolonged isolation periods (Darbishire et al., 2020). At the social level, COVID-19 caused the superimposition of a new social order over an old one. As the basic unit of society, the family is understandably in a state of dizzying disorientation and being forced to react to new conceptions of time, space, relationships, and everything else. Parents are receiving few signals regarding what is appropriate behavior in this radically different new social reality. We propose that some parents will respond by imposing direct control over their children. Support for this assumption stems from the numerous historical instances in which governments declared martial law. Martial law allows a government to assume absolute power through the imposition of its direct control over society. This includes the suspension of civil law and is justified as a measure to overcome wide-scale chaos (Dyzenhaus, 2009). Recent evidence suggests that COVID-19 caused a rise in authoritarian forums of governments (Yeganeh, 2021). Similarly, some parents will assume power in order to increase the probability of success against resistance to their children-focused protective interventions, leading some parents to modify the implicit social contract they have with their children. This modification may occur in the form of a decrease in the level of parents' openness to their children's autonomy over the university enrollment decision.

We find theoretical support for the argument that some parents now have veto powers in the bargaining power theory. The rationale behind the theory is that an individual's bargaining power is dependent on his or her outside options (McElroy & Horney 1981). Some parents will surely take note of their children's low probability of achieving financial independence due to the post-pandemic economic reality. Parents will accordingly identify their children's diminished bargaining power. Another concept relevant to university enrollment decisions is conflict avoidance, which is an overarching strategy for parents as they negotiate with their children regarding university options in the West (Haywood & Scullion, 2018). This concept may be less critical in the post-COVID-19 era. For example, children's threats to leave the house without their parents' consent are less serious because of the children's low chances of receiving a student loan or acceptance into a work-study program (Crew & Manager, 2020). In such narratives, parents' increased influence is operationalized through two constructs. The first construct is a constraint (Grimes, 1978), where the parents' threat to withhold or the actual removal of resources from their children may influence the university enrollment decision. In other words, they use their veto checkbook power. The second construct is inducement (Grimes, 1978), where parents transfer economic resources to their children to increase their influence on the university enrollment decision. The rationale for proposing that COVID-19 caused a global power-shifting phenomenon can therefore be built on three pillars: historical precedents of martial law, the theoretical support of bargaining power theory, and operationalized constructs and tools available to parents in the current economic reality. Accordingly, we believe that the ubiquitous effects of COVID-19 offer an unprecedented opportunity and need for research to make generalizations that bridge the gap between the East and West. This study contributes to stimulating discussions to bridge this gap.

This study examines parents' experiences during campus site visits. We investigate the effect of human encounters, including staff-parent encounters and perception of other parents, university reputation, and physical setting on parents' satisfaction with a university. We also examine the impact of university satisfaction on intention to advocate the university and brand preference and the role of these constructs in driving enrollment decisions.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The described disruptive nature of COVID-19 affecting social norms creates a conceptual space, further supporting the need to identify gaps in previous literature prior to extending current knowledge into this new space. As always, culture provides a perspective that helps social science researchers explain the behaviors of the living. This study takes into account the fact that an individual's understanding of the world is dependent on interactions within society. This socially mediated learning process is the basis for the collective concepts that shape the culture of different nations (Turner & Oakes, 1986). Some social constructs used in the mainstream literature limit the roles individuals may play in uniform versions, regardless of cultural context. Some highly cited roles in the consumer buying behavior literature describe relationships that existed long before recorded history, such as parent-child relationships. Such relationships are certainly unique in nature. However, the cornerstones of many theories in the field of social science have the expectation of reciprocity and exchanges with other members of society. It is difficult to conceptualize that social exchange theory, as well as others, has been extended without adaptation to explain the relationship between parents and their children. This positivistic ideology requires investigation through empirical analysis, especially within the East, where parent-child relationships have a different power distribution order. Thus, there is a need for this study as it aims to extend the current knowledge of parents' roles beyond written-in-stone definitions. Many contemporary research interests in social sciences are fueled by the need to study the new social order in the post COVID-19 era. Scientific inquiry into the pre-COVID-19 social order is therefore critical to developing our understanding of the differences between the two orders and makes the need to investigate questionable generalizations in the old social order an urgent matter. The definition of parents' roles in the university enrollment decision process, through encoded roles limited to influencers (Murphy, 1981; Whitehead et al., 2006), is an example of Western generalizations in the higher education marketing literature.

Power Structures in East and West

The uniqueness of the parent-child relationship does not render itself easily to standardized roles. Therefore, it is possible that previous literature premised on reciprocity may have overlooked untheorized roles that some parents play in the university enrollment decision process. We propose that the university enrollment decision is a context for multiple decision-makers; in this context, some parents may play the role of decision-maker. Decision-making power refers to the probability that the decision-maker will be in a position to carry out his or her own will despite resistance (Blau & Scott, 1962). Power and authority are conceptually similar constructs that are extreme points on the control continuum (Grimes, 1978). Eastern cultures are premised on embeddedness, which regards individuals within society as entities rooted in collective groups (Burgess & Steenkamp, 2006). Social norms within the East legitimize the unequal distribution of power among group members according to a hierarchical power distribution order. This hierarchy is founded on values such as obedience and respect for authority (Burgess & Steenkamp, 2006). Therefore, parents' power and authority over their children are strong in the East. Additional support is offered by Chao and Tseng (2002), who reported that Eastern parents exercise power over decisions that concern family members.

Meanwhile, the West is an egalitarian culture, meaning it is concerned with values such as self-independence and the normative expectation of individuals to express their self-preference (Burgess & Steenkamp, 2006). At the young age of 16, some Western children reportedly play the role of co-decision-makers within the context of a multiple decision-maker family (Dauphin et al., 2011). Western higher education literature describes parents in terms such as supporters, influencers, and partners (Dietrich et al., 2012). All parents want to maintain a good relationship with their children and avoid conflicts (Haywood & Scullion, 2018). However, it is possible that parents' role is not constant and changes according to situational variables. Western parents have more reasons to avoid conflicts that can damage their relationships with their children than Eastern parents. Western

parents recognize the relatively short time difference between university-related conflict events and the normative nest-leaving event. For example, in the United States, the average age of nest-leavers is 20.8 years (Ribar, 2015), compared to 24.9 in China (Yi et al., 1994). Eastern parents may expect time to be on their side as any conflict may be forgotten or resolved over time between enrollment-related conflicts and nest leaving; this is a luxury that Western parents cannot afford. The discussion leads us to recognize the limitations of the Western conceptualization of parents' role in university enrollment decision process as being a non-authoritarian role. Yet the marketing literature includes a clear gap as it does not acknowledge the methodological collectivism of the East, which is fundamental in defining additional roles that some parents play in the university enrollment decision process. This study aims to fill this gap by empirically testing a well-established decision model from a different theoretical standpoint. Such work is instructive in itself and justifies the need for this study as the adopted Western model should not work in conditions where parents are co-decision-makers. This study is perhaps the first to quantitatively examine this new proposed role. The results may allow for the calibration of the Western lens through which we see the role of Eastern parents.

Parents as Consumers

Many parents share a sense of obligation to allocate their financial resources to pay for their children's expensive university fees. Practical support comes from banks in most countries of the world, which give out personal loans specially designed to satisfy this parental sense of obligation. However, parents give to their children without receiving anything in return. A parent certainly does not expect to be paid back by his or her children for the costs incurred. It is logical to say that money spent on university tuition cannot be spent on oneself. This behavior is rational if we consider that parents and their children are not completely separate entities. The literature proposes that parents view their children as extensions of themselves (Holmstrom et al., 2011). Further support is offered by the looking glass self-theory (Cooley, 1964), which states that children are one significant mirror in which parents see themselves reflected. Although parents are not physically attending university classes themselves; their younger self extended-mirror reflections are. In the metaphorical sense, parents can be regarded as consumers (Harper et al., 2012) who regard university fees as an investment in themselves (Onu, 2015).

A highly cited benefit of university education is enhanced personal status (Conway et al., 1994). Children's attainment of their university degrees is considered one of the most significant measures of some parents' success (Canterbury, 2000). The literature suggests that the benefits of education are co-consumed by parents as well as students. Pressing this consumer-parent logic forward, we draw practical parallels between parents and consumers. The payment of fees is an activity shared between consumers and the fee recipient. This act of payment drives a sense of entitlement in parents (Carney-Hall, 2008) and in the common consumer to be compensated for the monetary sacrifices made. In addition, complaint is another common behavior parents and consumers exhibit when dealing with a service delivery failure. When fee-paying parents perceive a gap between university performance and expectations, they confidently raise their concerns and reportedly stop at nothing, no matter how minor, until the university resolves their concern (Carney-Hall, 2008). In recognition of the many instances parents have displayed similar behaviors on campuses, several terms have been coined (e.g., helicopters, snow plows, and bulldozers) to describe such parents (Kiyama & Harper, 2018). An additional similarity exists in students and parents shopping around for universities during the evaluation stage (Moogan et al., 1999). Shopping is a word mainly identified with consumers. The discussion leads us to view a university education as a service that offers benefits consumed by multiple consumers, and prominent among those consumers are parents.

Following the consumer orientation logic, it is counterintuitive that some parents decline to play an active role in the university enrollment decision given their high personal relevance, as discussed thus far. Some parents leave the university decision completely to their children (Al-Yousef, 2009; Brooks, 2003; Iacopini, 2017). This evidence is not in line with the looking glass self-theory claim

of generalization, which is founded on natural parental instincts. A counterargument is that, although some parents decline to participate in the university enrollment decision process, they still share the sense of obligation to pay for their children's university tuition and, therefore, are invested in their children's future. The lack of cultural capital that correlates with a low level of education is a possible reason for this behavior (Brooks, 2003). Parents who did not attend university do not have the necessary information about the different university offerings, thereby making them first-time decision-makers themselves. Some parents reported that they do not feel confident interfering in their children's university decisions. The reported common characteristic among these parents was their low level of education (Iacopini, 2017). If we adhere to the common saying that knowledge is power, then the parental role during the university enrollment decision process may depend not on parents' sense of relevance to the university decision but rather on the parents' level of cultural capital in general and subject area-relevant knowledge specifically. It is rational to expect that a parent who is an engineer would have more to say to his or her child about applying to an engineering program than about a philosophy program. Parents from similar educational backgrounds have more influence over their children's educational choices than non-similar education parents (Eldegwy et al., 2022).

Our discussion reveals that parents who enjoy sufficient levels of cultural capital are consumers who are expected to play active roles in the decision-making process. In line with consumers' buying behavior literature, many parents actively participate in three sequential steps: the predisposition stage, in which the economic and social factors stimulate parents' and students' interests or not in matriculating to higher education; the search stage, in which the parents and students proactively examine potential institutions and assess their academic preparation and financial capabilities, with students and parents usually applying to and choosing from approximately four universities (Galotti & Mark, 1994) ranked in order of brand preference and considered as the choice set; and the choice phase, in which students and parents select their preferred university from the choice set (Litten, 1982). However, the unique nature of education as a service renders this decision-making process a daunting endeavor.

University as Service Brand

Debate about what the product of the university continues, with some arguing it is learning, classes, and lectures while others argue it is the graduates themselves (Canterbury, 2000). A brand "is a synthesis of all the elements, physical, aesthetic, rational and emotional" (Hart & Murphy, 1998, p. 61). Service encounters between the provider and consumer are referred to as moments of truth in the service industry (Brown et al., 2009). Within university brands, a more realistic term may be years of truth. We believe that this holistic definition of the university brand is in line with the holistic nature of the university education service and that the two are not conceptually distinct. Central to building the university brand is consumer satisfaction, which intern is based on his expectations. However, there are no comprehensive service-level agreements that can cover the extended period and holistic nature of the educational service with its many touch points and the endless possible resulting scenarios. The two most significant challenges in branding services are intangibility and heterogeneity. University brands are deemed as one of the most intangible exchange settings. The university service of education cannot be verified in advance of a sale to ensure quality because it can neither be touched nor fully conceptualized on the mental level. Heterogeneity is another challenge in branding university services. The service of education is a process dependent on people. Different staff have different teaching styles, and even the same professor may change over time. Students as well change over the course of their studies. Learning is a transformative process in such a way that the student may not be the same person by the end of the process. The learning process is dependent on staff and students co-creating value (Elsharnouby, 2015). We recognize that both value-creating parties are changing. Accordingly, the standardization of service brands is almost an impossible undertaking. These characteristics justify the difficulty some parents and students may encounter in evaluating the education service even after consumption (i.e., graduation).

Buying the wrong university brand can lead to grave consequences for the consumers, yet they are given few clues as to what the right choice is. Universities recognize that, due to the complexity of the university brands, their prospective consumers are being asked to take a leap of faith (Elsharnouby, 2015). This notion of taking a leap of faith is supported by the literature describing the prospective consumer's concept of the university brand as an institution that completely surrounds its constituents, which blurs the line between home and work (Canterbury, 2000) as well as the concept of the university brand as a large collective group of people with few distinguishable characteristics (Schultz, 2006). Therefore, the complexity of the brand and magnitude of the level of importance of the enrollment decision lead some parent-consumers to risk-averse behavior, such as settling for a brand they know (Canterbury, 2000). In many cases, alumni parents enroll their children in the same university; this well-reported phenomenon has led to a special term for students of alumni parents—namely, legacy students (Hurwitz, 2011). One can argue that, by choosing the brand they know, some alumni parents are making the safest instead of the best enrollment decision.

Brand experiences formed through direct interaction with the service components allow for the formation of higher-order beliefs such as satisfaction. Direct experiences, such as with event marketing, allow the consumer to collect information about, process, and evaluate the brand attributes directly through his or her own senses (Smith & Swinyard, 1982). Brand experience is therefore more real, and the information collected is perceived by the consumer to be more credible. One of the most common channels offering prospective university consumers the opportunity to develop direct brand experiences is event marketing.

University Marketing Events

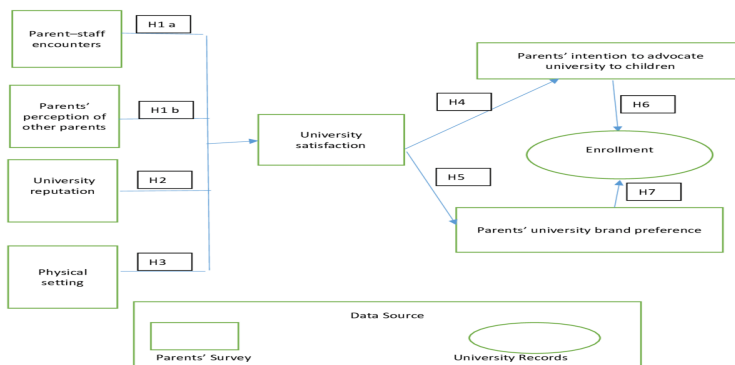
University marketing events for enrollment purposes include campus site visits, deans' receptions (Secore, 2018), and subject tasters (Howarth et al., 2016). The most popular forum is campus site visits, which are an age-old tradition for students and parents to evaluate an average of four different university brands within their choice set (Galotti & Mark, 1994). Parents' scrutiny of key items in their children's and mirror reflections' educational service experiences is an opportunity in which parents collect, process, and evaluate information directly through their senses (Smith & Swinyard, 1982). Parents' direct experiences obtained through site visit events allow for interactive and hands-on exposure to the elements that constitute the education service. Site visit events are an opportunity to look into the future (Secore, 2018), and the human "interactions met while visiting during these events make the prospects seem more real" (p. 152). Parents' beliefs (including satisfaction with university-promised service level) formed during university site visit events through direct experiences with brand ambassadors' academics, other parents on-site, and university physical settings offer strong clues of quality in a time of confusion and uncertainty associated with intangible service brand evaluation. This is expected to be appreciated by the consumer-parent before committing to the unique university decision. The site visit events will more likely attract the consumer-parent who wishes to play an active role in the university enrollment decision. The non-obligatory, optional attendance nature of the site visit is expected to be less attractive to low cultural capital consumer-parent. Low cultural capital was reported as a reason for some parents' hesitation to participate in the university decision (Iacopini, 2017). This is of special importance to this work. The empirical nature of our examination of the expected rise of power of consumer-parents may be discounted by some parents who decline to act upon their rise in power. Accordingly, the inclusion of low cultural capital parents in this study will increase the in-group variation producing misleading results.

Hypothesis Development

The underlying premise of this study is evident in its discussion of many concepts and terminologies driven by the consumer buying behavior literature (e.g., parent-consumer, involvement, service brand, decision-making process). Accordingly, the constructs and relationships adopted are based on the dominant stream of service marketing, which theorizes that consumers are highly reliant on

clues to predict quality due to the intangible nature of services (Berry, 1980; Shostack, 1977). These clues allow the consumer to “tangibilize the intangible” (Gabbott & Hogg, 1994, p. 136). Service consumers derive clues from three main categories. First, process dimensions pertain to how the service is delivered, which includes the service personnel characteristics of responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Zeithaml, 1981); more recently, other consumers present in the service environment have also offered clues of service quality (Brocato et al., 2012). Second, the consumer’s perception of the service provider (Gabbott & Hogg 1994) includes previously held consumer conceptions about the service provider. Third, the physical environment includes the standard of equipment, furniture, and service personnel attire (Bitner et al., 1990). Satisfaction is a widely reported output of these moments of truth (Brown et al., 2009) in which consumers’ expectations are met or surpassed (Surprenant & Solomon, 1987). The logic is that meeting consumers’ expectations in the context of the university site visit, which is similar to a pre-purchase trail, will lead to favorable positive cognitive, emotional, and behavioral output. As previously discussed, students and parents are both co-consumers. It is on these solid grounds that we propose our conceptual model (see Figure 1). The operationalization of the model constructs within the university context is based on the work of Keaveney and Young (1997) and Navarro et al. (2005), whose model conceptualized student–teacher interaction during a course within the university’s physical setting to determine student experience satisfaction. The model proposed by Navarro et al. (2005) investigated the relationship between the satisfaction and behavior outputs directed toward the university offering the course. Our study is built on the premise that consumer-parents appreciate direct experiences with service attributes, which are clues of quality that offer them a glimpse into their children’s educational future. Parents are expected to be satisfied with the service attributes, which allows for predicting education service quality and, therefore, the success of their children/mirror reflections. Parahoo et al.’s (2013) work suggested three key predictors of satisfaction: university reputation and the interactions between staff and students and between students and their peers. Therefore, three drivers of university satisfaction are adopted in this study to explore parents’ experiences during university site visits—namely, human encounters (encompassing staff–parent encounters and the perception of other parents), university reputation, and physical setting. Recent studies have suggested that higher education students satisfied with some separate components of the university experience, such as social experiences (Eldegwy et al., 2018) and offered courses (Navarro et al., 2005), tend to advocate for other components (Eldegwy & Elsharnouby, 2019; Navarro et al., 2005) and exhibit more preference toward the university (Eldegwy et al., 2019; Sánchez, 2014). These behavioral and intentional outputs of satisfaction are adopted in this study as parents’ intention to advocate the university to their children and university brand preference; these constructs are analyzed against the backdrop of actual student enrollment.

Figure 1. Hypothesized model



Human Encounters in Services

The extant literature advocates the creation of pleasant and memorable consumer experiences to address the challenges of service marketing, such as intangibility and inseparability. The role of service providers cannot be understated in the service context. The term *service encounters* has gained widescale recognition since the 1980s (Surprenant & Solomon, 1987). In the service encounter, both provider and consumer interact for the successful delivery of the service (Solomon et al., 1985). These human interactions are critical to the determination of the satisfaction or dissatisfaction state (Bitner et al., 1990). Central to the service delivery is the human encounter (Edgett & Parkinson, 1993), which is inclusive of all human encounters, including service providers and other consumers present on site (Brocato et al., 2012). Some researchers have argued that the manner through which the service is delivered, which is human-intensive, is often more important than the core service (Ozment & Morash, 1994).

Parent–Staff Encounters

Consumers seek information about brands from both experts and those who work within the service as a profession (Park & Parker Lessig, 1977). Academic staff are professional experts who work within the university brand. This is in line with the assurance dimension of process delivery (Zeithaml, 1981). The responsiveness of knowledgeable academic staff to parents' informational needs during site visits offers a clue of service quality. Parents are searching not just for the best university but also the best university that fits their children. Students frequently use words such as “fits me” when describing factors driving the university enrollment decision (Lehmann, 2004, p. 98). Academic staff are also brand ambassadors, and their personal characteristics are extended to the university brand. Meanwhile, parents are clearly familiar with their children's capabilities and traits. Therefore, parent–staff encounters during site visits may allow parents to draw parallels in their search for the right fit. Further support on the relationship between the consumer and staff encounter is offered through the empirical work of Parahoo et al. (2013), who identified that positive engagement with staff is a major determinant of students' satisfaction. Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) reported that academic staffs' interactions with students generate positive evaluations. Mainstream research confirms the importance of staff–student encounters as a significant driver of student satisfaction. Accordingly, we propose that encounters between staff and the co-consumer parents will generate positive emotions, including satisfaction. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1a: Parent–staff encounters have a positive effect on parents' university satisfaction.

Perception of Other Parents

The presence of other consumers in the service setting affects the service consumption experience (Maher & Elsharnouby, 2020). Silpakit and Fisk (1985) argued that the similarity between consumers present on-site increases the chances of successful service delivery. Grove and Fisk (1997) stated that the appropriateness of other consumer behavior affects consumers' evaluations of service experience and, therefore, affects consumer satisfaction. Brocato et al. (2012) added that the physical appearance of other parents also has an effect on consumers' satisfaction with service experience as an extension of these concepts, leading us to expect that perceptions of other parents during a site visit will positively impact the parents' evaluative experience, leading to satisfaction. The rationale for this extension is twofold. First, parents may experience a feeling of safety in numbers as being part of a similar group decreases the chances that they are making the wrong decision. Internal group discussions with other parents may also serve to reinforce the beliefs formed during the site visit. Second, the presence of other parents who are positively perceived by parents enhances the social experience of parents and, therefore, is more likely to produce satisfaction as an evaluative response. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1b: Parents' perception of other parents has a positive effect on parents' university satisfaction.

University Reputation

The reputation of an organization is defined as customers' positive beliefs about what distinguishes one brand from another (Bhattacharya & Elsbach, 2002). Researchers agree that awareness is an integral part of brand reputation. Therefore, it is rational to expect co-consumer parents' satisfaction with the university to be affected by the reputation of the university, similar to the case in which students as parents may be affected by the reputation of the university in which their children will receive educational service. Ample evidence in the higher education literature states that there is a strong relationship between university reputation or image and satisfaction (Parahoo et al., 2013). Therefore, we expect that a superior university reputation will generate higher parent satisfaction. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: University reputation has a positive effect on parents' university satisfaction.

Physical Setting

Service encounters occur within an enabling environment, which allows for the successful delivery of service. Tangibles have also been used to offer clues of quality to help consumers in their challenging task of evaluating the intangible service prior to consumption. The university physical setting has consistently been reported as having a positive impact on student satisfaction (Karna & Julin, 2015). The rationale for extending the relationship between physical setting and co-consumer parent satisfaction is that the physical setting either enhances or reduces the quality of the social exchange characteristic of the service setting. Parents search for the "student-institution right fit" (Banning & Banning, 1986, p. 1) and, therefore, may evaluate the physical setting during their campus visit to estimate the university's ability to respond to their children's needs. Furthermore, parents may use the quality of a physical setting as a proxy for the service quality that their children will receive during the consumption of the educational service and, therefore, are satisfied with the service quality they expect their children to receive. Consequently, we put forth the following hypothesis:

H3: University physical settings have a positive effect on parents' university satisfaction.

Intention to Advocate to Children

Satisfied consumers, just like satisfied parents, will be expected to exhibit valuable behavior for service providers. Consumers engage in activities such as advocating the brand to other consumers and referral behavior. The theory of social exchange offers the explanation that satisfied consumers feel an obligation to reciprocate by engaging in beneficial behavior for the other party in the exchange process (Homans, 1958). Satisfied students are consistently reported to exhibit advocacy and referral behavior (Walton et al., 2012). In many cases, parents have attended university themselves and wish for their children to relive their experiences (Eldegwy et al., 2022). As parents have a natural interest in their children's future, parents who have favorable evaluative university experiences will aim to steer their children toward familiar educational prospects that offer their children the best chance in life. Parents have the strongest influence on their closest social circle, which includes their children being part of the family unit theory (Litten, 1982). Furthermore, parents have been consistently reported as major influencers of their children's university enrollment through encouragement and expectation (Sia & Ismail, 2016). Parents engage in discussions with their children regarding their university selection and explicitly or implicitly influence their children. Accordingly, we expect satisfied parents to be more inclined to advocate the university to their children:

H4: Satisfaction with the university has a positive effect on parents' intention to advocate the university to their children.

Parents' University Brand Preference

Satisfaction is cited in several works as a driver of brand preference (de Chernatony et al., 2004). Brand preference toward service brands is defined as the bias a customer holds toward a particular brand (Chang & Liu, 2009). Brand preference includes affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses (Ebrahim, 2013). Thus, satisfied parents will develop highly valuable responses such as likeness, which is logical to expect through the association of staff ambassadors (academic staff encountered) with the university brand, and positive evaluation of service attribute benefits experienced during a campus site visit, weighed against all costs associated with purchasing the educational service to produce a cognitive response as a perceived value. Finally, behavioral response is also a component of brand preference, as purchase intention is a consequence of brand preference. Purchase intention is a customer's plan to buy a specific brand (Chang & Liu, 2009). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H5: Parents' university satisfaction has a positive impact on university brand preference.

University Enrollment

The decision to enroll in or attend one university over another is defined as university enrollment. Student enrollment entails tuition payment—full, scholarship, or partial payment—recorded in university financial systems, thereby making it a behavior that can be objectively measured. Undergraduate university enrollment is operationalized in this paper as tuition fee payment. Tuition fee payment has received a lot of attention in the literature due to its importance as a major source of revenue for universities, so it is logical that parents' brand preference with its purchase intention component is an indicator of parents' future planned behavior of payment of tuition. In addition, parents' advocacy of a university to their children is expected to affect university enrollment, as students are expected to be influenced by their parents as role models and major influencers. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H6: Parents' intention to advocate for a university positively affects university enrollment.

H7: Parents' university brand preference positively affects university enrollment.

METHODS

Study Context

Private universities in Egypt are new to the Egyptian higher education landscape. These universities are in direct competition with each other to increase their application pools, as they are not funded by the government (Eldegwy et al., 2018). Competition has been increasing ever since private universities were introduced in 1996 (Eldegwy et al., 2018). Most high-fee private universities have adopted a market-oriented strategy in line with the steady international trend that universities worldwide are embracing in terms of the marketing practice identified with corporations (Eldegwy et al., 2018). These high-fee private universities use communication channels that include advertisements on social media, billboards, and newspapers, as well as school visits and site visit events.

Data Collection Instrument

To ensure that valid scales of measurement are used in this study, we collected previously validated scales that have been published in the relevant literature. A few adjustments were required in order to

suit the context of higher education. Five-point Likert scales have been used in the majority of previous studies, while answers related to enrollment have been collected from university electronic systems. To measure the concept of university reputation, we adopted the scales of Eldegwy et al. (2018) to capture the extent to which parents believe that the university has a good reputation and good standing compared to other universities. Parents are asked to evaluate their encounters with staff during site visits and to rate the reliability of information, quality of support, and staff responsiveness. These scales are based on Mai's (2005) work. Parents' perception of other parents is based on parents rating other parents similarly, and these scales were adopted from Brocato et al. (2012). Parents visiting universities will experience the physical setting as part of a site tour and then rate their evaluation of the physical setting as impressive, modern, and comfortable. These scales were introduced by Sivasdas and Baker-Prewitt (2000) to capture parents' university satisfaction. Parents' brand preference scale, based on Ebrahim's (2013) work, rates the extent to which they prefer the university over another similar university and consider it to be their first option. We captured advocacy toward children utilizing the scales of Reichheld (2003). Finally, university enrollment data were collected from the university system.

Data Collection and Sample

First, the survey was produced in accordance with the relevant literature and was examined by two professors of marketing. Ten parents were also asked to review the survey to ensure that the language used was clear and valid. The final questionnaire was composed of 27 questions; the 28th response was obtained from the university's electronic system after enrollment.

Our study focused on direct experiences operationalized as campus site visits to high-fee (greater than 5000USD in all programs annually) private universities in Egypt. The rationale for including high-fee private universities rather than low-fee private universities is that high-fee universities undertake organized marketing activities, which include a formal campus site visit event, unlike low-fee universities. We examined the role of parents with regard to student enrollment; the population of parents of prospective students at high-fee universities is estimated to be 10,000 parents. The site visit was a planned on-campus experience designed to involve high school students' parents during the university shopping process (Moogan et al., 1999). In small groups of three to five parents, staff first conducted icebreaker activities and accompanied the parents to a general presentation designed to include university reputation, university staff and teaching, services and facilities, classes and curriculum, skills development, and preparation for the future (i.e., career prospects), social integration (i.e., extracurricular activities), IT support, and physical aspects. Staff then directed the parents to attend a specialized Q&A session. Parents were subsequently invited to a campus tour to experience the physical infrastructure of the campus.

Data were collected in August and September 2020. Only parents who participated in campus site visits were asked to complete the survey after the duration and nature of the study were explained to them. The distributed questionnaire informed the participants of the nature of the research study. Due to the highly competitive nature of the industry, a convenience sampling technique was adopted, which yielded only 339 surveys completed by actual applicants who were offered admission. This number is acceptable for structural equation modeling (SEM; Hair et al., 2019) and is well above the preferred 1:20 sample-to-variable ratio suggested by Hair et al. (2019), as the study included eight variables. Questionnaires were collected and linked to students' actual behavior (i.e., enrolled in the university).

RESULTS

To assess the reliability and validity of the constructs, we utilized SEM with the help of AMOS 20. All constructs ranged from .85 to .95 for composite reliability, which is above the threshold for acceptable internal consistency. In addition, the average variance extracted (AVE) was above the threshold of .5 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). According to all variables, the confirmatory factor

analysis (CFA) results possessed standardized factor loading greater than 0.5, providing evidence of convergent validity. The model's goodness-of-fit measures were as follows: $\chi^2 = 547.2$, $df = 206$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 2.66$, $IFI = 0.958$, $TLI = 0.948$, $CFI = 0.958$, and $RMSEA = 0.070$. The model was tested using SEM. Path mode fit had adequate fit: $X^2 25.4$, $df 7$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 3.63$, $IFI = 0.99$, $TLI = 0.97$, $CFI = 0.99$, and $RMSEA = .088$. Therefore, the model has a good fit with the data.

The results in Table 3 indicate that parent–staff encounters had a significant effect on university satisfaction ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.001$), meaning H1a is supported. The significant effect of perception of other parents on university satisfaction ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$) offers support for H1b, indicating that university reputation had a significant effect on university satisfaction ($\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H2. The results also support H3, as a quality physical setting had a significant effect on university satisfaction ($\beta = 0.37$, $p < 0.001$). The four predictors of university satisfaction explained 61% of the variation in this construct. University satisfaction had a significant effect on the intention to advocate the university to their children ($\beta = 0.98$, $p < 0.001$), which supports H4, with 53% of the variance in intention to advocate the university to their children explained by university satisfaction. H5 is supported as university satisfaction has a direct and significant effect on university brand preference ($\beta = 0.97$, $p < 0.001$), with 43% of the variation in university brand preference being explained by university satisfaction. Intention to advocate the university to children had a significant and direct effect on enrollment ($\beta = 0.66$, $p < 0.001$), which supports H6. The results also support H7, as university brand preference had a direct and significant effect on enrollment ($\beta = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$). The latter two constructs predict 59% of the variance in university enrollment.

Table 1. Constructs and findings of confirmatory factor analysis

Constructs	Items	Λ	T
Parent–staff encounters	The staff has: PSE1: . . . supported me in a timely manner	.90	--
	PSE2: . . . provided me with excellent and reliable information	.96	32.1
	PSE3: . . . provided me with good support	.95	31.4
University reputation	University X has: UR1: . . . a good reputation	.83	--
	UR2: . . . good reputation compared to other universities	.89	21.1
	UR3: . . . faculties known for having an excellent reputation	.92	22.3
	UR4: . . . been known for its educational program quality in all faculties	.93	23.1
	UR5: Other people I have met have a positive opinion about this university	.74	15.8

Table 1 continued on next page

Table 1 continued

Constructs	Items	Λ	T
Perceptions of other parents	POP1: I could relate with the other parents	.77	--
	POP2: I feel I am similar to the other parents	.80	20.0
	POP3: I feel there is a social similarity between me and other parents	.83	16.5
	POP4: I fit right in with the other parents	.84	16.7
	POP5: The behavior of the other parents was appropriate	.89	17.8
	POP6: The other parents' behavior was pleasant	.89	17.9
	POP7: I found that other parents acted pleasantly	.88	17.6
Physical setting	University X's: PS1: . . . facilities are impressive	.77	--
	PS2: . . . facilities are up to date	.93	17.6
	PS3: . . . outdoor public areas are admirable	.85	16.6
University satisfaction	University X has: UR1: . . . met my expectations	.88	--
	UR2: . . . fulfilled my needs	.87	23.5
	UR3: . . . satisfied with this university	.89	22.6
Intention to advocate to children	IAC1: I will talk positively about X university to my offspring	.80	--
	IAC2: I will encourage my offspring to join X university	.89	18.3
	IAC3: I will recommend X university to my offspring	.83	17.1
University brand preference	UBP1: I prefer X university over all other universities	.85	--
	UBP2: I like X university more than any other university	.90	22.0
	UBP3: X university is my first choice over other universities	.89	21.4

Table 2. Composite reliability, correlation matrix, and average variance extracted scores for all constructs

Constructs	Composite reliability	AVE	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Parent–staff encounters (1)	0.96	0.90	1							
University reputation (2)	0.94	0.70	0.49	1						
Perception of other parents (3)	0.96	0.71	0.56	0.47	1					
Physical settings (4)	0.89	0.70	0.61	0.56	0.58	1				
University satisfaction (5)	0.92	0.80	0.60	0.49	0.65	0.66	1			
Intention to advocate to children (6)	0.90	0.70	0.48	0.53	0.51	0.62	0.56	1		
University brand preference (7)	0.90	0.77	0.51	0.52	0.54	0.65	0.54	0.48	1	
University enrollment (8)	n/a	n/a	0.45	0.35	0.63	0.47	0.41	0.36	0.59	1
Note: AVE = average variance extracted										

Table 3. Structural Equation Model Results

Hypothesized paths	Beta	t-value	Hypothesis result
H1a: Parent-staff encounters—University satisfaction	0.26***	6.95	Supported
H1b: Perception of other parents—University satisfaction	0.22***	4.71	Supported
H2: University reputation—University satisfaction	0.15***	4.66	Supported
H3: Physical setting—University satisfaction	0.37***	8.27	Supported
H4: University satisfaction—Intention to advocate to children	0.98***	20.93	Supported
H5: University satisfaction—University brand preference	0.97***	18.44	Supported
H6: Parents' intention to advocate to children—Enrollment	0.66***	8.82	Supported
H7: University brand preference—Enrollment	0.36***	5.82	Supported
R2			
University satisfaction	0.61		
Parents' intention to recommend to children	0.53		
Parents' university brand preference	0.43		
Enrollment	0.59		

Note: Sig. at *** $P < .001$

DISCUSSION

We believe that a finding of special relevance is the significance of parents' perception of other parents. Interestingly, our results suggest that the direct effect of perceptions of other parents on satisfaction is comparable to the direct effect of staff–parent quality encounters on satisfaction. The importance of employee–consumer interactions is extensively cited in service marketing literature. Relevant brands must establish meaningful relationships with brand ambassadors (e.g., academics). The higher education literature supports the idea that university staff members play a pivotal role in driving students' satisfaction (e.g., Eldegwy et al., 2018; Parahoo et al., 2013). This new construct is a contribution to higher education marketing literature. Consumers are expected to enjoy being surrounded by others from similar backgrounds. Examples of previously studied contexts in which other consumers' perception was found to be a significant driver of positive consumer evaluations include pubs and shopping stores (Brocato et al., 2012). Within the higher education context, other parents' socially similar and appropriate behavior at site visit events enhanced the overall quality of parents' social experiences during the crucial university evaluation stage and proved to be a significant predictor of parents' university satisfaction. Another possible explanation is that parents may perceive other parents' social similarity as a clue for educational quality. In other words, parents may attribute the university's brand ability to attract socially similar parents as a signal of the university's brand benefits resonating with similar others. Therefore, parents within socially similar groups may be more comfortable making risky university enrollment decisions than parents in socially non-similar groups or those who make the decision as isolated individuals.

Our extension of Parahoo et al.'s (2013) model, which investigated student university satisfaction compared to parents' university satisfaction, produced strikingly similar results. Parahoo et al. (2013) reported that 60.9% of the variation in student university satisfaction was explained by similar antecedents to those employed in our study, which found a 61% variance in parents' university satisfaction. Parahoo et al.'s (2013) antecedents to students' university satisfaction are university reputation, human interactions (academic staff–student, administrative staff–student, and student–student interactions), and effectiveness of technological university facilities. The same logic applied

to parents as much as it did to students. Parents are likely to be as equally satisfied as students with good reputations in universities that offer quality social experiences (staff encounters, perception of others) enabled within quality physical settings. A possible justification for this resemblance is the similarity of values and beliefs between parents and children. Parents transfer their values and beliefs to their children through the process of intergenerational transmission (Albanese et al., 2016). Children interact with their parents on a daily basis, and it is possible that they have learned to appreciate similar quality service attributes during their life exposures to their parents' life experiences.

The empirical nature of this paper allows us to report the proposed model's relatively high explanatory power of 59%. This is of particular importance for two reasons. First, the antecedents of enrollment decisions are based on parents' rather than students' perspectives. Second, the enrollment decision is based on actual payment of tuition fees rather than self-reported intentions. Consequently, there is reason to propose the role of parents as co-consumers. Previous research has confirmed the role of parents as prominent influencers in their children's higher education decision-making (Iacopini, 2017; Sánchez, 2014). It is common for high-involvement decisions such as university enrollment to be made jointly (Moogan & Baron, 2003). A significant finding was our identification of an additional role for some parents as co-decision-makers in addition to their role as influencers. Verma (1982) concluded that family patriarchs play more effective roles as deciders in high-involvement purchases, such as university decisions. It is our view that parents are co-decision-makers in emerging Eastern markets due to the relatively high explanatory power of the enrollment construct. The study also confirmed the role of parents as influencers in students' university decisions (validated student enrollment), as explained by parents' intention to advocate for the university to their children.

CONCLUSION

It is intriguing that the role of parents as co-decision-makers in university enrollment decisions has not been empirically investigated before in an Eastern context. This paper introduces a novel approach to explaining parents' role through actual rather than intended behavior. Evidence from the East and West shows a rise in authoritarian forums of governments due to the COVID-19 crisis (Yeganeh, 2021). Crises tend to embolden strong leaders to take bold and swift actions (Yeganeh, 2021). The situation of parents can be analogized. We argue that COVID-19 has caused a generalizable shift in power toward parents. The recognition of this proposed global phenomenon may be considered significant, as it gives reason to revise the written-in-stone roles of consumers in the decision-making process in fields beyond higher education marketing.

The present study makes several contributions to the existing literature. First, we recognize the importance of other parents' perceptions as a significant driver of parents' university satisfaction, and we believe that the inclusion of this construct is novel as it was underplayed in previous higher education marketing literature. Furthermore, the comparative effect size of this new construct to the well-supported staff constructs affect size, calling for further investigation into parents' risk-averse behavior. We found it difficult to attribute the strength of this construct to enhancing the social experience of parents during site visits and believe that the safety-in-numbers argument is more relevant. Second, within this context, we also proposed that university satisfaction may be achieved not by meeting expectations but rather by allowing parents to establish the expectations and then meeting their criteria for the right fit. The example of admission selectivity representing quality university service drives dissatisfaction due to the student's ineligibility. Third, we proposed a context (i.e., site visit) in which relevant brand service attributes are synthesized, offering the parent-consumer a direct hands-on experience that we consider to be an opportunity for a pre-purchase trial of the university service; pre-purchase trials have been reported to be limited to products due to the inseparability dimension of services (Gabbott & Hogg, 1994).

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

In practice, universities are complex and fragmented institutions, as they are composed of subprograms and dependent on complex and difficult-to-evaluate human experiences, rendering university brand management a challenging endeavor (Eldegwy et al., 2018; Naheen & Elsharnouby, 2021). This study offers implications for communicating the university brand to an important co-decision-maker, namely, the consumer-parent. Therefore, universities may find it prudent to offer clues of quality to parents during campus site visits to decrease the overall complexity of making the university enrollment decision.

We advise universities to enhance the quality of parents' campus site visit experiences by considering the following recommendations: (a) categorize parents prior to site visit invitations according to the new dimension of parents' social similarity; (b) invest in physical resources and showcase those resources to parents; (c) carefully select responsive, sociable, creditable, and presentable brand ambassadors (academic staff) in order to establish a relationship with parents; and (d) embark on marketing campaigns that aim to enhance overall university reputation among its different stakeholders, including parents. These recommendations are expected to increase the likelihood of parents' university satisfaction, thereby having positive effects on university brand preference and intention to advocate the university to their children. Brand preference and intention to advocate drive the highly valued university enrollment.

Site visit events offer universities an effective tool to enhance brand preference and encourage advocacy behavior among prospective student families. The utilization of a university's site visit events is a managerially sound decision. Site visit events are relatively easy to monitor, measure, and manage compared to indirect experience channels such as advertising, as site visit events are conducted in controlled settings with university personnel and can easily access parents' feedback. Attendance at site visit events is not mandatory, so universities are advised to promote their site visit events and motivate parents to attend them, as they are easy to customize to different parent inquiries and concerns.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research has several limitations that can be considered a call for future research. The most significant limitation of this study is that we presented an argument that proposes a global power shift in favor of parents due to COVID-19 effects on society. However, our empirical investigation was limited to the context of the East due to resource constraints. Therefore, we propose that future extensions of our Eastern developed model be applied to the Western context in order to substantiate the generalizability argument. Second, although this empirical investigation may be the first to explain parents' responses through objective data represented by actual tuition fees payment rather than subjective behavioral intention, it is limited by the fact that we did not find precedents in the literature for benchmarking the results. Third, we proposed that parents with sufficient cultural capital will opt to attend university site visits and that the optional attendance nature of the event will exclude low culture capital parents who willingly decline to play active roles. In retrospect, we find this assumption to be simplistic, as some parents may decide not to attend site visits for completely different reasons, such as parents working at the university or some frequently returning alumni. A professor who teaches at the university might have no reason to attend the site visit if his or her children decide to enroll. Therefore, although the assumption that the optional attendance nature of site visits may allow for the exclusion of low culture parents, the site visit will not necessarily attract all high cultural capital parents. The final limitation stems from the interpretation of the results. Although empirical evidence supports the hypothesized role of parents as co-decision-makers within the Eastern context due to the high explanatory power of the model, we do not know its precise causes. The data were collected from an Eastern culture, which has a hierarchical power structure, in the post-COVID-19 era. It may

be the case that the co-decision-maker role has always been present in the Eastern context but was not theorized due to the Western domination in the literature. It may also be that Eastern parents decided to play this new role as a reactive measure to the post-COVID-19 reality. It is our view that both factors conspired to produce the results of our study. The decision-maker role may have always been present in the Eastern context, and the COVID-19 pandemic may have made the role more significant.

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