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Chair of Neuromarketing

Beyond Academics: Exploring the Impact of Advertising Appeals on Parental School Choice

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Academic Year 2022/23

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Abstract

This thesis explores the phenomenon of parental decision-making in the education market, with a particular focus on the impact of marketing appeals. In today's increasingly competitive educational panorama, parents are faced with complex choices when choosing schools for their children. This research explores the influence of two distinct marketing appeals: academic-centred and child-centred appeals, on parental intentions to enrol their children in schools.

Through an analysis of survey data, this study demonstrates that academic-centred appeals significantly increase the perceived credibility of educational institutions. This highlights the role of tailored marketing appeals in shaping parental perceptions of schools. Additionally, the research reveals a strong positive correlation between perceived credibility and parental intention to enrol their children in a school.

Furthermore, this investigation uncovers the mediating role of perceived credibility in the relationship between advertising appeals and parental intention to enrol. Specifically, academic-centred appeals significantly increase perceived credibility elevating parental intention to enrol.

The study also examined the impact of gender in this relationship. In the context of child-centred appeals, female parents displayed a slightly higher intention to enrol their children in schools compared to their male counterparts.

This research contributes valuable insights into the dynamics of school choice and marketing appeals. Educational institutions seeking to improve their enrolment strategies can benefit from the findings, which emphasize the importance of shaping marketing strategies to influence parental perceptions and decisions effectively.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Professor Rumen Pozharliev for his guidance, mentorship, and valuable insights throughout this journey.

I extend my appreciation to all the family, friends, and professional / academic colleagues that offered their assistance, shared their experiences, and provided constructive feedback.

1. Introduction

In recent years, some regions of the globe, are witnessing an impactful shift in the educational market. As educational institutions, particularly private, continue to proliferate, a competitive market has emerged where schools seek the attention and enrolment of students. This panorama can represent a challenge and an opportunity for educators and schools. Along the years, an interest in the private education sector has surged, driven by several key factors and parents face increasingly complex decisions when it comes to choosing the right school for their children.

When parents are making decisions regarding the education of their children, they are influenced by several factors. Explained in the Rational Choice Theory, the parental decision-making process was normally seen as a utilitarian calculation (Becker, 1986; Bast & Walberg, 2004). However, recent research reveals a more distinct and social decision-making process (Coleman, 1988). A relevant study present in the literature, identifies academic-centred and child-centred factors as two important categories of factors influencing parental decision-making when choosing a school for their child (Woods et al., 1998).

Several studies have been showing that parents tend to prioritize academic-centred factors when making school choices for their children (Burgess et al., 2015; Borghans et al., 2014; Collins and Snell, 2000; Bosetti, 2007; Fung & Lam, 2011). On the other hand, a more recent body of research shows that, child-centred factors, most specifically, personal growth, happiness, supportive environments, and caring teachers, are often prioritized by parents (Mahfooz & Normén-Smith, 2022; Chan & Yeung, 2020).

Considering the studies reviewed in the literature, the present research decided to analyse how advertising appeals can influence parental decision-making. Advertising appeals in the education market can include different strategies implemented by educational institutions to attract parents and students. According to the literature on advertising appeals, it is possible to categorize them into rational and emotional appeals (Albers-Miller & Stafford, 1999).

Even though, there is a robust body of research with regards to the importance of factors influencing parental decision-making, there is a gap in the literature regarding the specific impact of different types of appeals, particularly appeals related to academic-centred (rational) and child-centred factors (emotional), on parental intentions to enrol their children in a school. This research aims to analyse this gap by exploring the effects of these two advertising appeals on parental decision-making processes.

According to what was mentioned before, the present study aims to answer the following research questions:

- How academic-centred and child-centred advertising appeals influence parental intention to enrol their child in a school?

- Does the perceived credibility of a school mediate the relationship between advertising appeals and parental intention to enrol their child in a school?
- Does gender moderate the impact of advertising appeals on parental decision-making in education?

In order to investigate these research questions, a primary study was conducted represented by an online survey. A diverse sample of participants completed the survey. Participants were randomly exposed to academic-centred or child-centred advertising appeals. After that, assessments of perceived credibility and parental intention to enrol their child in the school.

The analysis revealed that academic-centred appeals significantly increased perceived credibility and parental intention to enrol their child in the school, compared to child-centred appeals. Perceived credibility was identified as a key mediator in the relationship between advertising appeals and parental decision-making. On the other hand, gender did not present a significant moderating effect, but it presented small variations in the context of child-centred appeals.

This research contributes to the theory on parental decision-making in the education market by going beyond traditional rational choice models. The study examines the specific way parents make choices for their child's education. It also recognizes the influential role that advertising plays in these decisions. The present research considers both academic and child-centred factors, and it provides a possible view of how parents decide.

Moreover, it adds value to the literature on advertising appeals in education because it demonstrates the significant impact of academic-centred (vs. child-centred) appeals on parental intentions to enrol. This study tries to analyse more than the impact of the advertising appeals and emphasizes the importance of maintaining a balanced relationship between advertising messages and the core strengths of the specific educational institution.

At the same, the research emphasizes the importance of marketers and educational institutions to balance the communication strategies, it also highlights the importance of aligning marketing strategies with what parents expect and value.

According to the results of the present study, highlighting academic excellence can enhance an institution reputation and attract more students.

However, it's worth noting, that like any study, this one has some limitations. Future research could explore other factors influencing parental decisions, such as location, family income, discounts, etc. Future researchers can also dive deeper into how gender plays a role in these relationships. Additionally, qualitative research methods could provide a richer understanding of the aspects behind the parental decision-making in education.

In summary, this research aims to shed light on the process of parental decision-making in the education market, with a strong focus on the impact of advertising appeals. By addressing this aspect, educational institutions and marketers can better tailor their strategies to attract parents and guardians, and in turn increase their enrolments.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Private Education Market

Along the years, an interest in the private education sector has surged, this interest was driven by several key factors. One significant driver of this interest can be explained by the rapid expansion of the private education sector, which has seen a great growth in various markets worldwide, particularly in regions like Asia, Africa and Europe (Moujaes et al., 2011). This growth can be, in part, justified by the increasing personal wealth, which enabled families to explore alternatives to the public education systems, sometimes considered poor by parents (James, 1993). Additionally, governments have faced challenges in meeting the escalating demand for education, particularly in nations with limited resources. As a result, parents have turned to the private sector as a valid alternative, giving opportunity for the emergence of this market. (Mattei & Verhoest, 2010).

Recent studies have highlighted the expansion of the private education sector. Supporting the evidence from James (1993), a report from the International Finance Corporation (IFC) indicate that the rising of personal wealth has empowered families to seek educational alternatives to public education (Thacker & Cuadra, 2014). Furthermore, in countries where governments struggle to keep pace with the growing demand for education, private institutions have stepped in to provide needed support, especially in poor nations. Consequently, private enrolment in education has outpaced public enrolment in numerous regions across the globe, with the IFC estimating the market size of the private education sector at over \$400 billion (Thacker & Cuadra, 2014).

Parents faced with choices between public and private alternatives, are increasingly opting for private education. In the literature it is possible to identify a consensus, that in several regions, private schools offer attractive alternatives to parents, including some indicators of higher efficiency, such as increased teacher effort and reduced absenteeism (Day Ashley et al., 2014). However, along with this findings, a growing body of research from a human rights perspective has raised concerns about the implications of private education's growth for the public sector's responsibility to ensure the right to education. This perspective has also revealed issues of stratification in the educational systems (UNESCO, 2015).

It is possible to state that several factors justifying this growth within the market. Firstly, parents are demanding a higher quality education. Parents awareness of the advantages of private education are increasing, they are now turning to private institutions to provide a possibly upgraded educational experience for their children. Additionally, the openness to parental engagement, access to advanced technology and educational resources, and the provision of extracurricular activities by private schools are among other key factors contributing to the growth of the private education market (Custom Market Insights, 2023).

Additionally, a significant trend influencing parental preferences in the education market is the generational shifts. According to Vice Media Group (2021) the preferences of Gen Z parents diverge from other generations. While previous generations prioritized academic achievements, today's parents may prioritize holistic development, emotional well-being, and education as a path to more options, not only credentials (Chan & Yeung, 2020). Considering these generational changes, marketers must be aware of the variety and complexity of desires and values of parents as they make important decisions about their children's education, especially at a young age.

Parents now face many choices for their children's education, because of the rapid marketization of education. Educational institutions must now respond to the high expectations of parents, since they prioritize not only academic excellence, standards, or reputation, but also the wellbeing and happiness of the children (Stearns, 2019).

To conclude, the education industry is experiencing growth and transformation, influenced by technological advancements, globalization, and shifting parental preferences across generations. Having in consideration all the aspects mention above, marketers face the challenge of meeting an increasingly diverse and demanding audience: parents seeking educational institutions aligned with their values (Resende et al., 2011).

2.2 Parental Decision Making in the Education Market

The process of parental decision-making in the education market plays an important role in determining the educational experiences of their children. With education being increasingly exposed to marketization, parents now face a variety of choices when selecting the most appropriate educational institutions for their children. In this section, this research analyses various perspectives on parental decision-making, and the factors and influences that guide parents in making choices about their children's education.

While Rational Choice Theory has been one of the main theories that helped researchers comprehend parental decision-making in the education sector, contemporary research indicates that the actual process is more complex than a simple calculation of economic returns on educational investments (Hatcher, 1998). When examining parental decision-making in the context of school choice, the Rational Choice Theory perspective reveals three key factors that guide the process: information, available choices, and a cost-benefit analysis of the best option (Bast & Walberg, 2004). According to this theory, parents are considered utility maximisers, making decisions based on clear value preferences and calculations of the costs, benefits, and probabilities of success associated with different educational options (Becker, 1986). This perspective suggests that parents actively look for schools that offer the best return on their investment in terms of their children's academic achievement and future prospects.

However, different researchers challenge the idea that parental decision-making is simply based on rational calculations. Instead, they highlight the complex and social nature of the decision-making process. As Coleman (1988) analysis, individuals typically engage in a search for information when faced with significant decisions. In the case of parental decision-making for education, this search involves different rationalities and elements of chance (Helland & Wiborg, 2019). Parents often have into consideration their personal values and subjective educational goals and seek guidance from their social and professional networks to gather information. However, the capacity of parents to make informed choices can be limited if their network does not provide access to relevant and valuable information regarding school choice options (Smrekar & Goldring, 1999).

Within this context, Woods, Bagley, and Glatter (1998) conducted an analysis of parental decision-making and identified two major thematic concerns: academic-centred and child-centred.

Academic-centred vs Child-centred factors

Academic-centred factors are focused around parents' emphasis on the quality of education and a school's commitment to academic excellence. The academic-centred factors mainly include factors mainly centred on academic aspects, such as academic standards, examination results, and the presence of a sixth form in the school (Woods et al., 1998). Parents that prioritize their child's educational achievements have more likelihood of seeking institutions with high academic standards and strong performance in standardized tests (Burgess et al., 2015; Borghans et al., 2014; Collins and Snell, 2000; Bosetti, 2007). These academic factors can be key indicators of a school's success in transmitting knowledge and fostering intellectual growth, making them essential criteria in parental school choice (Fung & Lam, 2011).

Studies reveal that parents value academic standards and prefer schools with higher academic quality to attract their children (Burgess et al., 2015). Academic quality is often measured by factors like national examination scores (Borghans et al., 2014). The positive relationship between academic performance and parental choice emphasizes the potential for school choice to elevate academic standards, as schools compete for students based on their academic achievements (Burgess et al., 2015).

On the other side, child-centred factors are centred on the holistic development of students and prioritize their emotional well-being and personal growth. Parents who value a nurturing and supportive educational environment prioritize factors like the child's happiness and the presence of caring teachers (Gramaxo et al., 2023). According to Mahfooz and Normén-Smith (2022), “happy schools” play a crucial role in developing social cohesion, creating supportive communities, and cultivating a “lifelong love of learning”. In this context, some of the analysed literature refers that, schools that provide a safe and positive learning environment, along with teachers that show positive attitudes and attributes, are highly preferred among parenta (Gramaxo et al., 2023).

Chan & Yeung (2020) mentioned in their study that parents in Hong Kong frequently consider their child's happiness as the most important criteria when selecting kindergartens for their children. Gramaxo et al. (2023) indicated that parents value a school's physical environment, social activities, and a fair assessment process as integral components contributing to their child's well-being and overall happiness.

While the present review has been examining factors influencing parental decision-making in the context of educational service, it is important to mention that the decision-making process is influenced by various aspects. Beyond the academic and child-centred factors discussed earlier, parents also take into account a range of practical and contextual factors, such as the geographical proximity of schools to their residence or workplace, the financial feasibility of enrolling their child, the availability of scholarships or discounts, the admissions criteria, the overall infrastructure and facilities provided by the institution and other relevant aspects (Borghans et al., 2014; Burgess et al., 2015; Hofflinger et al., 2020).

Altogether, these factors, create reflexions that shape the choices of parents and reflect the diverse needs and circumstances of families in the education market. Accordingly, while this review is mainly looking at the different aspects of the educational service, it's important to remember that parents' decisions are influenced by a mix of practical considerations and their hopes for their children's future.

2.3 Advertising Appeals

In the dynamic world of marketing, effective communication with potential consumers is essential for businesses to be successful. As one of this communication strategies this research highlights the concept of advertising appeals, which can be used as a powerful tool to influence consumer behaviour and shape their perceptions of products or services (Zhang et al., 2014). The choice of advertising appeal plays an important role in determining the success of marketing campaigns, and impacts crucial elements such as attention, awareness, attitude, and consumer behaviour (Rizwan et al., 2013).

Advertising appeals can be seen as one of the driving aspects of advertisements, these appeals utilize the persuasiveness necessary to deliver the message marketers intend to transmit to the audience. A well-designed advertising appeal can attract and arouse the consumers, making them to act and engage with the brand (Jovanovic, Vlastelica, & Cicvaric Kostic, 2016). Researchers have classified advertising appeals into two broad categories: rational and emotional (Albers-Miller & Stafford, 1999). Each type of appeal offers a different approach that allows marketers to connect with consumers, and try to reach their distinct preferences and motivations.

Rational vs Emotional appeals

Rational appeals aim to provide logical reasoning and information to persuade consumers (Stafford and Day, 1995). Belch and Belch (2009) suggest that rational appeals emphasize features of the service and the benefit of using a particular brand. Stafford (1996), argues that rational appeals (specifically verbal tangible

ones) can lead to, more positive attitudes toward the advertisement, higher repurchase intentions and higher levels of recall for experimental services. Liebermann and Flint-Goor (1999) mentioned that for experience services, rational appeals are more effective. Rational appeals highlight specific characteristics of the product/ service, such as quality, feature, economy, competitive advantage, performance, popularity, among others (Belch and Belch, 2009).

In the context of the education industry, rational appeals could be associated with factors that align with academic-centred considerations. These could include highlighting specific academic characteristics of the educational institution, such as academic standards, examination results, and/or the presence of specialized programs or subjects. When parents are presented with rational appeals, they may focus on the measurable and objective aspects of the school's performance and academic offerings, aiming to make an informed decision based on concrete data and information (Belch & Belch, 2009).

Emotional appeal is an advertising strategy that aims to generate either positive or negative emotions in consumers in order to influence their attitudes and positive emotions regarding the product/ service (Albers-Miller & Stafford, 1999). Many research studies have explored the effects of emotional appeals in the different contexts of advertising. These studies provided evidence that emotional advertising bring an influence on customers' responses to advertisements (Edell & Burke, 1987), grabs their attention more effectively (Olney, Holbrook & Batra, 1991), and can impact their attitudes towards ads and brands (Aaker, Stayman & Hagerty, 1986).

In the specific context of the education industry the literature is scarce, despite this, research from other sectors can offer valuable insights. For instance, a study by Mattila (1999) in the tourism industry demonstrated the positive impact of an emotional message strategy in advertising, making the audience liking of the advertisement and positively affected future purchase intentions. In the same line of works, research by Geuens, De Pelsmacker, and Faseur (2010) on the impact of emotional vs non emotional appeals on different types of products/ services revealed that emotional appeals have better results than non-emotional ones in terms of the attitude towards the ad and the brand. In an empirical ad content study, that analyses the relationship between emotional and rational appeals and product type (goods or services) Liebermann and Flint-Goor (1999) established that “emotionally dominant appeals fit most appropriately credence services”. Although these studies don't apply directly to the education industry, they provide a basis for understanding the potential effects of emotional appeals in marketing communications.

Moriarty (1991) identified a range of emotional appeals that can be utilized in advertising: excitement, fear (danger, personal embarrassment), family (love, protection), guilt, love (affection, romance), nostalgia, pleasure (humour, happiness and joy), poignancy, pride, relief and sorrow (grief, suffering).

Despite the scarce literature in the education industry, it is possible to state that emotional appeals may be related to factors associated with child-centred considerations. These appeals might focus on creating an emotional connection with parents by emphasizing the happiness, well-being, and personal growth of their children in the school environment. Emotional appeals can tap into parents' desires for their children to have a nurturing and caring learning experience, fostering positive emotions and attachments to the educational institution (Moriarty, 1991).

Taking into consideration the extensive literature on parental decision-making and the role of advertising appeals in the different industries, this research proposes the following hypothesis to guide the model:

H1: Exposure to academic-centred appeals significantly increases parents' intention to enrol their child in the school compared to child-centred appeals.

This hypothesis is based on the extensive body of research indicating that parents give higher levels of value to academic excellence and measurable educational outcomes when making school choices for their children (Burgess et al., 2015; Borghans et al., 2014; Collins and Snell, 2000; Bosetti, 2007).

While past research has broadly analysed message appeals in other industries, to the author's best knowledge, there are no studies investigating the effect of using a rational vs. emotional message appeal in the communication of education (specifically k-12) services.

2.4 Parents' Perceived Credibility

In the context of school choice and how parents make decisions, credibility can become an important factor to consider in this process. Credibility, as described by Erdem and Swait (2004), can be described as the trust consumers give to the information they receive from a brand. It's about consumers seeing a brand as not only knowledgeable but also reliable in keeping its promises. For parents who are trying to navigate the complex choice of school for their children, credibility becomes a key player in shaping how they see and what they plan to do when it comes to choosing a school for their children (Collins and Snell, 2000).

The influence of brand credibility on purchase intentions has been analysed in some service categories, as highlighted by Baek and King (2011). It is supported by factors like reduced perceived risk, increased perceived quality, improved value for money, and decreased information costs.

The influence of university rankings on brand credibility and perceived differentiation in the context of higher education institutions (HEIs) has been explored by Kethüda (2022). The study suggests that HEI rankings have a significant positive influence on how the perceived credibility and distinctiveness of university brands is seen by consumers. This influence becomes particularly evident when universities communicate attributes associated with academic success, effectively communicating to possible students

and their families. This highlights the importance of rankings in shaping a university's brand image, as evidenced by how external recognition can impact consumers' perceptions regarding the educational institution.

Credibility, which can be related to how much people believe in a brand's competence and reliability, plays a natural role in building its reputation. When parents perceive an educational institution as credible, it influences their overall impression of the school's reputation. The connection between credibility and reputation can be important in influencing how parents perceive the institution's ability to deliver on its promises. This alignment is crucial in building trust and confidence among parents.

As highlighted by Kethüda (2022), a school's reputation, like a corporate reputation, is highly influenced by its perceived credibility. A positive reputation will generate positive word-of-mouth behaviours, emphasising the relationship between these two factors in shaping parental attitudes, satisfaction, and loyalty towards educational institutions (Skallerud, 2011).

The important role of school reputation in shaping parents' decision-making processes is valued in a research conducted by Kosunen (2013). The author emphasizes that the reputation of schools emerges as a pivotal factor influencing parental logic when making choices about their children's education. This concept has been addressed in other contexts, with Power and Whitty (2002) ranking schools based on their reputation for academic and social selectiveness. Moreover, the instrumental order of a school, be it academic performance or the future exchange value of education, is linked to reputation assessments.

Having in consideration the corporate reputation literature, research by Skallerud (2011) mentions the impact of reputation on organizational success. In the educational context, a school's reputation may be parallel to the corporate context, influencing parental satisfaction and loyalty. As good reputation fosters positive word-of-mouth behaviours, customer loyalty, and financial performance in the business world, it follows that a school's reputation would similarly shape parental attitudes and behaviours towards it. This connection may highlight the important role of perceived credibility in parental decision-making within the education sector.

Considering the above, this research adds three more hypotheses to its study:

H2: Exposure to academic-centred appeals significantly increases parents' perceived credibility of the school compared to child-centred appeals.

H3: Higher perceived credibility significantly increases parents' intention to enrol their child in the school.

H4: Perceived Credibility will mediate the relationship between the type of ad appeal and parents' intention to enrol their child in the school.

2.5 Gender Differences in Parental Decision-Making

Parental decision-making regarding school choice has been considered an interesting topic in educational research, with gender differences emerging as a relevant aspect to mention in this dynamic process. Several studies analyse these gender disparities.

In a study from Hein & Lewko (1994), the authors explore parenting styles in families of students. Findings indicate that males tend to attribute greater emphasis on measurable outcomes, aligning with academic-centred factors, while females often prioritize the emotional well-being and family-related variables, possibly matching the panorama of child-centred factors.

A different study revealed that mothers are more likely to engage in extensive information-seeking behaviours when evaluating potential schools (Brown, 2022). They tend to seek niche school environments, schools that will keep their children safe or schools with a positive racial environment (Brown, 2022; Verhoest & Mattei, 2010). In a study by Way et al. (2013) focused on parenting beliefs of mothers from Nanjing, China, the mothers they interviewed had broader goals for their children beyond academic success, including being happy, self-sufficient, and socially and emotionally well adjusted.

These studies emphasize the importance of recognizing and understanding gender differences in parental decision-making regarding school choice. While mothers and fathers may show different priorities, it's important to acknowledge that these distinctions are not absolute and may intersect with other factors. This underscores the need for a deeper approach in educational marketing strategies to understand these diverse parental preferences and values.

Despite this and building on the gender-related literature discussed earlier, the Hypothesis 5 of this research aims to understand the specific hypothesis that mothers assign a higher level of priority to child-centred factors when selecting a school for their child. This hypothesis arises from a growing body of research suggesting that maternal perspectives often emphasize the emotional well-being, happiness, and personal growth of their children. Understanding to what point mothers prioritize child-centred appeals in the school choice process can add valuable insights on the dynamics of parental decision-making.

H5: Mothers give more priority to child-centred factors when choosing a school for their child compared to fathers.

The overall conceptual model of this thesis has been reported in figure 1.

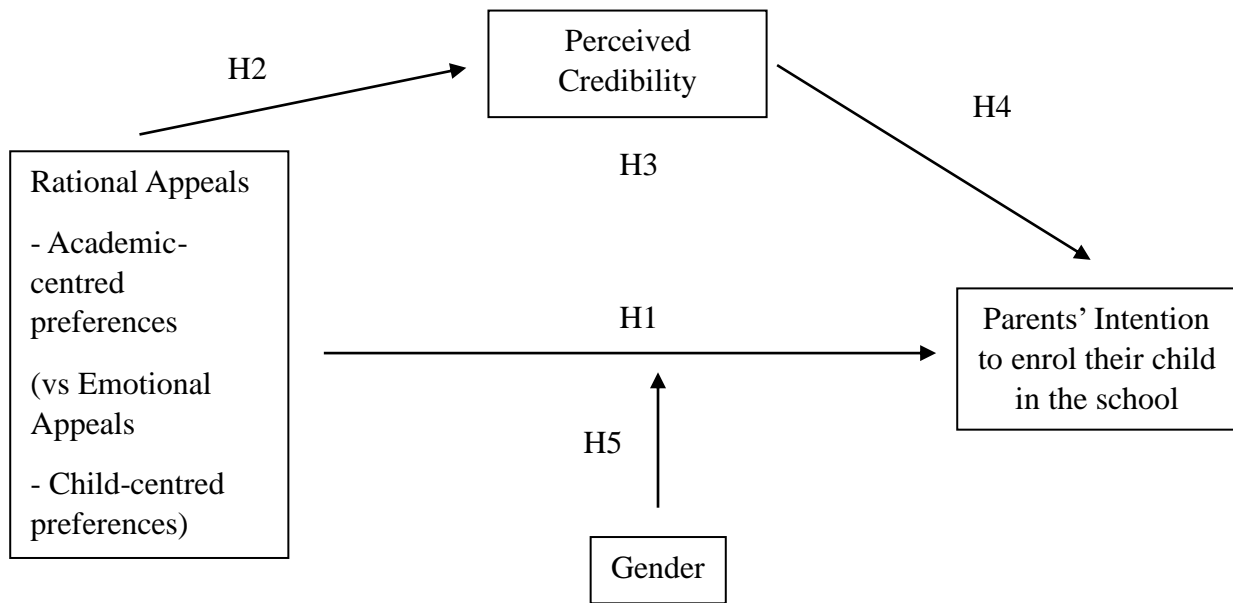


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of the Variables in the Study.

3. Methodology and Procedure

3.1 Method

In order to test the hypotheses presented in this study, a primary investigation was conducted through an online survey using Qualtrics, focusing on Perceived Credibility and Parents' Intention to Enrol their child in the school. The study explored how exposure to fictitious school advertisements, based on factors known to influence parental decision-making as documented in the literature may affect Parents' Intention to Enrol. Additionally, this research considered the potential mediating role of Perceived Credibility and the moderating effect of gender.

To ensure a diverse pool of respondents, the survey was distributed randomly via WhatsApp, Facebook, and LinkedIn. Respondents accessed the questionnaire through anonymous links, guaranteeing the confidentiality of their responses. The survey was exclusively available in the English language to maintain uniformity in the responses. The survey was designed to be concise, with the average completion time being less than 3 minutes.

3.2 Participants

A total of 279 participants completed the survey. Among these, 187 responses were valid, meeting the specific criteria. Some participants did not pass the manipulation check, while others were not parents of children under the age of 18, aligning with the focus of this investigation. Regarding gender, respondents represented a balanced distribution, with 50.8% identifying as male and 48.1% as female. Additionally, 0.5% of participants identified as non-binary or third gender, while another 0.5% chose not to specify their gender. Geographically, participants were spread across the globe. A substantial portion, 38.5%, resided in Portugal, while 28.9% in South Africa, the remaining participants hailed from various regions worldwide. Aged ranging from 21 to 53 years, the average age of the respondents was 33.45 years, with a standard deviation of 15.75 years.

3.3 Procedure

The study employed a 2 (Ad Appeal: Academic-centred vs. Child-centred) between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions, academic-centred or child-centred appeal. To ensure unbiased judgment, the advertisements featured a school without specifying the brand, and the brand's name was fictitious.

Firstly, participants were asked to provide demographic information, including gender, age, country of residence, and whether they were parents of children under 18 years old.

Before viewing the stimulus, participants were informed that they would see an advertisement for a school. No additional details about the source or platform were provided.

The stimuli for the study consisted of a picture representing either an academic-centred or child-centred appeal scenario. Each scenario was accompanied by a caption adapted according to the appeal type based on the literature previously analysed.

Following the stimulus presentation, participants were asked to carefully read the caption and then respond to two scales: 1) **Perceived Credibility of the School:** Participants indicated their agreement with statements assessing the credibility of the school featured in the child-centred appeal advertisement. A five-point Likert scale was used for each statement (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). The scales used were adapted from Newell and Goldsmith (2001) to measure expertise and experience. 2) **Parents' Intention to Enrol:** Participants assessed their likelihood of enrolling their child in the school based on the child-centred appeal. Two items were used, measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). These items were adapted from Lepkowska-White, Brashear, and Weinberger (2003) to measure purchase intention toward the product in the ad.

4. Results

Before testing the hypotheses presented, data were analysed using IBM SPSS Software. After eliminating from the database the answers of those respondents who did not pass the manipulation check, a total of 187 responses was analysed. One dummy variable, “Ad_ap” (0= Academic-centred; 1=Child-centred), was created in order to identify to which condition each participant was assigned.

After being shown the stimulus, respondents were asked to indicate perceived credibility on four items scale and their intention to enrol the child in the school on a two-item questionnaire. In order to ensure reliability of the scales, the items of which each of the two was composed were examined using Cronbach’s Alpha.

4.1 Reliability of the scales

For the scale measuring perceived credibility, Cronbach's alpha analysis showed a positive coefficient of (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.905$). This indicates a high level of internal consistency among the items comprising the perceived credibility scale. In other words, the questions related to perceived credibility exhibited a strong degree of interrelatedness, suggesting that respondents' responses to these questions were consistent with one another.

Similarly, for the scale measuring parental intention to enrol their child in the school, Cronbach's alpha analysis produced a positive coefficient (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.918$). This result reflects a very high level of internal consistency among the items that make up the intention to enrol scale. These findings suggest that the questions related to parental intention to enrol consistently assessed this construct, reinforcing the reliability of the scale.

4.2 Results

4.2.1 The direct effect of Advertisement Appeals on the Intention to Enrol

To examine whether exposure to academic-centred appeals would significantly increase parents' intention to enrol their child in the school compared to child-centred appeals a statistical t-test was designed to compare the mean scores of parental intentions to enrol between those who were exposed to academic-centred appeals and those who were exposed to child-centred appeals.

In the academic-centred appeal scenario, the mean score for Parental Intention to Enrol was calculated to be 3.3010. Conversely, for the child-centred appeal scenario, the mean score for Parental Intention to Enrol was 2.8810.

To statistically evaluate these differences, an independent samples t-test was conducted. Two sets of results were obtained, one assuming equal variances and the other not assuming equal variances. In both cases, the p-values associated with the t-tests were $p < 0.025$, indicating statistical significance.

To further assess the magnitude of this difference, we considered Cohen's d, a standardized effect size measure. The calculated Cohen's d value was $d = 1.26273$, signifying a large effect size. Additionally, the point estimate of Cohen's d, which equated to 0.333, reinforced this observation, indicating a moderate to large effect size. The outcomes of this analysis provide robust support for Hypothesis 1.

4.2.2 The effect of Advertisement Appeals on Perceived Credibility

To test hypothesis 2, a t-test to compare the mean perceived credibility scores between parents exposed to academic-centred appeals and parents exposed to child-centred appeals was conducted. The findings revealed that parents exposed to academic-centred appeals demonstrated a notably higher mean perceived credibility score, with a value of 3.7451, in contrast to parents exposed to child-centred appeals, who had a mean score of 3.1071. Importantly, these differences were found to be statistically significant, with both one-sided and two-sided p-values being $p < 0.001$, based on a sample size $N = 103$.

Moreover, the effect size analysis, as determined by Cohen's d, further underscored the significance of the results. The standardized Cohen's d value was computed to be $d = 0.90392$, signifying a substantial effect size. Additionally, the point estimate of Cohen's d was $d = 0.706$, corroborating the considerable difference in perceived credibility scores between the two appeal scenarios. These findings provide robust support for Hypothesis 1, suggesting that academic-centred appeals are associated with a higher perceived reputation of the school compared to child-centred appeals.

4.2.3 Perceived Credibility and Parents' Intention to Enrol

The third hypothesis posited that a higher perceived credibility of the school would be associated with an increased intention among parents to enrol their child in the school. To investigate this hypothesis, we employed a correlation analysis to examine the relationship between perceived credibility and parents' willingness to enrol their child.

For the academic-centred appeal, the Pearson correlation coefficient (r) between perceived credibility and intention to enrol was calculated to be $r = 0.735$, with a two-tailed significance level (Sig) of $\text{Sig} < 0.001$. This correlation was found to be highly significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), based on a sample size $N = 103$.

Similarly, for the child-centred appeal, a Pearson correlation coefficient $r=0.617$ was observed between perceived credibility and intention to enrol, accompanied by a two-tailed significance level $\text{Sig} < 0.001$. This correlation was also determined to be highly significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), based on a sample size $N=83$. These findings provide robust support for Hypothesis 3.

4.2.4 The mediating effect of Perceived Credibility and the Moderating effect of Gender

Hypothesis 4 was designed to explore whether perceived credibility functions as a mediator in the relationship between the type of advertising appeal and parents' intention to enrol their child in the school, while also considering the moderating role of gender. To examine this relationship, a mediation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro developed by Andrew Hayes. The analysis aimed to understand the conditional direct and indirect effects of advertising appeal on parents' intention to enrol their child in the school, taking into account the potential moderation by gender and the mediating role of Perceived Credibility.

The analysis was conducted on a sample of 187 respondents. The regression model results for perceived credibility indicated an R-squared value of 0.1112, suggesting that the model explained approximately 11.12% of the variation in perceived credibility scores. The F-statistic of 7.6328 was statistically significant ($p < 0.0001$), confirming that the model was significant in predicting perceived credibility.

The conditional direct effect of advertisement appeals on intention to enrol were evaluated based on gender. The analysis showed that, for both males and females, the effect of advertising appeals on intention to enrol was not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). This suggests that advertising appeals did not have a direct impact on parental intention to enrol their child in the school when gender was considered as a moderator.

The mediation analysis also examined the conditional indirect effects of advertising appeals on intention to enrol through the mediator perceived credibility, again considering gender. The results indicated that for both males and females, the indirect effect of advertising appeals on intention to enrol through perceived credibility was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). This implies that the impact of advertising appeals on intention to enrol was mediated by perceived credibility for both gender groups.

The index of moderated mediation was calculated as 0.0398, with a bootstrapped 95% confidence interval that did not include zero. This indicates a small but statistically significant moderation effect of Gender on the mediation process.

5. General Discussion, Theoretical Contributions, Managerial Implications and Future Research

5.1 General Discussion

This study aimed to understand how parents respond to different advertising appeals in the context of school choice and examined the impact of academic-centred and child-centred appeals on parental decision-making processes. The main focus of this research was to investigate whether these appeals influence parental intention to enrol their child in a school and the possible reasons driving these decisions. Additionally, the moderating role of gender in shaping parental responses was considered.

The findings give insights on the significance of advertising appeals when it comes to parental school choices. It was revealed that parents exposed to academic-centred appeals show a higher perceived reputation of the school compared to those exposed to child-centred appeals. This highlights the power of tailored marketing appeals in shaping parental perceptions of educational institutions.

The present study also found a strong positive relationship between perceived credibility and parental intention to enrol their child in a school, regardless of the type of appeal that was shown to them. This indicates that the perceived credibility of a school is a determinant of parental enrolment intentions.

This research also explored the mediating role of perceived credibility in the relationship between advertising appeals and parental intention to enrol. The research found that perceived credibility acts as a mediator, making clear how advertising appeals influence parental decisions. Specifically, academic-centred appeals significantly increased perceived credibility, which in turn increased parental intention to enrol their child in the school.

Moreover, this investigation considered the potential moderating role of gender in having impact on advertising appeals. Although gender did not significantly moderate the relationship between appeals and parental intention to enrol, there was a small moderation effect. In the context of child-centred appeals, female parents presented a slightly higher intention to enrol their child in the school compared to male parents. This gender effect highlights the distinctive nature of parental decision-making.

This study provides valuable insights into the dynamics of school choice and advertising appeals. The research highlights the importance of personalizing marketing strategies to influence parental perceptions and decisions effectively. These findings have implications not only for educational institutions trying to improve their enrolment strategies but also for the broader field of marketing when it comes to parental decision-making.

5.2 Theoretical Contribution

This thesis makes important contributions to the understanding of parental decision-making in the education market and the role of advertising appeals. It goes beyond previous research, by offering perspectives and insights into how parents make choices and the effectiveness of marketing strategies in the evolving educational landscape.

The literature review has revealed a complex landscape of parental decision-making in the education market. Rational Choice Theory is considered one of the main studies of this decision-making process, emphasizing factors such as information, available choices, and cost-benefit analyses (Bast & Walberg, 2004; Becker, 1986). However, this thesis extends beyond this rational framework, finding other aspects that may influence the decision-making of parents and guardians.

Challenging this theory supporting the decision based on rational calculations, this research embraces Coleman's (1988) argument that the decision-making process is social and, at the same time, influenced by factors beyond utility maximization. It validates the idea that parents' decisions are shaped by a combination of rationalities and external stimulus, including marketing strategies (Bauch & Goldring, 1995). This shift away from pure rationality adds depth to the understanding of how parents make decisions.

Moreover, this study supports Woods, Bagley, and Glatter (1998) analysis regarding the pivotal role of academic-centred and child-centred factors in shaping parental choices. Academic-centred factors have consistently emerged as influential, aligning with previous research emphasizing parents' desire for high academic standards and strong performance in standardized tests (Burgess et al., 2015; Borghans et al., 2014). Conversely, child-centred factors, focusing on emotional well-being and personal growth, also matter greatly. This corresponds with studies highlighting the importance of happiness, supportive environments, and nurturing teachers (Mahfooz & Normén-Smith, 2022; Chan & Yeung, 2020). By reconciling these two perspectives, this thesis offers a holistic understanding of parental decision-making.

In the dynamic reality of marketing, the choice of advertising appeals plays a fundamental role in shaping consumer behaviour (Zhang et al., 2014). Existing research has categorized these appeals into rational and emotional categories (Albers-Miller & Stafford, 1999). However, the literature on their application in the education industry has been limited.

This research demonstrates that academic-centred appeals significantly impact parents' intentions to enrol their children in a school. It confirms and extends previous findings by underlining that parents place a high value on academic standards and measurable educational outcomes when choosing schools (Burgess et al., 2015; Borghans et al., 2014). By providing real-world evidence of the effectiveness of academic-centred appeals, this study deepens the understanding of how rational appeals shape parental decision-making in the education market.

Furthermore, this study delves into the mediating role of perceived credibility between advertising appeals and parental intention to enrol their child in a school. While past research has examined the impact of credibility on consumer behaviour (Erdem & Swait, 2004), this study connects it explicitly to parental decision-making in education. It finds that academic-centred appeals significantly boost the perceived credibility of a school, shedding light on how marketing appeals can affect parental perceptions and decisions.

This research also considers whether gender plays a role in shaping parental responses to advertising appeals. While gender did not have a significant impact, it was possible to observe slight variations, especially in the context of child-centred appeals. This highlights the nuanced nature of parental decision-making and adds depth to the understanding of how different groups of parents may respond to marketing appeals, an area that, as far as the author found, has been relatively unexplored.

In summary, this thesis significantly enriches existing literature by recognizing the complex dynamics of parental decision-making, expanding the use of rational and emotional appeals in education marketing, and highlighting the mediating role of perceived credibility in the decision-making process. Additionally, it acknowledges the potential moderating influence of gender parental responses to advertising appeals. These theoretical contributions validate and extend previous research, offering a more comprehensive understanding of parental decision-making in the education market and the effectiveness of advertising appeals in this context.

5.3 Managerial Implications

The global education landscape is experiencing a remarkable transformation, with the private education sector undergoing substantial growth and evolution. Understanding the trends and implications of this dynamic industry can be fundamental for educational institutions and marketing professionals.

Innately, the reasons behind consumers actions are critical to the success and proliferation of any business, in any industry. Emerging into the process and factors influencing parental decision-making can strongly benefit schools, by adapting or adjusting their strategies into matching parents and students' expectations. This may imply, as an example studied in this research, considering a school valuing academic excellence, yielding emphasis on this characteristic when planning it's advertising strategies. The same may be applied to educational institutions focused on the holistic side of the children. Although it was not studied in the present research, the author considers worthy to reinforce, that these strategies should be tied with the actual characteristics of the services provided by the institution.

Advertising plays an important role in the education industry. As the competition among educational institutions intensifies, effective advertising can establish the difference. Schools, both public and private,

are investing in advertising to attract students and parents. A well-executed advertising campaign can significantly impact enrolments and enhance an institution's reputation (Machin, 2018). It's important for educational institutions to view advertising as an investment rather than just an expense. By using effective advertising strategies, schools can increase their visibility and attract more students.

Based on the results of this thesis, it is evident that rational appeals, most specifically academic-centred ones, have a substantial impact on parents' intentions to enrol their children in school. Highlighting academic excellence, specialized programs, and high standards in marketing materials can increase the preferences of parents towards a specific school. Educational institutions should reevaluate their advertising strategies to emphasize academic-centred factors, if it resonates with the values of the institution. This might include showcasing achievements in standardized tests, accreditation, and the unique educational experiences offered. Tailoring messages to highlight academic strengths can be important. At the same time, the author reinforces that it is important to keep the appeal aligned with the culture and values of the institution.

The research also highlights the critical role of perceived credibility in influencing parental decisions. Parents that are exposed to academic-centred appeals showed higher levels of perceived credibility, compared to child-centred advertising appeals. These results suggest that educational institutions can strategically communicate their commitment to academic excellence. This in turn will build credibility and reputation. Schools should invest in initiatives that bolster their perceived credibility. Highlighting academic achievements, faculty expertise, and quality assurance mechanisms can highly contribute to an enhanced reputation and increased trust among parents.

Although academic-centred appeals demonstrated higher levels of intentions to enrol and perceived credibility, child-centred appeals also presented positive results. Meaning that, educational institutions committed to value as their main value proposition, characteristics related to the wellbeing of the child, can still align these values with the appeals and thrive in this competitive environment.

In conclusion, the education market presents both challenges and opportunities for educational institutions and marketers. Understanding the dynamics of this growth and aligning advertising strategies with research insights can be important factors of success. Educational institutions that adapt to these, align values with advertising appeals, and foster credibility will be well-positioned to take advantage in the competitive world of education. By implementing these managerial implications, schools can ensure that their marketing efforts effectively resonate with parents, ultimately benefiting both the institutions and the students they serve.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions

In any research endeavour, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations encountered during the study. These limitations provide valuable insights into areas that require further investigation and refinement.

Additionally, they contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the research's scope and implications. In the context of this thesis, several limitations were identified, which pave the way for potential avenues of future research.

The data collection process relied on self-reported measures from parents. This method is subject to response bias and may not fully capture the complex interplay of factors that influence parental intentions to enrol. Future research could incorporate multi-method approaches, such as interviews or observations, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of parental decision-making processes.

This study focused on two specific advertisement appeals: academic-centred and child-centred. While these appeals were selected based on existing literature, they represent a fraction of the potential appeals used in educational marketing. Future research could explore additional advertisement appeals to provide a more nuanced understanding of their impact on parental intentions to enrol.

Employing mixed-methods research designs could enhance the depth of understanding of parental intentions. Qualitative data, obtained through interviews or focus groups, could provide rich insights into the factors influencing parental decisions, while quantitative measures can offer statistical validation.

Future research could delve into the use of multidimensional advertisement appeals, considering factors such as cost, curriculum quality, extracurricular activities, and teacher qualifications. Understanding how these multifaceted appeals interact and influence parental intentions can provide a more holistic perspective.

Investigating other mediating and moderating factors that influence the relationship between advertisement appeals and parental intentions is another possible analysis. Factors like parental socioeconomic status, cultural background, and the child's academic performance may play crucial roles.

In conclusion, while this thesis has made significant contributions to understanding the impact of advertisement appeals on parental intentions to enrol, it is essential to recognize its limitations. These limitations point to areas that warrant further exploration and refinement in future research endeavours. By addressing these limitations and pursuing the suggested research directions, scholars can continue to advance the understanding of the complex interplay between advertising appeals and parental decisions in the dynamic field of education.

6. Appendix

6.1 Stimulus



 School

High scores.
Academic standards.
Choose academic quality
for your child's future
success!

Enroll for 23/24

The advertisement features three children in school uniforms (red shirts, black skirts/pants, and backpacks) standing against a grey background. The text is positioned on the left side of the image.

Academic-centred advertising appeal



 International school

Happy kids.
Caring teachers.
Choose happiness for your
child's future success!

Enroll for 23/24

The advertisement features three children in school uniforms (red shirts, black skirts/pants, and backpacks) standing against a grey background. The text is positioned on the left side of the image.

Child-centred advertising appeal

6.2 SPSS Outcome

Descriptive analysis

		Statistics				
		How old are you?	What is your gender?	List of Countries	Are you a parent or guardian of a child under the age of 18?	Ad_appeal
N	Valid	187	187	186	187	187
	Missing	0	0	1	0	0

With which gender do you identify the most?

	N	%
Male	95	50,8%
Female	90	48,1%
Non-binary / third gender	1	0,5%
Prefer not to say	1	0,5%

In which Country do you live?

	N	%
Afghanistan	1	0,5%
Australia	2	1,1%
Austria	1	0,5%
Brazil	1	0,5%
Bulgaria	1	0,5%
Canada	1	0,5%

Finland	1	0,5%
Greece	2	1,1%
India	1	0,5%
Ireland	3	1,6%
Italy	7	3,7%
Mexico	3	1,6%
Netherlands	1	0,5%
Norway	1	0,5%
Poland	7	3,7%
Portugal	72	38,5%
Qatar	1	0,5%
South Africa	54	28,9%
South Korea	2	1,1%
Spain	6	3,2%
Sweden	1	0,5%
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	9	4,8%
United States of America	8	4,3%
Missin System g	1	0,5%

Ad_appeal distribution

	N	%
Child-centered	84	44,9%
Academic- centered	103	55,1%

Reliability of the Scales

Scale: Perceived Credibility

Case Processing Summary

		N	%
Cases	Valid	103	55,1
	Excluded ^a	84	44,9
	Total	187	100,0

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's	
Alpha	N of Items
,905	4

Scale: Intention to Enroll

Case Processing Summary

		N	%
Cases	Valid	103	55,1
	Excluded ^a	84	44,9
	Total	187	100,0

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's	
Alpha	N of Items
,918	2

The direct effect of Advertisement Appeals on the Intention to Enrol

T-Test

Ad_appeal	Group Statistics			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean

ItE	Academic-centered	103	3,3010	1,27445	,12557
	Child-centered	84	2,8810	1,24818	,13619

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Significance One-Sided p	Significance Two-Sided p	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
ItE	Equal variances assumed	,116	,733	2,263	185	,012	,025	,42002	,18564	,05377	,78626
	Equal variances not assumed			2,267	178,902	,012	,025	,42002	,18525	,05447	,78557

Independent Samples Effect Sizes

		Standardizer ^a	Point Estimate	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower	Upper
ItE	Cohen's d	1,26273	,333	,042	,622
	Hedges' correction	1,26788	,331	,042	,620
	Glass's delta	1,24818	,337	,043	,628

The effect of Advertisement Appeals on Perceived Credibility

T-Test

Group Statistics

Ad_appeal		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
PCredibility	Academic-centered	103	3,7451	,85462	,08421
	Child-centered	84	3,1071	,96105	,10486

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	t	df	Significance One- Sided p	Two- Sided p	Mean Differe nce	Std. Error Differe nce	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower Upper	
PCredibility	Equal variances assumed	,028	,867	4,80 1	185	<,001	<,001	,63800	,13289	,37583	,90018
	Equal variances not assumed			4,74 4	167, 788	<,001	<,001	,63800	,13449	,37250	,90351

Independent Samples Effect Sizes

		Standardizer ^a	Point Estimate	95% Confidence Interval Lower Upper	
PCredibility	Cohen's d	,90392	,706	,408	1,002
	Hedges' correction	,90761	,703	,406	,998
	Glass's delta	,96105	,664	,357	,967

Perceived Credibility and Parents' Intention to Enrol

Correlations

Correlations

		PCredibility_A A	Intention_to_E nroll_AA
PCredibility_AA	Pearson Correlation	1	,735**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<,001
	N	103	103
Intention_to_Enroll_A A	Pearson Correlation	,735**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001	
	N	103	103

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Correlations

		PCredibility_C A	Intention to Enroll CA
PCredibility_CA	Pearson Correlation	1	,617**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<,001
	N	83	83
Intention to Enroll CA	Pearson Correlation	,617**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001	
	N	83	83

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Process Macro SPSS Output

Run MATRIX procedure:

***** PROCESS Procedure for SPSS Version 4.2 *****

Written by Andrew F. Hayes, Ph.D. www.afhayes.com

Documentation available in Hayes (2022). www.guilford.com/p/hayes3

Model : 8

Y : ItE
 X : Ad_ap
 M : PCred
 W : Gender

Sample
 Size: 187

OUTCOME VARIABLE:
 PCred

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
,3335	,1112	,8256	7,6328	3,0000	183,0000	,0001

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	3,0977	,3032	10,2172	,0000	2,4995	3,6959
Ad_ap	,5762	,3985	1,4457	,1500	-,2101	1,3625
Gender	,0062	,1895	,0328	,9739	-,3677	,3801
Int_1	,0411	,2488	,1652	,8690	-,4498	,5321

Product terms key:

Int_1 : Ad_ap x Gender

Test(s) of highest order unconditional interaction(s):

	R2-chng	F	df1	df2	p
X*W	,0001	,0273	1,0000	183,0000	,8690

OUTCOME VARIABLE:
 ItE

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
,7061	,4985	,8353	45,2335	4,0000	182,0000	,0000

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	-,3586	,3822	-,9385	,3492	-1,1127	,3954
Ad_ap	,2965	,4031	,7354	,4630	-,4989	1,0919
PCred	,9690	,0744	13,0319	,0000	,8223	1,1157
Gender	,1514	,1906	,7943	,4280	-,2247	,5275
Int_1	-,3280	,2503	-1,3104	,1917	-,8219	,1659

Product terms key:

Int_1 : Ad_ap x Gender

Test(s) of highest order unconditional interaction(s):

	R2-chng	F	df1	df2	p
X*W	,0047	1,7171	1,0000	182,0000	,1917

***** DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y *****

Conditional direct effects of X on Y

Gender	Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
1,0000	-,0315	,1908	-,1652	,8689	-,4079	,3449
1,0000	-,0315	,1908	-,1652	,8689	-,4079	,3449
2,0000	-,3595	,1886	-1,9066	,0581	-,7316	,0125

Conditional indirect effects of X on Y:

INDIRECT EFFECT:

Ad_ap -> PCred -> ItE

Gender	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
1,0000	,5981	,1878	,2352	,9804
1,0000	,5981	,1878	,2352	,9804
2,0000	,6380	,1891	,2882	1,0259

Index of moderated mediation:

	Index	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Gender	,0398	,2607	-,4530	,5626

***** BOOTSTRAP RESULTS FOR REGRESSION MODEL PARAMETERS *****

OUTCOME VARIABLE:

PCred

	Coeff	BootMean	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
constant	3,0977	3,1036	,3135	2,4742	3,6921
Ad_ap	,5762	,5391	,4205	-,2634	1,3775
Gender	,0062	,0040	,1943	-,3663	,3894
Int_1	,0411	,0637	,2686	-,4615	,5900

OUTCOME VARIABLE:

ItE

	Coeff	BootMean	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
constant	-,3586	-,3782	,3709	-1,1328	,3295
Ad_ap	,2965	,3016	,4564	-,5966	1,2072
PCred	,9690	,9710	,0662	,8373	1,0972
Gender	,1514	,1614	,2246	-,2674	,6166
Int_1	-,3280	-,3325	,2719	-,8647	,1967

***** ANALYSIS NOTES AND ERRORS *****

Level of confidence for all confidence intervals in output:

95,0000

Number of bootstrap samples for percentile bootstrap confidence intervals:

5000

W values in conditional tables are the 16th, 50th, and 84th percentiles.

----- END MATRIX -----

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Thesis Summary

1. Introduction

In recent years, the education landscape has witnessed a fast growth, with parents facing complex decisions when choosing the right school for their children. This competitive environment has led to a need for effective marketing strategies in both public and private educational institutions.

While parental decision-making was traditionally viewed through the lens of Rational Choice Theory as a utilitarian calculation (Becker, 1986; Bast & Walberg, 2004), recent research has uncovered a more nuanced and socially influenced process (Coleman, 1988). Two significant categories of factors affecting parental choices in education are academic-centred and child-centred considerations (Woods et al., 1998). Academic-centred factors include a school's academic standards, performance, and measurable outcomes, while child-centred factors encompass emotional well-being, personal growth, supportive environments, and caring teachers.

This study investigates how advertising appeals, categorized as rational or emotional, impact parental decision-making in the context of enrolling their children in school. Despite the growing importance of these factors, there is a gap in the literature regarding the specific effects of academic-centred and child-centred appeals on parental intentions.

To address this gap, the research proposes three questions: 1) How do academic-centred and child-centred advertising appeals influence parental intention to enrol their child in a school?; 2) Does the perceived credibility of a school mediate the relationship between advertising appeals and parental intention?; 3) Does gender moderate the impact of advertising appeals on parental decision-making in education?

The study conducted an online survey exposing participants to either type of appeal, assessing perceived credibility and parental intentions. Results indicate that academic-centred appeals significantly increase perceived credibility and parental intentions compared to child-centred appeals. Perceived credibility mediates this relationship, while gender has minimal moderating effects, especially for child-centred appeals.

This research extends the understanding of parental decision-making in education, emphasizing the need for marketing strategies to align with parental expectations. Highlighting academic excellence can enhance an institution's reputation and attract more students.

Future research can explore additional influencing factors, the role of gender, and emotional aspects of educational decision-making. Overall, this study guides educational institutions and marketers in tailoring strategies for mutual benefit.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Private Education Market

Along the years, an interest in the private education sector has surged, driven by several key factors. This growth can be, in part, justified by the increasing personal wealth, enabling families to explore alternatives to often poor state education systems (James, 1993), the escalating demand for education (Mattei & Verhoest, 2010), parents demanding a higher quality education, parental engagement, access to advanced technology and educational resources, and the provision of extracurricular activities (Custom Market Insights, 2023).

There is consensus, supported by evidence, that private schools offer attractive alternatives to parents, including some indicators of higher efficiency, such as increased teacher effort and reduced absenteeism (Day Ashley et al., 2014). However, alongside these developments, a growing body of research from a human rights and equity perspective has raised concerns about the implications of private education's growth for the public sector's responsibility to ensure the right to education. (UNESCO, 2015).

Additionally, according to Vice Media Group (2021) the preferences of Gen Z parents diverge from other generations. While previous generations prioritized academic achievements, today's parents may prioritize holistic development and emotional well-being (Chan & Yeung, 2020).

To conclude, the education industry is experiencing growth and transformation., influenced by technological advancements, globalization, and shifting parental preferences across generations. Within this context, marketers face the challenge of meeting an increasingly diverse and demanding audience: parents seeking educational institutions aligned with their values. (Resende et al., 2011).

2.2 Parental Decision Making in the Education Market

The process of parental decision-making in the education market plays an important role in shaping the educational experiences of children. With the increasing marketization of education, parents now face a variety of choices when selecting the most appropriate educational institutions for their children.

According to the Rational Choice Theory, parents are considered utility maximisers, making decisions based on clear value preferences and calculations of the costs, benefits, and probabilities of success associated with different educational options (Becker, 1986).

However, recent research observes that, as Coleman (1988) mentions, individuals typically engage in a search for information when faced with significant decisions. In the case of parental decision-making for education, this search involves different rationalities and elements of chance (Ball, 2003). Parents often have

into consideration personal values, subjective educational goals and social networks to gather information. However, the capacity of parents to make informed choices can be limited if their network does not provide access to relevant and valuable information regarding school choice options (Smrekar & Goldring, 1999).

Within this context, Woods, Bagley, and Glatter (1998) conducted an analysis of parental decision-making and identified two major thematic concerns: academic-centred and child-centred.

Academic-centred vs Child-centred

Academic-centred factors are focused around parents' emphasis on the quality of education and a school's commitment to academic excellence. The academic-centred theme includes factors predominantly centred on academic aspects, such as academic standards, examination results, and the presence of a sixth form in the school (Woods et al., 1998). Parents who prioritize their child's educational achievements are likely to seek institutions with high academic standards and strong performance in standardized tests (Burgess et al., 2015; Borghans et al., 2014; Collins and Snell, 2000; Bosetti, 2007). On the other side, child-centred factors are centred on the holistic development of students and prioritize their emotional well-being and personal growth. Parents who value a nurturing and supportive educational environment prioritize factors like the child's happiness and the presence of caring teachers (Gramaxo et al., 2023). In this context, schools that provide a safe and positive learning environment, along with teachers that show positive attitudes and attributes, are highly preferred (Gramaxo et al., 2023; Chan & Yeung, 2020).

It is important to mention that the decision-making process is influenced by various considerations. These may include the location, the financial feasibility of the family, presence of scholarships or discounts, admissions criteria, the facilities of the school and other aspects (Borghans et al., 2014; Burgess et al., 2015; Hofflinger et al., 2020).

2.3 Advertising Appeals

The choice of advertising appeal plays an important role in determining the success of marketing campaigns, impacting crucial elements such as attention, awareness, attitude, and consumer behaviour (Rizwan et al., 2013). Researchers have classified advertising appeals into two broad categories: rational and emotional (Albers-Miller & Stafford, 1999).

Rational appeals aim to provide logical reasoning and information to persuade consumers (Stafford and Day, 1995). Belch and Belch (2009) suggest that rational appeals emphasize features of the service and the benefit of using a particular brand. Stafford (1996), argues that rational appeals can lead to more positive attitudes toward the advertisement, higher repurchase intentions and higher levels of recall for experimental services.

Rational appeals could be associated with factors that align with academic-centred considerations such as academic standards or examination results. When parents are presented with rational appeals, they may focus on the measurable and objective aspects of the school's performance and academic offerings, aiming to make an informed decision based on concrete data and information (Belch & Belch, 2009).

Emotional appeal advertising aim to generate either positive or negative emotions in consumers to influence their attitudes and positive emotions towards the product/ service (Albers-Miller & Stafford, 1999). Studies provided evidence that emotional advertising bring an influence on customers' responses to advertisements (Edell & Burke, 1987), captures their attention more effectively (Olney, Holbrook & Batra, 1991), and impacts their attitudes towards ads and brands (Aaker, Stayman & Hagerty, 1986).

It is possible to state that emotional appeals may be related to factors associated with child-centred considerations. These appeals might focus on creating an emotional connection with parents by emphasizing the happiness, well-being, and personal growth of their children in the school environment. Emotional appeals can tap into parents' desires for their children to have a nurturing and caring learning experience, fostering positive emotions and attachments to the educational institution (Moriarty, 1991).

Taking into consideration the literature, this research proposes the following hypothesis to guide the investigation **H1: Exposure to academic-centred appeals significantly increases parents' intention to enrol their child in the school compared to child-centred appeals.**

2.4 Parents' Perceived Credibility

Described by Erdem and Swait (2004), credibility, essentially comes down to how much consumers trust the information they receive from a brand. It's about seeing a brand as not only knowledgeable but also reliable in keeping its promises. For parents who are trying to navigate the complex world of education, credibility becomes a key player in shaping how they see and what they plan to do when it comes to choosing a school for their children (Collins and Snell, 2000). The influence of brand credibility on purchase intentions has been observed in numerous service categories, as highlighted by Baek and King (2011).

The influence of university rankings on brand credibility and perceived differentiation in the context of higher education institutions (HEIs) has been explored by Kethüda (2022). This highlights the importance of rankings in shaping a educational institutions brand image.

As highlighted by Kethüda (2022), a school's reputation, like a corporate reputation, rests on the foundation of perceived credibility. A positive reputation will generate positive word-of-mouth behaviours, underlining the interplay between these two factors in shaping parental attitudes, satisfaction, and loyalty towards educational institutions (Skallerud, 2011).

Having in consideration the corporate reputation literature, research by Skallerud (2011) underlines the impact of reputation on organizational success. In the educational context, a school's reputation may be parallel to the corporate context, influencing parental satisfaction and loyalty.. This connection may highlight the significant role of perceived credibility in parental decision-making within the education sector.

H2: Exposure to academic-centred appeals significantly increases parents' perceived credibility of the school compared to child-centred appeals.

H3: Higher perceived credibility significantly increases parents' intention to enrol their child in the school.

H4: Perceived Credibility will mediate the relationship between the type of ad appeal and parents' intention to enrol their child in the school.

2.5 Gender differences in parental decision making

In a study from Hein & Lewko (1994), the authors find that males tend to place greater emphasis on measurable outcomes, aligning with academic-centred appeals, while females often prioritize the emotional well-being and family-related variables, matching the principles of child-centred appeals.

Several studies reveal that mothers are more likely to engage in extensive information-seeking behaviours when evaluating potential schools (Brown, 2022). They tend to seek niche school environments, schools that will keep their children safe or schools with a positive racial environment (Brown, 2022; Verhoest & Mattei, 2010).

These studies emphasize the importance of recognizing and understanding gender differences in parental decision-making regarding school choice. While mothers and fathers may show different priorities, it's essential to acknowledge that these distinctions are not absolute and may intersect with other demographic factors.

Building on the gender-related literature discussed earlier:

H5: Mothers give more priority to child-centred factors when choosing a school for their child compared to fathers.

The overall conceptual model of this thesis has been reported in figure 1.

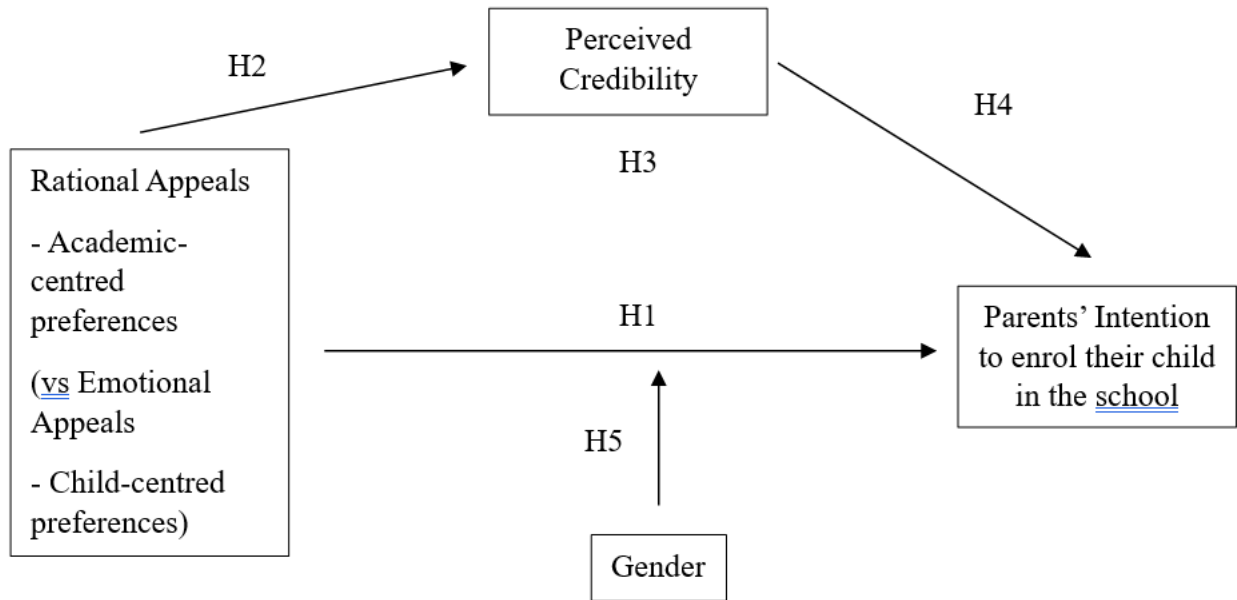


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of the Variables in the Study.

3. Method: Participants and Procedure

In order to test the hypotheses presented in this study, a primary investigation was conducted through an online survey using Qualtrics, focusing on Perceived Credibility and Parents' Intention to Enrol their child in the school.

A total of 187 responses were valid, meeting the specific criteria with 50.8% identifying as male and 48.1% as female. Geographically, a substantial portion, 38.5%, resided in Portugal, while 28.9% in South Africa, the remaining participants hailed from various regions worldwide. Aged ranging from 21 to 53 years, the average age of the respondents was 33.45 years, with a standard deviation of 15.75 years.

The study employed a 2 (Ad Appeal: Academic-centred vs. Child-centred) between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions, academic-centred or child-centred appeal. Firstly, participants were asked to provide demographic information. The stimuli for the study consisted of an advertising representing either an academic-centred or child-centred appeal scenario.

Following the stimulus presentation, participants were asked to carefully read the caption and then respond to two scales: 1) Perceived Credibility of the School: A five-point Likert scale was used for each statement (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). The scales used were adapted from Newell and Goldsmith (2001); 2) Parents' Intention to Enrol: Two items were used, measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). These items were adapted from Lepkowska-White, Brashear, and Weinberger (2003).

4. Results

Before testing the hypotheses presented, data were analysed using IBM SPSS Software. One dummy variable, “Ad_ap” (0= Academic-centred; 1=Child-centred), was created in order to identify to which condition each participant was assigned. In order to ensure reliability of the scales, the items of which each of the two was composed were examined using Cronbach’s Alpha.

4.1 Reliability of the scales

For the scale measuring perceived credibility, Cronbach's alpha analysis showed a positive coefficient of (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.905$). Similarly, for the scale measuring parental intention to enrol their child in the school, Cronbach's alpha analysis produced a positive coefficient (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.918$).

These findings suggest that the questions related to parental intention to enrol consistently assessed this construct, reinforcing the reliability of the scale.

4.2 Results

4.2.1 The direct effect of Advertisement Appeals on the Intention to Enrol

A t-test was designed to compare the mean scores of parental intentions to enrol between those who were exposed to academic-centred appeals and those who were exposed to child-centred appeals. In the academic-centred appeal scenario, the mean score for Parental Intention to Enrol was 3.3010. Conversely, for the child-centred appeal scenario, the mean score for Parental Intention to Enrol was 2.8810.

To statistically evaluate these differences, an independent samples t-test was conducted. In both cases, the p-values associated with the t-tests were $p < 0.025$, indicating statistical significance.

Additionally, the point estimate of Cohen's d, which equated to 0.333, reinforced this observation, indicating a moderate to large effect size. The outcomes of this analysis provide robust support for Hypothesis 1.

4.2.2 The effect of Advertisement Appeals on Perceived Credibility

To test hypothesis 2, a t-test to compare the mean perceived credibility scores between parents exposed to academic-centred appeals and parents exposed to child-centred appeals was conducted. The findings revealed that parents exposed to academic-centred appeals demonstrated a notably higher mean perceived credibility score, with a value of 3.7451, in contrast to parents exposed to child-centred appeals, who had a mean score of 3.1071. Importantly, these differences were found to be statistically significant, with both one-sided and two-sided p-values being $p < 0.001$, based on a sample size $N = 103$.

Moreover, the effect size analysis, as determined by Cohen's d , further underscored the significance of the results. The standardized Cohen's d value was computed to be $d = 0.90392$, signifying a substantial effect size. Additionally, the point estimate of Cohen's d was $d = 0.706$, corroborating the considerable difference in perceived credibility scores between the two appeal scenarios. These findings provide robust support for Hypothesis 1, suggesting that academic-centred appeals are associated with a higher perceived reputation of the school compared to child-centred appeals.

4.2.3 Perceived Credibility and Parents' Intention to Enrol

The third hypothesis posited that a higher perceived credibility of the school would be associated with an increased intention among parents to enrol their child in the school. To investigate this hypothesis, we employed a correlation analysis to examine the relationship between perceived credibility and parents' willingness to enrol their child.

For the academic-centred appeal, the Pearson correlation coefficient (r) between perceived credibility and intention to enrol was calculated to be $r = 0.735$, with a two-tailed significance level (Sig) of $\text{Sig} < 0.001$. This correlation was found to be highly significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), based on a sample size $N = 103$.

Similarly, for the child-centred appeal, a Pearson correlation coefficient $r=0.617$ was observed between perceived credibility and intention to enrol, accompanied by a two-tailed significance level $\text{Sig} < 0.001$. This correlation was also determined to be highly significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), based on a sample size $N=83$. These findings provide robust support for Hypothesis 3.

4.2.4 The mediating effect of Perceived Credibility and the Moderating effect of Gender

To examine this relationship, a mediation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro developed by Andrew Hayes. The analysis aimed to understand the conditional direct and indirect effects of advertising

appeal on parents' intention to enrol their child in the school, taking into account the potential moderation by gender and the mediating role of Perceived Credibility.

The analysis was conducted on a sample of 187 respondents. The regression model results for perceived credibility indicated an R-squared value of 0.1112, suggesting that the model explained approximately 11.12% of the variation in perceived credibility scores. The F-statistic of 7.6328 was statistically significant ($p < 0.0001$), confirming that the model was significant in predicting perceived credibility.

The conditional direct effect of advertisement appeals on intention to enrol were evaluated based on gender. The analysis showed that, for both genders, the effect of advertising appeals on intention to enrol was not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). This suggests that advertising appeals did not have a direct impact on parental intention to enrol their child in the school when gender was considered as a moderator.

The results also indicated that for both males and females, the indirect effect of advertising appeals on intention to enrol through perceived credibility was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). This implies that the impact of advertising appeals on intention to enrol was mediated by perceived credibility for both gender groups.

5. General Discussion, Theoretical Contributions, Managerial Implications and Future Research

5.1 General Discussion

This study aimed to understand how parents respond to different advertising appeals in the context of school choice and examined the impact of academic-centred and child-centred appeals on parental decision-making processes. The findings revealed that parents exposed to academic-centred appeals show a higher perceived reputation of the school compared to those exposed to child-centred appeals.

The present study also found a strong positive relationship between perceived credibility and parental intention to enrol their child in a school, regardless of the type of appeal that was shown to them. This indicates that the perceived credibility of a school is a determinant of parental enrolment intentions.

This research also explored the mediating role of perceived credibility in the relationship between advertising appeals and parental intention to enrol. The research found that perceived credibility acts as a mediator, specifically, academic-centred appeals significantly increased perceived credibility, which in turn increased parental intention to enrol their child in the school.

Although gender did not significantly moderate the relationship between appeals and parental intention to enrol, there was a small moderation effect. In the context of child-centred appeals, female parents presented a slightly higher intention to enrol their child in the school compared to male parents.

5.2 Theoretical Contribution

This thesis goes beyond previous research, by offering perspectives and insights into how parents make choices and the effectiveness of marketing strategies in the evolving educational landscape.

Challenging the Rational Choice Theory supporting the decision based on rational calculations, this research embraces Coleman's (1988) argument that the decision-making process is social and, at the same time, influenced by factors beyond utility maximization. It validates the idea that parents' decisions are shaped by a combination of rationalities and external stimulus, including marketing strategies (Bauch & Goldring, 1995).

Moreover, this study supports Woods, Bagley, and Glatter (1998) analysis regarding the pivotal role of academic-centred and child-centred factors in shaping parental choices. Academic-centred factors have consistently emerged as influential (Burgess et al., 2015; Borghans et al., 2014). Conversely, child-centered factors, focusing on emotional well-being and personal growth, also matter greatly (Mahfooz & Normén-Smith, 2022; Chan & Yeung, 2020).

Existing research has categorized these appeals into rational and emotional categories (Albers-Miller & Stafford, 1999). However, the literature on their application in the education industry has been limited. This study provides real-world evidence of the effectiveness of academic-centred appeals, and deepens the understanding of how rational appeals shape parental decision-making in the education market.

While past research has examined the impact of credibility on consumer behaviour (Erdem & Swait, 2004), this study connects it explicitly to parental decision-making in education. It finds that academic-centred appeals significantly boost the perceived credibility of a school, shedding light on how marketing appeals can affect parental perceptions and decisions.

This research also considers whether gender plays a role in shaping parental responses to advertising appeals. This adds depth to the understanding of how different groups of parents may respond to marketing appeals, an area that, as far as the author found, has been relatively unexplored.

In summary, this thesis significantly enriches existing literature by recognizing the complex dynamics of parental decision-making.

5.3 Managerial Implications

The global education landscape is experiencing a remarkable transformation, with the private education sector undergoing substantial growth and evolution. Understanding the trends and implications of this dynamic industry can be fundamental for educational institutions and marketing professionals.

Emerging into the process and factors influencing parental decision-making can strongly benefit schools, by adapting or adjusting their strategies into matching parents and students' expectations. Although it was not studied in the present research, the author considers worthy to reinforce, that these strategies should be tied with the actual characteristics of the services provided by the institution.

Advertising plays an important role in the education industry. A well-executed advertising campaign can significantly impact enrolments and enhance an institution's reputation (Machin, 2018). It's important for educational institutions to view advertising as an investment rather than just an expense. By using effective advertising strategies, schools can increase their visibility and attract more students.

Based on the results of this thesis, it is evident that rational appeals, most specifically academic-centred ones, have a substantial impact on parents' intentions to enrol their children in school. Highlighting academic excellence, specialized programs, and high standards in marketing materials can increase the preferences of parents towards a specific school.

The research also highlights the critical role of perceived credibility in influencing parental decisions. Parents that are exposed to academic-centred appeals showed higher levels of perceived credibility, compared to child-centred advertising appeals. These results suggest that educational institutions can strategically communicate their commitment to academic excellence. This in turn will build credibility and reputation. Schools should invest in initiatives that bolster their perceived credibility. Highlighting academic achievements, faculty expertise, and quality assurance mechanisms can highly contribute to an enhanced reputation and increased trust among parents.

Although academic-centred appeals demonstrated higher levels of intentions to enrol and perceived credibility, child-centred appeals also presented positive results. Meaning that, educational institutions committed to value as their main value proposition, characteristics related to the wellbeing of the child, can still align these values with the appeals and thrive in this competitive environment.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions

In any research endeavour, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations encountered during the study. These limitations provide valuable insights into areas that require further investigation and refinement. In the context of this thesis, several limitations were identified.

The data collection process relied on self-reported measures from parents. This method is subject to response bias and may not fully capture the complex interplay of factors that influence parental intentions to enrol.

This study focused on two specific advertisement appeals: academic-centred and child-centred. While these appeals were selected based on existing literature, they represent a fraction of the potential appeals used in educational marketing.

Employing mixed-methods research designs could enhance the depth of understanding of parental intentions. Qualitative data, obtained through interviews or focus groups, could provide rich insights into the factors influencing parental decisions, while quantitative measures can offer statistical validation.

Future research could delve into the use of multidimensional advertisement appeals, considering factors such as cost, curriculum quality, extracurricular activities, and teacher qualifications. Understanding how these multifaceted appeals interact and influence parental intentions can provide a more holistic perspective.

Investigating other mediating and moderating factors that influence the relationship between advertisement appeals and parental intentions is another possible analysis. Factors like parental socioeconomic status, cultural background, and the child's academic performance may play crucial roles.

In conclusion, while this thesis has made significant contributions to understanding the impact of advertisement appeals on parental intentions to enrol, it is essential to recognize its limitations.