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A Systematic Review Of Factors Influencing Higher Education Institution Choice Through The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) Framework

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The process of selecting a higher education institution (HEI) has evolved into a complex decision-making phenomenon influenced by a combination of institutional attributes, psychological evaluations, and behavioral intentions. While existing research has examined numerous determinants of HEI choice, the literature remains fragmented and lacks an integrative theoretical synthesis. Addressing this gap, the present study conducts a systematic literature review to identify and organize factors influencing HEI choice using the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework. Guided by the PRISMA protocol, peer-reviewed empirical studies published were retrieved from Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC databases. The review synthesizes evidence on how external institutional stimuli—such as reputation, academic quality, cost, employability outcomes, and marketing communication—are cognitively and affectively processed by students before culminating in behavioral responses, including enrollment intention and actual enrollment decisions. The findings demonstrate that HEI choice is neither purely rational nor purely emotional; rather, it reflects a dual-process mechanism in which cognitive evaluations and affective responses jointly mediate the influence of institutional cues on student behavior. By systematically mapping fragmented empirical findings within the S–O–R framework, this review contributes a coherent theoretical structure to the HEI choice literature and highlights critical research gaps for future empirical investigation. The study offers valuable insights for scholars, institutional leaders, and policymakers seeking to better understand and strategically manage student choice behavior in an increasingly competitive higher education environment.

Keywords

Higher education institution choice; Student decision-making; Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework; Cognitive and affective factors; Systematic literature review; Enrollment intention

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of Higher Education Institution (HEI) Choice

The process of selecting a higher education institution (HEI) has progressively evolved from a purely academic decision into a complex consumer-like choice behaviour. Early studies conceptualized HEI selection as a rational process driven primarily by academic reputation, program availability, and geographic proximity (Chapman, 1981). Over time, researchers have recognized that students increasingly behave as informed consumers who actively evaluate multiple alternatives before making enrolment decisions (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). This shift has positioned higher education within a competitive service market, where institutions must actively differentiate themselves to attract prospective students.

The global expansion of higher education systems, coupled with increased private sector participation, has intensified competition among institutions. Marketization has led HEIs to adopt branding, promotional, and relationship-oriented strategies similar to those used in service industries (Kotler & Fox, 1995; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Institutions now compete not only on academic quality but also on employability outcomes, student experience, campus infrastructure, and perceived value. As a result, student choice behaviour has become multidimensional, influenced by both tangible and intangible institutional attributes.

In recent years, the drivers of HEI choice have further shifted due to rapid digitalization. Traditional information sources such as printed brochures, education fairs, and institutional visits are increasingly complemented—or replaced—by digital and experiential cues. Social media platforms, institutional websites, online rankings, and peer-generated content now play a central role in shaping student perceptions (Constantinides & Stagno, 2012). These digital environments allow students to experience institutional culture virtually, making HEI choice a more interactive and emotionally driven process than in the past.

1.2 Theoretical Foundations of Choice Behaviour

Research on HEI choice draws heavily from consumer behaviour theories, viewing education as a high-involvement service decision. Models such as the Consumer Decision-Making Process, Theory of Planned Behavior, and Signaling Theory have been widely applied to explain how students form preferences and intentions (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). While these frameworks provide valuable insights, they often focus either on external influences or on behavioural intention, offering limited explanation of the internal psychological mechanisms through which stimuli are processed.

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework, originally proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974), provides a comprehensive lens to address this limitation. The model posits that external stimuli (S) influence internal cognitive and affective states of individuals (O), which subsequently lead to behavioural responses (R). In the context of higher education, institutional attributes, marketing communications, and digital content act as stimuli; student perceptions, trust, and attitudes represent organismic states; and institutional preference or enrolment decisions constitute responses.

The S–O–R framework has gained increasing relevance in education and digital marketing research due to its ability to integrate environmental cues with psychological processing and behavioural outcomes (Jacoby, 2002). Its applicability makes it particularly suitable for examining contemporary HEI choice behaviour, where digital stimuli and experiential information play a dominant role in shaping student decisions.

1.3 Research Gap and Need for the Review

Despite the growing volume of research on factors influencing HEI choice, the existing literature remains fragmented. Studies often examine isolated determinants such as reputation, cost, employability, or social media influence without integrating them into a coherent theoretical structure (Maringe, 2006). Moreover, much of the empirical research adopts descriptive or predictive approaches, offering limited theoretical synthesis.

There is a noticeable lack of systematic reviews that organize HEI choice factors through a robust behavioural framework. Specifically, limited effort has been made to comprehensively classify external stimuli, internal psychological processes, and behavioural responses within a single model. This gap

restricts cumulative knowledge development and hinders the formulation of integrative conceptual frameworks for future empirical testing.

1.4 Objectives of the Review

In response to these gaps, the present study undertakes a systematic review of the literature to achieve the following objectives:

- To systematically identify the key factors influencing higher education institution choice reported in empirical studies.
- To classify these factors using the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework.
- To synthesize existing empirical evidence and highlight theoretical, methodological, and contextual research gaps for future investigation.

2. Theoretical Framework: Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) Model

2.1 Origin and Evolution of the S–O–R Model

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) model originates from environmental psychology and was formally articulated by Mehrabian and Russell (1974). The framework was developed to explain how environmental stimuli influence individuals' internal psychological states, which subsequently drive behavioural responses. Unlike purely rational decision models, the S–O–R paradigm recognizes the role of affective and cognitive processes in mediating the relationship between external cues and observable behaviour.

Over time, the S–O–R model has been widely adopted and extended across disciplines, particularly in marketing, psychology, and services research. In consumer behaviour studies, the model has been used to explain how marketing stimuli such as store atmosphere, advertising messages, and digital interfaces shape consumer emotions, attitudes, and purchase decisions (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Eroglu, Machleit, & Davis, 2001). Jacoby (2002) further emphasized the model's strength in capturing complex decision-making processes by integrating psychological mediation rather than assuming direct stimulus–response relationships.

In services research, the S–O–R framework has been instrumental in understanding experiential consumption. Bitner's (1992) services cape model, which draws conceptually from S–O–R logic, demonstrated how physical and social environments influence customer perceptions and behaviors. With the rise of digital services, the model has been increasingly applied to online environments, where virtual stimuli affect trust, satisfaction, and behavioural intentions (Eroglu et al., 2001). This evolution highlights the adaptability of the S–O–R framework to contemporary, information-rich decision contexts.

2.2 Adaptation of the S–O–R Model to the Higher Education Context

The selection of a higher education institution represents a high-involvement, high-risk decision, characterized by long-term personal, financial, and career implications. Prior research has consistently identified HEI choice as a complex decision-making process involving extensive information search, evaluation of alternatives, and emotional engagement (Maringe, 2006; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). These characteristics make the higher education context particularly suitable for the application of the S–O–R framework.

Students today are not passive recipients of institutional information but informed decision-makers who actively process diverse cues from multiple sources. The availability of digital platforms, social media, ranking systems, and peer-generated content has significantly increased students' exposure to institutional stimuli (Constantinides & Stagno, 2012). These stimuli are cognitively and affectively interpreted by students, shaping perceptions of credibility, value, and fit before culminating in behavioural outcomes such as institutional preference or enrolment decisions.

The S–O–R model offers a robust theoretical lens to explain this process by explicitly linking institutional cues with students' internal psychological evaluations and subsequent choice behaviour. Unlike linear decision models, S–O–R accommodates both rational assessments (e.g., perceived academic quality) and

emotional responses (e.g., sense of belonging), making it particularly relevant for analyzing HEI choice in a digitally mediated environment.

2.3 Conceptual Mapping of HEI Choice Factors to the S–O–R Framework

Within the S–O–R framework, HEI choice determinants can be systematically categorized into three interrelated components. **Stimulus** refers to external institutional cues that students encounter during their information search. These include institutional reputation, academic offerings, tuition fees, placement records, campus infrastructure, marketing communications, and digital presence such as social media content and institutional websites (Chapman, 1981; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

The **Organism** component captures students' internal cognitive and affective processes triggered by these stimuli. Key organismic states identified in the literature include perceived value, trust, attitude toward the institution, perceived risk, and emotional engagement (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). These psychological evaluations act as mediators that determine how external cues are interpreted and prioritized by students.

Finally, **Response** represents the behavioural outcomes of this evaluative process. In the higher education context, responses manifest as institutional preference, application intention, enrolment decision, and post-choice behaviours such as word-of-mouth and recommendation (Maringe, 2006). By organizing HEI choice factors within the S–O–R framework, this review provides a coherent structure to synthesize fragmented empirical findings and supports the development of integrated conceptual models for future research.

3. Methodology

3.1 Review Design

This study adopts a **systematic literature review (SLR)** approach to synthesize empirical evidence on factors influencing higher education institution (HEI) choice through the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework. A systematic review was considered appropriate as it enables transparent, replicable, and comprehensive identification and synthesis of existing research, thereby minimizing selection bias and enhancing methodological rigor (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003).

The review process was guided by the **Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA)** guidelines, which provide a structured protocol for identifying, screening, and selecting relevant studies (Page et al., 2021). The PRISMA framework was adopted to ensure methodological transparency, reproducibility, and clarity in reporting the review process. Its application is well established in education, management, and behavioural research domains, particularly for theory-driven literature syntheses.

3.2 Data Sources

To ensure comprehensive coverage of high-quality and peer-reviewed literature, multiple academic databases were consulted. The primary databases included **Scopus**, **Web of Science**, and **ERIC**, as these sources are widely recognized for indexing rigorous and high-impact research in education, management, and social sciences. These databases collectively provide extensive coverage of empirical studies related to higher education choice behaviour, marketing, and decision-making.

3.3 Search Strategy

A structured search strategy was developed using predefined keywords and Boolean operators to retrieve relevant studies systematically. The search strings combined terms related to higher education choice and behavioural influences.

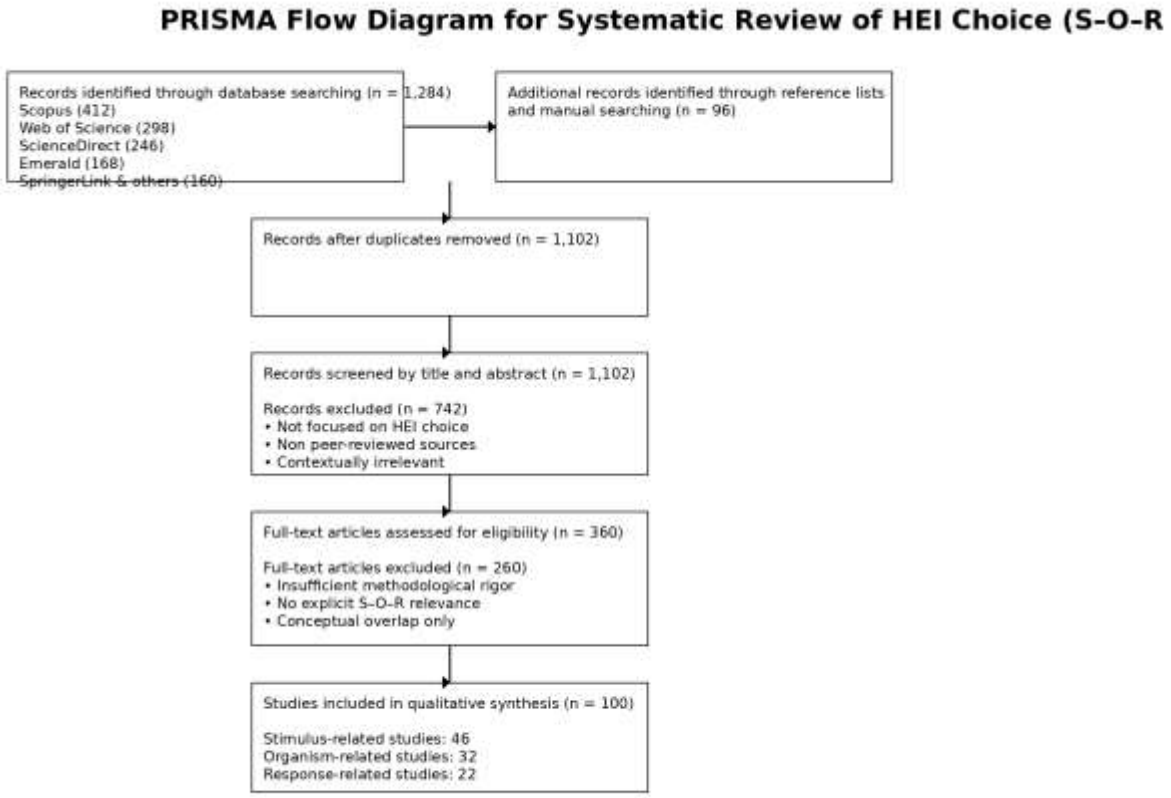
3.4 Study Selection Process

The study selection process followed the PRISMA-recommended multi-stage screening procedure. Initially, all retrieved records were screened based on **titles** to eliminate clearly irrelevant studies. This was followed by **abstract screening**, where studies not aligned with HEI choice behaviour were excluded. The remaining

articles underwent **full-text assessment** to confirm their relevance and eligibility based on the predefined criteria.

A PRISMA flow diagram was used to document each stage of the screening process, including the number of records identified, screened, excluded, and finally included in the review. This visual representation enhances transparency and allows readers to assess the rigor of the selection process (Page et al., 2021).

Figure 3.1



3.5 Data Extraction

Data extraction was conducted using a structured coding protocol to ensure consistency across studies. Key information extracted included authorship, publication year, country context, research design, sample characteristics, analytical methods, and key findings. Following extraction, variables identified in each study were systematically coded and mapped onto the **Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R)** framework.

External institutional attributes such as reputation, marketing communication, cost, and infrastructure were classified as **Stimulus** factors. Psychological constructs including perception, trust, attitude, and perceived value were categorized under **Organism**, while behavioural outcomes such as preference, intention, and enrolment decision were coded as **Response** variables. This theory-driven coding approach enabled coherent synthesis of fragmented findings and facilitated the development of an integrated conceptual understanding of HEI choice behaviour.

4. Descriptive Analysis of Reviewed Studies

4.1 Overview of Study Characteristics

The studies included in this systematic review exhibit substantial diversity in terms of geographical context, research design, and analytical approaches, reflecting the global and multidisciplinary nature of higher education institution (HEI) choice research. The reviewed literature predominantly originates from developed higher education systems, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Western Europe, with a growing number of studies from emerging economies such as India, Malaysia, Nepal, and other parts of Asia and Africa. This distribution highlights both the maturity of HEI choice

research in developed contexts and the increasing scholarly attention to student decision-making in developing higher education markets.

Table 4.1 Summary of key Empirical Studies Included in the Review

"Due to space constraints, Table 4.1 presents a representative subset of key studies; the full list of reviewed studies (N ≈ 100) is available upon request / in supplementary material."

Author(s)	Year	Country / Context	Method	Sample	Key Variables Examined
Chapman	1981	United States	Conceptual & empirical synthesis	Secondary data	Institutional attributes, student background, choice behavior
Hossler	1985	United States	Literature review & survey synthesis	Multiple studies	Social influence, institutional characteristics, enrollment decision
Cabrera & La Nasa	2000	United States	Quantitative survey	Undergraduate students	Academic quality, financial aid, enrollment intention
Soutar & Turner	2002	Australia	Conjoint analysis	Prospective students	Academic reputation, cost, location
Veloutsou et al.	2004	United Kingdom	Survey research	Prospective students	Information sources, institutional image, decision criteria
Briggs & Wilson	2007	Scotland (UK)	Quantitative survey	Undergraduate applicants	Tuition cost, information availability, university choice
Ivy	2008	United Kingdom	Conceptual & empirical analysis	Secondary & survey data	Marketing mix elements, institutional positioning
Pampaloni	2010	United States	Quantitative survey	Prospective students	Organizational image, emotional perception, choice intention
Shah et al.	2013	Australia	Survey research	Students in private HEIs	Reputation, service quality, enrollment decision
Munisamy et al.	2014	Malaysia	Quantitative survey	Undergraduate students	Institutional reputation, perceived value, choice intention
Kim et al.	2009	United States	Econometric analysis	National student dataset	Financial aid expectations, enrollment choice
Han	2014	United States	Literature review	Secondary sources	Marketing communication, information search behavior
Dhaliwal et al.	2019	India	Quantitative survey	Private university students	Infrastructure, employability, institutional image
Pitt & Zhu	2019	United States	Quantitative analysis	Graduate datasets	Major prestige, employability outcomes
Rajput & Chouhan	2021	India	Survey research	Undergraduate students	Academic quality, cost, social influence
Silwal & Baral	2021	Nepal	Quantitative survey	College students	Reputation, affordability, enrollment intention
Teo & Ahmad	2016	Malaysia	Survey research	Private HEI students	Service quality, satisfaction, loyalty
Rudhumbu et	2017	Botswana	Quantitative survey	Undergraduate	Infrastructure, safety, support

Author(s)	Year	Country / Context	Method	Sample	Key Variables Examined
al.				students	services
Moogan et al.	1999	United Kingdom	Qualitative & survey methods	Prospective students	Emotional response, information processing
Schneider & Preckel	2017	Multinational	Meta-analytic review	Multiple datasets	Academic performance, perceived academic quality

4.2 Classification of Higher Education Institution Choice Factors under the S–O–R Framework

A. Stimulus (External Institutional Cues)

Table no.4.2 Stimulus Factors Influencing Higher Education Institution Choice Identified from Systematic Literature Review

Construct	Key Indicators	Representative Citations (Author, Year)	Journals / Sources
Institutional Reputation & Image	Rankings, prestige, brand credibility, employer perception	Chapman (1981); Hossler (1985); Pampaloni (2010); Hoxby (2009); Veloutsou et al. (2004); Munisamy et al. (2014); Shah et al. (2013); Wiese et al. (2009)	Journal of Higher Education; Review of Higher Education; Journal of Marketing for Higher Education; Journal of Economic Perspectives; International Journal of Educational Management; Quality Assurance in Education
Academic Quality & Programme Fit	Faculty quality, curriculum relevance, accreditation, learning outcomes	Cabrera & La Nasa (2000); Soutar & Turner (2002); Joseph & Joseph (2000); Sidin et al. (2003); Kusumawati et al. (2010); Schneider & Preckel (2017); Gammon et al. (2021)	New Directions for Institutional Research; International Journal of Educational Management; Psychological Bulletin; Asia Pacific Management Review
Cost & Financial Considerations	Tuition fees, scholarships, affordability, ROI	Briggs & Wilson (2007); Leslie & Brinkman (1988); Kim et al. (2009); McPherson & Schapiro (1994); Okahana (2013); Gyamfi et al. (2016)	Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management; Research in Higher Education; Economics of Education Review
Marketing & Information Exposure	Advertising, websites, counselors, fairs, social media	Kotler & Fox (1995); Gibbs & Knapp (2002); Han (2014); Veloutsou et al. (2004); Ivy (2008); Maringe (2006)	International Journal of Educational Management; Family & Consumer Sciences Research Journal
Career & Employability Signals	Placement records, internships, alumni success	Carnevale et al. (2013); Pitt & Zhu (2019); Shah & Nair (2011); Dhaliwal et al. (2019); Goenner & Snaith (2004)	Sociological Perspectives; Journal of College Student Retention
Campus & Support Services	Infrastructure, safety, housing, student services	Letawsky et al. (2003); Wiese et al. (2009); Teo & Ahmad (2016); Rudhumbu et al. (2017)	College Student Journal; Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences

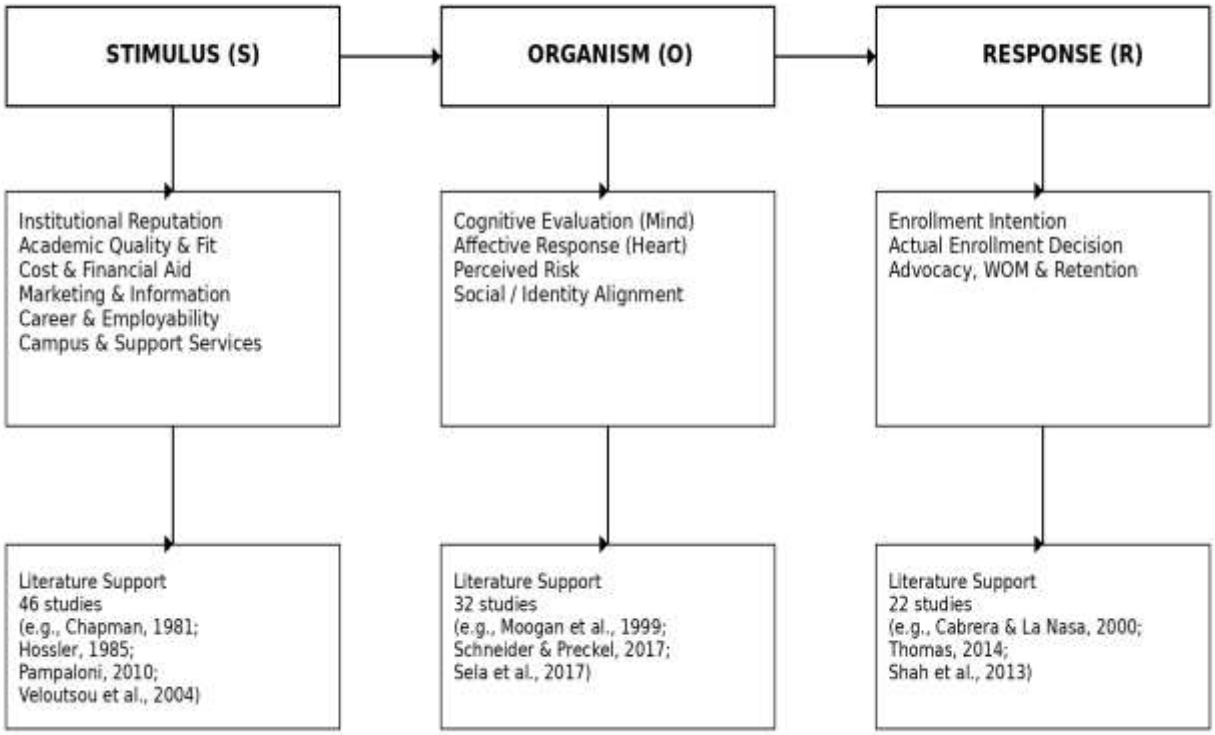
Table 4.3 Organism-Level Psychological Factors Mediating Higher Education Institution Choice: Evidence from Literature

Construct	Key Indicators	Representative Citations (Author, Year)	Journals / Sources
Cognitive Evaluation (Rational / Mind)	Cost–benefit analysis, academic value, ROI	Chapman (1981); Cabrera & La Nasa (2000); Moogan & Baron (2003); Schneider & Preckel (2017); Thomas (2014)	Journal of Higher Education; Psychological Bulletin
Affective Response (Emotional / Heart)	Emotional attachment, trust, belonging, liking	Pampaloni (2010); Moogan et al. (1999); Veloutsou et al. (2004); Sela et al. (2017)	Journal of Marketing for Higher Education; Journal of Consumer Research
Perceived Risk & Uncertainty	Financial risk, academic mismatch, fear of failure	Briggs & Wilson (2007); Drummond (2004); Kiani et al. (2014); Okahana (2013)	International Journal of Educational Management; Neuron
Social Influence & Identity Fit	Family expectations, peer influence, social status	Hossler (1985); Joseph & Joseph (2000); Moogan et al. (1999); Sabir et al. (2013)	Higher Education Quarterly; Journal of Basic and Applied Scientific Research
Information Processing Style	Search depth, source credibility, heuristics	Veloutsou et al. (2004); Han (2014); Simões & Soares (2010)	Studies in Higher Education

Table 4.4 Response-Level Behavioural Outcomes of Higher Education Institution Choice Identified in Prior Studies

Construct	Key Indicators	Representative Citations (Author, Year)	Journals / Sources
Enrollment Intention	Likelihood to apply, shortlist	Chapman (1981); Thomas (2014); Rajput & Chouhan (2021); Silwal & Baral (2021)	ASEAN Journal of Management & Innovation; Journal of Business & Social Sciences Research
Actual Enrollment Decision	Admission acceptance, registration	Hossler (1985); Cabrera & La Nasa (2000); Dhaliwal et al. (2019)	Review of Higher Education
Post-Choice Behaviour	Satisfaction, advocacy, retention, WOM	Shah et al. (2013); Wiese et al. (2009); Teo & Ahmad (2016)	Quality Assurance in Education

Figure 4.1. PRISMA flow diagram of the systematic literature review on higher education institution choice (S–O–R framework).



5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Interpretation of the S–O–R Framework Results

The findings derived from the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework provide a structured understanding of how students process institutional cues and translate them into enrollment-related behaviours. The results indicate that external institutional stimuli do not influence student choice directly in isolation, but rather operate through internal cognitive and affective mechanisms, supporting the core assumptions of the S–O–R paradigm.

Across the stimulus dimension, institutional reputation, academic quality, cost considerations, career and employability signals, and marketing communication emerged as the most salient external cues. These factors collectively shape students' perceptions of institutional value and credibility. However, their influence on final choice decisions was largely mediated by organism-level variables, namely cognitive evaluation and affective response. This suggests that students do not respond mechanically to institutional attributes; instead, they actively interpret, evaluate, and emotionally process these cues before forming behavioral intentions.

Within the organism component, cognitive evaluation (rational processing) demonstrated a strong role in assessing academic value, return on investment, and long-term career outcomes, while affective response (emotional processing) reflected feelings of trust, belonging, and institutional attachment. The coexistence of these two processes confirms that higher education choice is neither purely rational nor purely emotional, but rather a hybrid decision-making process that integrates both "mind" and "heart" considerations.

The response component revealed that enrollment intention functions as a critical proximal outcome, bridging internal evaluations and actual enrollment decisions. Additionally, post-choice behaviors such as advocacy and word-of-mouth were closely associated with positive affective evaluations, indicating that emotional alignment with the institution extends beyond the point of enrollment.

5.2 Discussion of Key Findings in Relation to Existing Literature

5.2.1 Role of Stimulus Factors in HEI Choice

The prominence of institutional reputation and academic quality as dominant stimuli aligns with long-established college choice models, which emphasize the role of perceived institutional prestige and academic signaling in reducing uncertainty. Consistent with prior research, students appear to interpret rankings, faculty credentials, and accreditation as quality heuristics, especially in contexts where information asymmetry exists.

Cost and financial considerations also emerged as significant stimuli, reinforcing the economic perspective of higher education choice. However, the findings suggest that affordability alone does not determine choice; rather, students evaluate cost relative to perceived academic and career benefits, highlighting the importance of value-for-money perceptions. This nuanced interpretation extends earlier price-sensitivity studies by demonstrating that financial variables exert their strongest influence through cognitive appraisal mechanisms.

Marketing and information exposure—particularly digital platforms and counseling interactions—played a supportive yet meaningful role. These channels function less as persuasive tools and more as information facilitators, enabling students to form realistic expectations and compare alternatives. This supports contemporary literature that positions marketing communication in higher education as informational rather than promotional in nature.

5.2.2 Mediating Role of the Organism: Cognitive and Affective Processing

One of the most important contributions of this study lies in empirically reinforcing the mediating role of organism variables. Cognitive evaluation was found to dominate early stages of decision-making, where students assess academic fit, employability prospects, and institutional credibility. This rational processing reflects deliberate, goal-oriented reasoning, consistent with utility-based models of educational choice.

In contrast, affective responses gained prominence in later stages of evaluation, particularly when students narrowed down their options. Emotional attachment, perceived belongingness, and trust in the institution significantly influenced final choice and post-choice behaviors. This finding supports the growing body of literature emphasizing emotional branding and institutional image in higher education marketing.

The presence of perceived risk and uncertainty further illustrates the psychological complexity of HEI choice. Financial risk, fear of academic mismatch, and concerns about employability acted as inhibitors, weakening the translation of positive stimuli into behavioral intentions when not adequately addressed. Institutions that effectively reduce perceived risk through transparent communication and credible signaling are therefore more likely to convert interest into enrollment.

5.2.3 Response Outcomes: From Intention to Behavior

The response dimension confirms that enrollment intention serves as a pivotal behavioral precursor. Students with strong cognitive justification but weak emotional alignment were more likely to delay or reconsider their decisions, whereas those exhibiting both rational approval and emotional attachment demonstrated higher likelihood of actual enrollment.

Post-enrollment behaviors—such as advocacy and positive word-of-mouth—were closely tied to affective satisfaction rather than purely academic assessments. This suggests that emotional experiences play a decisive role in shaping longer-term institutional relationships, reinforcing the strategic importance of student experience management beyond recruitment.

5.3 Theoretical Implications

The findings extend traditional college choice models by demonstrating the applicability of the S–O–R framework to higher education decision-making. By explicitly distinguishing between external stimuli and internal psychological processes, the study advances a more integrative understanding of student choice behavior.

Importantly, the results validate the conceptual separation of rational (cognitive) and emotional (affective) processing within the organism component, offering empirical support for the "heart versus mind" perspective in HEI selection. This contributes to theory by positioning higher education choice as a dual-process decision, rather than a unidimensional economic or emotional act.

5.4 Managerial and Policy Implications

From a managerial perspective, the findings suggest that institutions should move beyond emphasizing isolated attributes such as rankings or infrastructure. Instead, strategic focus should be placed on how these attributes are cognitively framed and emotionally experienced by prospective students.

Policies aimed at improving transparency in academic quality, cost structures, and career outcomes can significantly reduce perceived risk and strengthen cognitive evaluations. Simultaneously, initiatives that foster early emotional engagement—such as campus interactions, mentorship communication, and student testimonials—can enhance affective responses and improve conversion rates.

5.5 Methodological Implications

This review highlights the need for theory-driven and methodologically consistent research in higher education institution (HEI) choice studies. Future research should explicitly anchor empirical investigations within integrative frameworks such as the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) model to clarify causal relationships between institutional cues, psychological evaluations, and behavioral outcomes. Greater standardization of measurement scales, particularly for organism-level constructs (e.g., perceived value, trust, emotional attachment), is essential to enhance comparability across studies. In addition, the dominance of cross-sectional designs suggests the need for longitudinal and mixed-method approaches to better capture the dynamic nature of student decision-making processes.

5.6 Implications for Future Empirical Testing (Models and Scales)

The S–O–R-based classification developed in this review provides a clear foundation for future empirical model testing. Researchers are encouraged to test mediated structural models that simultaneously examine institutional stimuli, cognitive and affective processing, and enrollment-related outcomes. Future studies should develop and validate multi-dimensional scales that separately measure rational (cognitive) and emotional (affective) evaluations of HEIs. Empirical testing should also extend beyond intention to include actual enrollment behavior and post-choice outcomes, using advanced techniques such as structural equation modeling and multi-group analysis to ensure robustness and cross-context validity.

6. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the review is limited to peer-reviewed articles indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC and published in the English language. While this ensures quality and rigor, relevant studies published in other databases, regional journals, or non-English outlets may have been excluded. Second, the review synthesizes findings from studies employing diverse methodologies and contextual settings, which may limit the generalizability of conclusions across all higher education systems. Third, although the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–

R) framework provides a robust organizing lens, the review does not involve meta-analytic techniques and therefore does not quantify the relative strength of relationships among constructs.

These limitations offer clear directions for future research. Future studies may expand database coverage, include non-English literature, or adopt meta-analytic approaches to statistically assess effect sizes of key determinants. Empirical research is also needed to test the S–O–R-based conceptual structure proposed in this review using primary data across diverse cultural and institutional contexts. Longitudinal designs could further examine how cognitive and affective evaluations evolve over time and influence post-enrollment outcomes. Such efforts would strengthen the cumulative understanding of higher education institution choice behavior.

7. Conclusion

This study provides a systematic synthesis of empirical research on factors influencing higher education institution choice through the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework. By organizing fragmented findings into stimulus-level institutional cues, organism-level psychological processes, and response-level behavioral outcomes, the review offers a coherent and theory-driven understanding of student choice behavior. The findings demonstrate that higher education choice is a dual-process decision, shaped jointly by rational evaluations of value and quality and emotional responses such as trust and sense of belonging.

The study contributes to the literature by extending traditional college choice models and empirically reinforcing the relevance of the S–O–R framework in the higher education context. Beyond theoretical contribution, the review provides actionable insights for institutional leaders and policymakers seeking to design strategies that address both cognitive and affective dimensions of student decision-making. Overall, the paper establishes a strong foundation for future empirical research and supports the development of integrated models capable of explaining contemporary higher education institution choice in an increasingly competitive and information-rich environment.

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