

1 **Missing Link in ‘New-Normal’ for Higher Education: Nexus between Online**
2 **Experiential Marketing, Perceived-Harm, Social Distancing Concern and University**
3 **Brand Evangelism in China**
4

5 **Abstract**

6 Chinese universities were the first to experience the massive shock waves of the COVID-19
7 pandemic that disrupted higher education globally. Despite extensive marketing research on
8 higher education in the ‘new normal’, empirical evidence on the potential role of online
9 experiential marketing and university brand evangelism is still little to none. To address this
10 critical research gap, the present study is the first to explore university brand evangelism in
11 China and how it is influenced by online experiential marketing. In addition, the moderating
12 effects of perceived harm and social distancing concern on the relationship between online
13 experiential marketing and university brand evangelism were also tested. Based on a sample of
14 university students in China (N=242) and covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-
15 SEM), the findings revealed that online experiential marketing (including sense experience, feel
16 experience, think experience, act experience, and relate experience) significantly magnifies
17 university brand evangelism in China. Interestingly, this relationship becomes more
18 strengthened when the Chinese students have a high intensity of perceived harm of COVID-19
19 and social distancing concerns. These novel findings provide new insights to both policymakers
20 and marketers globally about the powerful medium of online experiential marketing to
21 successfully promote university brands (during and after the global pandemic) using university
22 brand evangelism more strategically.

23 **Keywords:** *University brand evangelism; online experiential marketing; perceived harm;*
24 *concern for social distancing; protection motivation theory.*

25 **1. Introduction**

26 Brands create a transformative halo effect by converting loyal customers into brand evangelists
27 who act as an external driving force to favorably influence others (e.g., peers, friends and
28 family) towards the brand (Mansoor & Paul, 2022; Al Nawas, Altarifi & Ghantous, 2021).
29 Hence, the term ‘brand evangelism’ refers to those highly passionate customers who possess
30 strong emotional attachment and commitment through purchasing, praising, defending, and
31 convincing others to get engaged with the brand (Mansoor & Paul, 2022). Moreover, brand
32 evangelists may even share negative sentiments and/or adverse feedback against rival brands
33 (Girardin, Blal & Lunardo, 2023; Al Nawas, Altarifi & Ghantous, 2021). Despite extensive
34 research in university branding literature, prior research has largely overlooked brand
35 evangelism in higher education (Zaman *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, experiential marketing has
36 gained tremendous growth and popularity in recent years (Dwivedi, *et al.*, 2023), especially its
37 efficacy during the pandemic (e.g., virtual experiences such as online learning, real-time
38 gamification and metaverse) has increased manifold (Köchling, 2021; Urdea, Constantin &
39 Purcaru, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2022). Although experiential marketing has been intensively
40 studied in the hospitality and tourism industry (Köchling, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2022), there is
41 surprisingly limited research focusing on experiential marketing and its impact on higher
42 education institutions (Chang, 2020; Khwaja *et al.*, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2022). In essence,
43 universities are educational institutions that exchange online and offline services in return for
44 tuition fees. Therefore, the unique learning experiences offered by universities are of great
45 importance to satisfy students’ expectations as well as develop a strong university brand image
46 (Cordelier, Vasquez & Viviane, 2021; Zaman *et al.*, 2021). To that extent, this study widens
47 the scope of experiential marketing literature in higher education by focusing on its effects on

1 university brand evangelism, in particular context of universities in China (Cordelier, Vasquez
2 & Viviane, 2021; Köchling, 2021).

3
4 There has been growing literature on the impact of COVID-19 perceived harm; however, the
5 assessment of multifaceted harm and consequences remains to be uncovered (Alves *et al.*, 2023;
6 Zaman *et al.*, 2021). Undeniably, the perceived harm of COVID-19 is presumed to be massive
7 and devastating for many, including higher education (Alves *et al.*, 2023; Evans, 2020; Kirk &
8 Rifkin, 2020; Zaman *et al.*, 2021). Despite, the unprecedented challenges of the global
9 pandemic, university students require unique learning experiences that match with their
10 changing needs, thus allowing them to celebrate growth, achievements and rewards, in order to
11 become university brand evangelists (Mansoor & Paul, 2022; Al Nawas, Altarifi & Ghantous,
12 2021; Zaman *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, it has also been advocated that the use of long-forgotten
13 ‘fear appeal’ can bear positive results for marketers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the
14 intelligent planning and use of fear appeal have led to positive purchase intentions (Addo *et al.*,
15 2020). Moreover, it is also argued that the consumer's repurchase intentions during COVID-19
16 is affected by the brand’s emphatic response and prioritizing people’s well-being over profits
17 (Pantano *et al.*, 2020). Similarly, “fear” has been studied with reference to brand equity and
18 brand attachment. It has been highlighted that the use of fear promoted through marketing
19 campaigns creates an emotional brand attachment (Dunn & Hoegg, 2014; Zaman *et al.*, 2021).
20 Although there are scholarly recommendations highlighting the importance of various
21 underlying factors to comprehend brand evangelism (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013;
22 Mansoor & Paul, 2022; Al Nawas, Altarifi & Ghantous, 2021), prior research has given limited
23 attention to the influential role of perceived harm of COVID-19 and concern for social
24 distancing in affecting brand evangelism (Mansoor & Paul, 2022; Zaman *et al.*, 2021).
25 Moreover, the effects of experiential marketing on brand evangelism, can further lead to a
26 generation of interesting new hypotheses (Köchling, 2021; Zaman *et al.*, 2021).

27
28 Prior branding literature has revealed that consumer brand evangelism is correlated with various
29 marketing concepts, including repurchase intention, brand love, brand engagement, brand trust,
30 and brand identification (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013; Doss, 2014; Harrigan *et al.*, 2020;
31 Kang *et al.*, 2020; Kautish, 2010; Mansoor & Paul, 2022; Al Nawas, Altarifi & Ghantous, 2021;
32 Nyadzayo *et al.*, 2020). However, there is a dearth of research exploring the applicability of the
33 brand evangelism concept in higher education institutions (Mansoor & Paul, 2022; Zaman *et al.*,
34 2021). Moreover, the branding literature has not explored potential factors (e.g., perceived
35 harm of COVID-19 and social distancing concern) that can moderate the relationship of brand
36 evangelism with other well-established marketing concepts, such as experiential marketing
37 (Harrigan *et al.*, 2020; Köchling, 2021; Mansoor & Paul, 2022; Nyadzayo *et al.*, 2020). Hence,
38 the present study aims to explore the effects of online experiential marketing (including sense
39 experience, feel experience, think experience, act experience, and relate experience) on
40 university brand evangelism in China (Köchling, 2021; Mansoor & Paul, 2022; Zaman *et al.*,
41 2021). Furthermore, the present study also aims to explore the moderating effects of perceived
42 harm of COVID-19 and social distancing concerns (on the relationship between online
43 experiential marketing and university brand evangelism) for the first time in literature through
44 the lens of protection motivation theory (Alves *et al.*, 2023; Saeed *et al.*, 2023; Zaman *et al.*,
45 2021). As originally developed to understand human responses to fear arousals, protection
46 motivation theory stipulates that behavior is predicted by the coping appraisals (e.g., perceived
47 self-efficacy and response efficacy) and threat appraisals (e.g., perceived severity and
48 susceptibility) (Hadizadeh-Talasaz *et al.*, 2022). As the present study integrated the perceived
49 harm and social distancing concerns, it is an initial attempt at reflecting both appraisals (i.e.,

1 perceived threat and coping mechanism) to contextually understand brand evangelism in higher
2 education (Zaman *et al.*, 2021).

3 2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

4 2.1 University Brand Evangelism

5
6 Over the past few years, higher education Institutions (HEIs), world over, are witnessing radical
7 structural changes amidst increased competition, shifting needs of students, evolving nature of
8 partnerships with the corporate sector, and research grants and funding (Girardin & Lunardo,
9 2023; Horta, 2023; Maringe and Mourad, 2012). These transformational changes in the higher
10 education sector necessitate the need to adapt to market-based approaches, including HEIs
11 branding, university brand love, university identification, and university brand evangelism
12 (Chung *et al.*, 2020; Nedbalová *et al.*, 2014; Vianden and Barlow, 2014; Hemsley-Brown *et al.*,
13 2016;).

14 The term “brand evangelism” is a recent development in the literature on consumer behavior.
15 Brand evangelism is defined as a deeper lever of customers’ psychological, emotional and
16 behavioral commitment and devotion toward a brand that translates into active vocal support,
17 referral, and endorsement (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013; Riivits-Arkonsuo *et al.*, 2014;
18 Kang *et al.*, 2020). Brand Evangelism is also defined as the extended version of positive word-
19 of-mouth, where the persuasive vocal advocacy is more profound and fervent than the positive
20 WOM (Tabassum, *et al.*, 2020). A happy customer is one who is satisfied with his/her purchase
21 and will give positive feedback about the experience and recommend the brand to others if
22 asked. Whereas ‘brand evangelists’ are a completely different type of customers who are
23 simply ecstatic about the brand apart from being happy and satisfied brand users. Brand
24 evangelists have a deeper level of commitment toward a brand than an ordinary customer since
25 they passionately and wholeheartedly endorse, support, and defend and promote a brand
26 voluntarily (Riivits-Arkonsuo *et al.*, 2014). In other words, brand evangelists enthusiastically
27 spread their feelings and beliefs as well as disseminate positive referrals continuously, thereby
28 influencing others to choose a brand while disparaging the competing brands (Becerra &
29 Badrinarayanan, 2013).

30 Today’s marketers have realized the importance of turning their emotionally attached
31 consumers from walking, voluntary vocal referrals to oppositional referrals (Girardin, Blal &
32 Lunardo, 2023; Kang *et al.*, 2020). Subsequently, marketers are exploring various routes to
33 convert satisfied customers to brand evangelists (Mahmood *et al.*, 2019). Although the
34 importance of this new yet exciting topic is fairly recognized, considering the number of
35 research published over the last decade, the literature remains still in its infancy (Girardin, Blal
36 & Lunardo, 2023). Table-1 summarizes the selected literature on brand evangelism, where its
37 relationship with other marketing concepts was investigated.

38 Table-1
39 *Summary of Selected Literature on Brand Evangelism*

Authors	Variables Under Study	Findings and Suggested Areas for Future Research
(Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013)	Brand Trust (IV) Brand Identification (IV) Brand Evangelism (DV) (measured as Brand Purchase Intentions,	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Brand trust influences purchase and positive brand referral intentions. Brand identification influences positive and oppositional brand referral intentions.• Suggests exploring the moderating variables that affect the intensity of brand evangelism.

	Positive Brand Referrals, and Oppositional Brand Referrals)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommends investigating the evolving nature of brand evangelism in the online (technology-enabled) marketplace.
(Kautish, 2010; Matzler <i>et al.</i> , 2007)	Extraversion (IV) Openness (IV) brand Passion (IV) Brand Evangelism (DV)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extraversion leads to brand evangelism • Suggest investigating the relationship between extraversion and brand evangelism different brands and “objects of love”.
(Harrigan <i>et al.</i> , 2020)	Value Creation (IV) Brand Evangelism (DV) (measured as brand defense and brand advocacy) brand Love (MV) CBE (MV)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value creation positively impacts brand evangelism (both brand defense and brand advocacy). Customer brand engagement (CBE) positively correlates with brand advocacy. Brand love has a mediocre impact on brand defense. • Value creation has a strong and measurable impact on brand evangelism, whereas the mediating variables (CBE and brand love) have weak to medium indirect impacts on brand evangelism. • Suggests focusing on the mediating role of various emotional drivers on brand evangelism. • Recommends including consumer personality and passion in future studies.
(Riivits-Arkonsuo <i>et al.</i> , 2014)	A qualitative study exploring various stages a customer passes through to become a brand evangelist.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brand evangelism is driven by deep personal level emotions and brand-related concepts, including consumer multisensory perception about brand authenticity, individuality, story, interaction, and experiences. • Suggests analyzing the behaviors of different generations (GEN Z, Alpha).
(Doss, 2014)	Brand Satisfaction (IV) Brand Trust (IV) Opinion Leadership (IV) Consumer-Brand Identification (MV) Brand Salience (MV) Brand Evangelist (DV)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The presence of opinion leadership helps to develop brand evangelism. • Brand salience and brand trust lead to evangelism. • Brand identification mediates the relationship between satisfaction and evangelism. • Suggests to analyze the extent of the impact of national culture on brand evangelism should be studied. • Proposes to analyze whether there is any difference in developing brand evangelism in service industries.
(Nyadzayo <i>et al.</i> , 2020)	Brand satisfaction (IV) Brand trust (IV) Self-Expressive Brand (IV) CBE (MV)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CBE mediates the relationship between brand trust, brand satisfaction, and brand evangelism. Also, a direct relationship between self-expressive brands and evangelism is reported.

Brand Evangelism (DV) Repurchase Intention (DV)

- Highly engaged customers are most likely to be emotionally linked to the brand and become brand evangelist.
- Brand evangelism can be promoted via brand trust and satisfaction with the mediating impact of CBE.
- Proposes to conduct cluster analysis for CBE levels (low, medium, high) and their impact on brand evangelism.
- Suggests to include the various types of customer engagement models/modes, which can differ from business to business.
- Recommends investigating how negative-valance concepts will affect the model/relationships.

(Kang <i>et al.</i> , 2020)	Brand Experience (IV) Brand Attachment (MV) Brand Distinctiveness (MV) Brand Evangelism (DV) (measured as Positive Referral Intentions and Oppositional Referral Intentions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exposure to different stimuli (i.e., experiences) increases brand attachment. A long-lasting and favorable brand experience builds brand distinctiveness. • Attachment is highly correlated with positive referrals in contrast to its weak correlation with oppositional referral. • Emphasizes the relevance of consumer-based relationships in building brand evangelists.
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2 As summarized in Table 1, the concept of brand evangelism has been studied in correlation
3 with various concepts of marketing, including brand trust, brand identification, brand
4 satisfaction, customer brand engagement, repurchase intention, brand attachment, brand love,
5 value creation, etc. (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013; Doss, 2014; Harrigan *et al.*, 2020; Kang
6 *et al.*, 2020; Kautish, 2010; Matzler *et al.*, 2007; Nyadzayo *et al.*, 2020). At an infancy stage
7 though, the brand evangelism concept has also been studied in the context of universities and
8 higher education institutions (Khwaja *et al.*, 2019). Literature suggests that identification with
9 the university and the social communities lead to the development of brand evangelism in
10 university students (Khwaja *et al.*, 2022). On similar lines, another study by (Amani, 2022)
11 reveals that HEIs' and universities' reputation majorly influences the development of positive
12 stakeholders' perception, including students, alumni, and employers. Other recommendation on
13 the positive impact of university identification is its influence on the university affiliation,
14 students' constructive participation, feedback for improvement, and advocacy intention (Balaji
15 *et al.*, 2016). Whereas Amani (2022) suggests that the identification with universities and HEIs,
16 and the sense of belongingness eventually lead to brand evangelism.

17 Furthermore, another study suggests that students' satisfaction with HEIs is majorly driven by
18 the institution-students' psychological contract which is strongly associated with brand
19 evangelism (Amani, 2022). This study focuses on student phycological concept covering three
20 main concepts, i.e., ideological psychological contract (IPC), transactional psychological
21 contract (TPC), and relational psychological contract (RPC), considering that fulfillment of the
22 two-way contract leads to university brand love and ultimately brand evangelism. The study
23 further reveals that fulfillment of university's mission and values enhance IPC, the university
24 services at par with the fee and other charges develops TPS, and relationship between university

1 staff and students boosts RPC; which collectively contribute to university brand love and brand
2 evangelism (Amani, 2022). Having discussed that, it is still evident that the depth and breadth
3 of the brand evangelism literature, especially in HEIs and Universities are still not developed.
4 Therefore, exploring its relationship with other diverse and correlated consumer behavior and
5 marketing models and variables will broaden the theoretical literature of brand evangelism
6 (Zaman *et al.*, 2023).

7 8 **2.2 Online Experiential Marketing** 9

10 The concept of experiential marketing has increasingly drawn the attention of marketing
11 scholars as the nature of the consumer-brand relationship continues to evolve due to changing
12 customers' expectations (Wang *et al.*, 2022), the presence of more informed customers, and
13 fragmented media. (Leahy, Fenton & Barry, 2022; Mccole, 2004). Experiential marketing is a
14 relatively new notion that focuses on customer-centricity as a way to provide positive and active
15 customer experiences before, during, and after the actual purchase (Machado *et al.*, 2014; Wang
16 *et al.*, 2022). As today's customers expect a more interactive, live, unique, and exclusive
17 interaction with the brands, experiential marketing has been regarded as the next big thing and
18 the future of marketing (Dixit & Prayag, 2022; Khwaja *et al.*, 2020). To simply put, experiential
19 marketing dwells on the very concept that the value does not lie only in products/services or
20 their operational and utilitarian benefits, but also resides in the experiential and hedonic
21 elements of the products/services (Leahy, Fenton & Barry, 2022; Schmitt & Zarantonello,
22 2013).

23
24 In marketing literature, experiential marketing has been categorized into five dimensions. In
25 particular, the sense dimension refers to the sensory experiences that arise from taste, sound,
26 sight, etc., while the feel component pertains to inner feelings and emotions that adhere to the
27 firm's marketing offer (Carmo, Marques & Dias, 2022; Rather, 2020; Tsaour *et al.*, 2007). The
28 third factor, namely "think" relates to the extent to which the product/service motivates
29 consumers to engage in creative and elaborative thinking. In a similar vein, the "act" dimension
30 is the extent to which the product can encourage consumers to generate experiences through
31 their own behaviors. The final dimension, the 'relate factor' is defined as the extent to which
32 the marketing offer could create a bond between a customer and a reference group, or culture
33 (Rather, 2020; Tsaour *et al.*, 2007).

34
35 Experiential marketing is a relatively new avenue for HEIs and universities (Wang *et al.*, 2022).
36 However, it is suggested to be offering promising outcomes. Consequential to the growth of
37 HEIs, especially the private institutions are facing increased competition and challenges thus,
38 they are strategizing new ways to market their services and creating memorable experiences
39 targeting stakeholders' satisfaction, positive brand name, and word of mouth (Ved & Oza,
40 2022). In a recent HEIs experiential marketing study, 674 foreign university students were
41 surveyed for their experience of the university as reflected in their communication on social
42 networking sites and it was revealed that experiential marketing holds potential benefits for
43 HEIs (Sotikova, & Cane, 2022). The study concluded that there is a high level of association
44 between loyalty to the country of the university and the communication of experiences on social
45 media sites (Sotikova, & Cane, 2022).

46 In today's information and technological era, digital disruption, coupled with internet
47 pervasiveness, is forcing marketers to transform their marketing channels by facilitating
48 customers' before, during, and after the actual purchase using a range of digital media known
49 as 'online experiential marketing' (Wang *et al.*, 2022; Chen *et al.*, 2008; Luo *et al.*, 2011;

1 Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013). Due to the advancement of digital technologies, marketers are
2 left with no option but to adapt to the requirements of the new technological era. Digital
3 marketers in this new experience-driven economy utilize a range of new digital media and are
4 forced to create unique online experiences before, during, and after the actual purchase behavior
5 (Aktan & Koçak, 2020; Chen *et al.*, 2008; Luo *et al.*, 2011; Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013).
6 Therefore, it is a necessity for marketers to adopt an online experiential marketing perspective
7 and reassess consumer behavior within the context of the digital experience economy
8 (Mahmood *et al.*, 2019).

9 10 **2.3. Online Experiential Marketing and Brand Evangelism**

11
12 Experiential marketing studies in various industries have depicted that favorable consumer
13 experiences positively influence consumers' evaluation of brands (Carmo, Marques & Dias,
14 2022; Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019). In literature, brand experience is found to be
15 strongly correlated with customers' felt emotional ties toward a consumer electronic brand,
16 which then turn them into brand evangelists (Harrigan *et al.*, 2020; Machado *et al.*, 2014). Also,
17 in the tourism and hospitality industry, experiential marketing is noted to enhance tourists'
18 behavioral engagements with the destinations (Rather, 2020) as well as augment their emotional
19 and functional destination perceptions. Similarly, favorable service experiences are found to
20 have a positive impact on customer satisfaction (Chang, 2020; Hameed and Khwaja, 2022),
21 which subsequently boosts brand equity in the hotel and hospitality industry (García *et al.*,
22 2018; Wiedmann *et al.*, 2018). In a study conducted on cruise travelers, consumer experiences
23 are found to be significantly correlated with brand evangelism as travelers are more inclined to
24 give positive and oppositional referrals after favorable experiences (Kang *et al.*, 2020; Khwaja
25 *et al.*, 2019).

26 To the best of our knowledge, experiential marketing has not been studied in relation to
27 university brand evangelism so far (Mahmood *et al.*, 2019; Wang *et al.*, 2022). However, based
28 on the above literature analysis, it can be inferred that experiential marketing activities
29 implemented by higher education institutions can positively affect university brand evangelism
30 amongst university students (Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019; Kang *et al.*, 2020; Rather,
31 2020). Universities are entities providing educational and other career-related online and offline
32 services to students. Therefore, similar to other service industries, experiences created by the
33 universities can help to transform satisfied students into brand evangelists who wholeheartedly
34 give positive referrals as well as endorsing and defending the university brand (Riivits-
35 Arkonsuo *et al.*, 2014; Wang *et al.*, 2022).

36 *H₁: Online experiential marketing positively impacts university brand evangelism.*

37 **2.4. Moderating effects of Perceived Harm of COVID-19**

38 With the onset of the global pandemic, customers' expectations from brands have been shifted
39 from the traditional goal/return orientation (economic rationalism) or pursuit of social relations
40 to a point where the focus is on the state of well-being (Alves *et al.*, 2023; Çağış & Yıldırım,
41 2023). Customers are shifting to brands that use existential questions and thereby developing
42 deeper level emotional and spiritual connections (e.g., campaigns promoting kindness and help)
43 (Karpen & Conduit, 2020). Similarly, brands that do not pose health risks will become more
44 salient during the pandemic due to the increased awareness as well as changing needs of
45 consumers (Belen, 2023; Jian *et al.*, 2020). **This momentum may be explained by the protection**

1 motivation theory, which states that perceived susceptibility and harm alter individuals'
2 responses to risky situations (Belen, 2023; Jian *et al.*, 2020).

3 In marketing literature, the notion of product harm crisis refers to events or accidents related to
4 product harms or defects associated with some brands. The product harm crisis dwells on the
5 notion that harmful products truly jeopardize brand image and if not handled well, product harm
6 crisis can completely deteriorate brand perceptions (Khwaja *et al.*, 2019; Mahmood *et al.*,
7 2019). In this regard, product-harm crisis is a source of negative information that adversely
8 affects consumers' brand preference as well as advertising effectiveness. This is not surprising
9 as ill-prepared responses to product harm crises often lead to a loss of brand equity (Dawar &
10 Pillutla, 2000; Jeon & Baeck, 2016).

11 Universities provide educational services mostly in return for fees paid by university students.
12 However, during the pandemic, universities' roles have gone beyond providing educational
13 services and encapsulated ensuring a safe and suitable environment for education. In line with
14 that, a recent study on university students revealed that the evaluation of university brand
15 performance during the pandemic was significantly influenced by the extent of students' trust
16 in the university brand (Chaudhary *et al.*, 2020). Like other services, perceived harm during
17 educational services negatively impacts university brand perceptions. To remedy this problem,
18 universities invested heavily in online platforms during the pandemic to substitute physical
19 services as much as possible. In a most recent study, Kumar *et al.* (2021) analyzed the
20 effectiveness of the university's website and learning content on students' perceived e-learning
21 quality and satisfaction during the pandemic. Their findings revealed that when a university is
22 perceived positively regarding online services, students tend to develop higher-quality
23 perceptions of e-learning. However, the strength of this relationship was moderated by
24 perceived harm on campus, where the impact was stronger for those with higher risk
25 perceptions. In a similar vein, it is expected that perceived harm on campus may have the
26 potential to moderate the relationship between online experiential marketing and university
27 brand evangelism (Alves *et al.*, 2023; Leahy, Fenton & Barry, 2022). Based on these theoretical
28 discussions, the following hypothesis is developed.

29 *H₂: Perceived harm of COVID-19 significantly moderates the relationship between online*
30 *experiential marketing and university brand evangelism.*

31

32 **2.5. Moderating effects of Concern for Social Distancing**

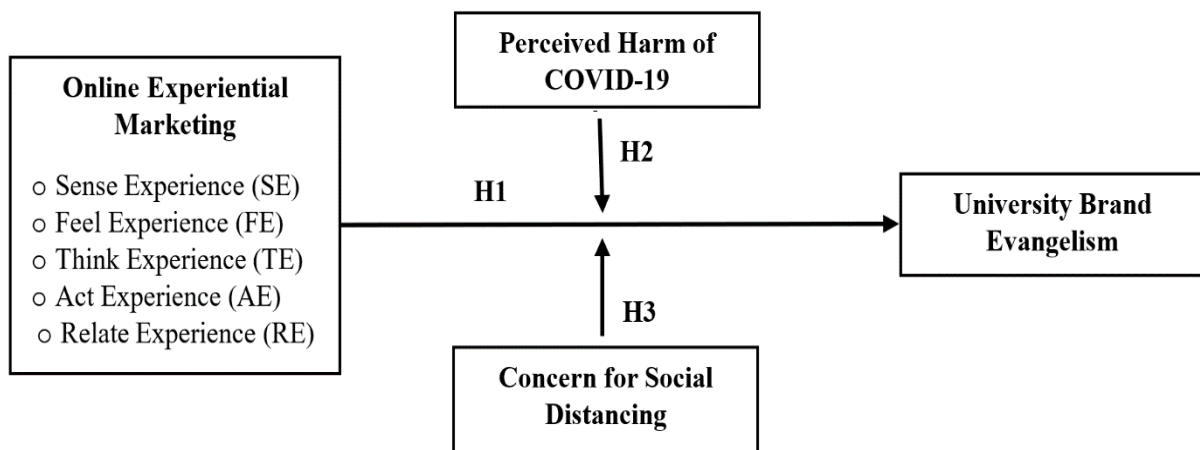
33 Since the start of the pandemic, social distancing has been widely accepted as an effective
34 coping mechanism, likewise masks, hand sanitizers, etc. Social distancing has been
35 recommended and put into force by health regulators and authorities as a measure against the
36 pandemic (Briscese *et al.*, 2023; Deepa *et al.*, 2023). Although social distancing is evidently a
37 necessary practice to tackle the pandemic, its detrimental long-term impact on businesses and
38 economies is still largely unknown (Koren & Petó, 2020; Matee, Motlohi & Nkiwane, 2023).
39 As the adverse outcome of social distancing norms, traditional marketing channels have
40 experienced unprecedented failures, while digital marketing channels have grown substantially
41 (Jiménez-Sánchez, 2020). This posits that consumers have shifted to new online channels very
42 rapidly and adapted to the new norm (Kirk & Rifkin, 2020). As a response to the social
43 distancing measurements, organizations that have been proactively implementing online
44 experiential marketing practices, have benefited from the ongoing crises. For instance, Ikea
45 Austria has utilized their online presence as a tool to reach out to their customers and create
46 unique experiences while taking them on an emotional journey (Kullnig, 2020).

1 Despite the little evidence about the impact of social distancing on businesses, prior research
 2 suggests that the impact will be augmented for the service industry, including hotel and
 3 restaurant businesses, whereas sectors providing compulsory services (i.e., health-care) are
 4 likely to be not impacted (Koren & Pető, 2020; Saeed *et al.*, 2023). In a most recent study,
 5 brand anthropomorphism is found to be a significant and positive predictor of brand defense
 6 for those who are more concerned about social distancing. Therefore, consumers who embrace
 7 social distancing practices were more likely to defend their favorite brands during the pandemic.
 8 On the other hand, the aforementioned relationship was found to be insignificant when
 9 consumers are less concerned about social distancing (Ali *et al.*, 2021). This indicates that social
 10 distancing concerns could moderate peoples' tendencies to defend their favorite brands
 11 (Girardin, Blal & Lunardo, 2023).

12 Once the pandemic took hold, most universities worldwide immediately adapted to the social
 13 distancing practices, which substantially disrupted offline education. This trend has raised the
 14 importance of the university-student relationship to avoid the detrimental effects of the current
 15 pandemic on university brand perceptions (Girardin, Blal & Lunardo, 2023; Horta, 2023).
 16 Therefore, experiential marketing practices implemented by universities could help universities
 17 to create emotionally attached students who can give positive referrals as well as defend
 18 themselves from public criticism (Chaudhary *et al.*, 2020). Also, students' **concern for** social
 19 distancing can have a possible effect on the degree of relationship between experiential
 20 marketing and university brand evangelism (Saeed *et al.*, 2023; Wang *et al.*, 2022). In this
 21 regard, for students who willingly conform to social distancing practices, the impact of
 22 experiential marketing on university brand evangelism is expected to be amplified (Ali *et al.*,
 23 2021; Saeed *et al.*, 2023). Based on these theoretical justifications, the third hypothesis is
 24 generated.

25 *H₃: Concern for social distancing significantly moderates the relationship between online*
 26 *experiential marketing and university brand evangelism.*

27 Based on theoretical insights and supportive evidence from prior literature, the conceptual
 28 model of university brand evangelism is graphically presented in Figure 1.



29

30

Figure 1 *Conceptual Model of University Brand Evangelism*

31

32

1 3. Methods

2 3.1. Sampling and Data Collection

3 This study adopted a quantitative approach to assess the proposed model, which linked
4 university brand evangelism with online experiential marketing, perceived harm on campus and
5 concern for social distancing. The sampling frame included undergraduate and post-graduate
6 students studying at five universities in China (including Peking University, Tsinghua
7 University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Zhejiang University, and Nanjing University), and
8 the data were collected through an online questionnaire. During the enforcement period of
9 COVID-19 social distancing measures at higher education institutions in China, the respondents
10 were reached out through emails, and informed that their personal information and responses
11 would be kept confidential (Zaman *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, they were not informed about
12 the purpose of the research nor given information about the study's conceptual model. This
13 elaborate process helped to deal with common method bias (MacKenzie & Podsakoff, 2012).
14 Also, in line with the recommended sample size for the structural equation model (N>200), a
15 total number of 242 responses were finally used to test the research hypotheses (Hair *et al.*,
16 2010, 2014, 2017; Kline, 2015).

17 The demographic results of the respondents are presented in table 1. As shown in table 1, the
18 majority of the respondents were domestic students (97.1%), while around 2.9 % were
19 international students. In terms of enrollment in education degree, 97.1% of respondents were
20 pursuing bachelor's degree, master's degree 0.4%, while 2.5% of students were pursuing Ph.D.
21 degrees. The majority of the respondents were in the age bracket of 19-24 years (84.3%), while
22 the second most dominant age group was 18 or under years (14%). The grade point average
23 (GPA) of most students was found to be in the range of 3.50 and above 3.50 (36.4%), while
24 34.7% of respondents had GPAs between 3.00-3.49. Lastly, most of the respondents were in
25 pursuing a degree in social science, business and law (74.4%). Detailed results are reported in
26 table 2.

27 Table 2
28 *Demographics Profiles*

Items		Frequency	Percentage
<i>Student type</i>	Domestic	235	97.1%
	International	7	2.9%
<i>Educational degree</i>	Bachelors	235	97.1%
	Masters	1	0.4%
	PhD	6	2.5%
<i>Age</i>	18 and under 18 years	34	14.0%
	19 – 24 years	204	84.3%
	25 – 34 years	4	1.7%
<i>GPA</i>	1.99 or below 1.99	2	0.8%
	No credits earned	7	2.9%
	2.00-2.49	24	9.9%
	2.50-2.99	37	15.3%
	3.00-3.49	84	34.7%
3.50 and above 3.50	88	36.4%	

<i>Field of Study</i>	Arts and Humanities	9	3.7%
	Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction	6	2.5%
	Social Science, Business and Law	180	74.4%
	Health and Welfare	2	0.8%
	Science, Mathematics and Computer	5	2.1%
	Other	40	16.5%

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3.2. *Measures*

4 Due to its interdisciplinary nature, this study adapted scales from various fields, including
5 health, tourism and marketing (Briscese *et al.*, 2020; Nyadzayo *et al.*, 2020; Painter *et al.*,
6 2017). In essence, universities provide various services beyond education, including on-campus
7 cultural activities, workshops, festivals, etc. Universities could be considered analogous to other
8 service-providing organizations, including the tourism and hospitality businesses. Therefore,
9 this study investigated the existent service marketing literature in tourism, and adapted a scale
10 to measure online experiential marketing (Lin *et al.*, 2009; Rather, 2020). The adapted scale
11 items fully represented the online experiences provided in a university setting, where the “sense,
12 feel, act, relate” and the “think” experiences were evaluated by 21 items. Furthermore, a five-
13 item scale was adapted from the branding literature to measure the extent to which students
14 actively promote their university brands (Nyadzayo *et al.*, 2020). The other construct of the
15 conceptual model, namely students’ concern for social distancing, was operationalized by 7
16 items, which were modified from the original work of Briscese *et al.* (2020). The last construct
17 of the model, perceived harm of COVID-19 on campus was measured by 7 items derived from
18 the prior literature (Jin & Cameron, 2007; Painter *et al.*, 2017). All the constructs were
19 evaluated on seven-point Likert type scales, where 1 represented strong disagreement and 7
20 meant strong agreement.

21 **4. Findings**

22 The data was estimated using structural equation modeling on Mplus 7.0. Data normality was
23 initially examined to verify that the data did not violate the normality assumption. Descriptive
24 statistics in Table 2 depict four dimensions of online experimental marketing, namely, sense
25 experience (OSE), feel experience (OFE), think experience (OTE) and act experience (OAE)
26 with standard deviation (S.D) values of 1.668, 1.525, 1.496 and 1.521 respectively. Similarly,
27 university brand evangelism (UBE), concern for social distancing (SD) and perceived harm of
28 COVID-19 (PH) have standard deviation values of 1.322, 1.363 and 1.740, respectively. The
29 data is also considered to have a normal distribution as the standard deviation scores were
30 between ± 2 , while the kurtosis and skewness scores were ± 3 and ± 2 , respectively (Hameed *et al.*,
31 2023; Kline, 2015; Zaman, *et al.*, 2022). Table 2 reports that skewness and kurtosis values
32 were also in the permissible range. Hence, there were no normality concerns in the data (see
33 table 3).

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Table 3
Data Normality (N=242)

Constructs	N	M	S.D	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
UBE	242	5.5223	1.322	-0.815	0.156	0.563	0.312
SD	242	4.7886	1.363	-0.270	0.156	-0.434	0.312
PH	242	2.7342	1.740	0.940	0.156	-0.056	0.312
OSE	242	4.9246	1.668	-0.421	0.156	-0.614	0.312
OFE	242	5.2624	1.525	-0.698	0.156	-0.031	0.312
OTE	242	5.3006	1.496	-0.699	0.156	-0.021	0.312
OAE	242	5.3347	1.521	-0.707	0.156	-0.051	0.312

Sense experience (OSE); Feel experience (OFE); Think experience (OTE); Act experience (OAE); University brand evangelism (UBE); Concern for Social distancing (SD); Perceived Harm of Covid-19 (PH)

4.1 Measurement Model

After the determination of data normality, it remains eminent to conduct a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of the data. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) results demonstrate that all the items were loaded on their respective constructs and the individual loadings of items were greater than 0.4. EFA loadings are denoted by ρ , while CFA loadings are denoted by λ in table 3. Similarly, composite reliability (CR) values of the constructs must be greater than 0.7 (Khwaja and Zaman, 2020). C.R values of the constructs turned out to be as follows: UBE (0.931), SD (0.862), PH (0.932), SE (0.964), FE (0.958), TE (0.967), AE (0.966), and RE (0.904) respectively. This demonstrates that there were no reliability concerns of the constructs. Average variance extracted (AVE) is an important indicator of discriminant validity and the results demonstrated AVE values of all the constructs to be more than 0.5, which is acceptable (Abbasi, *et al.*, 2022; Muthén, Muthén, & Asparouhov, 2017). Furthermore, measurement model fit indices were configured. Absolute fit indices were measured through chi-square/degree of freedom (χ^2/df), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). The value of χ^2/df emerged to be 2.800, RMSEA 0.08 and SRMR 0.078. All of these values are in the permissible range (Bashir, *et al.*, 2021) Similarly, incremental fit indices were determined through confirmatory fit index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis index (TLI). CFI value emerged to be 0.917, while TLI value emerged to be 0.897, which were also in the permissible range (see table 4).

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Table 4
EFA/CFA, composite reliability, and convergent validity of measurement model (N=242)

Constructs & Items	ρ	λ	CR	AVE
<i>University Brand Evangelism (UBE)</i>			0.931	0.732
UBE1	0.703	0.815		
UBE2	0.845	0.873		
UBE3	0.689	0.897		
UBE4	0.616	0.773		
UBE5	0.699	0.911		
<i>Concern for Social Distancing (SD)</i>			0.862	0.520
SD1	0.442	0.445		
SD2	0.541	0.781		
SD3	0.832	0.758		
SD4	0.885	0.868		
SD5	0.695	0.769		
SD6	0.529	0.624		
<i>Perceived Harm of COVID-19 (PH)</i>			0.932	0.692
PH1	0.781	0.766		
PH2	0.838	0.795		
PH3	0.837	0.795		
PH4	0.898	0.910		
PH5	0.844	0.851		
PH6	0.826	0.864		
<i>Sense Experience (SE)</i>			0.964	0.871
SE1	0.703	0.920		
SE2	0.827	0.930		
SE3	0.751	0.964		
SE4	0.789	0.918		
<i>Feel Experience (FE)</i>			0.958	0.851
FE1	0.975	0.933		
FE2	0.992	0.935		
FE3	0.979	0.891		
FE4	0.944	0.932		
<i>Think Experience (TE)</i>			0.967	0.855
TE1	0.921	0.876		
TE2	0.955	0.918		
TE3	0.895	0.917		
TE4	0.896	0.953		
TE5	0.925	0.957		
<i>Act Experience (AE)</i>			0.934	0.827
AE1	0.877	0.972		
AE2	0.897	0.955		
AE3	0.546	0.789		
<i>Relate Experience (RE)</i>			0.904	0.760
RE1	0.519	0.883		
RE2	0.597	0.934		
RE3	0.628	0.793		

Measurement model fit statistics:

a. Absolute fit indices

$\chi^2 = 1573.833$, $df = 562$, $\chi^2/df = 2.800$, $P = 0.000$, $RMSEA = 0.080$, $SRMR = 0.078$

b. Incremental fit indices

CFI = 0.917, and TLI = 0.897

Note. * $p < 0.05$; ρ = Factor loadings at 0.40 using EFA; λ = standardized factors loadings using CFA; CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = average variance extracted.

1 Table 5 provides results of Multicollinearity & Discriminant Validity. Square correlations in
2 diagonals indicate that there are no validity concerns.

3

4 Table 5

5 *Multicollinearity & Discriminant Validity (N = 242)*

	PH	UBE	SD	RE	AE	TE	FE	SE
PH	0.832							
UBE	0.104	0.855						
SD	0.356	0.550	0.721					
RE	0.078	0.742	0.484	0.872				
AE	0.067	0.794	0.620	0.806	0.909			
TE	0.113	0.781	0.624	0.789	0.880	0.925		
FE	0.123	0.750	0.598	0.800	0.839	0.177	0.923	
SE	0.177	0.777	0.550	0.754	0.814	0.123	0.941	0.933

6

7 ***4.2 Structural Path Model***

8 The results of path modeling are demonstrated in table 6. Path modeling was conducted for the
9 testing of hypotheses. It was essential to examine the effects of online experimental marketing
10 (OE) on university brand evangelism (UBE). Hypothesis 1 (H1) determined the cause-and-
11 effect relationship between OE and UBE. The result provided a path coefficient value of 0.691,
12 p-value of 0.00 and t-statistics value of 18.67. Thus, H1 was accepted as a p-value confirmed a
13 significant relationship, and path coefficient values emerged to be considerable. For the
14 acceptance of the hypothesis, t-statistics must be greater than 1.96 (Mueller & Hancock, 2018).
15 Hypothesis 2 (H2) configured the moderation effect of perceived harm of COVID-19 (PH)
16 among OE and UBE. Path coefficient value emerged to be 0.306, p-value, 0.00 and t-statistics
17 to be 6.375. Hypothesis 3 (H3) configured the moderation effect of concern for social distancing
18 (SD) among OE and UBE. P-value of this relationship was 0.00, path coefficient value of 0.243
19 while t-statistics 4.860. Hence, all the hypotheses of the study were accepted.

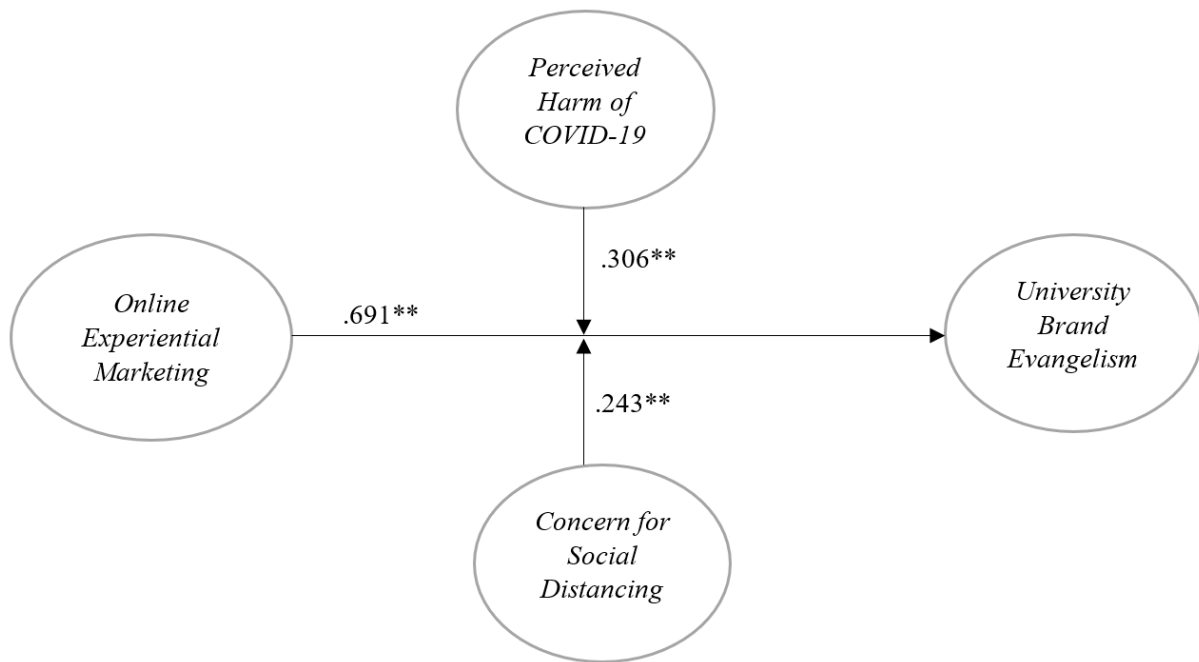


Figure 2 Structural Path Model of University Brand Evangelism

Table 6

Results of Hypotheses (N=242)

Hypotheses	Relationships	Path Coefficients	t-statistics	p-values	Outcomes
H1	OE → UBE	0.691**	18.67	<0.01	Accepted
H2	OE*PH → UBE	0.306**	6.375	<0.01	Accepted
H3	OE*SD → UBE	0.243**	4.860	<0.01	Accepted

Notes: ** $p < 0.01$; OE: Online Experimental Marketing, PH: Perceived Harm of Covid-19 on Campus, CD: Concern for Social Distancing

5. Discussion

Once COVID-19 took hold, marketing scholars have shifted their attention to assessing the impact of the pandemic on consumer behavior towards various products and services (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020; Matee, Motlohi & Nkiwane, 2023; Saeed *et al.*, 2023). As a quick response to the pandemic, universities worldwide had to abandon traditional physical classes and adapt their systems to the new norm of social distancing (Matee, Motlohi & Nkiwane, 2023; Saeed *et al.*, 2023). Yet, there is little research assessing and understanding the impact of the new normal in the context of university brands (Girardin, Blal & Lunardo, 2023). These existent studies emphasized the growing importance of students' e-service and e-information quality perceptions (Shehzadi *et al.*, 2020) as well as the utilization of social media to protect university brands from the crisis (Bhattacharya & Faisal, 2020; Zaman *et al.*, 2021). Despite these early efforts, prior literature is still considered not capable of explaining the impact of the pandemic on students' behavior toward university brands. To that end, this study for the first time, adapts the concept of brand evangelism to a university context and investigates its relationship with online experiential marketing provided by universities. Furthermore, students' perceived harm of getting COVID-19 on campus and social distancing concerns are involved as moderating variables in the relationship between experiential marketing and university brand evangelism (Wang *et al.*, 2022; Zaman *et al.*, 2021).

1 Since the beginning of the outbreak, universities have been continuously looking for new ways
2 to tackle pandemic-related problems. In this regard, this study for the first time, posits that
3 experiential marketing practices of universities could be helpful in supporting university brands
4 during a crisis (Horta, 2023). The findings revealed that experiential marketing positively
5 impacts university brand evangelism, which aligns with prior studies that were conducted in
6 other contexts, including tourism, hospitality, and consumer electronic sectors (García *et al.*,
7 2018; Harrigan *et al.*, 2020; Kang *et al.*, 2020). In times of crisis, consumers' negative emotions
8 are generally amplified; therefore, positive experiences provided by universities can have the
9 potential to reduce students' anger and increase sympathy towards the university brands.
10 Consequently, students will show positive behavioral responses such as positive referrals and
11 defending the university brand from critics and complaints (Grappi & Romani, 2015).

12 As another major contribution, this study is an initial attempt to analyze whether students'
13 tendency to conform to social distancing practices may result in different attitudes toward
14 university brands (Girardin, Blal & Lunardo, 2023). The current study empirically verified the
15 positive moderating effect of students' social distancing concerns on the relationship between
16 experiential marketing and university brand evangelism (Girardin, Blal & Lunardo, 2023;
17 Zaman *et al.*, 2021). This empirical finding confirmed a recent study that highlighted the
18 moderating role of social distancing **concerns** in the formation of brand defense behavior (Ali
19 *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, parallel with an increase in social distancing concerns, the students
20 who are more concerned about social distancing tend to act as active university brand
21 evangelists (Zaman *et al.*, 2021).

22 The present study also confirmed the moderating role of perceived harm on campus on the
23 relationship between experiential marketing and university brand evangelism (Alves *et al.*,
24 2023; Zaman *et al.*, 2023). This finding indicates that the impact of experiential marketing on
25 university brand evangelism is augmented in case students perceive offline (physical) spaces
26 on campus as dangerous and risky (Alves *et al.*, 2023; Leahy, Fenton & Barry, 2022;). Higher
27 education institutions provide services from education to sports and cultural activities, which
28 provide students with various experiences that can be either positive or negative. As suggested
29 in prior literature, when a product is associated with harm, a negative product experience will
30 directly lead to dissatisfaction with consumers' trust in this product. Subsequently, consumers'
31 trust will inevitably be lost, which then induces negative consumers reaction against the product
32 (Dawar & Pillutla, 2000; Van Heerde *et al.*, 2007). In light of that, the current study also
33 confirmed that students' willingness to spread positive information about university brands
34 voluntarily is significantly related to their feelings of insecurity and harm toward the university
35 brand (Alves *et al.*, 2023; Chaudhary *et al.*, 2020).

36 **5.1. Theoretical and Practical Implications**

37
38 To the extent of the authors' knowledge, there has not been any study that examined the
39 concepts of online experiential marketing for higher education institutions (Wang *et al.*, 2023).
40 Therefore, this study is an initial attempt that validates an adapted scale to measure online
41 experiential marketing in the context of higher education institutions by utilizing the widely-
42 accepted multidimensional approach of experiential marketing (Alves *et al.*, 2023; Brakus *et*
43 *al.*, 2009; Tasci & Milman, 2019). Since the beginning of the pandemic, universities have had
44 to explore new ways to tackle the setbacks of COVID-19 on university brand images
45 (Bhattacharya & Faisal, 2020; Shehzadi *et al.*, 2020). As universities keep campuses closed
46 during the pandemic, the tension amongst students about the quality of online education has
47 been augmented, which has led to student criticism and protests over the universities and tuition
48 fees (Eun-ji, 2021; Helmore, 2020). However, there are still some opportunities lying in front
49 of higher education institutions to remedy and lighten the problems caused by COVID-19. First

1 and foremost, universities should reposition themselves as experience providers rather than
2 entities providing higher education and extracurricular activities, etc. (Kang *et al.*, 2020).
3 Universities are advised to invest in innovative online and offline platforms to create unique
4 student experiences, which subsequently establish strong experiential ties with their students.
5 For instance, through the utilization of contemporary techniques such as the flipped classroom,
6 immersive virtual reality applications, and gamification, etc., more engaging educational
7 environments can be created (Radianti *et al.*, 2020; Saleem *et al.*, 2021). In this way, students
8 can be converted into brand evangelists who wholeheartedly spread positive information and
9 defend the university brand in a time of crisis (Alves *et al.*, 2023).

10 As another major contribution, this study for the first time adopted and extended the protection
11 motivation theory to measure university brand evangelism amidst the pandemic. The current
12 study investigated the impact of social distancing as a coping appraisal within the context of
13 university brand evangelism (Saeed *et al.*, 2023). The findings revealed the positive moderating
14 effect of social distancing concerns on the relationship between experiential marketing and
15 university brand evangelism (Carmo, Marques & Dias, 2022; Matee, Motlohi & Nkiwane,
16 2023). Based on the protection motivation theory, the findings showed that social distancing
17 may serve as a coping mechanism for the pandemic in a university context. Therefore, social
18 distancing is empirically recommended to restore university brand image during the pandemic.
19 Furthermore, universities are suggested to increase students' awareness about the necessity of
20 social distancing and other similar health measures to restore their brand images. Student
21 counseling departments can design online interactive training about social distancing, which
22 can also allow students to freely share their feelings and criticisms during the pandemic. This
23 strategy will not only convince students about the vitality of health measures but also establish
24 emotional attachments of students toward university brands (Alves *et al.*, 2023; Saeed *et al.*,
25 2023).

26 The current study also integrated the impact of the perceived harm of COVID-19 on student
27 brand evangelism. The concept of product harm crisis has been extensively investigated in
28 terms of various industries, from consumer products to energy or telecommunication, etc.,
29 whilst, there is a lack of research focusing on higher education institutions (Khamitov *et al.*,
30 2020). Due to the pandemic, physical spaces that students often frequented began to be
31 perceived as dangerous, which led to the closure of many on-campus facilities, including
32 classrooms, fitness centers, and swimming pools, etc. Consequently, university students are
33 emotionally and psychologically affected by COVID-19 in a negative way (Capone *et al.*,
34 2020). In light of this, the current study highlighted the moderating effect of perceived harm on
35 the relationship between online experiential marketing and university brand evangelism for the
36 first time in marketing literature (Saeed *et al.*, 2023). Based on the findings, in case students
37 perceive higher health risks on campus, the impact of online experiential marketing on brand
38 evangelism was found to be amplified. This result may be explained by the protection
39 motivation theory, which asserts that perceived severity of the pandemic (i.e., threat appraisal)
40 determine students' behavioral intentions online. Therefore, universities are advised to
41 illuminate students about the actual health risks related to COVID-19 since young adults are
42 inclined to underrate the negative health consequences (Aktan, 2020; Nivette *et al.*, 2020). In
43 this regard, universities are recommended to organize online meetings, where the health risks
44 associated with Covid-19 are clarified with the collaboration of university representatives and
45 health professionals. This strategy will not only help students to develop a sense of attachment
46 but also transform them into brand evangelists who actively give positive referrals about the
47 universities amidst the pandemic.

48

49 **5.2. Limitations and Future Research Directions**

1 Despite the novel model offered to the higher education marketing literature, the present study
2 has some major limitations that have to be addressed. Higher education services require long-
3 term contact with students as well as higher interpersonal relationships. Therefore, higher
4 education services lack instant gratification as opposed to other service industries like
5 hospitality, and tourism (Horta, 2023). In essence, students' positive behavior toward university
6 brands is influenced by many factors, including previous interaction and experience, culture,
7 career objectives, and communication messages. **In this regard, future studies are advised to
8 involve other antecedents along with online experiential marketing to provide a more detailed
9 understanding of students' behavior toward universities during a time of crisis (Wang *et al.*,
10 2022; Sultan & Wong, 2012).** Furthermore, the data were collected from university students
11 studying in China, a country that has followed a different course of action against the pandemic
12 than the rest of the world (Alves *et al.*, 2023; Horta, 2023). While having been associated with
13 the virus and stigmatized in the early stages of the pandemic, China became a safer haven for
14 university education due to its very coercive actions to vigilantly curb the pandemic (Li *et al.*,
15 2020; Yang, 2020). China is a distinct case of the pandemic, which prevents the generalizability
16 of the findings to universities in other countries. **In this respect, to increase the generalizability
17 of the findings, future studies are recommended to focus on other countries that have been hit
18 by the pandemic to varying degrees.** The present study provided empirical evidence for the
19 impact of "social distancing concerns and perceived harm" on students' behavior toward
20 university brands (Girardin, Blal & Lunardo, 2023; Saeed *et al.*, 2023). However, this finding
21 should be validated in future studies by incorporating well-established consumer behavior
22 theories such as the protection motivation theory (Youn *et al.*, 2021) and the theory of perceived
23 risk (Shin & Kang, 2020). Furthermore, as the current pandemic has nearly left no choice but
24 to use online platforms as an education medium, the technology acceptance model can also be
25 used to analyze the impact of COVID-19 on students' perception of university brands (Goh &
26 Wen, 2020). Lastly, the present study measured online experiential marketing in HEI's as a
27 first-order (composite) construct, hence creating an opportunity for future studies to examine
28 its multi-dimensional nature and its underlying impact on university branding (Wang *et al.*,
29 2022).

30

31 **5.3. Conclusion**

32 Amidst the global pandemic, universities worldwide had to imperatively switch to online
33 platforms as a new medium of education to inhibit the spread of the virus on campus (Horta,
34 2023). In this regard, social distancing has been widely accepted as a must-do measure to curb
35 the spread, yet it also has caused unprecedented drawbacks for higher education organizations
36 (Horta, 2023; Zaman *et al.*, 2023). This study investigates how university brand image can be
37 restored through the utilization of online experiential marketing tools. Based on the findings,
38 universities are advised to invest in online platforms generating unique student experiences to
39 transform students into brand evangelists who actively defend the university brand as well as
40 provide positive referrals. Furthermore, the findings revealed the moderating roles of students'
41 "social distancing concerns and perceived harm on campus" on the relationship between online
42 experiential marketing and university brand evangelism. Consequently, universities are
43 recommended to increase student's awareness about the necessary implementation of social
44 distancing practices as well as enlighten them about the factual risks of COVID-19 for younger
45 generations (Zaman *et al.*, 2021). In this respect, universities are suggested to organize
46 interactive online counseling services, where students' concerns related to health risks and
47 social distancing measures will be answered with the collaboration of health experts, and

1 psychiatrists (Alves *et al.*, 2023; Belen, 2023). This strategy will capture students' emotions
2 and help universities to restore their brand images amidst the health crisis (Zaman *et al.*, 2021).
3

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31 construction projects. *Engineering, Construction and Architectural Management*.

32

33 **Appendix – Adapted measures with scale items**

34 *University Brand Evangelism*

- 35 1. “I would make a perfect activist /promoter for my university brand”.
- 36 2. “I would convince several of my friends to choose my university brand”.
- 37 3. “I feel the need to tell everybody that my university brand is the most appealing brand”.
- 38 4. “If someone tries to denounce my university brand, I would tell him/her off unmistakably”.
- 39 5. “I would try to convince as many people as possible about my university brand”.

40

1 *Online Experiential Marketing*

2 Sense Experience

- 3 1. "I feel that the website design of my university is very beautiful".
- 4 2. "It is very attractive to experience the online services provided by my university".
- 5 3. "I always find the delivery of online classes in my university as very special".
- 6 4. "I always think that our web-based student portal has a very nice design".

7
8 Feel Experience

- 9 5. "At any time when I interact with my university online (i.e., e-mail, system messages), I
- 10 always feel that the communication was pleasurable".
- 11 6. "The layout of the student web portal of my university always makes me feel comfortable".
- 12 7. "The learning atmosphere during online classes always makes me joyful".
- 13 8. "I always feel very comfortable when I look for information from online sources of my
- 14 university".

15
16 Think Experience

- 17 9. "Online courses offered in my university always inspire me to think".
- 18 10. "Online resources provided by the university library inspire my curiosity".
- 19 11. "The information shared on the university web page makes me think about new things".
- 20 12. "Online education experience led me to think of my life-style".
- 21 13. "The design of the student web portal inspires my curiosity for new information".

22
23 Act Experience

- 24 14. "I am willing to share my positive online university experiences with friends".
- 25 15. "Online activities provided by the university attract me to join".
- 26 16. "Thanks to its elaborate design, I like to further explore the university web site".
- 27 17. "Thanks to its elaborate design, I like to further explore the university web student portal".

28
29 Relate Experience

- 30 18. "Participating in the online courses represents my enthusiasm toward online learning".
- 31 19. "Participating in the online activities provided by the university enables me to exchange my
- 32 ideas with those who have common interest as mine".
- 33 20. "I can relate to other students through the university web student portal".
- 34 21. "I can relate to other students who have common issues, beliefs and interests as mine
- 35 through university web site".

36
37 *Perceived Harm of COVID-19*

- 38 1. "I feel being at risk on campus for getting COVID-19".
- 39 2. "I am concerned about getting COVID-19 on campus".
- 40 3. "The thought of getting COVID-19 on campus scares me".
- 41 4. "COVID-19 on campus poses a threat to me personally".
- 42 5. "I feel that students are at high risk of getting COVID-19 on campus".
- 43 6. "I am not very certain about how to deal with COVID-19 threat on campus".
- 44 7. "I feel that COVID-19 threat on campus would last a long time".

45
46 *Concern for Social Distancing*

- 47 1. "If I were on campus, I would very often wash my hands".

- 1 2. "If I were on campus, I would always wear a mask".
- 2 3. "If I were on campus, I would avoid shaking hands with anyone".
- 3 4. "If I were on campus, I would keep a safe distance from everyone".
- 4 5. "If I were on campus, I would avoid crowded places".
- 5 6. "If I were on campus, I would avoid cafeteria, libraries, and sports facilities as much as
- 6 possible".
- 7 7. "If I were on campus, I would avoid using public spaces".
- 8
- 9