Article

Factors Influencing International Students' Choice of Educational Destination: A Systematic Review through the Socioecological Model Lens

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ABSTRACT

International student recruitment is a key trend in global higher education and has consistently been a major focus for universities worldwide. We identified the factors influencing decision-making for educational destinations through a socioecological approach, offering policymakers actionable insights to attract international students. For analysis, English-language articles published between 2019 and 2024 were selected from five databases. Twenty-nine articles were included. Thematic analysis revealed 10 themes influencing international student decision-making, categorized into individual, interpersonal, organizational, sociocultural, and public policy factors, aligned with the levels of the socioecological model.

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INTRODUCTION

Globalization has fostered the transnational nature of technical and scientific capacities and has had far-reaching effects—most notably, the expansion of the international higher education market. Today, the internationalization of universities has become a crucial issue. With the advent of globalized communication, international relations among universities have strengthened (Jalilvand, Abdi, & Shahidi, 2020). Consequently, internationalization has emerged as a relatively new, broad, and diverse concept, as well as a strategic priority in higher education. Over the past half-century, the internationalization of education has transformed from a marginal activity into a central component of reform in the education system and student recruitment strategies (De Wit & Altbach, 2021).

Over the past few decades, research on international student mobility has increased significantly. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on international student inflows, causing a temporary decline in numbers, the return to normal conditions has spurred a renewed global effort to attract international students. (Sin, Antonowicz, & Wiers-Jenssen, 2021).

According to UNESCO's 2025 report, the number of students in higher education abroad has risen to 6.9 million by 2022, nearly tripling since 2000. This reflects a continued surge in academic mobility and global enrollment (UNESCO, 2025). Moreover, forecasts for the international student market predict that the number of international students will reach 7.6 million by 2025, with an estimated annual growth rate of 6% during this period (Tham, Mahmod, & Alavi, 2013). The United States remains the leading destination for international students. Following this, continental Europe—particularly the United Kingdom, France, and Germany—continues to rank among the most popular destinations (Sin et al., 2021). Moreover, China has the highest number of students studying abroad and is recognized as a leading country of origin. In 2019, China was the top source of international student mobility globally, with 1.53 million citizens enrolled in higher education institutions abroad (P. Yang, 2022).

Attracting international students significantly benefits the host country's economy through their living expenses and tuition fees. In Australia, the international education sector accounts for 15% of university income, making it the country's third-largest export revenue source. The Australian Department of International Development has projected that the global demand for international education will reach approximately 7.2 million students by 2025 (Ogunnaike, Tairat, Adeniyi, & Omolade, 2014). Educational services rank as the fifth most profitable sector in the United States, generating revenues of more than $17 billion in 2009 and exceeding $27 billion in 2014 (Hung & Yen, 2022). Decreasing tuition revenues and reduced annual government budgets have prompted universities and colleges to develop new strategies for attracting international students to offset budget deficits and increase revenue (Wu & Naidoo, 2016). Numerous factors influence students' decision-making for a study destination, and these insights are vital for policymakers in developing strategic plans to generate revenue. Xue et al. reported that Chinese international students in Malaysia face academic, sociocultural, and psychological adaptation challenges (Xue & Singh, 2025). Riaz et al. identified mental health as a key challenge faced by international students. These findings suggest that individuals with strong social support networks exhibit better psychological and sociocultural adaptation, which positively influences their overall well-being (Riaz, Rafique, & Riaz, 2025).

Understanding students' choices regarding destination countries, higher education institutions, and study programs is essential for developing effective marketing strategies for universities and higher education providers. Extensive research has been conducted to examine students' preferences for international education, particularly the key determinants of these decisions, with the aim of informing marketing strategies in higher education. According to a 2020 study by Nuseir and El Refae, several factors influence students' decisions to study at UAE universities, including the university's academic reputation and the availability of desired programs and support services.

of financial aid, budget considerations, geographical location and proximity to the student's residence, university facilities and services, and advertising and marketing channels (Aral Dogu, 2019). Similarly, a 2019 study by Kusumawati et al. revealed that high school graduates in Indonesia identified university reputation and career prospects as key factors in choosing a public university, often influenced by recommendations from family, friends, or teachers (Kusumawati, Perera, & Yanamandram, 2019).

This study aims to identify the factors influencing international student recruitment and map them within the socioecological model (SEM). SEM is a theoretical framework that explores how various factors at different levels shape individuals' behaviors and decisions. These levels include the individual, interpersonal, institutional, sociocultural, and public policy levels (Hawkins et al., 2021). In the context of international student recruitment, the model provides a structured approach to identifying and categorizing influential factors at each level, offering deeper insights into how these factors affect students' decisions to

study in a particular country or institution. Accordingly, this study seeks to examine these factors through the lens of SEM via a systematic review, which enables higher education institutions to gain a comprehensive understanding of these elements, develop strategic macro goals, and design effective marketing plans for attracting international students.

METHOD

This systematic review aimed to identify the factors associated with decision-making for education destinations. In alignment with the research objectives, keywords were determined, and with the assistance of a library specialist, MeSH (Medical Subject Headings) terms were identified. The search strategy was implemented across five databases: PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, ProQuest, and Embase. The main keywords used were "higher education", "education destination", "international student", "student destination choice", and "decision making". The search strategy for each database and its output are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Search strategy and output of the selected database

Database	search strategy	Number of outputs
PUBMED	(((((Marketing strategy[Title/Abstract]) OR (Marketing[Title/Abstract])) AND (higher education[Title/Abstract])) OR (Education destination[Title/Abstract])) OR (International student[Title/Abstract])) OR (Student destination choice[Title/Abstract])	689
WOS	(((((TI=(Marketing strategy)) OR TI=(Marketing)) AND TI=(higher education)) OR TI=(Education destination)) OR TI=(International student)) OR TI=(Student destination choice)	652
PREQUEST	(Marketing) AND (Student destination choice)	6241
SCOPUSE	((marketing AND strategy) OR (marketing)) AND ((higher AND education) OR (education AND destination) OR (international AND student) OR (student AND destination AND choice))	1215

Two similar studies examined the factors influencing international students' decisions to study abroad. One study explored factors such as educational quality, the attractiveness of the destination country, financial considerations, and postgraduate job opportunities, all of which significantly impact students' decision-making (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2021). Another study identified a range of motivations driving students' choice of study destination, including limited capacity in their home country, cost–benefit analysis, personal development, career advancement, social status, and the global recognition of academic qualifications(Paulino & Castaño, 2019).

Since these studies, which were published in 2019 and 2021, addressed research questions closely aligned with ours, we set our inclusion criteria to include articles published between 2019 and 2024. This timeframe ensured the inclusion of the most recent and relevant literature. Only English-language articles were considered. Articles were excluded if they did not address factors related to decision-making for educational destinations, were published before 2019, or were classified as gray literature.

Duplicate articles identified via EndNote (version 8) were removed. The screening process involved an initial review of article titles, followed by an assessment of abstracts. Two researchers conducted the screening. A third researcher resolved any disagreements at any stage. The researcher-designed form used for data gathering collected information on the first author's name, year of publication, country and research setting, study type, data collection tools, sampling method and sample size, analysis approach, and factors influencing international student recruitment.

Thematic analysis was used to evaluate the results, and the quality of the studies was assessed via the STROB checklist. This checklist evaluates 22 items across categories such as title, abstract, introduction, methods, results, discussion, and funding. Articles scoring below 75% were classified as low quality.

RESULTS

In terms of the search strategy, 8797 articles were found from the reviewed databases, and 50 articles were found via manual search. After the mentioned articles were summarized in EndNote software, 5989 duplicate articles were removed. A total of 2858 articles out of the remaining 2700 articles were removed by examining the title and their lack of relevance to the subject of the present discussion. In the next step, the abstracts of the remaining articles were reviewed, and by removing 129 unrelated articles, 29 articles were included in the study. The study selection process was based on the PRISMA flow diagram (Fig 1).

PRISMA 2009 Flow Diagram
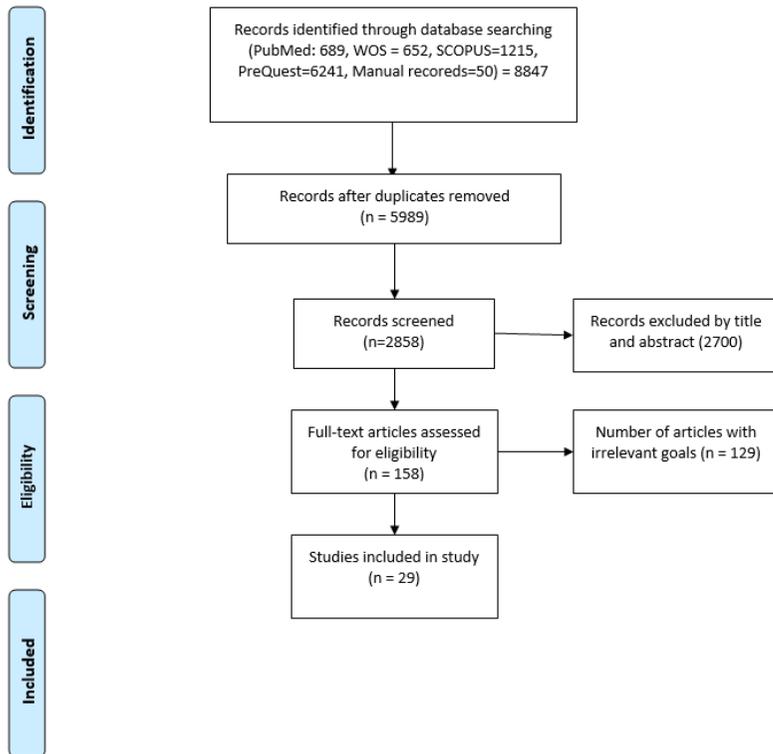
Fig 1: PRISMA flow diagram of the study

Overview of Study Characteristics

All of the selected articles were cross-sectional studies conducted in university settings. The studies utilized researcher-designed questionnaires, with five studies employing both methods (Ke, Junfeng, & Xiaojing, 2022; Prach, Johnson, & Ferguson, 2023) (Gbollie & Gong, 2020; Kumar & Raman, 2020; G. Wei, Lin, Jingdong, & Yanxiong, 2020).

In 2020, the highest number of publications recorded was 11. China has emerged as the country with the most studies in this area, contributing eight articles (Gbollie & Gong, 2020; Ke et al., 2022) (Alolga, Kassim, & Dramou, 2022; Dai, Hu, Li, & Oladipo, 2023; Guan, Mok, & Yu, 2023; G. Wei et al., 2020;

H. Wei, Yuan, & Zhao, 2019; S. Yang, Ye, & He, 2023). Among the selected studies, eight were qualitative (Dai et al., 2023; Haniya & Said, 2022; Jafar & Legusov, 2021; Jayawardena, Ross, & Grace, 2020; Manning, 2020; Phan, 2023; Riccomini, Cirani, Pedro, Garzaro, & Kevin, 2021; Wilkins, Hazzam, Ireland, & Kana, 2024), 17 were quantitative (Alolga et al., 2022; Aral Dogu, 2019; Collins, Şimşek, & Takır, 2022; Guan et al., 2023; Guru, Bhatt, & Agrawal, 2022; Koenings, Di Meo, & Uebelmesser, 2020; Ma, 2022; Mitić & Mojić, 2020; Nuseir & El Refae, 2022; Pardiyono, Suteja, Puspita, & Juju, 2022 ;Pawar, Dasgupta, & Vispute, 2020; Pawar, Vispute, Islam, & Chanda, 2020; Sim, Tan, Sia, & Hii, 2020; Sun, Nguyen, & Ganesh, 2020; Ürer Erdil, Tümer, Nadiri, & Aghaei, 2021; H. Wei et al., 2019; S. Yang et al., 2023), and five employed a mixed-methods approach (Gbollie & Gong, 2020; Ke et al., 2022; Kumar & Raman, 2020; Prach et al., 2023; G. Wei et al., 2020.)

Convenience and purposive sampling methods were predominantly used in the majority of the studies reviewed. The sample sizes ranged from 3 participants to 1,238. Notably, one study included a sample of 275,559 students spanning a three-year period and collected data from all students admitted to the university (S. Yang et al., 2023).

Most of the studies utilized statistical analyses such as descriptive-analytic (Alolga et al., 2022; Aral Dogu, 2019; Collins et al., 2022; Gbollie & Gong, 2020; Guan et al., 2023; S. Yang et al., 2023), exploratory factor analysis (Guru et al., 2022; Koenings et al., 2020; Nuseir & El Refae, 2022; Pawar, Dasgupta, et al., 2020; Pawar, Vispute, et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2020; Ürer Erdil et al., 2021), and thematic analysis (Dai et al., 2023; Haniya & Said, 2022; Jafar & Legusov, 2021; Jayawardena et al., 2020; Manning, 2020; Wilkins et al., 2024). Additionally, content analysis was employed in five studies (Ke et al., 2022; Ma, 2022; Phan, 2023; Riccomini et al., 2021; H. Wei et al., 2019).

Various studies have identified several factors influencing the attraction of international students, with the most frequently mentioned being the university's ranking and reputation (Aral Dogu, 2019; Collins et al., 2022; Dai et al., 2023; Guan et al., 2023; Haniya & Said, 2022; Ke et al., 2022; Koenings et al., 2020; Ma, 2022; Mitić & Mojić, 2020; Nuseir & El Refae, 2022; Wilkins et al., 2024), the quality of education (Alolga et al., 2022; Aral Dogu, 2019; Dai et al., 2023; Gbollie & Gong, 2020; Guru et al., 2022; Ke et al., 2022; Manning, 2020; Pawar, Dasgupta, et al., 2020; Pawar, Vispute, et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2020; Wilkins et al., 2024), and the effectiveness of advertising methods (Aral Dogu, 2019; Collins et al., 2022; Jayawardena et al., 2020; Kumar & Raman, 2020; Nuseir & El Refae, 2022; Pawar, Vispute, et al., 2020; Riccomini et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2020; Ürer Erdil et al., 2021). The characteristics of the selected articles are presented in Table 2.

The studies identified several additional factors influencing the choice of educational destination. These factors include the following factors according to frequency:

- Job opportunities during and after studies (Aral Dogu, 2019; Dai et al., 2023; Gbollie & Gong, 2020; Guan et al., 2023; Mitić & Mojić, 2020;

Riccomini et al., 2021; Sim et al., 2020; Ürer Erdil et al., 2021; G. Wei et al., 2020; S. Yang et al., 2023)

- Well-equipped university facilities (Alolga et al., 2022; Aral Dogu, 2019; Jafar & Legusov, 2021; Ke et al., 2022; Nuseir & El Refae, 2022; Pawar, Vispute, et al., 2020; Sim et al., 2020; Wilkins et al., 2024)
- Financial considerations like scholarships (Gbollie & Gong, 2020; Ke et al., 2022; Ürer Erdil et al., 2021; Wilkins et al., 2024; S. Yang et al., 2023), cost of living, and tuition fees (Aral Dogu, 2019; Guan et al., 2023; Guru et al., 2022; G. Wei et al., 2020)
- Recommendations from personal networks (Aral Dogu, 2019; Koenings et al., 2020; Manning, 2020; Phan, 2023)
- Cultural factors (Dai et al., 2023; Gbollie & Gong, 2020; Pawar, Dasgupta, et al., 2020; H. Wei et al., 2019)
- Ease of obtaining visas (Dai et al., 2023; Gbollie & Gong, 2020; S. Yang et al., 2023)
- The university's security and location (Pawar, Vispute, et al., 2020; Sim et al., 2020; G. Wei et al., 2020)
- Having internationally renowned faculty (Aral Dogu, 2019; Manning, 2020)
- Advertising of the destination country and university (Pardiyono et al., 2022; Phan, 2023)
- Providing strong learning support for international students (Ke et al., 2022)
- The expertise of academic staff (Alolga et al., 2022)
- Availability of practical on-campus units (Jafar & Legusov, 2021)
- Facilities such as gyms, sports programs, and swimming pools (Aral Dogu, 2019)
- The presence of friends or acquaintances in the destination country (Phan, 2023)
- Proximity to the homeland (G. Wei et al., 2020)
- Environmental factors such as weather (Phan, 2023)
- Individual experiences, such as national and international exposure (Phan, 2023)
- The desire to earn a foreign educational certificate (Alolga et al., 2022)
- Opportunities to learn English (Pawar, Dasgupta, et al., 2020)
- Innovation in exchanging educational services with international institutions (Riccomini et al., 2021)
- Financial and entrepreneurial support (Riccomini et al., 2021).

Table 2: Characteristics of the selected studies

Authors & Year	Country	Setting	Design	Tools	Study population/N	Sampling	Analysis
(Wilkins et al., 2024)	United Arab Emirates and Malaysia	International Branch Campuses in the UAE and Malaysia	Qualitative	Semistructured interview	53 international students	Snowball sampling	Thematic analysis
(Guan et al., 2023)	China	NA	Quantitative	Researcher-made questionnaire	1238 international students studying outside China	Convenience Sampling	Descriptive
(Phan, 2023)	Vietnam	A university in Vietnam	Qualitative	In-depth interview	19 international students from Vietnam	Snowball sampling	Content analysis
(Dai et al., 2023)	China	Three Chinese universities in Beijing, Shandong and Guangdong	Qualitative	Semistructured interview	55 international PhD students	Snowball sampling	Thematic analysis
(Ke et al., 2022)	China	A university	Mixed method	Standard questionnaire	67 international students	Convenience Sampling	Content analysis
(Alolga et al., 2022)	China	Jiangsu Provincial Pharmaceutical University, Nanjing, China	Quantitative	Researcher-made questionnaire	154 Pharmacy students	Convenience Sampling	Descriptive
(S. Yang et al., 2023)	China	Jiangsu Province, China	Quantitative	Researcher-made questionnaire	275,559 students from 2015 to 2018	Convenience Sampling	Descriptive-analytical
(Haniya & Said, 2022)	Malaysia	University of Technology Malaysia	Qualitative	Interview	18 international students	Convenience Sampling and chosen by the university	Thematic analysis

Authors & Year	Country	Setting	Design	Tools	Study population/N	Sampling	Analysis
(Pardiyono et al., 2022)	Indonesia	Private universities	Qualitative	Researcher-made questionnaire	International students	Multistratified random sampling	Structural analysis
(Ma, 2022)	Taipei	A prominent university in Taipei	Qualitative	Researcher-made questionnaire	524 international students in China	Purposeful sampling	AHP
(Riccomini et al., 2021)	Brazil	Brazilian higher education institutions	Qualitative	Interview	Marketing and branding managers of private universities in São Paulo-Rio de Janeiro-Paraná-Minas	Convenience Sampling	Content analysis
(Ürer Erdil et al., 2021)	Northern Cyprus	State University of Northern Cyprus	Qualitative	Researcher-made questionnaire	700 first-year students	Not included	AHP, EFA
(Guru et al., 2022)	India	6 universities from different states of India	Qualitative	Researcher-made questionnaire	167 Indian students enrolled in universities abroad	Purposeful sampling	AHP
(Sim et al., 2020)	Malaysia	International Unit of the University of Malaysia	Qualitative	Researcher-made questionnaire	575 international students	Convenience Sampling	Multi group partial least squares analysis
(Pawar, Vispute, et al., 2020)	India	Indian Universities	Quantitative	Researcher-made questionnaire	249 full-time international students from Asian and African countries (29 countries)	Purposeful sampling	AHP
(Jafar & Legusov, 2021)	Canada	Toronto	Qualitative	Semistructured interview	55 international students at Toronto colleges of arts and technology	Purposeful sampling	Thematic analysis

| Authors & Year	Country	Setting	Design	Tools	Study population/N	Sampling	Analysis
(G. Wei et al., 2020)	China	China University of Geosciences, Wuhan	Mixed method	Focus group interview and researcher-made questionnaire	250 international students and 10 educational representatives from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan	Convenience and purposeful sampling	Content analysis - descriptive statistics
(Mitić & Mojić, 2020)	Serbia	university	Qualitative	Researcher-made questionnaire	838 final-semester students who planned to continue their studies abroad	Convenience Sampling	Linear model
(Collins et al., 2022)	Turkey	A private university in Türkiye	Qualitative	Researcher-made questionnaire	197 international students	Convenience Sampling	Regression analysis
(Manning, 2020)	China and Taiwan	12 educational institutions	Qualitative	Researcher-made questionnaire	23 international students	Sampling through calls from institutions and departments	Thematic analysis
(Kumar & Raman, 2020)	India	Universities in 6 different cities in India	Mixed method	Semistructured interview	183 international students	Snowball sampling	Focus group discussion
(Jayawardena et al., 2020)	Austria	Six universities in Australia	Qualitative	Collection through websites, books and magazines	43 international students	Convenience Sampling	Thematic analysis and framework-based analysis
(Nuseir & El Refae, 2022)	United Arab Emirates	Two public universities and three private universities	Qualitative	Researcher-made questionnaire	425 international students	Simple random sampling	AHP

Authors & Year	Country	Setting	Design	Tools	Study population/N	Sampling	Analysis
(Koenings et al., 2020)	Germany	A German university	Qualitative	Researcher-made questionnaire	723 students	Convenience Sampling	AHP
(Pawar, Dasgupta, et al., 2020)	India	Two Indian universities	Qualitative	Researcher-made questionnaire	122 international students from 35 countries	Purposeful sampling	AHP
(Sun et al., 2020)	USA	174 international schools in America	Qualitative	Researcher-made questionnaire	75,000 international students from 22 institutions	Convenience Sampling	AHP
(H. Wei et al., 2019)	China	Internet	Quantitative-survey	Researcher-made questionnaire	Data collection from 102 countries from 2000 to 2015	Not included	Content analysis
(Aral Dogu, 2019)	Northern Cyprus	Three higher education institutions in three cities of Northern Cyprus	Quantitative-descriptive	'Questionnaire from Khanna's study	500 local and international students	Convenience Sampling	Descriptive analysis
(Gbollie & Gong, 2020)	China	Six prominent Chinese universities in Wuhan	Mixed method	Interview & Researcher-made questionnaire	African and Asian international students (537 questionnaires and 30 interviews)	Convenience Sampling	Descriptive-analytical

On the basis of the thematic analysis, the effective factors were categorized into ten main themes: personal background, attitudes and beliefs, family opinions and features, friends' and peers' opinions, university features, social media, culture and community values, features of the destination country, visa and immigration policies, and scholarship opportunities. These themes are further grouped into five categories—individual, interpersonal, organizational, sociocultural, and public policy—following the levels of the social ecology model (see, Table 2 and Figure 2).

Table 3: Factors associated with decision-making for educational destinations based on the socioecological model

Socioecological levels	Themes	subthemes
1-Individual level	Personal background	Previous experiences, educational and career goals, financial capabilities, curiosity for cultural familiarity
	Attitudes and beliefs	Student's attitude toward studying abroad, interests, cultural and religious beliefs, desire to gain international experience, interest in a specific field, and search for a prominent university
2-Interpersonal level	Family opinions and features	The family's economic and social status, the parents' level of education, the family's social status, the opinions of parents and other family members about different universities, and their expectations of the student's academic and career future, and the expectations of friends.
	Friends and peers' opinions	Opinions and experiences of friends and peers about different universities, and their recommendations to students
3-Organizational level	University features	Quality of education, international reputation and prestige of the university, university facilities, low tuition fees, safety and security on campus, availability of scholarships, job opportunities after graduation, and global university rankings
	Social media	University advertisements on social media, opinions of current students and alumni about universities on social media, and information about university rankings in the media

4-Sociocultural level	Culture and community values	Culture and values of society regarding studying abroad, and career prospects, studying in specific and valuable fields in the eyes of individuals, such as medicine
	Features of the destination country	Environmental conditions, climate, culture and language of the destination country, presence of friends and acquaintances in that country, similar culture, proximity to the homeland, low cost of living, future job opportunities, characteristics of the city where the university is located (climate, recreational and cultural facilities)
5-Public policy level	Visa and immigration policies	Ease of obtaining a visa, work visa policies and job opportunities after graduation, and immigration laws of the destination country.
	Scholarship opportunities	Government and university policies in providing scholarships to international students, and the extent of coverage of these scholarships
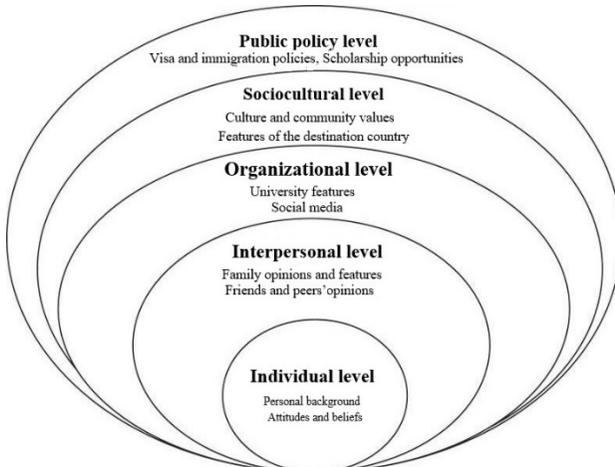
Figure 2. Socioecological Model for Factors Affecting Decision Making Regarding Educational Destination

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to identify the factors affecting the attraction of international students via a socioecological model. Ten themes were extracted, grouped into categories with similar concepts, and finally classified according to the levels of the socioecological model. The following sections discuss the findings according to these five socioecological levels.

Individual level: The findings emphasize the crucial role of individual-level factors, specifically personal background and attitudes and beliefs, in attracting international students. Personal background includes a wide range of elements, such as prior educational experience, socioeconomic status, and cultural upbring. Attitudes and beliefs are equally significant, encompassing students' motivations, aspirations, and perceptions of the value of international education. Salisbury et al. (2010) support this finding, positing that a student's habitus and accumulated social, cultural, financial, and human capital significantly affect their intention to study abroad (Salisbury, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2010). Similarly, Tang (2017) stated that international students' attitudes and willingness are key factors in their decision to study abroad (Tang, 2017). A strong desire for personal growth, career advancement, or cultural immersion can therefore drive students to seek opportunities beyond their home country. Effective recruitment strategies must acknowledge the complexity of these individual factors and tailor their approaches to address prospective students' diverse needs and motivations.

Interpersonal level: The findings highlight the role of family opinions and features and friends' and peers' opinions in attracting international students, emphasizing the importance of interpersonal factors. These influences directly affect an individual's subjective norms by creating social pressure and expectations surrounding the decision to study abroad. These trusted sources shape what potential students perceive as desirable and acceptable behavior, demonstrating that institutions must consider not only direct marketing to students but also the influential networks surrounding them to attract international applicants effectively. In line with this, Harvey et al. (2017) confirmed that students' parental opinions were highly influential in their choice to study abroad (Harvey, Robinson, & Welch, 2017). Additionally, Whatley (2018) highlights that peers may directly and indirectly influence students' decisions regarding studying abroad (Whatley, 2018).

Organizational level: Organizational factors, including university features and social media, play a significant role in attracting international students. University features encompass a broad spectrum of elements contributing to a university's appeal, including academic reputation, program offerings, campus facilities, research infrastructure, and student support services. Vrontis et al. (2018) reported that both traditional sources, such as friends, family, and university websites, and social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, play significant roles in attracting international students (Vrontis, El Nemar, Ouwaida, & Shams, 2018). Prospective students carefully evaluate these features and compare them across institutions to determine the best fit for their academic and personal needs. Social media enables universities to target specific

demographics and geographic regions, tailoring their messaging to resonate with diverse audiences. By strategically utilizing social media, universities can build brand awareness, enhance their reputation, and ultimately attract more international applicants (Tomaszewicz & Barczyk, 2024).

Sociocultural level: Sociocultural factors, including culture and community values and features of the destination country, play a profound role in shaping the decisions of prospective international students. Students weigh cultural compatibility, community inclusivity, and alignment with their values alongside the destination's cultural richness, safety, and quality of life. Lewis (2016) highlights that cultural factors are key determinants for studying abroad, with students preferring destinations offering cultural familiarity, shared language, and cross-cultural learning opportunities (Lewis, 2016). Universities and governments must actively cultivate these sociocultural factors to attract and retain international students, recognizing that students' decisions are deeply intertwined with their desire for a fulfilling and enriching cultural experience.

Public Policy level: Public policy factors, notably visa and immigration policies and scholarship opportunities, are pivotal in attracting international students. Efficient visa processing and clear immigration rules and pathways to permanent residency create a welcoming environment, whereas comprehensive scholarship programs address financial barriers, especially for students from developing countries. Government-backed financial aid not only eases the cost of international study but also demonstrates a nation's dedication to attracting and nurturing global talent. These economic incentives often tip the scales for prospective students, making robust scholarship offerings a strategic tool for governments aiming to establish themselves as premier international education destinations and promote global academic collaboration.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, attracting international students is influenced by a multifaceted interplay of factors across individual, interpersonal, organizational, sociocultural, and policy levels. This systematic review highlights important policy implications, suggesting that governments and educational institutions should adopt a multilevel approach to enhance their appeal as study destinations. Key strategies include simplifying visa and immigration processes, increasing financial support and scholarships, improving academic and social support services, promoting multicultural and inclusive environments, fostering international collaboration, and continuously monitoring and evaluating policies. Implementing evidence-based, comprehensive policies that address these interconnected factors can significantly strengthen a country's competitiveness in the global education market, benefiting both international students and host communities alike. Therefore, the policy implications of this systematic review emphasize the need for coordinated, multidimensional strategies to attract and support international students effectively.

Declaration of interest statement: The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.

AI Use Statement: No artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the preparation or writing of this manuscript.

Reference Integrity Statement: The authors confirm that all references are accurate and that all URLs and DOIs are correct and verified.

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