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Multilayered family involvement in university choice in Cambodia

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ABSTRACT

Family support is widely recognized as influential in students' educational trajectories, yet research on university choice has predominantly emphasized parental involvement. This study extends the focus to include non-parental family members. Drawing on literature on social capital, higher education access, and family dynamics, this study investigates how extended family members beyond parents, such as siblings, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins, contribute to university decision-making in Cambodia, a country characterized by post-conflict legacies and structural inequalities in higher education. Using a qualitative approach grounded in social capital theory, this study analyzes interviews with 52 Grade 12 and first-year university students in Phnom Penh and surrounding areas, enabling a more comprehensive examination of university choice processes that have often been studied in isolation that have often been examined separately, largely due to the practical difficulties of sampling and accessing multiple stakeholders within the same familial decision-making unit. Our study indicates multilayered patterns of family involvement across three key stages: predisposition, search, and final choice. While parents were described as providing initial encouragement and final input, extended family members offer essential academic, emotional, and financial support, particularly in cases where parents lack higher education experience. In this study, first-generation students more frequently described relying on third-party support, such as teachers and religious leaders, due to limited familial capital. By uncovering both commonalities and differences in how various family actors engage in the university choice process, this study contributes to more nuanced theories of educational decision-making that move beyond binary classifications of family background.

1. Introduction

University choice is a critical decision that shapes students' future careers and earnings potential, and social mobility, while also contributing to national development. For this reason, university choice has been a central concern not only for students and families but also policymakers and higher education institutions (HEIs). Although the literature on university choice has traditionally focused on demand-side factors such as enrollment determinants, retention, and the effects of scholarships, a supply-side perspective is equally important, particularly in developing-country contexts where family involvement in educational decision-making is strong and often extends beyond parents.

In this study, demand-side factors are defined as students' internal and individual determinants, such as preferences, aspirations, and academic ability, that shape their university choices, whereas supply-side factors refer to the external conditions, information, and institutional arrangements that influence and constrain these choices. From this perspective, family members, including siblings, are not treated as independent decision-makers on the demand side, but rather as providers of resources such as information, advice, and financial support that influence students' choices. In this sense, family members function as part of the surrounding environment that shapes decision-making rather than as the primary actors of choice. Thus, siblings are conceptualized as part of the supply of social capital within the decision-making environment.

Understanding how extended family members shape students' university choices provides critical insights for governments and higher education institutions, as it directly informs enrollment planning, admission strategies, and recruitment policies that are responsive to local socio-cultural realities. Previous research consistently highlights the strong influence of parental educational background on students' university choices (Roksa and Kinsley, 2019; Tarkhnishvili et al., 2022). In particular, studies on first-generation students (FGS) whose parents have no university experience suggest that both students and their

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parents often struggle more with making informed choices compared to non-FGS peers (Capannola and Johnson, 2022; Perna, 2006; Roksa and Kinsley, 2019). Beyond parents, a growing body of literature has identified the influence of high school teachers, counselors, peers, and neighbors on students' aspirations and decisions (Bedasso, 2019; Connie et al., 2022; Meyer et al., 2021), as well as the role of institutional environment in shaping students' intentions and choices (Park and Hossler, 2015).

While these studies have provided important insights, research on university choice has predominantly emphasized parental involvement and institutional influence, particularly in developed countries. As a result, the role of other family members in the university choice process has received limited scholarly attention. This omission is an important point when considering the fact that family structures, intergenerational relationships, and economic responsibility differ substantially depending on context in developing countries.

This study examines the involvement not only of parents but also of siblings, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins in university choice. In Cambodia, as in many developing country contexts, educational decision-making is embedded within broader family economic structures in which financial responsibilities extend beyond parents alone (Kobayashi, 2020). Extended family members, particularly siblings, often contribute to household income, and larger family sizes reinforce patterns of mutual support. Because university tuition is typically financed by families rather than through substantial public support, higher education decisions are collectively discussed and negotiated within these socioeconomic arrangements. Research on university choice has largely developed in high-income countries (Maramba et al., 2015; Meyer et al., 2021; Nieuwoudt and Pedler, 2021), where parental educational background, especially prior university experience, has been shown to facilitate the encouragement of university attendance and support the active promotion of enrollment. However, these studies tend to focus primarily on parental influence, reflecting family structures in which educational and financial responsibilities are more centralized within the nuclear household.

In contrast, Cambodia's social structure was shaped by the severe disruption of educational opportunities during the civil conflict of the 1970s, resulting in significant generational disparities in educational attainment. To better contextualize the Cambodian case, it is important to consider the socio-economic and political transformations over the past five to six decades. The Khmer Rouge regime (1975–1979) led to the collapse of the education system and the loss of an entire generation of educated individuals, resulting in low educational attainment among many parents today(Clayton, 1995; Nee and O'Leary, 2002). This historical disruption created a significant intergenerational gap in educational experience. At the same time, the fragmentation of extended family networks during the conflict and the subsequent reconstruction period reshaped family structures(Sen, 2012), while trust has remained largely confined within kinship networks(Inada, 2013; Sen, 2012, 2012). In the context of ongoing economic growth alongside persistent inequality, access to higher education continues to depend heavily on family resources(Chea, 2019; Hun, 2024). These conditions have contributed to a distinctive pattern of intergenerational relations in Cambodia, where not only parents but also siblings and extended family members play an important role in supporting university choice, particularly when parental educational experience is limited.

Consequently, parental educational backgrounds and patterns of family involvement differ substantially from those observed in many developed countries with high upper secondary enrollment rates. These contextual differences highlight the need to examine broader family dynamics in university decision-making. Against this background, the objective of this study is to examine how students in Cambodia perceive family involvement in their university choice process. By focusing on the role of both parents and extended family members, this study contributes a novel empirical perspective to the literature on university choice and family involvement in the developing countries context. The study addresses the following research question: How do students perceive the involvement of different family members in their university choice in Cambodia, and what mechanisms shape this influence?

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on social capital theory, university choice, and family involvement. Section 3 describes the research design and methodology. Section 4 reports the findings, focusing on family involvement across the three stages of university choice. Section 5 discusses the theoretical implications, and Section 6 concludes.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical framework

Social capital theory is useful in understanding the mechanisms of interaction between students and their families in university choices (Gofen, 2009; Hossler et al., 1999). Coleman discusses this social capital by putting it into an intra-family context. He points to it as an important capital for students' decisions about higher education and post-secondary success (Coleman, 1988). According to him, parents' education and occupation alone cannot fully explain a child's educational attainment; Kikuchi (1965) and Schmid and Garrels (2021) have expressed a similar view, holding that household income alone cannot fully explain educational attainment in this case, enrollment in higher education. While social capital theory provides a central analytical lens for this study, it is also important to acknowledge complementary theoretical perspectives. Human capital theory (Becker, 1993) comceptualizes educational choice as a rational investment, while collge choicve model (Chapman, 1986; Litten, 1982; Jackson, 1982) frame it as a multi-stage process shaped by individual characteristics, institutional factors and external envrionments factors. However, these approaches tend to under-specify how intra-family relationaships structre access to information and support across stages.

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Human capital theory, as developed by Becker (1993), predicts that decisions regarding higher education are made through rational cost–benefit calculations, in which families evaluate the expected returns to education relative to its costs. From this perspective, parental decisions play a central role, as households are assumed to allocate financial resources strategically to maximize long-term economic benefits. This framework is useful in contexts such as Cambodia, where the cost of tuition, private tutoring, and opportunity costs of schooling are significant considerations in household decision-making. However, it has important limitations. Specifically, it cannot fully explain why, in situations where parental educational capital is limited, siblings or other family members assume a primary role in providing guidance, nor why access to information and support varies across families with similar economic constraints. In this sense, human capital theory overlooks the relational mechanisms through which educational decisions are shaped within families.

Similarly, stage-based college choice models (Chapman, 1986; Litten, 1982; Jackson, 1982) provide an important analytical framework for understanding the temporal structure of university decision-making, distinguishing among predisposition, search, and choice stages. These models inform the analytical structure of the present study. However, they were primarily developed in high-income contexts and implicitly assume decision-making within nuclear families, where parental influence is dominant and relatively stable across stages. As a result, they do

not adequately account for the redistribution of roles among multiple family actors, such as siblings, extended family members, or non-family actors, particularly in contexts where parental educational resources are limited. The findings of this study suggest that influence is not fixed but shifts across stages, with different actors assuming greater importance depending on the availability of educational and informational resources. This divergence highlights a key limitation of existing models, which do not anticipate stage-specific variation in the relative importance of different family members.

Building on Coleman (1988) and Furstenberg (2005), this study conceptualizes family involvement as a form of social capital that facilitates or constrains university choice. It focuses on how family-based social capital is differentially mobilized depending on the educational composition of the family. Social capital is understood here as relational resources embedded in family and community networks, which may be shared collectively or held by specific individuals, and which function as forms of mutual support in achieving educational goals (Hanibuchi, 2018). Rather than framing this phenomenon as a simple lack of family resources, the study emphasizes how historical and socio-economic conditions are related to the mobilization of social capital.

This study advances social capital theory by demonstrating that, in the Cambodian context, bonding social capital within families cannot be assumed to function as a stable or dominant mechanism in university choice; rather than reflecting a deficit in family resources, this pattern highlights how historical disruption and socio-economic conditions reshape the ways family social capital is mobilized in educational decision-making. Instead, the findings reveal that when intra-family social capital is weak or insufficient, students actively mobilize bridging social capital, particularly through teachers and community members, to compensate for familial constraints. By empirically illustrating this compensatory mechanism, the study reframes university choice not as a process driven solely by family-based resources but as a dynamic reconfiguration of social capital across bonding and bridging dimensions. In doing so, it extends social capital theory by highlighting how different forms of social capital interact and substitute for one another in contexts characterized by historical trauma and weakened kinship structures.

More specifically, this study introduces a distinction between vertical social capital, primarily parental, and horizontal social capital, particularly sibling-based, demonstrating that these forms operate differently across stages of university choice. By foregrounding this intra-family differentiation, the study prepares the ground for a more nuanced discussion of how authority and support shift across generations.

2.2. Family involvement in university choice

Existing studies on family involvement in university choice have predominantly examined who is involved at the different stages, rather than how involvement is structured and transformed across contexts (Ashraf, 2014; Bohara, 2021; Flaster, 2020). Much of the literature adopts a stage-based framework of university choice, typically distinguishing between the predisposition, search, and choice stages (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatk, 2016; Park and Hossler, 2015; Perna, 2006). Although this framework has been effective in structuring empirical findings, existing studies tend to treat stages as analytically discrete, offering limited insight into how family involvement evolves across stages or how it differs according to family educational background. As a result, little is known about how extended family members beyond parents participate in university choice, how their involvement shifts across stages, and how these dynamics unfold within developing country contexts where educational decision making is often embedded in broader kinship networks.

Across these stages, parental influence remains central but varies in form and intensity. During the early stage, when students' aspirations toward higher education are formed, parents play a particularly significant role (Gaspar and Soares, 2021; Gofen, 2009; Md Mehedi et al., 2023). Parents with higher education backgrounds tend to express stronger expectations and engage more actively in their children's educational trajectories, whereas those without university experience often emphasize accessibility and affordability at predisposition stage (Shen, 2015; Vega, 2018). These differences reflect variation in perceived risks and available resources rather than aspiration alone. Parental expectations do not always align with students' aspirations, and such mismatches can shape decision-making processes through negotiation between family pressure and individual preferences (Capannola and Johnson, 2022; Morton et al., 2018).

At the search stage, family involvement is shaped by access to information and guidance. In developed contexts, families often function as interpreters of institutional information (Czajkowski et al., 2020; Meyer et al., 2021), whereas in developing contexts, parental educational background significantly influences the availability of such guidance. When parents possess relevant educational experience, they tend to guide students by emphasizing academic reputation and institutional quality, whereas those with limited educational backgrounds often lack the capacity to provide actionable information, resulting in greater reliance on students themselves (Iacopini and Hayden, 2017; Md Mehedi et al., 2023; Te, 2022). These patterns suggest that differences in family involvement reflect not only intensity but also informational asymmetry within families. Financial considerations further shape the process, as students from low-income backgrounds prioritize scholarships, tuition costs, and proximity to home, often through family discussions(Callender and Melis, 2022; Castleman and Meyer, 2019).

At the final choice stage, parental involvement persists but varies from supportive guidance to directive control, sometimes leading to negative outcomes such as dissatisfaction or dropout in contexts of strong parental authority(Aypay et al., 2012; Md Mehedi et al., 2023). Gendered patterns are also evident, as family members may impose constraints on students' choices based on concerns such as safety and distance (Ashraf, 2014). These findings suggest that university choice reflects underlying family power relations rather than a purely individual decision. Despite these insights, existing research remains limited in two key respects. First, it primarily focuses on parents, offering limited understanding of how siblings and extended family members contribute to decision-making. Second, it provides little analysis of how multiple family actors interact within a single decision-making process.

2.3. Family involvement

2.3.1. Parental, siblings, and extended family involvement

Research on parental involvement indicates that roles vary according to gender norms, cultural expectations, and intra-household authority structures (Eldegwy et al., 2022). While some studies report relatively balanced involvement between mothers and fathers, others highlight the persistence of paternal authority, particularly in decisions concerning location and field of study. However, the predominance of quantitative approaches limits understanding of intra-family negotiation processes, as survey-based designs rarely capture divergent viewpoints within the same household. This limitation points to the need to examine family involvement as a relational and contextually embedded process rather than a uniform pattern.

Compared to parents, the roles of siblings and extended family members remain underexamined. Prior studies suggest that siblings, particularly those with recent higher education experience, may shape aspirations and decision-making, especially among first-generation students (Hossler et al., 1999; Smith, 2020). Research in non-Western contexts further demonstrates that sibling influence is mediated by gender norms and intra-household resource distribution (Chen, 2020). Similarly, studies from Africa and Asia identify extended family members as potential sources of information and guidance (Gaspar and Soares, 2021; Gofen, 2009). However, definitions of "family" vary across contexts, and few studies examine how multiple family actors interact

within a single decision-making process. This limits comparative analysis and theoretical development.

In the Cambodian context, existing research has primarily focused on gender disparities and economic constraints, with less attention to the roles of siblings and extended family members. While prior studies highlight the importance of parental influence, they provide limited insight into how broader kinship networks function in practice during university choice(Booth, 2014; Chandy, 2019; Chea, 2019; Eng et al., 2020; Hun, 2024). As a result, the interactions among multiple family actors, including siblings and extended family members, remain insufficiently examined.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in social capital theory to examine family involvement in university choice. Semi-structured interviews constitute the primary data source for the analysis presented in this paper. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary method for capturing the process-oriented nature of students' educational decision-making, encompassing school choice and emerging career considerations. A narrative-based qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for this study, as it enables the interpretation of educational decisions as interconnected processes unfolding over time rather than as isolated events.

Data were collected using four complementary tools: online surveys, questionnaire-based interviews, document reviews, and observations. These data sources were analytically integrated through a sequential and triangulated process. Data collection focused primarily on semi-structured interviews. Online surveys and questionnaire-based interviews were first used to identify students' educational backgrounds, family structures, and preliminary patterns of family involvement, and to support the sampling process. In-depth semi-structured interviews constituted the core data source and directly informed the findings presented in this paper. Document reviews and observations were used only in a supplementary manner to provide contextual understanding of institutional practices, examination timelines, and the broader setting of university choice, and were not treated as primary analytical sources. The unit of analysis incorporates both demand-side perspectives (students and families) and supply-side perspectives (institutional and policy contexts), enabling an examination of how family social capital operates within the Cambodian higher education landscape.

3.2. Setting

This study uses primary data collected in Cambodia in February 2024. The study was based on an online survey to be conducted to support participants' selection at a total of 6 of each high schools and universities in the capital city of Phnom Penh and Kandal province in Cambodia, covering grade 12 high school students and first-year university students. Universities under the jurisdiction of the MoEYS are located in 20 of Cambodia's 25 provinces. Cambodia has a total of 746 upper secondary schools, of which 180 are located in Phnom Penh and Kandal Province. In addition, there are 125 higher education institutions nationwide, with 57 situated in Phnom Penh and Kandal Province (MoEYS, 2019).

The capital city of Phnom Penh and other districts often show different characteristics from rural areas in terms of access to education, academic ability within families, and socioeconomic factors, such as a wide range of program options. It is clear that the capital area has more schools than other urban areas. In the case of Cambodia, more than half of the universities are located in the capital city of Phnom Penh across the board, and the number of universities declines as one moves from urban to rural areas. Students living in rural areas have economic considerations before making a college choice, as it involves inter-regional mobility. In addition, there is more information about universities and opportunities to learn in areas like the capital, dotted with universities.

3.3. Sampling recruitment process

In order to conduct the fieldwork for this study, the researcher applied for approval from the MoEYS in Cambodia. As part of the application process, the researcher was required to explain the study's objectives and provide detailed data collection plans to MoEYS. Upon receiving approval, the fieldwork commenced. As part of the preparation, several high schools and universities in Cambodia were selected, and online surveys were conducted through the school principals. The selected schools were limited to those within a 20-kilometer radius of central Phnom Penh, ensuring accessibility for students from their homes.

For the selection of the participants, the online survey was conducted in Phnom Penh and Kandal province in Cambodia. This first survey was collected from grade 12 students (n = 180) and first-year university students (n = 91). Based on the result, 52 total participants were selected using a theoretical sampling method. 28 were high school students, and 24 were first-year university students. The online survey was used solely to support the sampling process and was not used as an analytical dataset.The sampling condition was parents' education level (primary, secondary, higher education), occupation, household income,[1] number of siblings, and an indicator of family involvement.

Data collection and analysis were conducted iteratively. The analysis presented in this paper is based on interview data. Interviews were analyzed concurrently with data collection, and both sampling criteria and interview questions were refined in response to emerging themes. As interviews accumulated, recurring patterns became evident in family involvement, decision-making rationales, and perceived constraints across participants. Saturation was reached when additional interviews no longer generated substantively new themes or analytical insights relevant to the research questions. At this stage, further data collection was deemed unlikely to enhance explanatory depth, and the interview process was concluded.

The sampling strategy was intentionally designed to address limitations identified in prior research. Previous studies have often relied on university students' retrospective justifications of their higher education choices, with limited attention to parental pressure, peer influence, self-image, and group identity (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2015). By broadening the participant base and incorporating multiple perspectives, the present study seeks to provide a more contextually grounded account of the processes underlying university choice.

3.4. Data collection

Prior to conducting the fieldwork, the researcher obtained formal approval from the Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS). As part of this process, the study objectives and data collection plan were submitted for review. Fieldwork began after approval was granted. Several high schools and universities were selected within a 20-kilometer radius of central Phnom Penh to ensure accessibility for student participants. An online survey was distributed to Grade 12 high school students and first-year university students through school principals. The survey was used solely to collect basic background information and to identify potential interview participants; it was not used as an analytical dataset in this study.

The primary data source of this study consists of semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which form the basis of the analysis presented in this paper. Based on the survey results, students were purposively selected for interviews. Interviews with high school students and university

[1] The income level is divided into three levels based on CESE 2022; low (Under $195), middle ($196-$390), and high (Above $390).

students were conducted alternately or in mixed formats to reduce bias and to allow comparisons across educational stages. Student interviews were conducted primarily at schools, according to participants' schedules. In the later stage of fieldwork, interviews with family members were conducted using a paired sampling approach. Family members, including parents, siblings, grandparents, and uncles or aunts, were identified through student interviews. With prior consent, the researcher or a gatekeeper contacted family members to request participation. Family interviews were conducted at participants' homes, near their workplaces, or online when in-person meetings were not feasible. All interviews lasted approximately 45 min. Before each interview, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and obtained informed consent. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission. Field notes were taken to supplement the interview data. These supplementary materials were used only to support contextual understanding and were not treated as primary sources in the analysis. All recordings were transcribed verbatim and anonymized.

3.5. Participant characteristics

According to Table 1, a total of 52 individual interviews were conducted, with 52 participants. Among them, 28 were grade 12 high school students, of whom half (50.0%) were female, and 15 (53.6%) were attending public high schools. The age of the high school students ranged from 17 to 19 years, with a median age of 17.6 years. Additionally, 16 high school students (57.1%) came from families where neither parent held a university degree. Regarding first-year university students, 15 (62.5%) were female, and 8 (33.3%) were enrolled in public universities. Their age ranged from 17 to 28 years, with a median age of 19.6 years. Among them, 15 students (62.5%) had parents who had not obtained a university degree. All participants expressed aspirations for university enrollment.

3.6. Data analysis

The analytical induction approach (Foster et al., 2021; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016) was used to develop a coding structure with themes and sub-themes under a series of domains corresponding with the content of the interview question, such as advice expectation, encouragement, in-home education, and providing information. The main analysis in this paper was conducted on the semi-structured interview transcripts. The initial codes were developed through a comprehensive review of all interview transcripts by a single researcher, using a codebook informed by prior research (Raj et al., 2019), fieldwork, and a pilot survey. These codes were iteratively compared with the relevant literature, and an initial codebook was sequentially developed and refined. A final coding scheme was divided based on the three processes (predisposition stage, search stage, and choice stage). Using social capital theory (Park and Hossler, 2015; Perna, 2006) as the framework. The codebook was finalized following application to a subset of the data. Supplementary materials, including field notes, document review, and observations, were used only to support contextual interpretation and were not treated as equivalent analytical sources in the findings section.

In this study, extended family members are not treated as a homogeneous group. Rather, they are conceptually distinguished based on their relational proximity and typical roles in students' educational decision-making. Specifically, siblings are understood as near-peer actors who often provide practical advice based on recent educational experience. Cousins may serve as indirect reference points, particularly when they have university experience, while aunts and uncles are more likely to act as authority figures or financial contributors, especially in families where parents have limited educational backgrounds. This distinction allows for a more nuanced analysis of how different types of family members shape students' university choice in Cambodia.

Table 1
Number of participants in collected sample.

	Grade 12 Students (n = 28)	First-year University Students (n = 24)	Total
Total interviews	28	24	52
Gender			
Male	14	9	23
Female	14	15	29
School type			
Public	15	8	23
Private	13	16	29
Students age			
17	11	2	13
18	16	6	22
19	1	7	8
20	0	2	2
21	0	2	2
22	0	3	3
23	0	1	1
28	0	1	1
FGS/non-FGS			
FGS	16	15	31
non-FGS	12	9	21

Source: Created by the author based on field research

3.7. Ethical consideration

The researcher involved a systematic consent and assent process. This study deals with personal experiences and family relationships; due consideration was given to Cambodian cultural and familial relations. To enable safe participants can be declined in any case. Before each interview, the researcher introduced themselves and briefly explained the study's objectives and its potential implications. Consent was obtained from all participants before proceeding. The interviews were conducted at schools, aligning with their schedules on weekdays and weekends. Toward the later stages of the student interviews, interviews with family members were initiated. This study employed a paired sampling method involving students and their families. The research protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), Graduate School of International Cooperation Studies, Kobe University, on 25th December 2023 (Approval No. 2023–03).

4. Findings

This study suggests that direct and indirect family involvement shapes how participants described their university choice processes in Cambodia through (a) aspiration formation (predisposition), (b) information acquisition (search), and (c) final decision-making (choice). Parents were frequently described as playing an important role in early aspiration formation, siblings were often described as being closely involved in the information acquisition stage, and extended family members appeared to be involved more selectively during the final decision-making stage. When parental involvement is absent or limited, non-parental family members, particularly siblings and uncles or aunts, are more actively involved in students' university choice processes. Grandparents were mentioned less frequently as involved actors, largely because of weakened intergenerational ties and a lack of formal educational experience. In some cases, overlapping involvement from both parents and siblings was observed. This suggests that family participation can be understood as layered and cumulative rather than by a single dominant actor.

Variation in involvement appeared to be associated with families' education and occupational background. These factors shape students' access to university-related information and support. Consequently, family involvement extends beyond parents to siblings and extended relatives, with roles that differ across stages of the decision-making process. These roles are shaped not only by the presence or absence of parental involvement but also by its nature, whether supportive or oppositional. When parents lack formal educational experience,

students are more likely to encounter resistance, discouraging guidance, or constraints regarding university progression. Together, the findings suggest that intra-family social capital may be one important mechanism through which educational advantage is reproduced in the cases examined.

4.1. Family involvement in predisposition stage

In the predisposition stage, family involvement was often described as sustaining aspirations for university through encouragement and expectations, while academic support at home is strongly stratified by families' educational capital. Although encouragement was reported across a wide range of participant backgrounds, the capacity to provide academic guidance (e.g., tutoring, study strategies) declines sharply after primary school among families with limited educational resources.

Table 2 summarizes the types of involvement reported by high school and university students. Overall, encouragement was reported by most participants, whereas expectations, advice, and home-based academic support show larger variation across educational stages and family resources.

Table 2 demonstrates that family involvement is not static but varies across educational stages and forms of support. While encouragement and expectations remain consistently high across both groups, in-home educational support fluctuates by schooling level, indicating that different forms of family engagement become salient at different developmental stages. These patterns support the argument that family involvement operates in stage-specific ways rather than as a uniform influence.

1) **Encouragement**

Encouragement emerged as a prominent form of family involvement that sustains students' educational aspirations and persistence, particularly in the period leading up to university choice. The findings indicate that encouragement was commonly described as widely provided not only by parents but also by siblings and extended family members during early and middle schooling. However, as students progress into secondary education, encouragement becomes increasingly emotion-oriented and parent-centered, emphasizing perseverance and completion rather than direct academic guidance.

Across cases, encouragement took several recurring forms, including motivating students to attend school, urging them to concentrate on their studies, emphasizing the value of education during primary and early secondary schooling, and linking studying to future employment prospects. Importantly, these forms of encouragement were observed across different parental educational backgrounds, household income levels, school types, and genders, suggesting that encouragement functions as a broadly shared expectation with families in this sample rather than a resource dependent on educational capital.

While encouragement was consistent over time, its content and function evolved. During earlier educational stages, parents, siblings, grandparents, uncles, and aunts jointly motivated students to focus on academic learning. In later secondary education, encouragement shifted toward emotional support, such as urging students not to give up despite academic or personal difficulties. This shift reflects the changing demands students face as they approach high-stakes examinations and university transitions.

For example, HS18, a female private high school student, described how her parents consistently supported her educational aspirations even in a social context where expectations for girls often end at high school. Similarly, UN12 (FGS, female) emphasized her mother's ongoing encouragement, which combined emotional reassurance with modest financial support:

"My mother just pushed me to study. She told me education is important for everyone. She always supports me, even when I don't like a subject or major. She encourages me by giving money or emotional support." (UN12, FGS,female)

Although participants were asked broadly about encouragement from family members, initial responses most often referred to parents, either the father, the mother, or both. Encouragement from siblings and extended family members was typically acknowledged only after follow-up questions and was mentioned less frequently. Some university students summarized such encouragement simply as appreciation for the opportunity to attend school, suggesting that encouragement from non-parental family members may be experienced as implicit rather than explicit. At the same time, the findings reveal that encouragement is shaped by economic and educational constraints, even when it is emotionally strong. HS21 (FGS, male), the fourth of six siblings, described how his mother consistently encouraged him to continue schooling despite her limited education and inability to provide academic instruction. His account illustrates how encouragement may be selectively directed toward one child when family resources are scarce:

"My mom always encouraged me to study… because only me who can study until high school. The other siblings didn't attend school… Not because I was smart, but because my mom didn't have enough money." (HS21, FGS, male)

This illustrates how even affective support functions as a scarce resource distributed unequally within the family network, reflecting the structural conditions that constrain the mobilization of bonding social capital. Taken as a whole, these findings suggest that encouragement plays an important motivational role in sustaining students' engagement with schooling and aspirations for university. However, while encouragement supports persistence, it does not necessarily offset structural constraints related to limited educational and economic resources that become more consequential in later stages of the university choice process.

2) **Expectations**

Expectations functioned as a mechanism that oriented students' aspirations toward university by linking higher education to upward mobility and secure employment. Across cases, expectations were most commonly expressed by parents, though in some instances they were reinforced by siblings, grandparents, teachers, or extended relatives. These expectations were not limited to whether students should attend university, but often extended to what kind of major or career they should pursue. Participants frequently described parental expectations in terms of avoiding physically demanding work and securing stable, well-paid employment. This framing appeared regardless of parents' own educational backgrounds, suggesting that

Table 2
Family involvement activities.

Family Involvement Activities	High School Student (n = 28)	University Students (n = 24)
Encouragement	28	20
Primary level	22	16
Lower secondary level	20	19
Upper secondary level	21	18
Expectation	25	11
Advice	25	12
In-home Education	17	14
Primary level	17	11
Lower secondary level	7	5
Upper secondary level	12	6
Pay educational fee	21	16

Note. At the upper secondary level of home education, the numbers increased compared to the early secondary level because, in addition to the parents, the children and their cousins teach the subjects at the late secondary level. Looking at parents alone, three parents taught high school students, and two parents taught university students.
Source: Created by the author based on field research

expectations reflected shared social beliefs about the value of university education. For example, HS11 (non-FGS, female) explained that her parents expected her to attend university because it would allow her to obtain "an easy job" compared to manual labor.

At the same time, expectations became more directive when parents or relatives had clear occupational images or professional experience. UN3 (non-FGS, female), whose father is a dentist, described how he encouraged her to pursue dentistry and actively shared information about the profession and university pathways. In such cases, expectations were closely tied to family occupational trajectories. However, expectations also generated tension when students' preferences diverged from those of their parents. HS5 (non-FGS, male) reported strong encouragement to attend university, but hesitated to disclose his desired major in medicine because his father preferred an IT-related field. This indicates that expectations can function simultaneously as support and pressure, shaping how openly students communicate their aspirations within the family. Overall, expectations played a central role in shaping whether students aimed for university and how they framed their future possibilities, while also influencing negotiations over major choice in later stages. This suggests that expectations function not only as normative guidance but also as a mechanism through which family members project socially structured aspirations, thereby shaping how students perceive feasible and desirable educational pathways within their social context.

3) **Advice**

Advice emerged as a more targeted and experience-based form of family involvement, often shaping students' understanding of specific majors or professions. Unlike encouragement and expectations, advice was closely linked to the advisor's own educational or occupational background. Parents, siblings, and extended family members offered advice based on their personal experiences, particularly when they worked in or had studied in fields that students aspired to enter. For example, HS4 (male), who aspired to become a lawyer, described receiving detailed advice from his uncle, a practicing lawyer, about the nature of legal work and the importance of university education. Similarly, UN21 (FGS, male) emphasized the influence of his older brother, a law student, who advised him that higher education was essential for securing stable employment.

These cases indicate that advice becomes especially influential when a family member serves as a role model with proximate professional experience, enabling students to better visualize future career paths. In contrast, students whose family members lacked such experience reported receiving more general advice, often focused on not neglecting studies rather than on specific academic or career strategies.

Thus, advice functioned as a mechanism linking family-based experiential knowledge to students' emerging academic and career choices. This indicates that access to experience-based advice is unevenly distributed across families, reflecting differences in available social capital that enable some students to better align their aspirations with concrete educational and occupational pathways.

4) **In-home Education**

In-home education reflected the most pronounced stratification by family educational capital. While many families provided basic educational support during primary school, such as assistance with Khmer literacy, mathematics, and general learning, this form of involvement declined sharply at the lower secondary level, particularly in families where parents had limited formal education. In families where home-based education continued into secondary schooling, parents or older siblings typically possessed higher educational attainment or relevant skills. For example, students described receiving English instruction from parents working in English-speaking environments or from siblings enrolled in university. UN20 (non-FGS, male) reported receiving Khmer lessons from his mother during childhood and English lessons from his father during high school, reflecting differentiated parental contributions based on expertise.

When parents lacked the capacity to provide academic support, siblings, grandparents, uncles, aunts, or cousins often compensated. HS5 (non-FGS, female), for instance, relied heavily on her grandmother for basic literacy and numeracy during early childhood, while UN18 (non-FGS, female) described receiving textbooks and study materials from cousins living nearby. These patterns suggest that in-home education operates as a redistributive mechanism within families, where educational support is reallocated among available members. However, the extent and sustainability of such support remain strongly conditioned by overall family educational resources. This illustrates how educational support within the household is redistributed among available members, but remains structurally constrained by the overall level of family educational capital, limiting the extent to which such support can be sustained over time.

5) **Financial Support for Education**

Financial support constituted a critical but uneven form of family involvement, shaping both students' access to educational opportunities and their eventual university choices. While public high school education in Cambodia is nominally free, many students incur additional costs through private tutoring, supplementary classes, transportation, and learning materials expenses that vary significantly by household resources.

Interview data showed that parents were the primary providers of financial support, particularly for supplementary tutoring aimed at preparing for Grade 12 examinations. However, the number of subjects students could afford to study privately differed across families, with FGS households generally supporting fewer classes. In some cases, students compensated for limited family resources by tutoring peers or earning small incomes, as illustrated by HS2 (FGS, male), who financed part of his education through teaching English.

Siblings also played a crucial role in financial support, particularly unmarried older siblings who contributed their earnings to younger siblings' education. UN15 (FGS, female), the youngest of six sisters, described how her eldest sister's factory income enabled her to remain in school when other siblings had already dropped out. However, such support often diminished after siblings married or formed their own households, highlighting the fragility of intra-family financial arrangements. Taken together, financial support directly shaped the feasibility of educational pathways, influencing not only whether students could attend university, but also which majors and institutions remained realistically accessible. This demonstrates that financial support operates as a critical gatekeeping resource, where unequal economic capital within families directly constrains the range of educational opportunities available to students.

4.2. Family involvement in search stage

In the search stage, family involvement primarily shapes students' access to university-related information and their narrowing of potential majors. The findings suggest a noticeable difference based on whether families possess prior university experience. Students from non-FGS backgrounds generally had broader and earlier access to information, while FGS students relied more heavily on siblings, extended family members, and schools to compensate for limited parental guidance. Across both groups, however, family involvement played as an important factor in major selection rather than university selection, reflecting the perceived importance of aligning majors with future employment prospects.

Students gathered information related to (a) universities and majors (e.g., available majors, course content, faculty quality, reputation), (b) financial considerations (e.g., tuition fees, scholarships, transportation, living costs), and (c) information sources (e.g., university websites and

social media, government platforms, school-based guidance, and university visits). At this stage, respondents focused primarily on identifying a feasible and desirable major, often before finalizing the choice of institution.

Family involvement among non-FGS students

For non-FGS students, parents were frequently described as important information brokers, drawing on their own university experience, social networks, and familiarity with higher education institutions. UN8 (non-FGS, female), for example, described how her father used personal connections to obtain detailed information about the university she aspired to attend:

> *"My father knew this university… He knows a person who can connect to the director… So I got full information about this university."* (UN8, non-FGS, female)

In addition to direct parental mediation, non-FGS students often demonstrated strong independent search skills, which were fostered by supportive home environments. HS15 (non-FGS, male) reported beginning online university searches as early as Grade 8, facilitated by access to a computer at home and parental encouragement to explore information online. Such students commonly conducted searches in English, indicating that language proficiency further expanded the scope of accessible information. These cases suggest that parental educational capital may shape not only direct access to information but also students' confidence and skills in searching independently.

4.2.1. Family involvement among FGS students

In contrast, many FGS students reported limited reliance on parents for university-related information due to their parents' lack of higher education experience. In these cases, siblings emerged as key compensatory actors, particularly older siblings who had attended university. UN21 (FGS, male) described how his older brother, a fourth-year law student, actively supported his search by exploring universities and scholarships online and visiting campuses in person:

> *"My older brother… went through some universities on Google and Facebook… and went to the university directly to ask for information."* (UN21, FGS, male)

Sibling involvement was not limited to information provision but also included reflective advice based on personal experience. UN17 (FGS, female) explained that her brother, dissatisfied with his own IT major, encouraged her to consider alternative fields, illustrating how siblings' experiences help younger students avoid repeating perceived mistakes.

Role of extended family and schools

Extended family members, such as uncles, aunts, and cousins, played a supplementary but selective role. Only a small number of participants sought information from uncles or aunts, typically when these relatives had university experience. Cousins were mentioned slightly more often, particularly when they lived nearby or had recently completed university. For example, UN18 (non-FGS, female) received scholarship information directly from her cousin, highlighting the importance of proximity and recent experience. By contrast, grandparents were not reported as sources of university-related information, largely due to their limited educational opportunities resulting from historical disruptions such as civil conflict.

Schools, especially high school teachers, also functioned as important information providers, particularly for FGS students. Many participants reported attending university orientation sessions organized by their schools, where teachers introduced different majors, universities, and scholarship opportunities. UN23 (FGS, female) noted that such sessions significantly influenced her understanding of available options:

> *"They taught us the differences between each university… There is an orientation for my class." (UN23, FGS, female)*

In some cases, students combined family and school-based resources. UN5 (FGS, male), for instance, relied on relatives, school visits, and his mother's informal information gathering through social media and coworkers to identify a university that was geographically accessible and financially feasible.

Overall, the search stage reveals how family educational capital structures access to information, with non-FGS families providing direct guidance and skill transmission, and FGS students relying more on siblings, extended family, and schools as alternative information channels. These patterns underscore that family involvement during the search stage is less about encouragement and more about information brokerage and filtering, shaping the set of majors and institutions that students ultimately consider viable.

4.3. Family involvement in the choice stage

At the university choice stage in Cambodia, family involvement was reported in nearly all cases in this sample, and the alignment or misalignment between students' and parents' preferences, particularly regarding major choice, plays a decisive role in shaping final enrollment outcomes. This process is strongly conditioned by the timing of the Grade 12 examination and scholarship allocation mechanisms.

4.3.1. Timing of the choice stage and intensification of family discussions

The findings indicate that the university choice stage typically takes place after the Grade 12 examination, most commonly between October and late November. This timing is closely linked to Cambodia's scholarship system, as scholarship decisions are determined by examination results and may be offered by institutions other than those initially preferred by students. As a result, many students postpone their final university decisions until examination outcomes and scholarship notifications are confirmed. During this period, discussions between students and parents intensify. Students reported that Grade 12 represents a critical moment for determining their future educational paths, prompting more frequent and focused conversations with parents. One student explained:

> "Now, lately, I've been talking a lot with them because it's nearly the end of my high school years. So I try to get their opinion about supporting me in choosing universities."

These findings suggest that the choice stage is not a single decision point but a compressed period of negotiation shaped by institutional constraints and family expectations.

4.3.2. Forms of family involvement at the choice stage

Family involvement during the choice stage was observed in all cases. All 24 university students reported discussions with family

Table 3
Family involvement activities at the choice stage.

Type of Involvement	Main Family Actors	Interpretive Characteristics	University Students (n = 24)
Shared decision-making through discussion	Parents	Final decision reached through mutual discussion; student agency maintained	24
Advisory support (non-directive)	Parents, Siblings	Advice offered without enforcing preferences; students retained final choice	12
Extended family guidance	Uncle / aunt	Advice based on occupational or higher education experience	3
Directive involvement	Parents	Parental preferences imposed on students' final decision	4

Note. For the advice category, the primary information providers were listed.
Source: Created by the author based on field research

members regarding their final university decision (Table 3). Parents were the most common source of advice, followed by siblings and extended family members such as uncles and aunts. However, in some cases, parents exerted strong influence or imposed their own preferences.

Table 3 shows that family involvement at the university choice stage is shaped less by direct parental control and more by discussion and advisory support. The prevalence of shared decision-making and non-directive advice indicates that parents, siblings, and extended family members play distinct roles in the process. These findings suggest that family influence at this stage is differentiated and relational, rather than uniformly hierarchical.

4.3.3. Alignment and conflict in major choice

The analysis shows that alignment between students' and parents' preferences regarding major choice is an important factor in the final stage of university choice. Most parents (n = 23) supported their children's pursuit of higher education, with only one parent opposing university attendance altogether. Nevertheless, disagreements over major choices were identified in six cases, often shaped by parental aspirations and scholarship considerations.

Among students with supportive parents (n = 23), seven distinct patterns of decision-making emerged:

a) Students and parents agreed on both the university and major (n = 11);
b) Students and parents agreed on the major, and students additionally pursued another major (n = 2);
c) Students and parents disagreed on the major, but students followed their parents' preference (n = 1);
d) Students chose a major aligned with their parents' preference while also pursuing a personal interest (n = 1);
e) Students chose a major against their parents' preference, prioritizing their own interests (n = 3);
f) Parents forcibly decided the major for their children (n = 1); and
g) Students enrolled in majors determined primarily by scholarship availability rather than initial preferences (n = 3).

These patterns point to the fact that major choice functions as a key site of negotiation between student agency and parental authority.

4.3.3.1. Agreement and reinforcement of student choice. When students' and parents' preferences aligned, parental support reinforced students' confidence and facilitated smoother decision-making. More than 11 of the 24 participants reported full agreement with their parents regarding major choice. This agreement took several forms, including parents sharing the same preference, approving the student's choice after researching the major, or explicitly supporting any major chosen by the student. In such cases, students reported greater confidence and more open communication regarding their academic plans.

4.3.3.2. Strategic expansion of choices under parental support. In some cases, alignment with parental preferences enabled students to strategically expand their educational options. One first-year female student, whose parents supported her mathematics major at a public university, simultaneously enrolled in an English major at a private university to prepare for future study abroad. This case illustrates how parental support can allow students to navigate institutional opportunities more flexibly.

4.3.3.3. Financial constraints and deference to parental preference. In lower-income households, financial constraints often strengthened parental influence over major choices. UN21's case illustrates how the inability to afford supplementary tutoring required for the science track prevented her from pursuing medical studies. As a result, she followed an alternative path aligned with her parents' judgment. This suggests that in economically constrained families, students are more likely to defer to parental preferences, sometimes earlier than the formal university choice stage.

4.3.3.4. Negotiation, resistance, and coercion. While some students actively negotiated or resisted parental preferences, others experienced coercive decision-making. For example, UN2 pursued his preferred university despite his parents' opposition, supported by siblings and extended family members. In contrast, UN20 reported that his parents and uncle abruptly decided his major after the graduation exam, leaving him little room for agency. These cases highlight variations in intra-family power dynamics during the choice stage.

4.3.3.5. Scholarship-driven choices and their consequences. Scholarship availability emerged as a powerful structural factor capable of overriding both student interest and parental preference. UN19's case illustrates how scholarship-driven enrollment led to multiple institutional transitions and delayed alignment between education and career aspirations. Over time, parental involvement diminished as his educational path became increasingly self-directed. This suggests that family engagement may weaken when initial expectations are unmet or when educational trajectories become unstable.

To summarize, these findings demonstrate that family involvement at the choice stage is shaped by a complex interplay of examination timing, scholarship structures, parental aspirations, and household economic conditions. While family support often facilitates students' transitions to higher education, misalignment in major choice can generate negotiation, compromise, or coercion, resulting in diverse educational trajectories.

4.3.3.6. Third person involvement. When family involvement in university choice is absent, weak, or unsupportive, third persons outside the family, particularly teachers and clergy, can become decisive actors in shaping students' educational trajectories. In such cases, students' own determination interacts with external encouragement to compensate for limited familial support.

Throughout this study, the positive involvement of nuclear and extended family members has been emphasized. However, the findings also reveal cases in which family involvement was minimal or ineffective. In these situations, the influence of third persons outside the family became particularly significant, especially when parents opposed higher education or were unable to provide guidance and support.

One illustrative case is UN20, who stated, *"My family didn't interfere; they just let me do what I wanted."* Despite this apparent non-intervention, his university choice was strongly influenced by a high school teacher. UN20 comes from a low-income household with no family members who have had university experience. His parents completed only primary education, and his two older siblings ended their schooling at Grade 6. While his parents did not pressure him academically during his early schooling, this absence of pressure did not reflect poor family relationships. Until late secondary school, UN20 had not considered pursuing higher education. This changed when he entered Grade 10 and encountered a teacher who profoundly influenced his outlook. The teacher encouraged him to recognize the value of education, motivating him to study intensively. Within a few months, UN20 improved his class ranking from 25th out of 30–4 th. Reflecting on this period, he described the teacher's role as pivotal in shaping his academic aspirations.

Financial constraints remained a major barrier. During upper secondary school, his family's economic situation made immediate university enrollment impossible, a challenge further exacerbated by the COVID−19 pandemic. As a result, UN20 worked as an English teacher at a private high school, saving for tuition while supporting himself. During this period, encouragement from a close high school friend also played an important supportive role. UN20 eventually enrolled in

university four years after graduating from high school. He aspires to become a high school English teacher and expressed a strong desire to support his younger brother financially and academically. He also emphasized the importance of English education for Cambodia's national development.

A second case highlights the role of religious actors. UN15, the youngest of six sisters, experienced repeated educational disruption due to persistent family financial hardship. Her family moved to Thailand for work when she was in Grade 1, leaving some family members behind, and continued to relocate frequently after returning to Cambodia. As a result, UN15 repeated Grade 1 three times and intermittently dropped out of both primary and secondary school. Over time, her older sisters left school to work and contribute to the household income. During this period, UN15's schooling was partially supported by small financial contributions from her eldest sister. The death of her father during her secondary school years further destabilized the household.

In this context, the only consistent source of encouragement was a Cambodian pastor at a nearby church. With sustained effort and support, UN15 passed the Grade 12 examination with a C grade and enrolled in a university she learned about through a high school presentation. She selected this institution because of its proximity to her home and its affordability.

Overall, the cases of UN20 and UN15 demonstrate that when family members are unable or unwilling to support students' higher education decisions, teachers and clergy can play a critical compensatory role. At the same time, these cases also highlight the importance of students' own agency and determination, whether driven by career aspirations or a desire to support others. Even under adverse family circumstances, students actively mobilize available social resources to pursue higher education.

4.3.3.7. Gender differences. Although no clear gender differences were observed in patterns of family involvement at the choice stage, some female students reported that future marriage and life-course expectations subtly shaped educational decision-making. While overall family support for university attendance was observed across genders, several responses suggest gendered nuances in how future plans are considered. For example, HS7, a female student, reported that although her mother supported her desire to attend university, she discouraged her from pursuing medicine due to concerns about the long duration of training and its potential impact on marriage timing. Similarly, HS11 expressed uncertainty about whether to pursue higher education, seek employment, or marry after graduation, stating, *"Maybe I will work until 25 years old and then I will marry."*

These examples suggest that while overt gender disparities were not evident, some female students may internalize family expectations related to marriage and life planning when making educational decisions. However, such considerations did not amount to a systematic gender gap across the broader sample. Taken together, these findings suggest that family involvement is shaped not only by the type of actors involved but also by the distribution of social capital within the family and its stage-specific mobilization. In particular, when parental social capital is limited, other actors such as siblings and extended family members assume compensatory roles. Conversely, in some cases, the social capital of parents overlaps with that of siblings and relatives. This indicates that university choice processes are shaped not by a single dominant source of influence, but by a dynamic redistribution of resources within family networks.

5. Discussion

This section links the empirical findings more explicitly to the conceptual framework of social capital theory, highlighting how intra-family social capital is distributed and mobilized across stages. Building on the findings presented in the previous section, this discussion addresses the analytical and theoretical implications of the study, with a particular focus on limitations in conventional frameworks such as the binary classification of FGS and non-FGS. The results revealed that family involvement in university choice in Cambodia extends beyond parental influence and includes a broader array of actors such as siblings, uncles, aunts, and cousins. The timing, intensity, and nature of their involvement varied across stages of students' educational trajectories and were shaped by the educational backgrounds of these family members and the broader information environment.

Conventional studies argue that parental completion of university is a key determinant of children's university choices (Barsegyan and Maas, 2024; Ndiaye and Wolfe, 2016; Plaskett et al., 2018). These studies typically assume that families have completed at least upper secondary education and suggest that higher educational attainment among family members correlates with greater involvement. However, the present findings indicate a different pattern. It is not merely the presence or absence of parental university experience that shapes students' university choices. Rather, the educational gap between parents and children plays a critical role. This educational mismatch influences both the degree and the form of family involvement. Similar dynamics are observed in China. Liu et al. (2023) show that students from privileged families are more likely to consider and pursue postgraduate study abroad due to greater access to financial, informational, and cultural capital. By contrast, students from less privileged families often do not form such intentions, not because of disinterest, but due to limited exposure and feasibility. The assumption that family involvement is absent in certain contexts may therefore be misleading. In contexts such as Cambodia, structural limitations restrict access to education and information, making engagement in university choice more difficult rather than less important.

Research from Russia provides additional insight. Prakhov et al. (2020) find that appropriately balanced parental involvement positively correlates with academic achievement and successful transition to university. Taken together, the findings suggest that the issue should not be framed as a lack of involvement. Instead, it reflects constraints rooted in historical and socioeconomic conditions, including the lasting effects of the Khmer Rouge regime and uneven educational recovery in Cambodia (Sen, 2012).In addition, this study finds that family involvement in educational decision-making is dynamic and stage-specific. While students generally begin considering university options around Grade 10 in Cambodia, later than reported in studies from high-income contexts, this delayed awareness may be attributed to limited parental education and lack of early exposure to higher education pathways. Students displayed a wide range of aspiration development patterns, with some formulating concrete plans early on, others remaining undecided, and many navigating abstract options. These patterns were shaped not only by individual traits but also by family structures and sociocultural expectations. During the university search stage, the availability of information was closely tied to whether students had family members with prior university experience. In nuclear and extended families, individuals with such experience, especially siblings, uncles, and cousins, often provided essential information on university options and scholarship processes. In FGS households, siblings and cousins emerged as particularly important sources of support, compensating for the limited educational capital of parents. Conversely, students lacking such familial resources often faced a process of trial and error, placing them at a disadvantage.

Notably, differences in opinions between students and parents, However, prior stage-based models of university choice suche as Hossler (1999), Chapman (1986), and Litten (1982) generally assume that parental influence remains dominant across all stages. In contrast, the present findings show that influence is not consistently parent-centered, with siblings and extended family members playing more prominent roles, particularly during the search stage, while some actors such as grandparents remain largely absent. This indicates that the findings do not simply confirm known mechanisms, but reveal patterns of role

redistribution and actor-specific dominance that existing frameworks do not predict.Particularly regarding the selection of academic majors, emerged as a trigger for the involvement of other family members. This dynamic is especially important in Cambodia, where students must select both a university and a major simultaneously, with limited opportunity to switch later. Consequently, major selection should be treated as an integral part of university choice analysis. The interview data further identified distinct patterns of family involvement. For example, non-FGS (Cases A and B) received support from multiple family members, whereas FGS (Cases C, D, and E) relied more heavily on non-parental figures or experienced minimal support due to financial or motivational constraints. This variation suggests that family involvement is not uniform but multilayered, with different family members assuming diverse roles depending on available resources and the student's circumstances (see Fig. 1). From an analytical perspective, these patterns suggest that family involvement should not be conceptualized as a fixed form of parental influence. Rather, both the structure and intensity of involvement are shaped by the family's educational background, and in some cases, siblings assume roles typically associated with parents. This finding offers a qualitative perspective that may help refine existing models of university choice, which is embedded in a dynamic configuration of intra-family relationships, where educational capital within the family redistributes influence across generations.

From the theoretical perspective, this study adopts a social capital framework to analyze university choice. The findings indicate that, in the Cambodian context, the strong and enduring forms of bonding social capital within families assumed in much of the existing literature are not necessarily observed. As prior studies have noted, Cambodia's historical experiences of civil war and genocide have weakened not only broader social trust but also ties within families and kinship networks themselves. The results of this study support these earlier observations and further demonstrate that such fragility of family networks becomes particularly evident in concrete decision-making processes, such as university choice. Importantly, family-based social capital cannot be understood solely in terms of parental educational background. Rather, the distribution of educational experience across multiple family members, including siblings and extended relatives, shapes both the presence and direction of involvement. This refines existing approaches by shifting the focus from parental resources alone to a broader configuration of educational capital within the family.

The findings also reveal important contextual constraints on the operation of social capital. While prior research assumes that schools or community members compensate for limited parental resources, this study shows that such support may be limited when higher education experienced actors are absent not only within families but also in the surrounding social environment. As a result, neither family-based nor external sources of support are guaranteed. This extends social capital theory by demonstrating that bridging social capital depends on the existence of broader social networks, and that compensatory mechanisms cannot be assumed where such networks are weak. The findings further indicate that university decision-making is shaped through interactions among multiple family members, each contributing distinct forms of support. These include informational, financial, and emotional resources, which operate in complementary or substitutive ways depending on family background, suggesting that college choice should be understood as a multi-layered and relational process rather than a parent-centered one.

This study extends existing models of college choice by explicitly incorporating the role of extended family members. While prior research has largely focused on parental influence, the findings suggest that decision-making is shaped through a broader network of f family actors. In particular, different family members contribute in differentiated ways, reflecting the uneven distribution of social capital within the family. This indicates the need to reconceptualize college choice as a multi-layered and relational process embedded within family networks, rather than a parent-centered process. Building on this perspective, the study proposes that the relative importance of different actors varies according to the distribution of social capital within the family. For example, when parents have limited higher education experience, extended family members or non-family actors such as teachers play a more prominent role in providing guidance and information. Taken together, these findings suggest that existing college choice models can be refined by incorporating multiple family actors beyond parents and by recognizing the differentiated and context-dependent functions of their contributions. This framework also generates new testable propositions regarding how variations in family social capital shape patterns of involvement and decision making. These propositions are specified as follows:

Proposition 1. When parental higher education capital is limited or absent, sibling-based horizontal social capital becomes a primary, rather than supplementary, mechanism in university choice.

Proposition 2. The availability and influence of informational support during the search stage depend on the presence of university-experienced actors within the family network, rather than being uniformly provided by parents.

Proposition 3. The compensatory function of non-parental actors, including extended family members and external agents such as teachers, is contingent on the distribution of educational capital within both the family and the surrounding social environment, and therefore cannot be assumed as a universal fallback mechanism.

	Parent	Siblings	Uncle, aunt, grandparents	High School Teacher, Others
A	● (BDH)	● (BDH)	● (BDH)	▲ (BDH/stable work)
B	● (BDH)	- (non-BDH)	- (non- BDH)	▲ (BDH/stable work)
C	▲(non- BDH)	● (BDH)	● (BDH)	▲ (BDH/stable work)
D	▲(non- BDH)	- (non- BDH)	- (non- BDH)	●(non-BDH)
E	- (non- BDH)	- (non- BDH)	- (non- BDH)	-

Source: Created by the author based on data analysis
Note. ● Strongly involved
▲ Not so involved
— Non-remarkable involvement
BDH: Bachelor's Degree Holder

Fig. 1. Family Involvement Pattern.

The strong influence of siblings identified in this study represents more than an empirical pattern and offers an important theoretical contribution. Existing applications of social capital theory have primarily conceptualized family-based social capital as operating vertically through parents, implicitly privileging parental authority, resources, and decision-making power. In contrast, the findings of this study suggest that siblings function as a distinct and under-theorized form of intra-family social capital. In particular, siblings play a critical role in contexts where parental and broader social resources are limited, thereby compensating for the gap not only within the family but also within the surrounding social network.

From a social capital perspective, siblings occupy a unique structural position that combines elements of bonding and bridging social capital. Unlike parents, siblings, especially older siblings with recent higher education experience, often possess contextually relevant, up-to-date, and experientially grounded information. At the same time, their influence is embedded in emotionally close and trust-based relationships, allowing them to function as credible intermediaries between institutional knowledge and students' decision-making processes.

Theoretically, this suggests that sibling influence operates as a horizontal form of family social capital, rather than the vertical transmission typically assumed in parental models. In the Cambodian context, where historical disruption has weakened extended kinship networks and constrained parental informational capacity, siblings emerge as key agents who compensate for gaps in parental social capital. Their role thus challenges the assumption that bonding social capital within families is homogeneous and parent-centered.

These findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of family involvement in university choice, particularly in non-Western, low- and middle-income contexts. By moving beyond binary categorizations such as FGS and non-FGS, the study demonstrates the need to recognize the complex and layered nature of family support systems, which are shaped by historical, cultural, and socioeconomic conditions. In countries like Cambodia, where intergenerational educational attainment varies widely and access to information is uneven, recognizing the broader family network as a source of involvement is crucial. Future comparative studies across different regions and education systems may help refine theoretical frameworks and better capture the diverse realities of students' university choice decision-making worldwide. These findings suggest a testable proposition that the relative importance of family actors varies depending on the distribution of educational capital within the family.

6. Conclusion

This study makes three key contributions. Theoretically, it extends social capital theory by demonstrating that family involvement in university choice in Cambodia is neither uniform nor parent-centered, but operates through differentiated and stage-specific roles involving siblings and extended relatives. In doing so, it challenges deficit-based interpretations that equate limited parental education with an absence of family support. Methodologically, the study contributes a process-oriented qualitative approach that integrates multiple data sources and captures educational decision-making as a dynamic trajectory across the transition to higher education, moving beyond static and single-actor models of family involvement. From a policy perspective, the findings highlight structural inequalities in access to university-related information and guidance that are mediated by families' educational capital rather than individual ability or motivation. This underscores the need for institutional interventions, particularly comprehensive school-based counseling at the upper-secondary and postsecondary transition stages, to provide compensatory guidance for students who receive limited support within their families. Overall, the study calls for a context-sensitive understanding of family involvement that can better inform policies aimed at reducing unequal access to higher education in developing-country settings.

Limitation of this study

A single-country, single-site study with a limited sample cannot provide generalizable insights into higher education enrollment. In addition, some interviews were conducted through an interpreter, which may have affected the accuracy of interpretation. This study is based on qualitative interviews conducted in specific regions of Cambodia. While this approach allows for an in-depth understanding of individual experiences and decision-making processes, it limits the generalizability of the findings beyond the study context.

Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory and context-specific, offering analytical insights into how family involvement shapes university choice rather than aiming for statistical generalization.

The results also suggest that even when parental involvement is limited, extended family members such as siblings, uncles, and aunts can play important roles. As the sample is primarily drawn from urban areas, future research should examine how these patterns vary across rural areas, provincial cities, and other regions. Further studies using larger samples and quantitative or mixed-methods approaches would help to test the broader applicability of these findings.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Ogawa Keiichi: Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Tokuoka Mami:** Writing – original draft, Visualization, Software, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

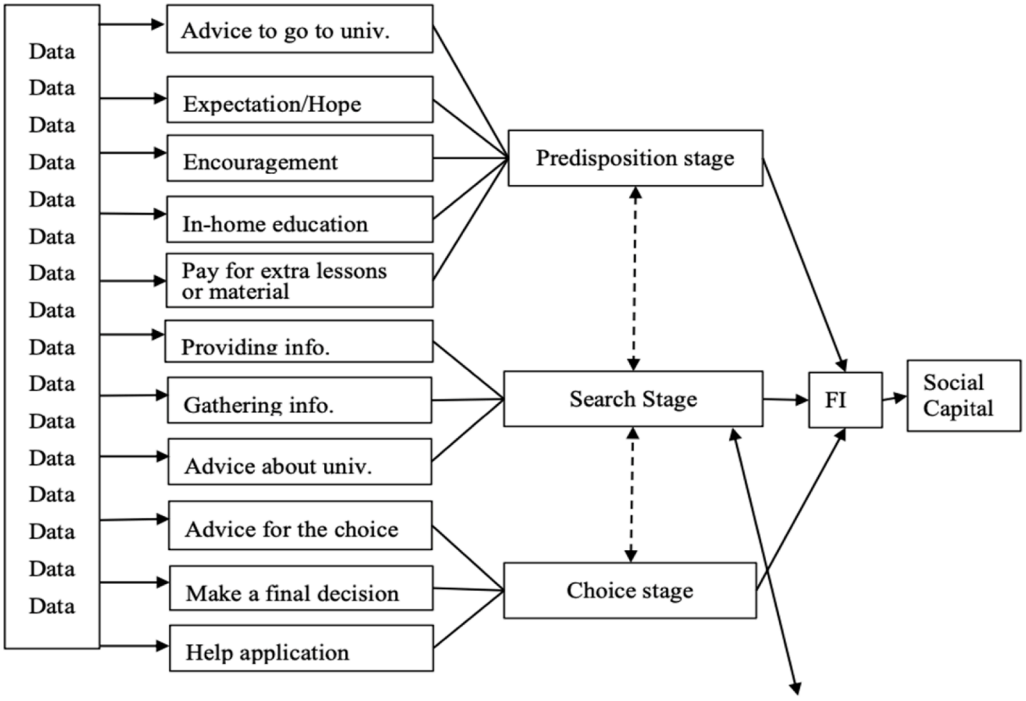
Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT solely as a supplementary tool to improve language clarity and readability. None of the information, wording, statements, arguments, analysis, or interpretations presented in this manuscript were generated solely by an AI chatbot, including ChatGPT. All intellectual content was conceived, developed, and written by the authors. After using this tool, the authors carefully reviewed and edited the manuscript as needed and take full responsibility for its content.

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Appendix. . Coding Three



Information	Tool	Judgment conditions
· Program/Major	· Institutional advertisement	· Academic
· Financial Aid	· SNS/HP/Internet	· Performance
· Reputation	· Verbal Information	· Advice
· Safety issue	· Institutional Activates	· Household Income
· Quality of faculty	· Recruitment Activities	· Family Structure

Sources: Created by the author based on Raj et al. (2019) and field research

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