Parents' Perception of Online College Degree Programs for their Children

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Abstract

Recent years have witnessed the rapid increase in enrollments in online learning programs as an effective alternative to traditional school settings because of various advantages offered by such programs, including convenience, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness. As a result, online college degree programs have received increased research attention in the field of education. This study examines parents' attitudes toward online college degree programs and investigates whether there are any differences in their perceptions depending on the gender or age of their children. The study also considers the most important factors influencing parents' perception of online college degree programs and analyzes any gender or age differences in the factors they emphasize. The results indicate that although parents generally had favorable attitudes toward online college degree programs regardless of the gender of their children, those with female students were more likely to support online programs than those with male children. In terms of the age of the child (measured based on the child's level of education--elementary, middle, or high school), parents with middle school students were most likely to favor online college degree programs. Parents with female children were most likely to emphasize program quality as the most important factor, whereas those with male students, program credibility. Parents were most likely to emphasize program quality as the most important factor regardless of the age of the child. These results have important implications for school administrators, teachers, and policymakers, and some limitations of the study are discussed.

Introduction

In recent years, online degree programs have become an increasingly important phenomenon in the field of education, with the number of online students more than doubling in the last few years (Allen, 2007). Commonly referred as "e-learning," online education has the potential to become a reliable alternative to traditional education, transforming the perspectives on how students should be educated. With the sustained growth of enrollments in online courses, some studies have suggested that online programs can provide financial advantages to those who have difficulty affording tuition fees (Seaman, 2008) and are likely to remain appealing because of their flexibility, particularly for adult students who must juggle their work-family responsibilities (Burton, 2002). On the other hand, other studies have insisted that, although online education appears to garner more favorable attitudes, many educators and employers and the public still view it as somewhat inferior to traditional education because of a lack of social interactions between students and instructors (Daymont, 2008). Given such mixed results, online learning often poses challenges to educators in determining which method of education is more appropriate and suitable for students. The purpose of this study is to extend this line of research by examining the attitudes of parents toward online degree programs and investigating which elements of such programs they tend to emphasize based on the gender and age of the child.

Theoretical Background

Previous studies have explored the general attitudes of people toward online courses in the last few years. According to the 2011 Pew Research survey (Taylor, 2011), 77% of the 1,055 college and university presidents interviewed reported that their institutions offered courses in which the instruction took place exclusively in online environments. The college presidents, recognizing the potential growth of online learning in the future, commented that a majority of their undergraduate students would be taking online classes by 2021. Burton and Goldsmith (2002) found similar results by using asynchronous online focus groups and suggested that the number of enrollments and demand for online education would increase steadily if students continued to benefit from a better understanding of the role of advisors in online courses and programs and are better served by registration processes designed with an

understanding of unique needs of online students. A majority of the participants expressed positive attitudes toward online programs.

The World Health Organization (2011) revealed that 75% of the governments in Southeast Asia sponsored online education initiatives and found substantial efforts being made in Europe and the Americas (67%). In addition, 93% of the countries with government-sponsored online education programs made efforts aimed specifically at children. The University of Massachusetts (2003) pointed out some positive aspects of online learning. First, online education is designed to be student-centered learning allowing for a wide range of online tools to be used to accommodate individual learning styles and help students become more versatile learners. Second, e-learning can promote collaborative learning by allowing students to become more active participants in the learning process. Here the contributing input requires that students comprehend what is being discussed, organize their thinking coherently, and express that thinking with carefully constructed language. Third, online learners can easily access global resources because they can access online databases and subject experts in the online classroom. Finally, students can be exposed to experiential learning through multimedia presentations because new technologies can be used to engage and motivate students and support them in their learning activities.

Despite these favorable findings, other studies have found negative attitudes toward this newly introduced technology-based education platform. Seibold (2007) reported that the participants (mainly employers) did not think online coursework would be equivalent to traditionally acquired coursework because they believed that it would lack interactivity and not foster a sense of community. They added that online education would not provide some valuable skills such as teambuilding and networking. Similarly, Journell (2010) considered a sample of students taking an online U.S. history course and discovered that a majority of the students' responses centered on the perception that e-learning would offer a quicker and easier approach to learning than what could be received in the classroom. More specifically, many students perceived that online courses would be less rigorous than traditional ones and did not perceive e-learning as conducive to active or social interactions.

Extending previous research, this study examines parents' perception of online education and their emphasis on specific elements of this new alternative to learning. Although some studies have highlighted the potential of online programs in the future, others have maintained that traditional learning is superior to internet-based learning. Given such

mixed results, this study considers the following research question:

RQ1:   How do parents perceive online college degree programs?

Certain characteristics of children may influence parents' perception on online education, including the child's age and gender. Previous studies have observed gender differences in learning as well as in academic achievement. Roth and Lavinia (2012) concluded that gender, either alone or in conjunction with other determinants, plays a critical sociocultural role in shaping and achieving academic success, verifying that gender is a fundamental element of gender differences in the context of learning. They also showed that girls are more likely to achieve academic success than boys because they perceive themselves to be better integrated into the social environment as well as better adapted individually to their social life as students. On the other hand, boys are likely to perceive a less friendly school environment and less support from their family members, and as a result, they are less likely to participate in school, which can hinder their academic achievement. Yau and Cheng (2012) examined gender differences in the level of technological confidence and suggested that male students are more likely to be confident in technology use in higher education. On the other hand, Sanders (2005) found that women can have successful technology-related careers, suggesting that the key issue in education is to remove technological barriers for female students and women. These findings suggest that the gender of the child may influence parents' perception of online programs.

Previous studies have examined age differences in parents' perception of various factors associated with their children. Krach (2003) commented that parents of elementary school children had better communication with the school than those of middle and/or high school children. Williams (2002) found that 29% of the parents felt "very involved" in their child's school life and that parents of elementary school children were more likely to feel this way than parents of middle or high school children. These findings suggest that the age of the child may influence parents' perception of online programs.

RQ2:   Does the gender or grade of the child influence parents' attitudes toward online college degree programs?

This study examines which elements of online education are likely to be emphasized by parents for better implications for educators and policymakers interested in promoting online education. For this, the study considers credibility, quality, learning environments, and cost-effectiveness.

Credibility

Online degree programs have been questioned mainly by those focusing on the credibility and reliability of online learning. Wagner (2008) asserted that, with the increase in the number of education programs delivered online, it is increasingly important for accreditation bodies to encompass e-learning in their standards to ensure the accreditation of online programs. In addition, the presented that there is a tendency for employers to view online education from reputable traditional institutions in a better light and that people are increasingly accepting online degrees. Guendoo (2007) found that an overwhelming majority (89.2%) of the community college administrators did not view online doctoral degrees as unfavorable to the credibility of faculty candidates. Although more than 70% of these administrators agreed that online interactions would not impair the level and quality of interactions between learners and between learners and faculty members, 83.3% reported limited face-to-face interactions and interpersonal experiences to be the most serious drawbacks of online doctoral programs. The above discussion suggests that the credibility of online degree programs may be an important factor influencing people's perception of those programs.

Quality

One of the most important elements that parents emphasize in online education is the quality of courses. Churchill (2004) demonstrated that students often assess the quality of online courses based on the service and support they receive during the process of learning. Both students and parents share their interest in taking courses that can enable the students to be satisfied in terms of the rigor and fairness of the course, professor and peer interactions, and support from course advisors. Erdil (2008) examined online education and found that course facilitators and personal tutors can make substantial contributions to students' overall

satisfaction with academic support. This indicates a strong relationship between the quality of online student support and the level of satisfaction among students. The above discussion suggests that the quality of online degree programs may be an important factor influencing people's perception of those programs.

Learning Environment

As mentioned earlier, the quality of the online degree programs is often assessed by the level of social interactions between instructors and students. However, online education has yet to provide sufficient evidence of an equivalent level of interactions with respect to traditional school settings. Morrow (2007) stated that interactions between learners and instructors represent a crucial element in the constructivist view of learning in a sociocultural context. It is when these interactions are transferred to and required to be exercised in an online environment that questions may arise regarding differences between virtual and traditional settings. Churchill (2004) pointed out that as consumers, students are satisfied when providers' services, including learning resources, academic and administrative services, and technology and infrastructure support, are responsive, timely, and personalized. Allen and Seaman (2007) showed that many academic leaders are very positive about a number of aspects of online education, including a belief that students are at least satisfied with online instruction as they are with face-to-face classes; evaluating the quality of online instruction is no more difficult than for face-to-face instruction; and an increasing majority view the quality of online education as the same or better than face-to-face instruction. The above discussion suggests that the learning environment may be an important factor influencing people's perception of online degree programs.

Cost-Effectiveness

A financial advantage is indeed one of the most commonly stated drivers of students' pursuit of online education. Online learning appeals to low-income students because it requires comparatively lower tuition fees than traditional programs. Churchill (2004) stated that the goal of online education is to control costs such that tuition fees are affordable yet sufficient to meet development and maintenance costs and to provide a sufficient return on

investment for setup and infrastructure costs. Bartley and Golek (2004) evaluated the cost-effectiveness of online learning and presented that, given staff members with sufficient experience in technical aspects of developing online training and enough time, online training can be more cost-effective than face-to-face training. The above discussion suggests that the cost-effectiveness of online degree programs may be an important factor influencing people's perception of those programs.

RQ3: What key factors do parents emphasize in terms of online college degree programs?

RQ4: Does the gender or grade of the child influence the key factors that parents emphasize in terms of online college degree programs?

Methods

Participants

A total of 60 parents participated in this study. All these participants were female and had at least one child currently in elementary, middle, or high school. The survey took place in the parents' lounge of Parkview Fitness Club, Bundang-Gu, Korea.

Procedure

The Parkview Fitness Club, located in Jeongja-Dong, had about 900 members as of 2013. The survey targeted only female parents because it was conducted during daytime hours, when there were only few male parents. The questionnaire was distributed to a total 60 parents, and all agreed to participate (a 100% response rate). On average, the questionnaire took about three to four minutes to complete. All the respondents were notified that their participation was voluntary and confidential and that their responses would be used only for the purpose of academic research. The data were collected from August 22 to 23, 2013.

Instrumentation

One item was used for demographic information (gender), and four items were used to assess the respondents' attitudes toward online college degree programs. These four items were measured based on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1)

to "strongly agree" (5) and were adapted from James (2002). The internal consistency and reliability of these four items were examined using Cronbach's α (.900), which indicated sufficient internal consistency and reliability (Nunnally, 1978). Table1 shows these four items.

For the respondents' attitudes toward key factors influencing the success of online college degree programs, the following four factors were presented to the respondents, and they were asked to indicate the one they considered to be most important with respect to online college degree programs: credibility, quality, the learning environment, and cost-effectiveness.

Table 1. Items for attitudes toward online college degree programs

I am interested in having my child enroll in online college degree programs.
Enrolling in online college degree programs would be valuable for my child's education.
Enrolling in online college degree programs would help my child get what he/she wants in life.
My child would get a lot of satisfaction from enrolling in online college degree programs.

Analysis

For RQ1, the means and standard deviations for the four items for attitudes toward online college degree programs were analyzed by considering the student's gender and grade level. For RQ2, the difference in means between male and female students was examined, and statistical significance was evaluated by the independent-samples t-test. In addition, this difference and significance for elementary, middle, and high school students were examined through a one-way ANOVA. For RQ3 and RQ4, the chi-square test was conducted by considering the four factors, including credibility, quality, the learning environment, and cost-effectiveness. Internal consistency based on Cronbach's alpha (.900) was sufficient.

Results

RQ1

The respondents generally had favorable attitudes toward online college degree programs. The results indicate that the mean for attitudes toward online college degree programs was 3.43 (SD=0.79). The mean for males was 3.28 (SD=0.94), whereas that for females, 3.58 (SD=0.58). In addition, the highest mean was for middle school students (3.59 (SD=.69)), followed by high school students (3.39 (SD=.89)) and elementary school students (3.30 (SD=.78). Tables 2 and 3 show the means and standard deviations for attitudes toward online college degree programs by the student's gender and grade, respectively.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations by gender

	n	M (SD)
Male	30	3.28 (SD=0.94)
Female	30	3.58 (SD=0.58)
Overall	60	3.43 (SD=0.79)

Note. The higher the mean, the greater the favorable perception of online college degree programs.

Table 3. Means and standard deviation by grade

Age	n	Mean	S.D.
Elementary School	20	3.30	.78
Middle School	20	3.59	.69
High School	20	3.39	.89
Total	60	3.43	.79

Note. The higher the mean, the greater the favorable perception of online college degree programs.

RQ2

The mean was higher for female students (3.58 (SD=0.58)) than for male students (3.28 (SD=0.94)). As shown in Table 4, the results of the independent-samples t-test indicate no significant gender difference (t(58)= -1.489, p=.142).

Table 4. The independent-samples t-test male and female students

		Levene's test of variances		t-test for equality of means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Score	Equal variance assumed	9.627	.003	-1.489	58	.142	-.30000	.20147	-.70328	.10328

The highest mean was for middle school students (3.59 (SD=.69)), followed by high school students (3.39 (SD=.89)) and elementary school students (3.30 (SD=.78). This indicates that parents of older children were more likely to have favorable attitudes toward online college degree programs. According to the one-way ANOVA (Table 5), however, there was no significant difference across grade levels (F(2,57)= .692, p=.505).

Table 5. One-way ANOVA

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Between	.869	2	.434	.692	.505
Within	35.794	57	.628		
Total	36.662	59			

RQ3

As shown in Table 6, the respondents emphasized quality as the most important factor in online college degree programs, followed by credibility, cost-effectiveness, and the learning environment, in that order.

Table 6. Most important factors in online college degree programs by gender (N, %)

	Credibility	Quality	Learning Environment	Cost-Effectiveness	Total
Male	**11 (36.7%)**	8 (26.7%)	3 (10.0%)	8 (26.7%)	30 (100.0%)
Female	5 (16.7%)	**14 (46.7%)**	6 (20.0%)	5 (16.7%)	30 (100.0%)
Total	16 (26.7%)	**22 (36.7%)**	9 (15.0%)	13 (21.7%)	60 (100.0%)

Table 7. Most important factors in online college degree programs by grade (N, %)

	Credibility	Quality	Learning Environment	Cost-Effectiveness	Total
Elementary school	7 (35.0%)	**8 (40.0%)**	1 (5.0%)	4 (20.0%)	20 (100.0%)
Middle school	5 (25.0%)	**8 (40.0%)**	4 (20.0%)	3 (15.0%)	20 (100.0%)
High school	4 (20.0%)	**6 (30.0%)**	4 (20.0%)	**6 (30.0%)**	20 (100.0%)
Total	16 (26.7%)	**22 (36.7%)**	9 (15.0%)	13 (21.7%)	60 (100.0%)

RQ4

As shown in Table 6, in terms of the most important factors in online college degree programs by gender, parents with female students were most likely to identify quality (46.7%), followed by cost-effectiveness. They were equally likely to report credibility and the learning environment. On the other hand, parents with male students

were most likely to identify credibility (36.7%). Then they were equally likely to report quality and cost-effectiveness. They were least likely to select the learning environment. The results of the chi-square test for the relationship between gender and these factors indicate no significant relationship ($\chi^2(3) = 5.579$, p=.134). Cramer's V was .305, implying a strong relationship.

As shown in Table 7, in terms of the most important factors in online college degree programs by grade, parents with elementary school students were most likely to identify quality (40.0%), followed by credibility, cost-effectiveness, and the learning environment, in that order. On the other hand, parents with middle school students were most likely to identify quality (40.0%), followed by credibility, the learning environment, and cost-effectiveness. Parents with high school students were most likely to identify quality (30.0%) and cost-effectiveness (30.0%) equally, followed by credibility and the learning environment equally. The results of the chi-square test for the relationship between the grade level and these factors indicate no significant relationship ($\chi^2(6) = 4.316$, p=.634). Cramer's V was .190, implying a strong relationship.

Discussion & Conclusions

In recent years, online college degree programs have received increasing attention as a reliable source of education for students. This online trend has gradually expanded its influence through improved communication with students and enhanced learning environments. In addition, an increasing number of students have shown favorable attitudes toward online education, and this unprecedented trend in the field of education is expected to be sustained. In this context, this study examines parents' attitudes toward online college degree programs and investigates whether there are differences in their perceptions depending on the gender and age of their children.

The respondents generally had favorable attitudes toward online college degree programs. More specifically, female parents were more likely than male parents to have favorable attitudes, but there was no significant difference. This may be explained by the fact that, when it comes to education, parents want the best education for their children regardless of their gender. This also suggests the narrowing of the gender gap in Korea. In terms of the age of the child (measured by the grade level), the respondents generally had favorable attitudes toward online college degree programs. More specifically, the parents with middle

school students were most likely have favorable attitudes, followed by those with high school students and elementary school students, in that order, although there were no significant differences. This indicates that parents of older children were more likely to have favorable attitudes toward online college degree programs. These results have some important practical implications for policymakers and administrators interested in promoting online education. First, administrators should investigate the key drivers of parents' favorable attitudes toward online education and highlight them in their promotional campaigns. Second, policymakers and teachers should continue their efforts to ensure both communal and private learning environments for students.

In terms of the most important factors influencing attitudes toward online college degree programs, the respondents emphasized quality as the most important factor in online college degree programs, followed by credibility, cost-effectiveness, and the learning environment, in that order. By gender, the parents with female students were most likely to identify quality, followed by cost-effectiveness, and they were equally likely to report credibility and the learning environment. The parents with male students were most likely to identify credibility, whereas they were least likely to select the learning environment. However, the results indicate no significant gender differences. By grade, the parents with elementary school students were most likely to identify quality, followed by credibility, cost-effectiveness, and the learning environment, in that order; those with middle school students were most likely to identify quality, followed by credibility, the learning environment, and cost-effectiveness; and those with high school students were most likely to identify quality and cost-effectiveness equally, followed by credibility and the learning environment equally. However, the results indicate no significant age differences. The results highlight program quality as the most important factor influencing parents' perception of online degree programs, and therefore policymakers and administrators should focus on enhancing program quality to better promote online degree programs.

This study has some limitations. The respondents were generally familiar with one another because they belonged to the same fitness club and saw one another regularly. This may explain the lack of gender or age differences because the respondents might have engaged in in-depth discussions on the education of their children, arriving at similar conclusions. In addition, all respondents were female, which may also explain the lack of

significant age and gender differences. In this regard, future research should employ random sampling and consider both male and female parents to verify this study's results.

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Appendix

QUESTIONNAIRE

We invite you to participate in this short survey to help us better understand how online college degree programs can improve students' educational achievement.

Your participation is voluntary and confidential, and your responses will be used only for the purpose of academic research.

WHAT IS THE ONLINE DEGREE PROGRAM?

Online degree programs allow students to earn academic degrees such as bachelor's and master's degrees through the Internet instead of physically attending college in traditional campus settings. The number of students enrolling in online degree program has increased sharply, and online degree programs are indeed becoming a reliable alternative to traditional education.

This study focuses on online college degree programs, that is, obtaining a bachelor's degree 100% online.

1) What is your child's gender (for the oldest child below college level)? Male_____/Female_____

2) What is the school level of your child?

Elementary school_____

Middle school_____

High school_____

3) Attitudes toward online college degree programs

a) I am interested in having my child enroll in online college degree programs.

____Strongly disagree

____Disagree

____Neither disagree nor agree

____Agree

____Strongly agree

b) Enrolling in online college degree programs would be valuable for my child's education.

____Strongly disagree

____Disagree

____Neither disagree nor agree

____Agree

____Strongly agree

c) Enrolling in online college degree programs would help my child get what he/she wants in life.

____Strongly disagree

____Disagree

____Neither disagree nor agree

____Agree

____Strongly agree

d) My child would get a lot of satisfaction from enrolling in online college degree programs.

____Strongly disagree

____Disagree

____Neither disagree nor agree

____Agree

____Strongly agree

4) Please choose one of the following four elements that you consider to be the most important one in online college degree programs:

____Credibility

____Quality

____Learning environment

____Cost-effectiveness

Thank you!

<u>   **(Online College Degree Program)**</u>   ?

(Online College Degree Program)

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