

Parents Engagement and their School Loyalty: A study on Pakistan schools

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Abstract

The engagement of the employees is considered to be an important part that could help to the organizations for the long term survival. Therefore, the engagement played an important key role for the survival of the organizational. But, the concept hasn't been applied to school literature. The author conceptualizes a theoretical model explaining the relationships between parental engagement, loyalty, and perception of school facilities, staff, tuition, and place, utilizing marketing mix theory. Data are collected from 191 Pakistan parents using survey. A structural equation modelling (SEM) technique is employed to assess the direction and strength of the constructs. It is found that there is strong support for parent engagement as a significant predictor of school loyalty. However, contrary to the general notion, there is insufficient statistical evidence to support that improvement in facilities, place and tuition will improve school engagement. Only teachers and staffs had a statistically significant positive association with parent engagement. The finding suggests managerial and policy implications, pinpointing teachers as key aspects for successful private schools. The research limitations and future directions were also discussed at the end of the study.

Keywords: *Engagement, Teachers, schools, Pakistan*

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Introduction

In the 21st century, the education is considered to be an integral part for the survival of the organizations long term. Despite many viewpoints on the issue, private schools are businesses. However, unlike other businesses, running private schools is about more than profitability, because the future of children is at stake. Therefore, decisions to open and close private schools must take the lives of children into full consideration. However, in Pakistan, from 1997 to 2013, as many as 225 schools were closed (Matichon, 2018), which forced thousands of children to abandon their studies half way through. One explanation was that many existing private schools are finding it difficult to attract and retain enough students,

thereby leading to insufficient school funding. In order to cope with this, some schools decided to reduce costs in order meet their budgetary ends (Fuengpanya, 2005). Reportedly, this results in teachers leaving schools, the overall quality of education being reduced, and school closures (Matichon, 2018). Private school sustainability is of relevance now more than ever, and applying business solutions to private schools could be the key to alleviate the problem.

Keeping customers satisfied was thought of as means to sustain businesses. However, studies in retail, supermarkets, banking, hotels, and other businesses indicate that high satisfaction is not necessarily linked to sustainable growth (Smith, 2005): "If you don't build emotional connections

with customers, then satisfaction is worthless” (McEwen & Fleming, 2003). Although customers might feel satisfied, they may not return or recommend the business to friends. As such, instead of targeting customer satisfaction, aiming for “engagement” could be a more powerful predictor of loyalty and business success, as has been described in empirical studies from various industries, for instance, social media (Liu, Liu, Lee, & Chen, 2019), Tourism (Rasoolimanesh, Noor, Schuberth, & Jaafar, 2019; Rather, Hollebeek, & Islam, 2019), Pharmaceuticals (Nitadpakorn & Kittisopee, 2017), Mobile Banking (Al-Dmour, Ali, & Aldmour, 2019), and Insurance (Petzer & Tonder, 2019). However, in the context of private schools, to the best of the author’s knowledge, there is no quantitative study that explores the relationship between engagement and loyalty for private schools in detail, especially in the context of Pakistan. Meanwhile, studies performed by Skallerud (2011) and Badri (2014) found that parental satisfaction is not a direct predictor of school loyalty. As such, it is worth exploring whether the concept of engagement as a powerful predictor for business loyalty and success holds true for private schools.

In the field of education, the concept of Parental Engagement is extremely well known, because studies have shown that it benefits children’s development and progress (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Fan & Chen, 2001; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007; Yamamoto, Holloway, & Suzuki, 2016). However, the application of such concept is not to be confused with business application, which has not been established in the study of private schools. In education literature, Engagement often implies more than involvement, but the two are often used interchangeably (Family-School & Community Partnerships Bureau, 2011). According to Harris & Goodall (2008), many schools emphasize involving parents in school-related activities, but this only constitutes parental involvement rather than parental engagement. For this study, Engagement refers to the level of emotional connection much deeper than physical involvement. The author partially applies Gallup 11 questions “questions that get at the heart of the customer loyalty concept” to define engagement concept. The precision of this definition is contextualized and modified using Itemized Objective Congruence (IOC) by experts in Pakistan. Then, the constructs are scrutinized again via quantitative techniques. Education literature often view “engagement” as a key enabler for

children’s success. However, less has been said about parental engagement of private schools as business entities, and the factors predicting them. It is the author’s intention to fill in this research gap by applying business concept to the field of private school. Therefore, the first section of this article will address the conceptualization of theoretical model, outlining and hypothesizing factors explaining parental engagement and loyalty. Then, the author will discuss the measurement, data collection, and data analysis in the Methods section.

Literature review and hypothesis development

In order to fulfil the research objective, a precise and simple theoretical model with strong predictive power was needed. After an extensive review of the related literature, the researcher decided to primarily base the model on marketing mix theory (Isoraite, 2016). Although many versions of marketing mix theory exist, mainstream marketing mix theory posits that marketing objectives can be achieved through the concept of “4P”: Price, Place, Production, and Promotion; the combination of these four Ps is a strong determinant of marketing objectives. Businesses have to take into account the product they are selling, the price at which the product is sold, the location or the distribution of such product, and the promotion that will accompany the sale of the product. Readjustment of the marketing mix is one of the ways in which businesses can address customer engagement (Forbes Insights, 2010) and business loyalty (Nuseir & Madanat, 2015). On the basis of this concept, the determinant of private school engagement and loyalty can be summarized as follows:

Moreover, schools are characterized by engagement between parents and their schools (Sanwisad, 2012). This is especially true for schools in smaller communities in rural areas, where the level of cooperation between parents and schools is at a medium to high level (Boonmaphi, Tanya, Nakvichet, & Chaisuwan, 2018). One of the mechanisms might be that, as parents and schools attend various community activities together, an emotional connection is developed that contributes towards building Parent Engagement and thus loyalty. The concept of “Place” captures the school’s location, because the proximity and accessibility of the school can play a role in the level of accessibility to school activities and contribution to the school. However,

as Pakistan society evolved and transportation technology improved, it is worth exploring whether this still holds true.

Apart from Place, Price acts as a quality signaler for schools; it has been shown to greatly affect school reputation and loyalty. Li and Hung (2009) and Gautam (2015) show that price as one element in the marketing mix could affect parent loyalty via the image of the educational institute/school. Parents view premium schools as a reflection of their status and are more loyal to superior schools. A study from Indonesia shows similar results, but the effect did not only apply to image, it also directly applied to loyalty (Hambali, Syah, & Suparman, 2019).

In addition, the concept of product is extremely broad and difficult to measure. As such, the researcher distinguishes a good vs. a bad product through the concept of “quality”. In the case of schools, it is a high-quality educational service that is provided. The service literature usually divides service quality according to physical environment vs. aspects of human interaction (Osman, Yavas, & Babakus, 2005; Kashif & Erdogan, 2009). In the contexts of schools, this could be the Perception of School Facilities (Physical environment), and Perception of School Staff (Human Aspects). Perception of School Facilities can improve the impression of a school, which then fosters a sense of pride that boosts engagement. In terms of Perception of School Staff, knowledgeable and caring teachers are part of the service the school is providing. According to marketing theory, it affects the school image (Li & Hung, 2009) and reputation (Badri, 2014), which are linked to loyalty.

Hypothesis development

Each component of the marketing mix model is synthesized and contextualized into emotional/perception factors as shown in Table 1. Perception of Place (PLC) is a reflection of “Place”, Perception of School Tuition (TUT) is a reflection of “Price and Promotion”, Perception of School Facilities (PSF) and Perception of School Staff (PSS) are reflections of “Product”. Parent Engagement (ENG) and School Loyalty (LYT) represent concepts of business engagement and loyalty.

H1: Perception of School Tuition (TUT) is positively associated with Parent Engagement (ENG).

H2: Perception of School Tuition (TUT) is positively associated with Parent Engagement (ENG).

H3: Perception of School Staff (PSS) is positively associated with Parent Engagement (ENG);

H4: Perception of School Facilities (PSF) is positively associated with Parent Engagement (ENG).

H5: Parent Engagement (ENG) is positively associated with School Loyalty (LYT).

Research Methodology

The research methodology had been developed based on the research objective. The researcher describes and assesses the hypothesized relationship between the factors proposed in the conceptual model using the Structural Equation Modelling (Hox & Bechger, 1999). The research is quantitative in nature and used the cross sectional research design. The unit of analysis is parents who were, at the time, sending children to a private school in Pakistan at the basic education level. The questions were formulated according to various studies in order to reflect each measure. LYT was derived from previous studies on parent loyalty to a school (Li & Hung, 2009; Skallerud, 2011; Badri, 2014; Hambali, Syah, & Suparman, 2019), and the concept of general loyalty. ENG reflects a synthesized and modified version of customer engagement theory, considering, in particular, the Gallup 11 questions “questions that get at the heart of the customer loyalty concept” which reflects the emotional attachment of customers (Appelbaum, 2001). The TUT and PLC measurements were adapted from the marketing mix concept (Li & Hung, 2009; Gautam, 2015; Hambali, Syah, & Suparman, 2019). As the concepts of PSS and PSF deal primarily with the perception and attitude of parents, an adaptation of the ServPerf concept was used instead of ServQual (Cronin & Taylor, 1992). In each question, answers are given on a 7-point Likert scale.

The content validity was evaluated using the itemized objective congruence index (IOC). Fifteen questions, derived from the literature, reflecting each construct (PSF, PSS, TUT, PLC, ENG, LYT) were sent to nine experts in the area of education and management. Each expert was able to give a score of “-1”, “0”, and “1” corresponding to whether they “disagreed”, were “uncertain”, or “agreed” that each specific question represented the construct. The sums of the scores were then averaged and computed into the IOC. Although an IOC score above 0.5 is considered satisfactory in some research (Rovinelli & Hambleton, 1976), the author used 0.7 as a threshold to establish a greater degree of consensus among experts. Items that scored less than the threshold were dropped from the measure. Out of 15 questions, 13 questions

passed the threshold. Using these questions, the questionnaire was pretested. The final 13 items and their IOC scores are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Construct, Items, and their IOC Score

Constructs and Items Asked in the Survey *	Agree +1	Uncertain 0	Disagree -1	IOC Score
Perception of School Facilities				
The school facilities look professional, suitable for my child's education	9			1
The school is equipped with enough equipment and technology	9			1
Perception of School Staff				
The school staff (teachers, management, general staff) are knowledgeable	9			1
The school staff (teachers, management, general staff) take care of my children well; they are reliable	9			1
Perception of School Tuition				
The Tuition fee is reasonable	9			1
The Tuition collected is well spent	8	1		0.89
Perception of Place				
Delivering my child to the school is convenient for me	9			1
There are many choices of transportation to get to the school	8	1		0.89
Parent Engagement				
I have faith and believe in the school	9			1
I feel that the school respects me and is fair in its treatment of all families	8	1		0.89
I feel a connection to the school and feel that this school is the most suitable for my family	9			1
Parent Loyalty				
I will say good things about this school, and recommend this school to my friends	9			1
I would choose the same school for my child even if there were other good choices	9			1

Sample Collection

Using 10 schools in different regions in Pakistan as nodes, self-reported surveys were given out randomly to parents who, at the time, had children attending school, with the intention of drawing upon samples from the Pakistan population. They were sent out to parents via an online form, and were accessible from the period of December 2020 using a mobile phone or computer. The school nodes cover all regions of Pakistan. Parents who received the forms were not asked about the name of the school their children attended and were assured that the information they provided could not be used to identify them. In addition, all participants were asked to forward the survey to other parents who they knew were also sending children to private schools in Pakistan, even if they attended schools other than the 10 schools selected

as nodes. This ensured that the survey proliferated to parents in schools other from the ones selected. As the survey was only available in the Pakistan language, parents who could not read Pakistan were excluded. In addition, parents needed to have had their child/children in that particular school for more than 1 year in order to participate in the survey. This is because parents who are new to a school are not able to answer questions about why they keep their children in that particular school. The author applied an a priori Sample Size Calculator for Structural Equation Models to calculate the amount of data required for collection. With an anticipated effect size of 0.3, a desired statistical power level of 0.8, a number of latent variables of 6, a number of observed variables of 13, and a probability level of 0.05, the

recommended minimum sample size to detect an effect was 161 (Soper, 2019). Since 10 schools were enrolled in the investigation, the researcher initially planned for at least 20 surveys to be completed in each school and the respective

proliferation. However, at the end of October, 191 online surveys that fully complied with the criteria had been returned. Sample basic characteristics are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

	Frequency: N = 191	Percentage of Sample
Gender		
Male	73	38.2
Female	118	61.8
Age		
Less than 25 years old		0
25 to 35 years old	74	38.7
36 to 45 years old	89	46.6
46 to 55 years old	24	12.6
More than 56 years old	4	2.1
Respondent (parent)'s level of Education		
Less than College level	6	3.1
Bachelor's Degree	119	62.3
Higher than bachelor's degree	66	34.6
Child's Education level		
Primary	111	58.1
Secondary	80	41.9

Analysis methods and findings

On the basis of the gathered data, an exploratory analysis was carried out using a descriptive analysis and correlational analysis. The normality assumption was tested using a normal probability plot. A Factor Analysis was used to assess the construct, using the Maximum Likelihood (ML) estimation method. According to Kumsuprom (2010), the validity check is crucial because it allows for the assessment of constructs in terms of their convergent, discriminant, and face validity. The criteria used for the assessment are as follows:

1. In each construct, the factors should be related, as a reflection that they belong to the same construct (Convergent Validity). As such, the Standardized Loading of each Estimate should be more than 0.7 and the Reliability Score should be more than 0.5;
2. However, they should also be distinct in their unique way as to ensure Discriminant Validity. As such the correlation should be less than 0.9;
3. The items should also make sense in themselves and not represent the definitional domain of other construct as to ensure Face Validity.

On the basis of the construct, Structural Equation Modelling using ML was employed to test the hypothesis. This was done against goodness-of-fit measures that include: Chi-Square fit test (CMIN " χ^2 ") in comparison to its degree of freedom, Normed Fit Index (NFI), Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Root Mean Square Residual (RMR), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). The researcher assessed the fit based primarily on the criteria set by Kline (2005), Baumgartner and Homburg (1996), and Doll et al. (Doll, Xia, & Torkzadeh, 1994).

As shown in Table 2, from the 191 people who participated in the survey, the majority were females (61.8%). The respondents were mostly aged between 25 and 45 years old, which accounted for 85.3% of the respondents. Most had attained at least a bachelor's degree (96.9%) and had children attending primary school (58.1%). As can be seen in Table 3, the highest average rating given by the respondents was in the construct Perception of School Facilities (PSF), where the item "The school facilities look professional, suitable for my child's education" had the highest average (5.98 points on a 7-Point-Likert scale). The lowest average score was in the Perception of

School Tuition (TUT) construct, where the item “The Tuition collected is well spent” had an average of only 4.82 points.

Validity of measures explaining Parent Engagement was also assessed using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Here, the assessment showed a good fit to the four constructs explaining Parent Engagement, with an χ^2 of 34.29 and 14 degrees of freedom, an NFI of 0.98, a GFI of 0.96, an AGFI of 0.89, a CFI of 0.96, an AGFI of 0.89, an RMR of 0.07, and an RMSEA of 0.08, with all

four constructs providing statistically significant estimates as shown in Table 3. Although AGFI missed the usual criteria of 0.9 by 0.01, it is still considered acceptable based on Baumgartner and Homburg (1996). Since all items loaded highly on their factor loadings (from 0.72 to 1.14), validity of constructs explaining Parent Engagement was established (Dabholkar, Thorpe, & Rentz, 1996). In addition, the squared multiple correlations also ranged from 0.51 to 1.29, which suggests that internal consistency was achieved.

Table 3: Construct Reliability

	Mean (SD)	Standardized Estimate/CFA Factor Loadings	Squared Multiple Correlation/R ²
Perception of School Facilities (PSF)			
The school facilities look professional, suitable for my child's education	5.98 (0.08)	0.94	0.88
The school is equipped with enough equipment and technology	5.46 (0.08)	0.85	0.72
Perception of School Staff (PSS)			
The school staff (teachers, management, general staff) are knowledgeable	5.09 (0.13)	0.98	0.96
The school staff (teachers, management, general staff) take care of my children well; they are reliable	5.04 (0.14)	0.99	0.97
Perception of School Tuition (TUT)			
The Tuition fee is reasonable	4.90 (0.11)	0.98	0.96
The Tuition collected is well spent	4.82 (0.12)	0.72	0.51
Perception of Place (PLC)			
Delivering my child to the school is convenient for me	5.25 (0.11)	1.14	1.29
There are many choices of transportation to get to the school	5.28 (0.10)	0.85	0.72

Source: Own illustration

The Structural Equation Model (SEM) was run using the Maximum Likelihood estimation technique based on the proposed model. The result indicates a good fit with an χ^2 of 91.25 with 54 Degrees of freedom, an NFI of 0.98, a GFI of 0.93, an AGFI of 0.88, a CFI of 0.99, an RMR of 0.1, and an RMSEA of 0.06. The model's standardized estimates and its p value are reported in Table 4. Here, it can be seen that Parent Engagement was significantly and positively related to School

Loyalty (at 0.995, $p < 0.01$). However, out of the four constructs explaining Parent Engagement, only Perception of School Staff was significantly associated with Parent Engagement (at 0.958, $p < 0.01$). Perception of School Facilities, Perception of School Tuition, and Perception of Place were not significantly associated with Parent Engagement. The result of hypothesis testing is summarized in table 5.

Table 4: Estimate of parameters

Constructs	Parent Engagement		Parent Loyalty	
	Estimate	p ^a	Estimate	p ^a

Perception of School Facilities (PSF)	0.022	0.204
Perception of School Staff (PSS)	0.958	<0.01 ^b
Perception of School Tuition (TUT)	0.034	0.078
Perception of Place (PLC)	0.004	0.528
Parent Engagement (ENG)		0.995 <0.01 ^b

Source: own illustration

Table 5: Key findings

Hypothesis	Result
Hypothesis 1: Perception of School Tuition (TUT) is positively associated with Parent Engagement (ENG)	Insufficient evidence to support the hypothesis
Hypothesis 2: Perception of School Tuition (TUT) is positively associated with Parent Engagement (ENG)	Insufficient evidence to support the hypothesis
Hypothesis 3: Perception of School Staff (PSS) is positively associated with Parent Engagement (ENG)	Sufficient evidence to support the hypothesis (0.958, $p < 0.01$)
Hypothesis 4: Perception of School Facilities (PSF) is positively associated with Parent Engagement (ENG)	Insufficient evidence to support the hypothesis
Hypothesis 5: Parent Engagement (ENG) is positively associated with School Loyalty (LYT)	Sufficient evidence to support the hypothesis (0.995, $p < 0.01$)

Source: Own illustration

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings show that, in comparison to other factors, the respondents did not feel satisfied with the tuition fees of private schools as reflected by the low average score in Table 3 (less than 5 points on a 7point-Likert scale). In comparison, the parents had a good overall perception of school facilities as reflected by higher PSF score (from 5.46 to 5.98 out of 7). Although the means of tuition were low, tuition was the component with the most varied opinions among respondents as reflected by high value of standard deviation. That is, parents reported a mixture of very high and very low perception of tuition. This may be due the diverse goals of private schools. Some strive to deliver a very high level of education, and charge tuition accordingly, while some strive to extend the opportunity to serve the greater community. Determining whether their schools are able to meet their set goal, thereby, fulfilling parent's expectations, could be the deciding factor for parent perception of school tuition.

Out of the four factors determining Parent Engagement, only Perception of School Staff significantly affected Parent Engagement. There is insufficient statistical evidence to support that the other three predicting factors were positively associated with Parent Engagement. This could be because, on average, the physical appearance of private schools in Pakistan is much better than

their public-school counterparts. The mean PSF score was quite high in comparison with other aspects (Table 3). Therefore, it could be that there is very little room for improvement in PSF, which would affect ENG. Likewise, for PLC, parents may only initially consider "place" as a determinant for choosing a school for their children before choosing the school (Yaacob, Osman, & Bachok, 2015). However, once the school has been chosen, "place" may play little to no role in terms of exhibiting an effect on engagement. In addition, like PSF, PLC had high average scores. As such, there is little room for PLC to have an effect of on ENG. As for TUT, this result may be explained by the fact that price affects loyalty via other mechanisms like image and reputation. This is in line with studies conducted by Li and Hung (2009) who found no statistical evidence to support that marketing tactics, including Price, have positive effect on loyalty. Marketing tactics affect school image first-hand, and possibly have little to do with the engagement of the current school's parents.

On a more practical note, this study highlights the importance of parent engagement in building school loyalty; it confirms the concept of customer engagement as a strong predictor of loyalty, in line with the literature from other industries (Nitadpakorn & Kittisopee, 2017; Al-Dmour, Ali, & Aldmour, 2019; Liu, Liu, Lee, & Chen, 2019;

Rasoolimanesh, Noor, Schuberth, & Jaafar, 2019; Rather, Hollebeek, & Islam, 2019). Consequently, management in the private educational sector must address “Engagement” as an important gateway to building long lasting loyalty and sustainable school businesses. This can be done through improving the human aspects of the school, in order to improve the perception of the school staff. As is generally suggested, “Effective teachers are the most important factor contributing to student achievement” (Stronge & Hindman, 2003); this study illustrates that teachers and staff are both at the heart of student success and the success and sustainable continuity of the school as an entity. The standard deviation increases in PSS was associated with a 0.958 standard deviation increase in ENG. ENG acts as a mediator for the impact to be realized in LYT. It reinforces the belief that, as business owners and managers, one can only give commitment to the employees; it is the employees who will then enable the customer to develop their commitment for the business in return. Hence, when facing an investment dilemma for improving business engagement, business owner should direct their resources toward uplifting their human capital as priority consideration.

In terms of limitations, it is important to note that this study was conducted with a “correlational design”. Although the researcher used the term “effect” and “impact”, due to the research design, one can never be too certain whether one variable really causes another variable. The causality claim can be better elucidated with an experimental design that ensures validity and reliability. In addition, generalizability and bias may also be issues as the researcher selected certain schools as nodes for data collection. Although this allowed for the convenient coverage of all regions in Pakistan, it is important to note that such a design can in turn cause sampling biases. Future researcher can build on from these limitations by allowing for the collection of larger sample sizes in experimental settings, which will allow for a stronger argument for causality. In addition, adjustment of the constructs that allows for more factors could provide more in-depth insights into the relationship between engagement and loyalty. The researcher used the Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) technique to assess the associations between the proxies that represent parent perception of Tuition, Place, Facilities, Staff, School Engagement, and School Loyalty. It was found that only parent Perception of School Staff (PSS) shows a statistically significant positive association with Parent Engagement

(ENG). ENG then acts as a mediator for the “effect” to be realized in School Loyalty. This study suggests that, in order to build a successful and sustainable private school where parents are loyal, one should begin by improving engagement. At the heart of engagement, improving the school staff appears to be the key.

This study offers a few points in terms of research originality. First, unlike other studies that link the concept of parental engagement with student success, this study establishes a direct link with parental loyalty in private schools, which is a reflection of business success and sustainability. It confirms the importance of engaging customers as a powerful predictor of business success, in line with empirical findings from other business industries. Although this may be seen as taking an “academic capitalism” perspective, the author made it clear that this study was conducted with the aim of making a contribution to solving private school closure problems in Pakistan that stem from business operational problems. The second novelty of this paper lies in contextual understanding in Pakistan. Not only are the introduction of engagement concept new to the field of private school management, but the contextualized version of such concept offer another perspective of looking at engagement based on empirical data in Pakistan. The author collected samples in every region. Although this can induce biases, it allows for a certain degree of generalizability for the whole country instead of focusing on a specific geographical area. Third, this study pinpoints the managerial objective that private school executives should be focusing on. Improvement of the human aspects of the school is a key enabler of parent loyalty. Contrary to general notion, there is insufficient statistical evidence to support the notion that investment in facilities, improvement in transportation to get to school, and making parents more satisfied with the school tuition will help to promote school engagement and loyalty. However, there is sufficient statistical evidence to support that schoolteachers and staff are the essential basis for building engagement and loyalty in private schools. Given same amount of investment, addressing teacher and staff problems should be the primary concern.

As such, this study contributes to the private school business administration and education management literature by elaborating the role of marketing mix theory in building engagement and loyalty, pinpointing specific the foci. The results not only provide managerial implications for private schools in Pakistan, but also contribute to

the sustainable running of private school to serve the students in general.

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