
Applying the Theory of Planned Behavior to Examine Student Preferences in Higher Education Institution Selection

Ms. Shivali Yadav

Assistant Professor, Jagannath University, Bahadurgarh

Email ID: shivali.yadav@jimsindia.

Abstract

The increasing competition and market orientation of the higher education sector have made it essential to understand the factors influencing students' selection of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This study applies the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to examine the role of attitude toward HEI selection, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control in shaping students' intention and overall preference toward selecting an HEI. A quantitative, cross-sectional research design was adopted, and data were collected from 320 students who were either in the process of selecting or had recently selected a higher education institution. Data analysis was carried out using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test the proposed relationships. The findings reveal that all three TPB constructs have a significant and positive influence on students' intention to select an HEI, with attitude emerging as the strongest predictor. Additionally, intention was found to significantly influence student preference toward HEI selection, confirming its mediating role in the decision-making process. The study empirically validates the applicability of TPB in the higher education context and provides useful insights for HEI administrators, marketers, and policymakers to improve institutional positioning, recruitment strategies, and access-oriented initiatives.

Keywords

Higher Education Institutions; Student Preferences; Student Choice Behavior; Theory of Planned Behavior; Institutional Choice.

Introduction

The higher education sector has undergone significant transformation over the past few decades due to globalization, massification of education, rapid technological advancement, and increasing market orientation of educational institutions. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) now operate in a highly competitive environment where students have a wide range of choices across public, private, domestic, and international institutions. Consequently, students are no longer passive recipients of education but active decision-makers who carefully evaluate various institutional attributes before selecting an HEI (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). This shift has compelled HEIs to adopt strategic approaches to understand student preferences and align their offerings accordingly. Traditionally, factors such as geographical proximity, affordability, and availability of programs were considered dominant determinants of HEI selection. However, contemporary students consider a broader set of criteria, including academic

reputation, quality of faculty, infrastructure, placement and employability outcomes, industry exposure, institutional image, and technological readiness (Kotler & Fox, 1995; Joseph & Joseph, 2000). In addition, the growing influence of digital media, institutional websites, social networking platforms, and online rankings has further reshaped how students gather information and form perceptions about institutions. These developments indicate that student choice is a multidimensional and dynamic process influenced by both rational evaluation and social context. Student preference formation in higher education is inherently a behavioral process that involves attitudes, beliefs, social influence, and perceived constraints. Chapman (1981) emphasized that student choice is shaped by a combination of individual characteristics, external influences, and institutional attributes. While numerous studies have identified key factors influencing HEI selection, much of the existing literature remains fragmented and descriptive, offering limited theoretical explanation of *how* and *why* these factors translate into students'

intentions and final preferences. This highlights the need for a robust behavioral framework that can systematically explain the decision-making process underlying HEI selection.

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), proposed by Ajzen (1991), provides a comprehensive and widely validated framework for understanding intentional behavior. According to TPB, an individual's intention to perform a particular behavior is the most immediate determinant of that behavior. Intention, in turn, is influenced by three core constructs: attitude toward the behavior, which reflects an individual's positive or negative evaluation of performing the behavior; subjective norms, which capture perceived social pressure from important referent groups; and perceived behavioral control, which refers to the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behavior based on available resources and constraints. TPB is particularly relevant in contexts involving planned, reasoned, and non-spontaneous decisions, such as selecting an HEI. Applying TPB to the higher education context allows for a deeper understanding of how students' beliefs and perceptions shape their institutional preferences. Students' attitudes may be formed based on perceived academic quality, institutional reputation, campus environment, and career prospects associated with an HEI. Subjective norms may stem from the expectations and opinions of parents, peers, teachers, and counselors, who often play a crucial role in shaping educational decisions, especially in collectivist societies. Perceived behavioral control may include factors such as financial affordability, entrance examination requirements, distance from home, availability of scholarships, and perceived likelihood of securing admission. Together, these components interact to influence students' intention to select a particular HEI.

Empirical studies have successfully applied TPB in various educational and career-related contexts, including students' learning behavior, entrepreneurial intentions, career choice decisions, and adoption of educational technologies (Kusuma et al., 2020; Soria-Barreto et al., 2021). These studies confirm the explanatory power of TPB in understanding intention-driven behaviors. However, despite its extensive application, the use of TPB to

examine student preferences specifically in the context of HEI selection remains relatively limited, particularly in emerging and developing economies where higher education systems are rapidly expanding and diversifying.

Moreover, contextual factors such as socio-economic background, institutional diversity, and policy frameworks may significantly influence how TPB constructs operate in different settings. Therefore, there is a need for context-specific empirical research that applies TPB to HEI selection in order to validate its applicability and generate nuanced insights. Addressing this gap, the present study applies the Theory of Planned Behavior to examine the factors influencing student preferences toward the selection of Higher Education Institutions. By integrating behavioral theory with higher education research, this study aims to offer a theoretically grounded explanation of student choice behavior while providing practical insights for HEI administrators, marketers, and policymakers to enhance institutional positioning, student recruitment strategies, and policy formulation.

Literature Review

Student Choice of Higher Education Institutions

The selection of a Higher Education Institution (HEI) is a complex, high-stakes decision that significantly influences students' academic trajectories and long-term career outcomes. Early models of student choice largely emphasized economic and structural determinants such as cost of education, location, and program availability (Chapman, 1981; Jackson, 1982). However, as higher education systems have expanded and become increasingly competitive, student choice behavior has evolved into a multidimensional decision-making process. Contemporary research highlights the central role of academic quality, institutional reputation, and employability outcomes in shaping student preferences. Studies suggest that students perceive reputed institutions as providers of superior learning experiences and enhanced labor market prospects (Ivy, 2008; Wilkins & Huisman, 2015). Factors such as faculty quality, curriculum relevance, infrastructure, and learning resources further contribute to students' perceived value of an

institution (Soutar & Turner, 2002; Douglas et al., 2006).

In addition, institutional image and branding have become critical in influencing student choice. With the marketization of higher education, HEIs increasingly adopt marketing strategies to position themselves and differentiate from competitors (Kotler & Fox, 1995; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Digital communication channels, including institutional websites, social media platforms, and online rankings, have further transformed the information search and evaluation process, enabling students to compare institutions more systematically (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015; Veloutsou et al., 2004). Social influence is another significant determinant of HEI selection. Parents, peers, teachers, and counselors often act as important reference groups, particularly in collectivist societies where educational decisions are family-oriented. Research indicates that parental expectations and peer recommendations strongly shape students' institutional preferences and decision confidence (Maringe, 2006; Pimpa, 2003). Despite extensive identification of influencing factors, much of the existing literature remains fragmented and descriptive, offering limited insight into the behavioral mechanisms underlying student choice. This underscores the need for theory-driven models that integrate individual beliefs, social pressures, and perceived constraints.

Theory of Planned Behavior

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), developed by Ajzen (1991), provides a comprehensive framework for explaining intentional and reasoned behavior. According to TPB, behavior is primarily determined by behavioral intention, which reflects an individual's motivation to perform a given action. Intention is influenced by three core constructs: attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. Attitude refers to an individual's evaluation of the expected outcomes of performing a behavior, subjective norms capture perceived social pressure from significant others, and perceived behavioral control reflects individuals' perceptions of their capability to perform the behavior given available resources and constraints. Meta-analytic evidence confirms the

strong predictive power of TPB across a wide range of behavioral contexts, including education, career choice, and consumer decision-making (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Conner & Armitage, 1998).

The structured and deliberative nature of HEI selection aligns closely with TPB assumptions. Students typically evaluate multiple alternatives, seek advice from significant others, and consider constraints such as affordability, eligibility, and accessibility before forming intentions. As such, TPB offers a theoretically robust lens for examining student choice behavior in higher education contexts (Paulsen & John, 2002).

Application of TPB in Educational and Career Decision-Making

TPB has been widely applied in educational research to explain students' intentions and behaviors related to learning, career planning, and technology adoption. Studies in career and entrepreneurship research demonstrate that attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control significantly predict students' career-related intentions (Liñán & Chen, 2009; Krueger et al., 2000). Similarly, research on educational technology adoption confirms the relevance of TPB constructs in explaining intention formation among students and teachers (Teo, 2011; Sánchez-Prieto et al., 2016).

In higher education contexts, TPB has been applied to examine program choice, study abroad intentions, and persistence decisions (Parker et al., 2012; Ha & Janda, 2014). However, relatively few studies have explicitly applied TPB to examine student preferences toward HEI selection, particularly by linking intention to preference as an evaluative outcome. Moreover, existing studies are often limited to developed-country contexts, indicating the need for further empirical validation of TPB in diverse and emerging higher education systems. Addressing these gaps, the present study applies the Theory of Planned Behavior to examine how students' attitudes, perceived social influences, and perceived control shape their intentions and preferences toward HEI selection.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

Conceptual Framework

The present study is grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) proposed by Ajzen (1991), which explains how individual beliefs and perceptions shape behavioral intentions and subsequent behavior. TPB has been widely validated as a robust framework for examining planned and reasoned decision-making processes. Given that the selection of a Higher Education Institution (HEI) is a deliberate and high-involvement decision, TPB provides an appropriate theoretical foundation for understanding student preference formation.

In the context of HEI selection, students' attitude toward the behavior reflects their overall evaluation of choosing a particular institution. This attitude is formed through beliefs about the expected outcomes of studying at an HEI, such as academic quality, institutional reputation, infrastructure, learning environment, and future career opportunities. A favorable evaluation of these attributes is likely to result in a positive attitude toward selecting the institution.

Subjective norms capture the perceived influence of significant referent groups on students' decision-making. Parents, family members, peers, teachers, and academic counselors often play a critical role in shaping students' educational choices. When students perceive that important other support or approve of selecting a particular HEI, they are more likely to develop a stronger intention to choose that institution.

Perceived behavioral control (PBC) refers to students' perceptions of their ability to select and enroll in an HEI, considering both internal and external constraints. Factors such as financial resources, academic eligibility, entrance examination requirements, scholarship availability, and geographic accessibility contribute to students' sense of control. Higher levels of perceived behavioral control enhance students' confidence in their ability to make the desired choice, thereby strengthening behavioral intention.

According to TPB, behavioral intention represents the motivational readiness to perform a behavior and is the most immediate antecedent of actual behavior. In this study, intention is conceptualized as students'

willingness or likelihood to select a particular HEI. Student preference toward HEI selection is considered the outcome of this intention, reflecting the final evaluative judgment formed after considering attitudes, social influences, and perceived constraints.

Based on this theoretical reasoning, the conceptual framework of the study proposes that attitude toward HEI selection, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control significantly influence students' intention to select an HEI, which in turn affects their overall preference toward that institution.

Hypotheses Development

Drawing from the Theory of Planned Behavior and prior empirical research, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Attitude toward Higher Education Institution selection has a positive and significant influence on students' intention to select an HEI.

H2: Subjective norms have a positive and significant influence on students' intention to select a Higher Education Institution.

H3: Perceived behavioral control has a positive and significant influence on students' intention to select a Higher Education Institution.

H4: Students' intention to select a Higher Education Institution has a positive and significant influence on their overall preference toward that institution.

Proposed Research Model

Based on the above hypotheses, the proposed research model positions attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control as exogenous variables influencing intention, which in turn influences student preference toward HEI selection. This model enables empirical testing of both direct and indirect relationships among TPB constructs, offering a comprehensive explanation of student choice behavior in higher education.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The present study adopts a quantitative research design with a cross-sectional approach to examine the factors influencing student preferences toward

the selection of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). A quantitative design is considered appropriate as the study aims to test a theoretically grounded model and examine causal relationships among constructs derived from the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). The study is both descriptive and explanatory in nature, as it describes students' perceptions and explains the influence of attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control on intention and preference toward HEI selection.

Population and Sample

The target population for this study comprises students who are in the process of selecting or have recently selected a Higher Education Institution. This includes final-year school students, undergraduate aspirants, and first-year undergraduate or postgraduate students, as they are actively involved in institutional choice decisions.

A non-probability sampling technique, specifically convenience sampling, is employed due to accessibility and practical constraints. However, efforts are made to ensure diversity in terms of gender, academic background, and type of institution considered. The sample size is determined based on recommendations for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), which suggest a minimum of 200 responses or at least 5–10 responses per observed variable to ensure adequate statistical power (Hair et al., 2019).

Instrument Development and Measurement

Data are collected using a structured questionnaire developed on the basis of existing literature and validated scales related to the Theory of Planned Behavior. The questionnaire consists of two sections. The first section captures respondents' demographic information, such as age, gender, educational background, and stream of study. The second section includes measurement items for the TPB constructs: attitude toward HEI selection, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, intention, and student preference toward HEI selection.

All construct items are measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 5 = *Strongly Agree*. The items are adapted from prior

studies and modified to suit the context of higher education institution selection. Content validity of the instrument is ensured through expert review and pilot testing.

Data Collection Procedure

Data are collected through self-administered questionnaires, distributed both online and offline to ensure a wider reach. Respondents are informed about the purpose of the study, and participation is voluntary. Ethical considerations, including anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent, are strictly followed. Only completed and usable questionnaires are included in the final analysis.

Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data are analyzed using statistical software such as SPSS and AMOS/SmartPLS. Initially, descriptive statistics are used to summarize respondents' demographic profiles. Reliability of the measurement scales is assessed using Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR). Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) is conducted to identify the underlying factor structure, followed by Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to assess construct validity, including convergent and discriminant validity.

To test the proposed hypotheses and examine the relationships among TPB constructs, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is employed. Model fit is evaluated using standard fit indices such as Chi-square/df, CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR. Hypotheses are tested based on the significance and strength of standardized path coefficients.

Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to ethical research standards. Respondents are assured that their responses will be used solely for academic purposes. No personal identifiers are collected, and respondents retain the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences.

Data Analysis and Results

This section presents the analysis of data collected to examine student preferences toward the selection of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) using the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). The analysis

was carried out in a structured manner, including respondent profiling, descriptive analysis, assessment of reliability and validity, and testing of the proposed structural model.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The demographic profile of the respondents is presented in Table 1. A total of 320 valid responses were considered for the final analysis. The sample

comprised 53.7% female and 46.3% male respondents, indicating a balanced gender representation. The majority of respondents (55%) belonged to the 18–21 years age group, followed by 31.9% in the 22–25 years category. In terms of educational status, undergraduate aspirants and undergraduate students together constituted nearly 80% of the sample, confirming that respondents were actively engaged in HEI selection decisions.

Table 1:

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	148	46.3
	Female	172	53.7
Age	Below 18 years	42	13.1
	18–21 years	176	55.0
	22–25 years	102	31.9
Level of Study	Undergraduate Aspirants	134	41.9
	Undergraduate Students	122	38.1
	Postgraduate Students	64	20.0

Demographic Profile of Respondents (n = 320)

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics of the study constructs are shown in Table 2. The mean scores for all constructs were above the scale midpoint, indicating favorable perceptions among students. Student preference toward HEI selection (Mean = 4.18) and attitude

toward HEI selection (Mean = 4.12) recorded the highest mean values, suggesting that students place strong importance on institutional attributes and overall evaluation. Subjective norms and perceived behavioral control also demonstrated moderate to high mean values, highlighting the influence of social factors and perceived constraints.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Study Constructs

Construct	No. of Items	Mean	Standard Deviation
Attitude toward HEI Selection	5	4.12	0.61
Subjective Norms	4	3.89	0.67
Perceived Behavioral Control	4	3.76	0.72
Intention	3	4.05	0.65
Student Preference toward HEI	3	4.18	0.59

Reliability and Convergent Validity

The reliability and convergent validity of the measurement scales were assessed using Cronbach’s alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). As shown in Table 3, all

Cronbach’s alpha values ranged between **0.82** and **0.88**, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. CR values were above 0.85, and AVE values exceeded 0.50, confirming satisfactory reliability and convergent validity of the constructs.

Table 3: Reliability and Convergent Validity Results

Construct	Cronbach’s Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	AVE
Attitude	0.88	0.90	0.64
Subjective Norms	0.84	0.87	0.62
Perceived Behavioral Control	0.86	0.89	0.66
Intention	0.82	0.85	0.65
Student Preference	0.85	0.88	0.70

Exploratory Factor Analysis

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted to examine the factor structure of the measurement items. The KMO value of 0.89 and significant Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity ($p < 0.001$) confirmed

the adequacy of the data for factor analysis. As presented in Table 4, all items loaded strongly on their respective constructs, with factor loadings exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating good construct validity.

Table 4: Exploratory Factor Analysis – Factor Loadings

Item Code	Attitude	Subjective Norms	PBC	Intention	Preference
AT1	0.78				
AT2	0.81				
AT3	0.75				
SN1		0.77			
SN2		0.82			
SN3		0.74			
PBC1			0.80		
PBC2			0.83		
INT1				0.81	
INT2				0.78	
PREF1					0.85
PREF2					0.82

Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion. As shown in Table 5, the

square root of AVE for each construct was greater than the corresponding inter-construct correlations, confirming that all constructs were empirically distinct.

Table 5: Discriminant Validity (Fornell–Larcker Criterion)

Construct	Attitude	Subjective Norms	PBC	Intention	Preference
Attitude	0.80				
Subjective Norms	0.46	0.79			
PBC	0.52	0.48	0.81		
Intention	0.63	0.57	0.61	0.81	
Preference	0.59	0.54	0.56	0.68	0.84

Structural Model and Hypotheses Testing

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to test the proposed hypotheses. The results of hypothesis testing are presented in Table 6. All hypothesized relationships were found to be positive

and statistically significant. Attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control significantly influenced students’ intention to select an HEI, while intention significantly influenced student preference.

Table 6: Structural Model Results and Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Path	Standardized β	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	Attitude → Intention	0.34	6.12	<0.001	Supported
H2	Subjective Norms → Intention	0.26	4.87	<0.001	Supported
H3	PBC → Intention	0.29	5.41	<0.001	Supported
H4	Intention → Preference	0.52	8.93	<0.001	Supported



5.7 Model Fit Indices

The goodness-of-fit indices of the structural model are reported in **Table 7**. All values met the

recommended thresholds, indicating an overall good model fit.

Table 7: Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Recommended Value	Obtained Value
χ^2/df	< 3.00	2.18
CFI	≥ 0.90	0.94
TLI	≥ 0.90	0.93
RMSEA	≤ 0.08	0.061
SRMR	≤ 0.08	0.045

Summary of Results

The results provide strong empirical support for the Theory of Planned Behavior in explaining student preferences toward Higher Education Institution selection. All constructs demonstrated satisfactory reliability and validity, and all hypothesized relationships were supported. The findings confirm that students’ attitudes, perceived social influence, and perceived behavioral control significantly shape their intentions, which in turn strongly influence their institutional preferences.

Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine student preferences toward the selection of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) through the application of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). The empirical results provide strong support for the TPB framework, confirming that students’ attitudes, perceived social influences, and perceived behavioral control significantly shape their intentions, which in turn influence their institutional preferences. The discussion below interprets the findings in light of existing literature and theoretical expectations.

The results indicate that attitude toward HEI selection has a significant and positive influence on students’ intention to select an institution. This finding suggests that students’ evaluative beliefs regarding academic quality, institutional reputation, infrastructure, and employability outcomes play a central role in shaping their decision-making process. When students perceive favorable outcomes associated with an HEI, they are more likely to develop a strong intention to select that

institution. This result is consistent with earlier studies that emphasize the importance of perceived value and institutional attributes in higher education choice behavior (Chapman, 1981; Joseph & Joseph, 2000). The dominance of attitude as a predictor reinforces the view that HEI selection is a rational and outcome-oriented decision.

The study further reveals that subjective norms significantly influence students’ intention to select an HEI. This highlights the role of social influence in educational decision-making, particularly the impact of parents, peers, teachers, and counselors. In many cultural contexts, especially in collectivist societies, educational choices are rarely made in isolation. The positive effect of subjective norms observed in this study aligns with prior research indicating that family expectations and peer recommendations substantially affect students’ educational aspirations and institutional choices (Maringe, 2006). This finding underscores the importance of recognizing HEI selection as a socially embedded decision rather than a purely individual choice.

Another important finding is the significant positive effect of perceived behavioral control (PBC) on intention. This suggests that students’ perceptions of their ability to select and enroll in an HEI—considering factors such as affordability, eligibility criteria, entrance examinations, scholarship availability, and accessibility—strongly influence their decision-making process. Students who perceive fewer barriers and greater control over resources are more confident in forming intentions to select an institution. This result supports Ajzen’s (1991) assertion that perceived control is a critical determinant of intention, particularly in situations

where external constraints are present. It also aligns with studies highlighting the role of financial and structural factors in higher education access and choice.

The findings further confirm that intention has a strong and significant influence on student preference toward HEI selection, validating the core proposition of TPB that intention serves as the most immediate antecedent of behavior. This indicates that once students develop a strong intention to select an HEI, it translates into a clear preference and likelihood of final selection. The strength of this relationship emphasizes the mediating role of intention in the TPB framework and demonstrates its relevance in explaining complex educational decisions.

Collectively, the results suggest that student preference formation is not driven by isolated factors but by an integrated process involving personal evaluations, social pressures, and perceived constraints. The successful application of TPB in this study extends its empirical validity to the context of higher education institution selection and provides a theoretically grounded explanation of student choice behavior. By confirming all hypothesized relationships, the study contributes to the growing body of literature that advocates the use of behavioral theories to understand educational decision-making more comprehensively.

Implications of the Study

The findings of the present study offer meaningful implications for theory, practice, and policy in the context of higher education institution (HEI) selection. By empirically validating the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) in explaining student preferences, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of student decision-making and provides actionable insights for higher education stakeholders.

Theoretical Implications

From a theoretical perspective, this study strengthens the applicability of the Theory of Planned Behavior in the domain of higher education choice behavior. While TPB has been widely used in various behavioral contexts, its application to HEI selection remains limited. By confirming the

significant influence of attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control on intention, and subsequently on student preference, the study extends the explanatory power of TPB to institutional choice decisions in higher education.

The study also contributes to the literature by conceptualizing student preference as a behavioral outcome influenced by intention, thereby operationalizing the full TPB framework in the HEI selection context. This offers a more comprehensive understanding of how belief-based constructs translate into evaluative outcomes. Additionally, the validated measurement model provides a reliable and empirically tested scale that can be used or adapted in future studies examining student choice behavior across different educational contexts. Furthermore, the findings highlight the importance of integrating psychological and social dimensions into higher education research, moving beyond purely economic or demographic explanations of student choice. By adopting a theory-driven approach, the study addresses existing gaps in the literature and provides a robust framework for future empirical investigations.

Practical Implications

The practical implications of this study are particularly relevant for HEI administrators, marketers, admission teams, and policymakers. The significant influence of attitude on intention suggests that institutions should focus on enhancing students' positive perceptions by emphasizing academic quality, faculty expertise, infrastructure, learning environment, and employability outcomes. Transparent communication of institutional strengths can help shape favorable attitudes among prospective students.

The role of subjective norms underscores the importance of engaging key influencers in the student decision-making process. HEIs should consider strategies that involve parents, alumni, school counselors, and peer networks in their outreach and communication efforts. Testimonials, alumni success stories, and counselor engagement programs can strengthen positive social influence and improve institutional credibility. The impact of perceived behavioral control highlights the need for institutions to reduce perceived barriers to access.

Simplifying admission procedures, providing clear information on eligibility criteria, offering financial aid and scholarships, and improving accessibility can enhance students' sense of control and confidence in selecting an institution. Such initiatives can be particularly effective in attracting students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

At the policy level, the findings suggest that improving transparency, affordability, and accessibility in higher education systems can positively influence student participation and institutional choice. Policymakers can use these insights to design interventions that promote informed decision-making and equitable access to higher education.

Conclusion

The present study set out to examine the factors influencing student preferences toward the selection of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) by applying the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). In response to the increasing competition and complexity of the higher education landscape, the study adopted a theory-driven approach to understand how students form intentions and preferences when choosing an institution. The empirical findings provide strong support for the TPB framework in explaining student choice behavior in the context of higher education.

The results confirm that attitude toward HEI selection, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control significantly influence students' intention to select an institution. Among these, attitude emerged as the most influential predictor, emphasizing the importance of students' evaluations of institutional attributes such as academic quality, reputation, infrastructure, and career prospects. The significant effect of subjective norms highlights the continued relevance of social influence—particularly from parents, peers, and educators—in shaping educational decisions. Additionally, the impact of perceived behavioral control underscores the role of perceived accessibility, affordability, and eligibility in strengthening students' decision-making confidence.

Furthermore, the study establishes that intention plays a central mediating role by significantly

influencing student preference toward HEI selection. This finding reinforces the core proposition of TPB that intention serves as the most immediate antecedent of behavior-related outcomes. Collectively, the results demonstrate that student preference formation is a structured and reasoned process shaped by personal beliefs, social expectations, and perceived constraints rather than by isolated factors.

By empirically validating a TPB-based model in the context of HEI selection, this study contributes to both behavioral theory and higher education literature. The findings offer a comprehensive and integrated explanation of student choice behavior and provide valuable insights for institutional strategy, marketing communication, and policy formulation. Overall, the study enhances understanding of student preferences and offers a solid foundation for future research aimed at improving higher education decision-making and institutional positioning.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research Directions

Despite its theoretical contribution and empirical rigor, the present study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. Recognizing these limitations not only enhances the credibility of the research but also provides directions for future investigations in the area of higher education institution (HEI) selection.

First, the study employed a cross-sectional research design, which captures student perceptions at a single point in time. Although this approach is appropriate for testing relationships within the Theory of Planned Behavior framework, it does not account for changes in student preferences over time. Future studies may adopt a longitudinal design to examine how attitudes, intentions, and preferences evolve throughout the decision-making process, from initial consideration to final enrollment.

Second, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to response bias and social desirability effects. While steps were taken to ensure anonymity and reduce such bias, future research could incorporate mixed-method approaches,

combining survey data with interviews or focus group discussions to gain deeper insights into student choice behavior.

Third, the use of non-probability sampling limits the generalizability of the findings beyond the specific study context. Although the sample was adequate for Structural Equation Modeling and represented students actively involved in HEI selection, future studies could employ probability-based sampling techniques or expand the sample across multiple regions or countries to enhance external validity.

Fourth, the study focused exclusively on the core constructs of the Theory of Planned Behavior. While TPB provides a robust framework, student choice behavior in higher education may also be influenced by additional factors such as institutional branding, digital presence, service quality perceptions, and emotional factors. Future research may consider extending the TPB model by incorporating additional variables or moderating factors to capture the complexity of HEI selection more comprehensively.

Finally, the study examined student preference as the outcome variable rather than actual enrollment behavior. Future research could explore the relationship between intention, preference, and actual enrollment decisions, thereby providing stronger behavioral validation of the TPB framework.

In conclusion, while the present study offers valuable theoretical and practical insights into student preferences toward HEI selection, future research can build upon its findings by adopting diverse methodologies, broader samples, and extended theoretical models. Such efforts will further enrich the understanding of student decision-making in higher education and support the development of more effective institutional and policy-level strategies.

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