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# EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE OF COUNTRY PERSONALITY AND HEI IDENTITY ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' STUDY DESTINATION CHOICE: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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**Abstract:** *International students' study destination choices are influenced by both country-level and institution-level perceptions. Although previous studies have examined destination attributes, country image, university attractiveness, and institutional reputation, the relationships between these different levels of perception remain insufficiently explained. In particular, limited conceptual attention has been given to how country personality and higher education institution (HEI) identity jointly contribute to international students' study destination choice. This conceptual paper addresses this gap by integrating country personality and HEI identity within a person–situation interaction perspective. Drawing on Mischel and Shoda's (1995) Cognitive-Affective Processing System theory, the paper proposes that students interpret country-level and institution-level characteristics through their individual values, expectations, aspirations, and educational goals. Perceived person–environment fit is proposed as a potential explanatory mechanism through which students evaluate the compatibility between their personal characteristics and the perceived attributes of a destination country and its HEIs. Country personality represents the human-like characteristics attributed to a country, whereas HEI identity reflects the distinctive characteristics and values associated with an institution. By distinguishing these constructs and explaining their complementary roles, the proposed framework provides a theoretical basis for understanding how country-level and institution-level perceptions may jointly shape international students' destination decisions. The framework offers a foundation for future empirical research, particularly in the context of*

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*Malaysian public universities, and may inform destination positioning and institutional internationalisation strategies.*

**Keywords:** *Country personality, higher education institution identity, international students, study destination choice, Cognitive-Affective Processing System theory, perceived person–environment fit*

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## Introduction

The internationalisation of higher education has encouraged more students to study abroad. Malaysia has become an attractive destination because of its academic programmes, affordable education, and multicultural environment. However, choosing a study destination involves more than comparing costs, programmes, and university rankings. Students also consider how they perceive the host country and the higher education institution (HEI). Previous studies have examined factors such as academic quality, tuition fees, programme choices, facilities, location, and institutional reputation (Bodycott, 2009; Eder et al., 2010; Migin et al., 2015; Ke et al., 2022; Kosmaczewska & Jameson, 2023). Research has also explored country image and university reputation as factors that may influence students' decisions. For example, Ke et al. (2022) examined destination and university-related factors, while Migin et al. (2015) studied the factors influencing international students' choice of Malaysian private HEIs.

Although these studies provide useful insights, there is still a need to understand how students combine their perceptions of a country with their perceptions of a specific university. This study addresses this gap by examining country personality and HEI identity together. Country personality refers to the human-like traits associated with a country, such as friendliness, openness, and modernity. Hendriana et al. (2023) explored the relevance of country personality to international students' decisions about studying abroad. Meanwhile, HEI identity refers to the distinctive characteristics and values that define an institution, such as its academic orientation, institutional culture, and international environment. It is important to distinguish HEI identity from institutional image and reputation, as these concepts refer to different aspects of how an institution is defined and perceived.

Country personality and HEI identity may influence students' evaluations in different ways. A country may be perceived positively, but students may not find every university in that country suitable for their needs. Similarly, an attractive university may not be enough to encourage students to study in a country they do not prefer. Examining both constructs may therefore provide a better understanding of how students evaluate overseas study opportunities.This study draws on Mischel and Shoda's (1995) Cognitive-Affective Processing System (CAPS) theory, which explains that people may respond differently to the same environment because of their individual characteristics and how they interpret situations. In international education, students may evaluate a country or university differently depending on their values, expectations, motivations, and academic goals.

To further explain this process, the study considers perceived person–environment fit, which refers to how well individuals believe an environment matches their needs and preferences. For example, students who value cultural diversity may prefer a country they perceive as open and multicultural. They may then consider whether a university's identity and academic environment match their expectations. This concept may help explain how country personality and HEI identity relate to students' study destination choices, although its proposed role

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requires further theoretical development and empirical testing. Based on these arguments, this study proposes a conceptual framework linking country personality and HEI identity with international students' study destination choice. It also considers perceived person–environment fit as a potential explanatory mechanism. The framework is particularly relevant to Malaysian public universities, where attracting international students requires both promoting Malaysia as a study destination and highlighting the distinctive identities of individual institutions. This study contributes to the literature by bringing country personality and HEI identity together in one framework, applying a person–situation interaction perspective, and proposing perceived person–environment fit as a possible explanation of students' decisions. The framework provides a basis for future research and may offer useful insights for Malaysian universities and policymakers in developing international student recruitment and marketing strategies.

**Malaysia Higher Education Institutions as a Study Destination**

Malaysia has a diverse higher education system that includes public universities, private institutions, foreign branch campuses, and other tertiary education providers. This gives international students a wide range of study options. The government also continues to promote internationalisation through global partnerships and policies such as the Malaysia Higher Education Internationalisation Policy 2025–2030 (MOHE, 2025). Malaysia has also become an important study destination for students from Southeast, East, and South Asia (Koh, 2025). Several factors make Malaysia attractive to international students. First, Malaysia offers various academic programmes, internationally recognised qualifications, English-medium education, and international partnerships (EMGS, 2026). These opportunities allow students to choose programmes that match their academic interests and career goals. Second, Malaysia's multicultural and multilingual environment allows students to experience different cultures, languages, religions, and lifestyles. This diversity can provide valuable opportunities for intercultural learning. Malaysia's cultural environment and its closeness to many Asian countries may also contribute to its attractiveness as a study destination (Koh, 2025; MOHE, 2026). Third, affordability is another important factor. Malaysia generally offers lower tuition and living costs than several traditional English-speaking study destinations while providing access to English-medium programmes and recognised qualifications. Kuala Lumpur has also been recognised for its affordability as a student city (Koh, 2025; MIDA, 2022).

Malaysia's location in Southeast Asia is another advantage. Its proximity to countries in Southeast and South Asia makes travel more accessible for many students and provides opportunities to experience different cultures within the region (Koh, 2025). Government policies also support Malaysia's efforts to attract international students. The Malaysia Higher Education Internationalisation Policy 2025–2030 aims to strengthen international partnerships and Malaysia's position in global higher education. According to MOHE (2025), Malaysia has 20 public universities and more than 400 private higher education institutions, with students from 178 countries studying in the country as of 2023. International student enrolment also highlights Malaysia's role in regional higher education. As of 31 December 2024, Malaysia recorded 155,986 international students, including 53,322 in public universities (MOHE, 2025). By 31 December 2025, the total had increased to 159,138, including 56,565 in public universities (MOHE, 2026). Although these figures do not explain why students choose Malaysia, they show the importance of international education within the country's higher education sector.

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When choosing Malaysia, international students may consider both country-level and institution-level factors. At the country level, they may consider affordability, cultural diversity, educational opportunities, safety, and geographical accessibility. At the institutional level, they may look at academic reputation, programme offerings, facilities, institutional values, international recognition, and student support. Robert and Chong (2023) also identified programme offerings, tuition fees, institutional recognition, and reputation as relevant factors in students' choice of Malaysian private higher education institutions. Therefore, Malaysia provides a relevant context for examining country personality and HEI identity. Students may form beliefs of Malaysia as a country while also evaluating individual universities. Country personality reflects how students perceive Malaysia as a destination, while HEI identity reflects the distinctive characteristics and values of a particular university. Examining both constructs may provide a better understanding of how international students choose Malaysia and its higher education institutions.

## Literature Review

### Country Personality

Country personality refers to the human-like traits that people associate with a country. Unlike country image, which covers broader evaluations such as education quality, economic conditions, and infrastructure, country personality focuses on how people perceive a country's character. In international education, these perceptions may include whether a country is seen as friendly, open, modern, or culturally diverse. Such perceptions may influence how students view a country as a potential study destination. Previous studies have shown that students consider various country-related factors when choosing where to study, including education quality, safety, cost, and cultural environment (Bodycott, 2009; Eder et al., 2010; Ke et al., 2022). However, these factors are not all dimensions of country personality. For example, education quality and cost are functional attributes, while friendliness and openness reflect perceptions of a country's character. Therefore, studying destination attributes alone may not fully explain how country personality influences students' decisions.

Srikatanyoo and Gnoth (2002) developed a conceptual model to explain the role of country image in international higher education. Their work provides a foundation for understanding how perceptions of a country may influence students' evaluations. However, country image and country personality are related but different concepts. Country image refers to broader beliefs and evaluations about a country, while country personality focuses on the human-like traits associated with it. Hendriana et al. (2023) examined country personality alongside cognitive and affective country image and institution image. Their study involved 888 Indonesian high-school students and used structural equation modelling to examine intentions to study abroad. The findings suggested that cognitive and affective country image influenced study intentions directly or indirectly through country personality and institution image. This study provides relevant evidence for examining the relationship between country personality and students' study intentions. However, its findings may not apply equally to students from other countries or different higher education contexts. Students also consider cultural experiences, social interaction, lifestyle, and future opportunities when choosing a study destination (Bodycott, 2009; Kosmaczewska & Jameson, 2023). These factors may shape their overall perceptions of a country, but they should not automatically be treated as country personality traits. Clear distinctions between country personality, country image, and destination attributes are therefore important when explaining students' choices. From a theoretical perspective, country personality can be viewed as a country-level cue that students interpret based on their own

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values, expectations, and goals. Mischel and Shoda's (1995) Cognitive-Affective Processing System theory helps explain why individuals may respond differently to the same environment. For example, a student who values cultural diversity may be more attracted to a country perceived as open and multicultural. However, the specific influence of country personality on study destination choice still requires further investigation.

Overall, previous research highlights the importance of country-related perceptions in international student decision-making. However, studies have examined different concepts and factors, making it important to distinguish country personality from broader country image and functional destination attributes. Further research is needed to understand how country personality relates to study destination choice, particularly when considered alongside students' perceptions of a specific higher education institution.

**Higher Education Institution Identity**

Higher Education Institution (HEI) identity refers to the distinctive characteristics and values that make an institution different from others. Unlike country personality, which focuses on how people perceive a country, HEI identity focuses on what makes a university unique. For international students, these characteristics may help them decide whether a university matches their educational needs and expectations. Previous studies have examined institutional factors that influence students' university choices, including academic reputation, programme availability, facilities, services, and institutional recognition (Ke et al., 2022; Migin et al., 2015). However, these factors are not the same as HEI identity. For example, facilities and programmes describe what a university offers, while reputation reflects how people evaluate the institution. Therefore, the importance of these factors does not automatically prove that HEI identity independently influences students' decisions.

It is important to distinguish HEI identity from institutional image and reputation. Identity refers to the characteristics and values that define an institution, image refers to how people perceive it, and reputation reflects evaluations formed over time. Although these concepts are related, they should not be treated as interchangeable. Migin et al. (2015) studied 265 international students at five Malaysian private higher education institutions. Their findings showed that cost, academic reputation, programmes, and facilities were significantly related to students' choices, while location was not significant. Robert and Chong (2023), using data from 110 respondents, examined programme offerings, tuition fees, institutional recognition, and reputation in relation to students' choice of Malaysian private HEIs. Their findings showed significant associations between these factors and institutional choice.

These studies highlight the importance of institutional characteristics in students' decisions. However, they examined different factors and used different research methods, so their findings should not be considered contradictory. More importantly, the studies focused on institutional attributes rather than directly examining HEI identity as a separate construct. The research context also needs consideration. Both studies focused on Malaysian private HEIs, so their findings may not apply equally to public universities. Differences in institutional missions, programmes, and student expectations may influence how students perceive and evaluate a university's identity. Further research is therefore needed to understand HEI identity in the context of Malaysian public universities.

Before choosing a university, international students may obtain information from university websites, rankings, social media, online reviews, and recommendations. These sources can

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shape students' perceptions of an institution, but the image formed by students may not fully reflect the institution's actual identity. In a competitive higher education environment, universities try to distinguish themselves through their academic programmes, values, international opportunities, campus environment, and student support. However, students may evaluate these characteristics differently according to their needs, expectations, and educational goals. Therefore, understanding HEI identity requires examining how students perceive an institution's distinctive characteristics, rather than focusing only on individual university attributes.

Overall, previous studies show that institutional characteristics and reputation are relevant to international students' university choices. However, further research is needed to distinguish HEI identity from related concepts and understand how it contributes to students' decisions. This is particularly important when examining HEI identity alongside country personality, as students may consider both the country and the university when choosing where to study.

**Integrating Country Personality and HEI Identity in Study Destination Choice**

International students evaluate study destinations at two main levels: the country and the higher education institution (HEI). At the country level, they consider how they perceive the country and its characteristics. At the institutional level, they evaluate the university's identity, reputation, academic programmes, and other features. Although these evaluations are related, they represent different concepts. Country personality focuses on the traits associated with a country, while HEI identity refers to the characteristics and values that make a university distinctive. Previous studies have examined different aspects of destination choice. Srikatanyoo and Gnoth (2002) developed a conceptual model of country image in international higher education. Hendriana et al. (2023) examined the relationships between country image, country personality, institution image, and students' intentions to study abroad. Meanwhile, Migin et al. (2015) and Robert and Chong (2023) studied factors influencing international students' choices of Malaysian private HEIs. These studies provide useful insights, but they focus on different concepts and research settings. Therefore, their findings should not be treated as directly equivalent.

The studies also measure different aspects of students' evaluations. Country-related research may examine cognitive and affective country image or country personality. In contrast, institutional-choice studies often focus on programme offerings, fees, reputation, recognition, location, and facilities. These institutional factors are not the same as HEI identity. Similarly, findings about country image do not necessarily demonstrate the independent influence of country personality. Therefore, a conceptual framework should distinguish these concepts rather than combine them into a general list of destination-choice factors. The studies also involve different groups of students and educational settings. Hendriana et al. (2023) examined Indonesian high-school students' intentions to study in foreign countries, while Migin et al. (2015) and Robert and Chong (2023) focused on Malaysian private HEIs. Their findings may not apply equally to other student groups or public universities. Further research is needed to understand how country personality and HEI identity may influence international students considering Malaysian public universities. A positive perception of a country does not necessarily mean that a student will choose every university within it. For example, a student may view Malaysia positively but find that a particular university does not offer the desired programme or educational experience. Similarly, a university's distinctive identity may attract a student even if the student has not yet formed a strong perception of the country. These examples show why country personality and HEI identity should be examined separately.

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However, whether they have separate or combined effects on destination choice requires further investigation.

Mischel and Shoda's (1995) Cognitive-Affective Processing System (CAPS) theory provides a theoretical basis for understanding how individuals interpret environmental information. In this study, country personality represents a country-level cue, while HEI identity represents an institution-level cue. Students may evaluate these cues according to their own values, expectations, motivations, and goals. This perspective helps explain why students may respond differently to the same country or university. However, CAPS theory does not provide empirical proof that country personality and HEI identity influence destination choice. Instead, it offers a theoretical basis for developing and testing the proposed relationships. The framework must therefore clearly explain whether each construct is expected to influence destination choice separately or whether another mechanism is needed to explain how students evaluate both. Accordingly, this study proposes a conceptual framework that brings together country personality and HEI identity as distinct but complementary constructs in international students' study destination choice. Rather than simply adding more factors to existing destination-choice models, the framework clarifies the differences between country-level perceptions and institution-level identity and examines how they may contribute to students' decisions.

This framework is particularly relevant to Malaysia, where international students can choose from various higher education institutions within the same country. Although previous studies have identified institutional factors associated with students' choices, further research is needed to understand how perceptions of Malaysia relate to the identities of individual HEIs, especially public universities. The proposed framework addresses this conceptual gap, while recognising that the relationships between country personality, HEI identity, and study destination choice require further theoretical development and empirical testing.

**Theoretical Foundation: Person–Situation Interaction Theory**

Person–Situation Interaction Theory provides a theoretical basis for understanding how individual characteristics and environmental conditions jointly shape human behaviour (Endler, 1977; Mischel & Shoda, 1995). From this perspective, individuals do not respond to environmental conditions in the same way because their perceptions and responses are influenced by their personal characteristics, including values, beliefs, needs, motivations, and aspirations. Applied to international student mobility, this perspective suggests that students' study destination choices may depend not only on the characteristics of a country or higher education institution (HEI), but also on how students interpret these characteristics in relation to their own expectations and goals.

In the context of international education, country personality represents a country-level cue, referring to the human-like characteristics that prospective students associate with a country. These perceptions may be shaped by exposure to cultural information, media, social networks, and personal interactions (Nadeem, Mohammed, & Dalib, 2019). For example, a student who values cultural diversity may view a country perceived as welcoming, tolerant, and multicultural as an attractive study destination. However, the same country may be evaluated differently by students whose priorities or expectations differ. This illustrates why country-level perceptions should not be assumed to influence all students equally.

Similarly, HEI identity represents an institution-level cue that reflects how an institution communicates and expresses its distinctive characteristics, values, and educational orientation.

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Prospective students may consider these characteristics alongside more tangible attributes, such as programme offerings, facilities, educational quality, cost, and student support. Previous research has identified educational quality, cost, and facilities as relevant considerations in students' selection of higher education institutions (Padlee et al., 2010). Nevertheless, the importance attached to these attributes may vary according to students' academic goals, financial circumstances, and expectations of the university experience.

The theory therefore provides a rationale for examining country personality and HEI identity within the same conceptual framework. Country personality captures perceptions at the national level, whereas HEI identity captures perceptions at the institutional level. These constructs represent distinct sources of information that prospective students may consider when evaluating study destinations. Their relevance to destination choice can be understood through students' interpretation and evaluation of these cues in relation to their individual needs and aspirations.

However, the present framework focuses on the proposed direct relationships between country personality, HEI identity, and international students' study destination choice. Although Person–Situation Interaction Theory recognises that individual characteristics can shape responses to environmental conditions, this study does not propose or test specific moderating effects. Instead, the theory provides the broader rationale for understanding why students may evaluate the same country or institution differently. The specific role of individual characteristics in strengthening or weakening these relationships remains a question for future research.

**Conceptual Framework Development**

The conceptual framework was developed through a theory-informed synthesis of literature concerning international students' study destination choice, country personality, higher education institution identity, and person–situation interaction. The development process involved three stages.First, relevant literature was examined to identify the country-level and institution-level considerations discussed in previous research on international student mobility. Studies such as Bodycott (2009), Eder et al. (2010), Padlee et al. (2010), and Ke et al. (2022) provide background for understanding how destination-related and institutional considerations may inform students' decisions. This stage established the relevance of examining both the broader country context and the characteristics of individual institutions.

Second, the literature was conceptually compared to clarify the distinction between the constructs considered in this study. Country image and country personality are related but not interchangeable, country image may encompass broader beliefs and evaluations about a country, while country personality specifically concerns human-like traits attributed to it. Likewise, HEI identity should be distinguished from institutional image, reputation, and individual institutional attributes. Identity concerns the characteristics and values through which an institution defines and presents itself, while image and reputation concern how the institution is perceived or evaluated by relevant audiences. Maintaining these distinctions is important to avoid treating different concepts as equivalent within the proposed framework. Third, the two focal constructs were integrated using Person–Situation Interaction Theory as the theoretical foundation. This integration recognises that prospective students may consider both national-level perceptions and institution-level characteristics when evaluating potential study destinations. It also acknowledges that students interpret these cues in relation to their own needs and aspirations. The resulting framework therefore proposes two direct

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relationships: one between country personality and international students' study destination choice, and another between HEI identity and international students' study destination choice. This framework does not assume that country personality and HEI identity are identical constructs or that their effects are necessarily equal. Rather, it brings them together as distinct potential influences on destination choice. The framework is intended to provide a conceptual basis for future empirical investigation, particularly among international students considering public higher education institutions in Malaysia.

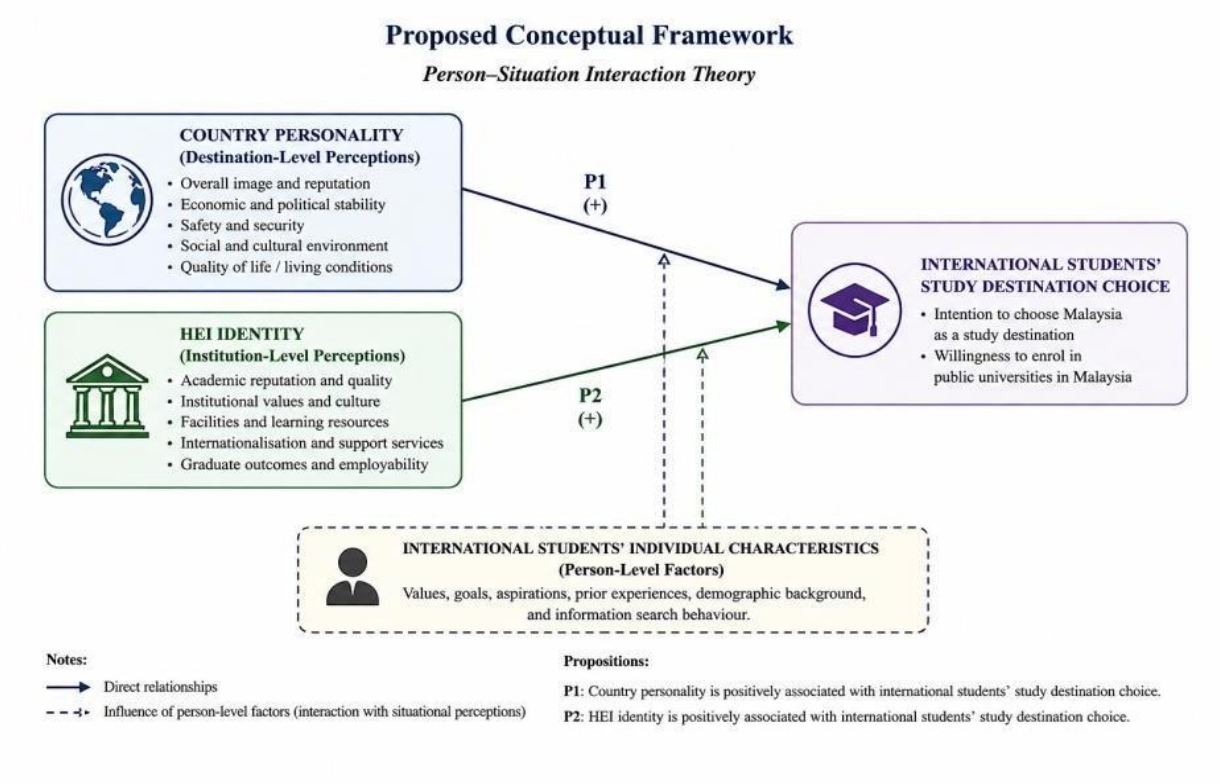



*Figure 1: This framework proposes that international students' study destination choice is shaped by their perceptions of the destination country and the higher education institution in interaction with their individual characteristics.*

Figure 1 presents the proposed conceptual framework, which positions country personality and HEI identity as two distinct constructs associated with international students' study destination choice. Country personality represents prospective students' perceptions of the human-like characteristics of a country, while HEI identity represents their perceptions of an institution's distinctive identity, values, and educational orientation. The framework draws on Person–Situation Interaction Theory to explain why these country-level and institution-level cues may be interpreted differently by students with different needs and aspirations. Country personality refers to the human-like traits that prospective students attribute to a country. These perceptions may include whether a country is viewed as welcoming, friendly, safe, tolerant, or culturally diverse. Although broader country evaluations may also involve political and economic conditions, security, and quality of life, these functional and contextual attributes should not automatically be treated as dimensions of country personality. They should be distinguished conceptually when developing the construct definition and its measurement. Based on this reasoning, the first proposition is:

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P1: Country personality is positively associated with international students' study destination choice.

HEI identity refers to the distinctive characteristics, values, and educational orientation through which a higher education institution presents and differentiates itself. In the context of international student choice, relevant considerations may include the institution's stated values, academic orientation, internationalisation approach, and commitment to student support. Other considerations, such as facilities, programme availability, institutional reputation, and graduate employability, may also inform students' evaluations of an institution. However, these attributes should not automatically be classified as dimensions of HEI identity without a clear conceptual justification. Their role should be specified according to the intended construct definition and the literature supporting its measurement. Based on this reasoning, the second proposition is:

P2: HEI identity is positively associated with international students' study destination choice.

The two propositions reflect the central argument that country personality and HEI identity provide different types of information that may contribute to international students' study destination evaluations. The country represents the broader social and cultural setting in which students anticipate living and studying, whereas the HEI represents the specific educational institution they may attend. Considering both constructs allows the framework to address destination choice at national and institutional levels rather than focusing exclusively on either the country or the university.

The framework also recognises that individual characteristics, such as personal values, academic and career aspirations, and prior experiences, may influence how prospective students interpret country and institutional cues. Nevertheless, these characteristics are not specified as formal moderators in the current framework. Their potential moderating roles would require further theoretical development and empirical testing before specific moderation propositions could be justified.

Overall, the proposed framework contributes to the conceptual discussion of international student destination choice by bringing country personality and HEI identity together within a single framework. It provides a basis for examining their respective relationships with study destination choice, with particular relevance to international students considering Malaysian public higher education institutions. Future empirical research can assess the proposed relationships and determine whether additional mechanisms or individual-level conditions should be incorporated into the framework.

**Discussion and Theoretical Implications**

This conceptual study proposes an integrated framework examining the influence of country personality and higher education institution (HEI) identity on international students' study destination choice, particularly in the context of Malaysian public universities. By integrating destination-level and institution-level perceptions, the framework extends existing discussions of international student mobility beyond conventional educational and destination attributes.

Theoretically, this study highlights country personality as a potential factor in understanding how international students perceive and evaluate a host country. It also emphasises HEI identity as an important institutional-level consideration that may shape students' perceptions of institutional attractiveness and suitability. Integrating these constructs provides a broader

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perspective on how perceptions of a country and its higher education institutions may contribute to students' destination decisions.

Furthermore, drawing on Person–Situation Interaction Theory, the framework recognises that international students may interpret destination and institutional characteristics differently according to their individual values, aspirations, expectations, and prior experiences. This perspective provides a theoretical basis for future research to explore individual differences in destination evaluation and to examine the conditions under which country personality and HEI identity may influence study destination choice. Overall, the proposed framework contributes to the conceptual understanding of international student mobility and provides a foundation for future empirical investigation.

### Practical Implications

The proposed framework offers potential implications for Malaysian public universities, policymakers, and other stakeholders involved in international student recruitment and higher education internationalisation. At the institutional level, universities may benefit from developing and communicating a distinctive HEI identity through their academic reputation, educational quality, institutional values, student support services, and internationalisation initiatives. Clear and consistent communication of these attributes may help prospective international students understand the characteristics of individual institutions and evaluate their suitability in relation to their academic and personal expectations. At the national level, policymakers and relevant stakeholders may consider the role of country personality in shaping perceptions of Malaysia as a higher education destination. Communicating Malaysia's educational opportunities alongside its social and cultural environment, safety, and quality of life may help prospective students develop a broader understanding of the destination. Collaboration between universities and relevant agencies may also support more consistent communication of Malaysia's higher education offerings. In addition, recognising differences in students' motivations, aspirations, cultural expectations, and prior experiences may encourage institutions to adopt more responsive recruitment and engagement strategies. Rather than relying on a uniform approach, universities may consider providing relevant information and support that address the diverse needs of prospective international students. Although these implications require further empirical validation, the proposed framework provides a conceptual foundation for informing institutional positioning, international student engagement, and future policy development.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this conceptual study proposes a framework to enhance the understanding of how country personality and higher education institution (HEI) identity may influence international students' study destination choice, particularly in the context of public universities in Malaysia. By integrating country-level and institution-level perceptions within a single conceptual framework, this study extends the discussion of international student mobility beyond conventional destination and institutional attributes. It highlights the potential importance of how international students perceive the personality of a host country and the identity of higher education institutions when evaluating overseas study opportunities. The proposed framework offers theoretical contributions to the literature on international student mobility, country personality, and higher education branding. It provides a foundation for understanding the possible relationships between country personality, HEI identity, an international students' study destination choice. From a practical perspective, the framework may offer useful insights for Malaysian higher education institutions and policymakers in

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developing strategies for international student recruitment, institutional positioning, communication, and engagement. Understanding how country-level and institution-level perceptions may shape students' decisions could support efforts to strengthen Malaysia's attractiveness as an international higher education destination. Nevertheless, as this study is conceptual in nature, the proposed relationships have not yet been empirically examined. Future research could validate the framework through quantitative methods, such as surveys and structural equation modelling (SEM), or qualitative approaches, including interviews with international students. Further studies could also explore the framework across different countries, public and private higher education institutions, and diverse international student populations. Such investigations would help establish the applicability of the proposed relationships and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping international students' study destination choices.

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