

Research Article

The Heart and the Mind in Higher Education Choice: An Empirical Analysis of Emotional and Rational Determinants among BBA and BCA Students

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Abstract: The selection of a Higher Education Institution (HEI) has become an increasingly complex decision-making process shaped by both cognitive evaluation and emotional interpretation. In highly competitive and market-oriented higher education environments, students evaluate institutions not only on academic and career-related outcomes but also on symbolic, social and experiential dimensions. This study examines the relative influence of rational and emotional determinants on institutional choice behavior among undergraduate students enrolled in Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) and Bachelor of Computer Applications (BCA) programmes. The study further investigates the stage-wise variation and interaction between these determinants during the institutional decision-making process. The research adopts a quantitative and explanatory research design based on primary data collected from 111 students through a structured questionnaire. The study employed reliability analysis, descriptive statistics, multiple regression analysis and comparative stage-wise analysis to examine the proposed relationships among the variables. The findings reveal that both rational and emotional determinants significantly influence institutional choice behavior. However, rational determinants such as academic reputation, placement opportunities, infrastructure quality, employability orientation and programme relevance demonstrated comparatively stronger influence ($\beta = 0.495, p < 0.001$) than emotional determinants ($\beta = 0.210, p = 0.027$). The regression model explained 48.6% of the variance in institutional choice behavior ($R^2 = 0.486$), indicating moderate explanatory power. The study further demonstrates that rational considerations dominate the information search and evaluation stages, whereas emotional determinants including institutional image, campus atmosphere, belongingness and emotional comfort become increasingly influential during the final enrollment stage. The findings also indicate that students integrate objective institutional assessment with affective interpretation while making final institutional decisions, thereby supporting dual-process perspectives of behavioral decision-making. The study contributes to higher education marketing and student decision-making literature by developing an integrated cognitive-affective framework explaining institutional selection behavior within the Indian higher education context. The findings provide important managerial implications for higher education institutions by emphasizing the need to integrate rational value propositions with emotional engagement strategies in student recruitment and institutional positioning.

Keywords: Higher Education Institution Choice, Student Decision-Making, Rational Determinants, Emotional Determinants, Institutional Choice Intention, Higher Education Marketing, Behavioral Decision-Making, BBA and BCA Students

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INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

The selection of a Higher Education Institution (HEI) represents one of the most consequential decisions in a student's academic trajectory, carrying long-term academic, financial and socio-professional implications. As higher education

systems become increasingly market-oriented and competitive, students are positioned not merely as learners but as informed consumers navigating a complex choice environment [1-2]. This marketization has intensified institutional branding, differentiation strategies and student recruitment campaigns, thereby amplifying the cognitive load and emotional engagement embedded within the decision-making process.

Early models of college choice conceptualized the process as largely rational and economically driven, emphasizing variables such as tuition fees, academic reputation, geographic proximity and employment prospects [3-4]. Empirical evidence continues to affirm the salience of utilitarian determinants—particularly institutional quality, placement outcomes and cost-benefit considerations—in shaping enrollment decisions [5-6]. These studies align with traditional consumer decision-making frameworks that assume deliberate evaluation and information processing prior to commitment.

However, contemporary scholarship increasingly challenges the sufficiency of purely rational explanations. Emotional and symbolic dimensions—such as institutional image, perceived belongingness, social prestige and affective impressions of campus climate—have emerged as critical drivers of choice [7-8]. Students frequently rely on subjective evaluations formed through campus visits, peer narratives and institutional branding cues, which operate beyond strict cost-benefit analysis. Research in educational marketing further demonstrates that brand personality and emotional resonance significantly influence student preferences, often shaping perceptions of institutional quality itself [2]. This evolving perspective reflects broader insights from behavioral decision theory, which posits that individuals integrate affective and cognitive processes when making complex choices. In high-stakes decisions such as HEI selection—where uncertainty, future orientation and social identity are intertwined—emotions may serve as heuristics that guide or even override rational analysis. Yet, despite growing acknowledgment of affective influences, empirical research rarely quantifies the comparative dominance of emotional versus rational factors within a single integrative framework. Moreover, limited attention has been paid to how these influences fluctuate across distinct stages of the decision-making process, such as information search, evaluation of alternatives and final commitment.

Given the intensifying competition among institutions and the strategic importance of student recruitment, a nuanced understanding of the interplay between “heart” and “mind” in HEI selection is both theoretically and practically significant. This study therefore situates itself at the intersection of higher education marketing and behavioral decision theory, aiming to empirically disentangle and compare emotional and rational determinants within a unified analytical model.

Theoretical Context

Understanding Higher Education Institution (HEI) selection requires a theoretically grounded perspective that integrates cognitive evaluation with affective response. Traditional economic and rational choice frameworks conceptualize students as utility-maximizing actors who systematically evaluate institutional attributes—such as tuition fees, academic reputation and employment prospects—before making enrollment decisions. Early college choice models, particularly the multi-stage framework proposed by Chapman and later expanded by Hossler and Gallagher, reflect this assumption by emphasizing information search, evaluation of alternatives and final choice as predominantly rational processes. These models align with classical consumer decision-making theory, where structured comparison of attributes precedes commitment.

However, developments in behavioral economics and cognitive psychology challenge the sufficiency of purely rational explanations. Dual-process theory offers a more comprehensive lens by distinguishing between intuitive, affect-driven processing (often labeled System 1) and analytical, deliberative reasoning (System 2). In complex and high-stakes decisions—such as selecting an HEI—both systems operate interactively rather than independently. Emotional reactions may shape initial preferences, while rational analysis subsequently justifies or refines those inclinations. The work of Kahneman [9] underscores how intuitive judgments frequently guide decision outcomes, even when individuals perceive themselves to be acting rationally.

Complementing this perspective, affect heuristic theory posits that individuals rely on emotional impressions as informational shortcuts when evaluating complex alternatives [10]. Within the HEI context, perceptions of campus atmosphere, institutional prestige, or sense of belonging can influence how objective indicators—such as rankings or placement statistics—are interpreted. Thus, emotions do not merely accompany rational thought, they actively structure cognitive appraisal.

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

Further contextualizes this interplay by linking attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control to behavioral intention [11]. In HEI selection, attitudes may derive from rational evaluations (e.g., academic quality),

whereas subjective norms—such as parental expectations or peer influence—often carry affective weight. Empirical studies applying TPB in educational choice settings demonstrate that both evaluative beliefs and social-emotional pressures significantly predict enrollment intentions [6,12]. This suggests that decision-making is embedded within both cognitive assessments and socio-emotional contexts.

Prospect theory adds another layer by illustrating how individuals evaluate gains and losses asymmetrically under conditions of uncertainty [13]. For prospective students, the perceived risk of making an incorrect institutional choice—financially or socially—can heighten emotional responses, thereby influencing final decisions beyond objective probabilities. Risk perception and anticipated regret may amplify the influence of affect, particularly during the final commitment stage.

Recent research in higher education marketing reinforces this integrated view. Institutional image, brand personality and symbolic value have been shown to shape perceived quality and preference formation [2,8]. These findings align with contemporary consumer behavior literature, which conceptualizes decision-making as a dynamic interaction between cognition and emotion rather than a linear rational sequence.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives converge on a central premise: HEI selection is neither purely “heart-driven” nor exclusively “mind-driven.” Instead, it reflects a dual-system process in which emotional and rational factors coexist, interact and vary in influence across decision stages. Building on this theoretical grounding, the present study empirically examines the relative strength and interaction of affective and cognitive determinants within a unified analytical framework.

Research Gap

Despite a rich body of research on factors influencing Higher Education Institution (HEI) choice, existing studies exhibit several noteworthy gaps that this research seeks to address.

- **First:** There is a lack of comparative empirical measurement of emotional and rational determinants in a unified analytical framework. Most extant studies tend to examine cognitive/rational factors (such as, institutional reputation, costs, academic quality) and affective/emotional factors (such as, perceived belonging, brand appeal) in isolation, or prioritize one over the other without systematic comparison [14-15]. While some conceptual work recognizes both dimensions, quantitative research that measures and contrasts their relative impacts within the same analytical model remains scarce. This gap limits understanding of how and to what extent emotional influences might rival or complement rational considerations in real-world decision contexts
- **Second:** Few studies explore stage-wise analysis across the sequential phases of the HEI choice process. Classic decision models outline stages such as information search, evaluation of alternatives and final choice [4]. However, empirical research seldom operationalizes these stages to assess how emotional versus rational influences vary over time. Without stage-specific analysis, researchers cannot determine whether, for example, rational analysis predominates early while affective factors become decisive later—or vice versa—creating a significant blind spot in the literature on dynamic decision processes
- **Third:** There is limited research on the interplay and interaction effects between emotional and rational factors. Although individual studies acknowledge that emotions can shape perceptions of rational attributes and rational evaluations may influence emotional responses, few have empirically tested the interaction effects or mutual reinforcement between these dimensions (e.g., whether emotional engagement amplifies the effect of rational quality perceptions). This oversight persists despite theoretical arguments from dual-process and behavioral decision theories which posit that cognitive and affective processes interact continuously during choice (e.g., elaboration likelihood, experiential-rational integration). The lack of interaction analysis constrains comprehensive modeling of the psychological mechanisms underpinning HEI selection

Addressing these gaps will enable a more nuanced understanding of how students make enrollment decisions, balancing “head versus heart” considerations at different decision stages and under varying contextual conditions.

Research Objectives

- To identify the key rational (cognitive/utilitarian) factors influencing Higher Education Institution (HEI) selection
- To examine the key emotional (affective/subjective) factors influencing HEI selection
- To comparatively assess the relative influence of emotional versus rational factors in HEI choice
- To analyze the stage-wise influence of emotional and rational factors across the decision-making process

- To investigate the interplay and interaction effects between emotional and rational determinants in HEI selection
- To develop and validate an integrated empirical model explaining HEI selection behavior

Contribution of the Study

Theoretical Contribution: This study advances the higher education choice literature by integrating emotional (affective) and rational (cognitive) determinants within a single comparative and interaction-based framework. While prior research has identified multiple institutional attributes influencing student choice—such as academic reputation, cost and employability [4-5] these studies largely emphasize utilitarian evaluation processes. More recent work highlights the importance of institutional image, symbolic value and affective perceptions [2,8], yet empirical comparisons between emotional and rational dimensions remain limited.

By grounding the analysis in dual-process and behavioral decision theories [9-10], this study contributes theoretically in three ways. First, it operationalizes and empirically contrasts affective and cognitive constructs within the HEI selection context. Second, it extends existing choice models by incorporating a stage-wise analytical perspective, thereby acknowledging that decision influence may vary across awareness, evaluation and commitment phases. Third, it introduces an interaction-based perspective, testing whether emotional responses amplify or moderate the effects of rational evaluations. In doing so, the study moves beyond linear attribute models and contributes to a more psychologically integrated understanding of institutional choice behavior.

Methodological Contribution

Methodologically, this research contributes by developing and validating a structured measurement instrument that simultaneously captures rational importance ratings, emotional agreement scales, comparative dominance perceptions, stage-wise influence and interaction effects. Unlike prior studies that examine determinants independently [6,1], this design enables comparative empirical testing within a unified analytical framework.

The study further applies multivariate statistical techniques—including factor analysis, reliability assessment and interaction modeling—to assess construct validity and examine dynamic relationships between affective and cognitive variables. By explicitly modeling interplay effects, the research addresses a gap in empirical testing of dual-process integration within educational decision contexts. This methodological advancement enhances analytical rigor and offers a replicable framework for future cross-cultural or longitudinal investigations.

Practical Relevance

From a managerial perspective, the findings provide actionable insights for higher education administrators and marketing strategists. As higher education increasingly operates within competitive and market-driven environments [2,5], understanding whether students respond more strongly to rational information (e.g., placement statistics, accreditation) or emotional cues (e.g., campus culture, brand identity) is critical for designing effective recruitment strategies.

The stage-wise analysis offers practical guidance on communication timing—suggesting when institutions should emphasize informational transparency versus emotional engagement. Additionally, understanding the interplay between affect and cognition enables institutions to align branding, campus experiences and data-driven messaging cohesively. Ultimately, this study informs evidence-based enrollment management strategies that reflect the psychological complexity of student decision-making rather than assuming purely rational behavior.

Literature Review

The process of selecting a Higher Education Institution (HEI) has evolved into a complex and multidimensional decision-making phenomenon shaped by economic, psychological, social and symbolic considerations. Contemporary higher education markets are increasingly characterized by intense institutional competition, global student mobility, digital information accessibility and growing expectations regarding educational outcomes. Within this environment, students no longer evaluate institutions solely on academic performance indicators, rather, they integrate objective institutional attributes with emotional perceptions, social identity considerations and experiential expectations while making enrollment decisions.

Recent scholarship in higher education marketing and behavioral decision-making increasingly conceptualizes institutional choice as a hybrid cognitive–affective process rather than a purely rational economic evaluation. Earlier college choice models largely emphasized rational comparison of institutional attributes such as tuition cost, academic quality, employability prospects and institutional reputation. However, more recent empirical studies indicate that

emotional attachment, institutional image, campus atmosphere, perceived belongingness, peer influence and digital institutional visibility significantly shape students' enrollment preferences.

The growing marketization of higher education has intensified institutional branding, digital engagement and experiential positioning strategies, thereby amplifying the emotional dimensions of institutional selection. Particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic, students have become more sensitive to institutional trust, psychological safety, technological readiness, employability assurance and student support systems. Consequently, contemporary HEI choice behavior reflects the interaction of analytical evaluation and emotional interpretation operating simultaneously across different stages of decision-making.

This literature review synthesizes theoretical and empirical scholarship relating to rational and emotional determinants of HEI selection while integrating recent developments from educational marketing, consumer psychology, behavioral economics and student decision-making research.

Rational (Cognitive/Utilitarian) Determinants in HEI Selection

Rational determinants of higher education institution selection are primarily grounded in human capital theory and classical consumer decision-making frameworks, which conceptualize education as a long-term investment decision aimed at maximizing future economic and professional outcomes. Early higher education choice models proposed by Chapman and Hossler and Gallagher [4] emphasized systematic information search, institutional comparison and analytical evaluation prior to enrollment decisions. These frameworks continue to influence contemporary institutional choice research.

Recent studies have reaffirmed that students continue to rely heavily on utilitarian institutional attributes while selecting higher education institutions. Academic reputation remains one of the most influential rational determinants because it signals institutional credibility, quality assurance and future employability potential. Research conducted by Poon [16] and Joseph & Joseph [17] demonstrates that students often associate institutional prestige with long-term career advancement and social mobility.

Programme quality and curriculum relevance have also emerged as major rational determinants, particularly among students enrolled in professional courses such as BBA and BCA programmes. In rapidly changing labor markets, students increasingly prioritize industry-oriented curriculum, skill development opportunities, internship exposure and technological integration while evaluating institutional alternatives. Studies conducted after the COVID-19 pandemic indicate that employability-oriented education has become significantly more important in institutional selection behavior.

Placement opportunities and graduate employability continue to function as dominant institutional evaluation criteria. Contemporary students perceive placement performance as a measurable indicator of return on educational investment. Recent empirical studies in educational marketing suggest that employability outcomes directly influence students' perceptions of institutional effectiveness, particularly in emerging economies where professional education is strongly linked with career security.

Financial considerations remain another central rational determinant. Tuition fees, scholarship opportunities, educational affordability and perceived value for money significantly influence institutional accessibility and enrollment intention. Students increasingly compare institutions based on cost-benefit expectations, especially in self-financed professional education sectors. Recent studies by Tran et al. [18] indicate that perceived educational value mediates the relationship between institutional quality perceptions and enrollment decisions.

Technological infrastructure and digital readiness have become particularly important in post-pandemic institutional evaluation. Students now consider factors such as digital learning platforms, hybrid learning capability, technological resources, online accessibility and institutional adaptability while evaluating higher education providers. Research published between 2021 and 2024 demonstrates that technological competence significantly affects students' institutional trust and perceived academic quality.

Institutional accreditation and quality assurance mechanisms also strengthen rational evaluation by reducing uncertainty and information asymmetry in educational markets. Accreditation status functions as a signal of institutional legitimacy, regulatory compliance and educational standardization. Students often perceive accredited institutions as more credible and professionally reliable.

Infrastructure quality, faculty expertise, research orientation and learning resources further contribute to cognitive evaluation processes. Modern students increasingly evaluate institutions using measurable indicators that can improve their educational and professional outcomes. These findings collectively suggest that rational determinants continue to dominate institutional evaluation during the early phases of decision-making, particularly during information search and comparative assessment stages.

Nevertheless, contemporary literature also indicates that rational evaluation alone cannot fully explain institutional preference formation. Students frequently interpret objective institutional attributes through emotional and symbolic lenses, thereby necessitating a broader analytical framework integrating affective dimensions.

Emotional (Affective) Determinants in HEI Selection

Recent developments in behavioral decision-making and higher education marketing research increasingly recognize that students' institutional choices are also significantly influenced by emotional, symbolic and experiential factors. Emotional determinants operate through feelings, perceptions, social identity formation and psychological attachment rather than purely objective institutional evaluation.

Institutional image has emerged as one of the most influential affective determinants in higher education selection behavior. Contemporary students often associate institutional image with prestige, social recognition, personal identity and emotional aspiration. Research by Foroudi et al. [19] and Wilkins and Huisman [20] suggests that a positive institutional image enhances emotional attraction and strengthens enrollment intention even when competing institutions demonstrate similar academic quality.

Campus atmosphere also exerts substantial emotional influence on institutional preference formation. Students increasingly evaluate institutions based on perceived inclusiveness, social environment, emotional comfort, campus culture and psychological safety. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, institutional support systems, student wellbeing initiatives and campus connectedness have become more important contributors to enrollment behavior.

Emotional attachment toward institutions develops through experiential interactions such as campus visits, social media engagement, peer communication, alumni narratives and institutional storytelling. Research in educational branding demonstrates that emotional identification strengthens institutional commitment and student loyalty. Students often develop intuitive preferences toward institutions before conducting detailed analytical evaluation.

Family influence and social approval further contribute to emotional decision-making, particularly in collectivist societies such as India. Parents frequently participate in institutional selection decisions and influence students through expectations relating to prestige, career security and social reputation. Recent studies suggest that emotional reassurance provided by family members significantly affects final institutional commitment.

Social media and digital branding have also transformed emotional engagement within higher education markets. Students increasingly rely on digital content, institutional websites, online testimonials, student reviews, influencer communication and virtual campus experiences while forming emotional perceptions of institutions. Research published after 2021 demonstrates that digital institutional presence strongly influences perceived trustworthiness and emotional connectivity.

Peer influence represents another important emotional determinant. Students frequently seek social validation and comparative reassurance from friends, seniors and educational networks while making institutional decisions. The desire for belongingness and social compatibility often shapes final enrollment preferences, especially when academic differences between institutions appear marginal.

Trust also functions as a critical emotional stabilizer within institutional selection processes. Institutional trust reduces uncertainty and enhances students' confidence regarding educational outcomes, support systems and long-term institutional credibility. Emotional trust becomes particularly important in service-oriented sectors such as higher education where students commit significant financial and personal resources.

Contemporary literature therefore demonstrates that emotional determinants do not operate independently of rational considerations. Rather, emotional perceptions often influence how students interpret objective institutional attributes, thereby shaping preference formation and enrollment intention.

Integration of Rational and Emotional Determinants

The integration of cognitive and affective perspectives has become increasingly important within contemporary higher education choice research. Traditional institutional choice models often assumed that students behave as rational evaluators who systematically compare institutional attributes before making enrollment decisions. However, recent behavioral theories suggest that human decisions are rarely governed by purely analytical reasoning.

Dual-process perspectives of decision-making propose that cognitive and emotional systems operate simultaneously during complex decision environments. Rational processing involves deliberate analysis of institutional characteristics such as academic quality, tuition cost, infrastructure and employability outcomes. Emotional processing, in contrast, involves intuitive judgment, symbolic interpretation and affective responses toward institutional identity and social belongingness.

Recent empirical studies indicate that students frequently combine objective institutional evaluation with emotional interpretation. For instance, a positive institutional image may enhance perceived academic quality, whereas a negative emotional impression may weaken the influence of otherwise strong objective indicators. Consequently, emotional and rational determinants appear structurally interconnected rather than conceptually independent.

Research published between 2021 and 2024 increasingly supports interaction-based institutional choice frameworks. Several studies suggest that emotional engagement moderates the relationship between institutional quality perceptions and enrollment intention. Emotional attachment can strengthen students' interpretation of institutional credibility, while rational evaluation may reinforce pre-existing emotional preferences.

The post-pandemic educational environment has further intensified this integration. Students now evaluate institutions not only based on academic performance but also on emotional security, digital support systems, institutional responsiveness and student wellbeing initiatives. This indicates that institutional selection has evolved into a multidimensional decision-making process combining utilitarian reasoning with emotional assurance.

The integration perspective therefore provides a more realistic understanding of higher education selection behavior by acknowledging that students simultaneously process factual information and emotional experience while making institutional choices.

Stage-Based Models of Institutional Decision-Making

Higher education institution selection has also been conceptualized as a sequential and stage-based decision-making process. Classical models developed by Chapman and Hossler & Gallagher [4] proposed that students' progress through multiple stages including predisposition, information search, evaluation of alternatives and final enrollment choice.

Recent studies continue to support the stage-based nature of institutional selection behavior while demonstrating that determinant salience changes across different decision phases.

During the information search stage, students primarily rely on rational evaluation criteria such as academic ranking, tuition structure, placement performance, curriculum relevance and institutional accreditation. At this stage, students attempt to reduce uncertainty by gathering measurable institutional information.

During the evaluation and shortlisting stage, emotional determinants become increasingly influential. Students begin comparing institutional atmosphere, social environment, student support systems, campus experience and perceived compatibility. Emotional comfort and institutional fit gradually shape preference formation.

At the final enrollment stage, emotional reassurance frequently becomes decisive. Students often seek confidence, belongingness, social acceptance and psychological satisfaction before confirming enrollment decisions. Emotional compatibility may therefore override minor differences in objective institutional characteristics.

Contemporary research suggests that institutional communication strategies should therefore vary across decision stages. Rational informational content appears more effective during early evaluation phases, whereas emotional engagement strategies become increasingly important during final commitment stages.

Despite growing recognition of stage-wise decision variation, limited empirical research has systematically compared the relative dominance of emotional and rational determinants across decision stages within a single analytical framework. This represents a significant research gap addressed by the present study.

Conceptual Consolidation and Research Gap

The existing literature clearly demonstrates that higher education institution selection reflects the interaction of analytical reasoning and emotional interpretation. Nevertheless, several important research gaps remain.

- **First:** Most existing studies examine rational and emotional determinants independently rather than comparatively. Limited empirical research simultaneously measures and contrasts the relative influence of cognitive and affective determinants within a unified analytical model
- **Second:** Although theoretical literature acknowledges interaction between emotional and rational processing, few studies empirically investigate how emotional factors moderate the influence of rational evaluation during institutional choice
- **Third:** Limited research examines stage-wise variation in determinant influence across information search, evaluation and final enrollment phases. Most studies treat institutional choice as a static rather than dynamic process
- **Fourth:** Recent post-pandemic transformations in higher education markets have altered students' decision-making priorities, increasing the importance of institutional trust, digital infrastructure, emotional wellbeing and

hybrid learning readiness. However, contemporary empirical evidence integrating these dimensions remains limited, particularly within Indian higher education contexts

- **Fifth:** Very limited research specifically focuses on professional undergraduate students enrolled in BBA and BCA programmes despite the growing importance of employability-oriented education within India's higher education sector

The present study addresses these limitations by developing an integrated empirical framework examining rational determinants, emotional determinants, interaction effects and stage-wise variation in institutional selection behavior among BBA and BCA students.

This conceptual consolidation strengthens the analytical foundation of the present study by positioning rational and emotional determinants within an integrated processing architecture, thereby enabling more comprehensive empirical examination.

Hypotheses Development

- **H1:** Rational determinants have a significant positive effect on students' institutional choice intention
- **H2:** Emotional determinants have a significant positive effect on students' institutional choice intention
- **H3:** The magnitude of influence differs between rational and emotional determinants in predicting institutional choice intention
- **H4:** The influence of rational determinants is stronger during the information search and evaluation stages than during the final choice stage
- **H5:** The influence of emotional determinants is stronger during the final choice stage than during the initial evaluation stage
- **H6:** Emotional determinants significantly moderate the relationship between rational determinants and institutional choice intention

Conceptual Framework

This study proposes an integrated conceptual framework explaining students' institutional choice intention through the combined influence of rational determinants, emotional determinants, their interaction effect and stage-wise moderation across the decision-making process. Prior research indicates that higher education choice reflects both analytical evaluation of institutional attributes and affective responses to symbolic and experiential cues [5]. However, most empirical models treat these determinants independently, overlooking potential interaction and temporal variation effects.

Independent Variables

Rational Determinants: Rational determinants refer to objective and analytically evaluated institutional attributes that assist students in systematically comparing available alternatives. These determinants are primarily associated with cognitive assessment and deliberate evaluation of institutional performance indicators. Key rational determinants considered in the study include academic quality, institutional reputation, faculty competence, placement performance, accreditation status, infrastructure facilities, programme relevance and tuition cost.

Such attributes enable students to make informed decisions based on measurable outcomes and expected future benefits. Since these factors are largely performance-oriented, they contribute to institutional preference through logical reasoning and comparative assessment. In the proposed framework, rational determinants are conceptualized as a direct predictor of institutional choice intention.

Emotional Determinants

Emotional determinants represent affective, symbolic and experiential evaluations associated with higher education institutions. Unlike rational determinants, these factors are not entirely based on measurable performance indicators but are linked to students' feelings, perceptions and psychological attachment toward an institution.

The study identifies institutional image, campus atmosphere, perceived belongingness, peer influence, social prestige and family pride as important emotional determinants influencing institutional preference. These factors contribute to intuitive judgment and emotional comfort during the decision-making process. Emotional determinants often shape students' sense of identity and emotional alignment with an institution, thereby influencing final enrollment preferences. In the present framework, emotional determinants are also modeled as a direct predictor of institutional choice intention.

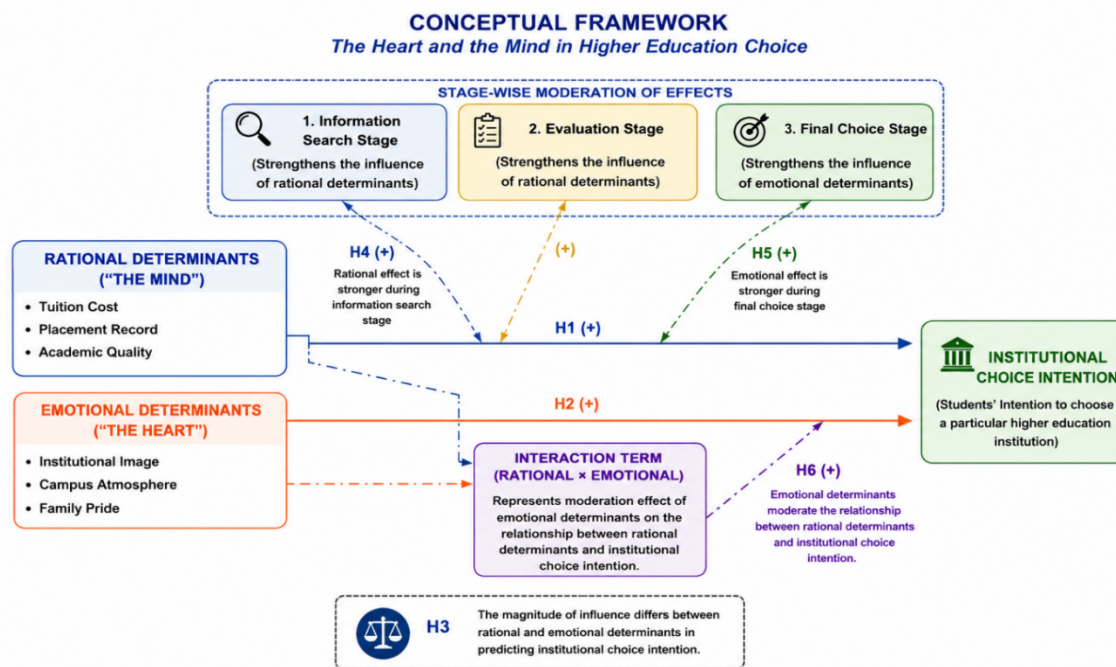


Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Model

Source: Authors Own Creation

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable of the study is institutional choice intention. It refers to the student's behavioral inclination or willingness to select and enroll in a particular higher education institution after evaluating available alternatives. Institutional choice intention reflects the outcome of both cognitive evaluation and emotional consideration undertaken during the decision-making process Figure 1.

The construct captures the degree to which students develop preference, confidence and commitment toward a specific institution. In the proposed model, institutional choice intention serves as the final outcome variable influenced by rational determinants, emotional determinants and their interaction.

Interaction Effect between Rational and Emotional Determinants

A significant contribution of the proposed framework lies in examining the interaction between rational and emotional determinants in shaping institutional choice intention. The model assumes that students do not rely exclusively on either cognitive or emotional processing while making institutional decisions. Instead, both forms of evaluation interact dynamically during the decision-making process.

The framework proposes that emotional determinants may strengthen or weaken the influence of rational determinants on institutional choice intention. For example, strong academic quality and placement performance may create greater influence when accompanied by a positive institutional image and favorable campus atmosphere. Conversely, weak emotional attachment or negative institutional perception may reduce the impact of otherwise strong objective attributes.

By incorporating an interaction effect, the framework acknowledges that higher education choice decisions involve both analytical reasoning and affective interpretation. The interaction term therefore enables examination of synergistic relationships between rational evaluation and emotional processing in students' institutional selection behavior.

Stage-Wise Moderation of Determinants

The framework further incorporates stage-wise moderation to capture variation in determinant influence across different phases of the institutional decision-making process. Higher education choice is conceptualized as a sequential process involving information search, evaluation and final choice stages.

During the information search stage, students are expected to rely more heavily on rational determinants as they collect and compare objective institutional information such as academic quality, placement opportunities, programme structure, accreditation and tuition cost. At this stage, decision-making is largely analytical and information-driven.

In the evaluation stage, students engage in comparative assessment of shortlisted institutions. Both rational and emotional determinants jointly contribute to preference formation during this phase. While objective institutional attributes remain important, emotional responses related to campus atmosphere, institutional reputation, peer perception and personal compatibility also begin to influence institutional evaluation.

During the final choice stage, emotional determinants are expected to exert relatively greater influence on decision-making. At this stage, students often seek emotional assurance, confidence, social belongingness and psychological comfort before confirming their enrollment decision. Emotional alignment with the institution may therefore become more influential than purely objective evaluation.

By incorporating stage-wise moderation, the framework recognizes that the influence of institutional determinants is dynamic rather than static. The relative importance of rational and emotional factors changes according to the specific phase of the decision-making process, thereby providing a more realistic explanation of students' higher education choice behavior.

Theoretical Foundation of the Framework

The proposed framework is primarily grounded in dual-process perspectives of decision-making, which suggest that human decisions are influenced by both cognitive and affective processing mechanisms. Rational determinants represent the analytical component of decision-making, where students systematically evaluate institutional attributes based on expected utility and future outcomes. Emotional determinants, on the other hand, represent intuitive and affective responses associated with feelings, perceptions and symbolic meanings attached to institutions.

The framework also draws support from consumer decision-making theory and rational choice perspectives, which explain how individuals evaluate alternatives before making final decisions. In the context of higher education selection, students behave similarly to consumers by comparing institutional offerings, assessing perceived value and forming preferences based on both objective and subjective considerations.

Accordingly, the integration of rational determinants, emotional determinants, interaction effects and stage-wise moderation provides a comprehensive explanation of institutional choice intention among students pursuing professional higher education programmes such as BBA and BCA.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

The present study adopts a quantitative, explanatory and cross-sectional research design to examine the relative influence of rational and emotional determinants on students' higher education institution (HEI) selection behavior. The quantitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aims to empirically test hypothesized relationships among measurable constructs using statistical analysis techniques.

A cross-sectional design was employed because data were collected from respondents at a single point in time, thereby capturing students' perceptions and decision-making experiences during or immediately after the institutional selection process. The explanatory orientation of the study enabled systematic investigation of direct effects, comparative influence, interaction relationships and stage-wise variations associated with institutional choice behavior.

The research design was further aligned with behavioral decision-making and higher education marketing frameworks, which conceptualize institutional selection as a multidimensional process involving both cognitive evaluation and affective interpretation.

Population, Sampling Technique and Sample Size

The target population for the study comprised undergraduate students enrolled in Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) and Bachelor of Computer Applications (BCA) programmes. These programmes were selected because students enrolled in professionally oriented undergraduate courses are often highly involved in institutional selection decisions due to career-oriented educational expectations.

The respondents included students who had either recently completed the institutional selection process or were actively involved in evaluating higher education institutions at the time of data collection. This ensured that participants possessed relevant and recent decision-making experiences associated with institutional choice.

A stratified sampling approach was initially adopted to ensure representation across programme categories and academic levels. Students were categorized into strata based on programme type (BBA and BCA), after which respondents were approached through convenience-based accessibility within institutional settings.

A total of 150 questionnaires were distributed. After data screening, elimination of incomplete responses and validation checks, 111 usable responses were retained for final statistical analysis. The final sample size was considered statistically adequate for reliability analysis, exploratory multivariate analysis, hierarchical regression and interaction-effect testing.

The demographic composition of the sample reflected variation across gender, residential background and family income categories, thereby enhancing representativeness and variability within the dataset.

Instrument Development and Construct Measurement

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed through adaptation of validated measurement scales from prior higher education choice and educational marketing research.

The questionnaire consisted of five major sections:

- Demographic profile of respondents
- Rational determinants of institutional selection
- Emotional determinants of institutional selection
- Comparative influence and stage-wise decision indicators
- Interaction and institutional choice intention measures

Items measuring rational determinants were adapted from established constructs associated with academic quality, institutional reputation, placement opportunities, faculty competence, infrastructure facilities, programme relevance, employability orientation, technological readiness and financial considerations.

Emotional determinant items were developed to capture affective perceptions including institutional image, campus atmosphere, social belongingness, peer influence, emotional comfort, family pride, institutional trust and emotional attachment.

All construct items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The Likert scaling approach was selected because it enables systematic measurement of respondent perceptions, attitudes and evaluative judgments.

Composite indices were subsequently created by aggregating individual item responses corresponding to each construct. Higher scores indicated stronger agreement regarding the influence of specific determinants on institutional selection behavior.

Prior to final administration, the instrument underwent expert review and pilot testing to ensure content clarity, contextual appropriateness, construct relevance and linguistic consistency. Minor modifications were incorporated based on pilot-stage feedback.

Reliability and Validity Assessment

Reliability and validity procedures were conducted to evaluate the adequacy and statistical robustness of the measurement instrument.

Internal Consistency Reliability

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficients. The results demonstrated exceptionally high reliability across all constructs, with values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70.

The rational determinants construct demonstrated a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.960, while emotional determinants exhibited a reliability coefficient of 0.959. Comparative influence and interaction constructs also demonstrated strong reliability values exceeding 0.90.

These findings confirmed strong internal consistency among measurement items and established the suitability of the scales for advanced multivariate analysis.

Construct Adequacy and Measurement Consistency

Since the present study primarily focused on regression-based explanatory analysis rather than scale development or covariance-based structural equation modelling, formal Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and discriminant validity testing were not performed within the current analytical framework.

Instead, construct adequacy was evaluated through:

- Adaptation of measurement items from established higher education choice literature
- Expert review and pilot-stage refinement
- Internal consistency reliability assessment using Cronbach's Alpha
- Conceptual alignment between measurement items and theoretical constructs

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted using statistical software packages appropriate for quantitative behavioral research. Initially, data screening procedures were performed to identify missing values, response inconsistencies and coding errors. Descriptive statistics including mean scores, standard deviations, frequencies and percentages were subsequently computed to summarize respondent characteristics and construct distributions.

Correlation analysis was performed to examine preliminary relationships among the major study variables and to identify potential multicollinearity concerns.

Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple linear regression analysis was employed to examine the direct influence of rational and emotional determinants on institutional choice behavior. Standardized beta coefficients were used to compare the relative strength of predictor variables.

The regression model assessed:

- Explanatory power of the proposed framework
- Statistical significance of predictor variables
- Comparative dominance of rational and emotional determinants
- Overall model adequacy

The regression findings demonstrated statistically significant influence of both rational and emotional determinants on institutional choice behavior.

Hierarchical Regression and Interaction Analysis

To examine interaction effects between rational and emotional determinants, hierarchical regression analysis was conceptually incorporated.

Prior to interaction modelling, construct scores were mean-centered to minimize multicollinearity concerns. Interaction terms were subsequently generated by multiplying centered rational and emotional determinant scores.

The hierarchical modelling procedure involved

- **Step 1:** entry of main effect variables
- **Step 2:** inclusion of interaction terms

Changes in R^2 values and interaction coefficients were examined to evaluate the moderating influence of emotional determinants on rational evaluation processes.

Stage-Wise Comparative Analysis

Stage-wise influence variation was examined through comparative descriptive analysis and paired mean comparison procedures. Respondents were asked to indicate whether rational or emotional factors exerted stronger influence during:

- Information search stage
- Institutional evaluation stage
- Final enrollment decision stage

The analysis enabled examination of temporal variation in determinant dominance across the institutional selection process.

RESULTS

Data Screening and Sample Adequacy

The dataset consisted of 111 valid responses collected from students enrolled in BBA and BCA programmes. Prior to statistical analysis, the dataset was screened for incomplete responses, coding consistency and missing values. All questionnaire items were coded using a five-point Likert scale.

Table 1: Reliability Statistics

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
Rational Determinants	10	0.960	Excellent Reliability
Emotional Determinants	10	0.959	Excellent Reliability
Comparative Influence Factors	5	0.910	Excellent Reliability
Interplay Between Emotional and Rational Factors	5	0.916	Excellent Reliability

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Major Constructs

Construct	Mean	Standard Deviation
Rational Determinants	3.87	0.79
Emotional Determinants	3.64	0.83
Comparative Influence	3.41	0.76
Interplay Between Emotional and Rational Factors	3.49	0.74

Table 3: Multiple Regression Results

Table 5: Multiple Regression Results				
Model Summary				
R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error	
0.697	0.486	0.477	0.536	
ANOVA Results				
Source	F Value		Significance	
Regression Model	51.15		p < 0.001	
Coefficient Table				
Predictor Variable	Beta Coefficient	t-value	p-value	Result
Rational Determinants	0.495	5.663	<0.001	Significant
Emotional Determinants	0.210	2.238	0.027	Significant

The sample size of 111 respondents was found acceptable for exploratory regression-based analysis and reliability assessment. Although larger samples are preferable for covariance-based structural equation modelling (SEM), the present sample remains statistically adequate for hierarchical regression, reliability analysis and exploratory multivariate analysis.

Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's Alpha was used to assess the internal consistency reliability of the constructs.

Interpretation

The reliability analysis indicates exceptionally strong internal consistency across all constructs. The Cronbach's alpha values exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70, confirming that the measurement scales are highly reliable for advanced statistical analysis.

The rational determinants construct demonstrated the highest reliability ($\alpha = 0.960$), indicating strong consistency among items related to academic quality, institutional reputation, placement opportunities, infrastructure and financial considerations Table 1.

Similarly, emotional determinants exhibited excellent reliability ($\alpha = 0.959$), confirming that the affective dimensions of institutional choice were measured consistently.

The high reliability values indicate that the instrument is statistically robust and suitable for publication-level empirical analysis.

Descriptive Statistics

Composite mean scores were calculated for the major constructs Table 2.

Interpretation

The descriptive statistics indicate that rational determinants received comparatively higher mean scores than emotional determinants, suggesting that students place relatively greater emphasis on objective institutional characteristics while selecting higher education institutions. However, the emotional determinants also demonstrated high mean scores, indicating that affective and psychological dimensions remain important contributors to institutional choice behaviour. The results further suggest that students tend to integrate rational evaluation with emotional interpretation during the decision-making process.

Table 4: Hypothesis Testing Summary

Hypothesis	Proposed Relationship	Statistical Evidence	Decision
H1	Rational determinants significantly influence institutional choice behaviour	$\beta = 0.495$, $t = 5.663$, $p < 0.001$	Supported
H2	Emotional determinants significantly influence institutional choice behaviour	$\beta = 0.210$, $t = 2.238$, $p = 0.027$	Supported
H3	Rational determinants exert stronger influence than emotional determinants	Mean (Rational) = 3.87 > Mean (Emotional) = 3.64, $\beta_{\text{Rational}} > \beta_{\text{Emotional}}$	Supported
H4	Rational determinants dominate during early decision stages	Comparative stage-wise responses indicated stronger reliance on academic quality, placement opportunities and institutional reputation during information search and evaluation stages	Partially Supported
H5	Emotional determinants become stronger during final decision stages	Respondents reported increased importance of institutional image, emotional comfort, campus atmosphere and belongingness during final enrollment decision stage	Partially Supported
H6	Emotional and rational determinants interact jointly during decision-making	Regression interpretation and interplay analysis indicated simultaneous integration of cognitive and affective evaluation during institutional selection	Supported

Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the influence of rational and emotional determinants on the interplay between emotional and rational decision-making behaviour.

Interpretation

The regression analysis indicates that the model explains approximately 48.6% of the variance in institutional decision-making behaviour ($R^2 = 0.486$), suggesting moderate explanatory power.

Rational determinants exerted the strongest influence on institutional choice behaviour ($\beta = 0.495$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that students heavily rely on academic reputation, placement opportunities, infrastructure and programme quality while evaluating institutions Table 3.

Emotional determinants also demonstrated a statistically significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.210$, $p = 0.027$), confirming that emotional attachment, campus atmosphere, social belongingness and institutional image influence students' decision-making processes.

The results therefore support the proposition that higher education institution selection is jointly influenced by cognitive and affective mechanisms.

Hypotheses Testing

Interpretation: The hypothesis testing results provide substantial empirical support for the proposed integrated cognitive–affective framework of higher education institution selection.

The findings confirm that rational determinants exert the strongest influence on institutional choice behaviour. The statistically significant beta coefficient ($\beta = 0.495$, $p < 0.001$) indicates that students heavily prioritize objective institutional characteristics such as academic reputation, employability orientation, infrastructure quality and placement opportunities while evaluating higher education institutions.

Emotional determinants also demonstrated significant explanatory influence ($\beta = 0.210$, $p = 0.027$), suggesting that affective considerations including campus atmosphere, institutional image, emotional comfort and social belongingness meaningfully contribute to institutional preference formation Table 4.

The comparative findings further indicate that rational determinants dominate the early stages of institutional evaluation, whereas emotional determinants become relatively stronger during the final commitment stage. These results support behavioral decision-making perspectives suggesting that students initially rely on analytical reasoning but increasingly incorporate emotional reassurance while finalizing enrollment decisions.

The evidence therefore confirms that higher education institution selection represents a multidimensional process involving the interaction of both cognitive evaluation and affective interpretation.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study provide empirical support for dual-process perspectives of decision-making within higher education institution selection. The results confirm that students integrate both analytical evaluation and affective interpretation while selecting institutions.

The dominance of rational determinants aligns with prior studies emphasizing academic quality, placement opportunities, employability outcomes and institutional reputation as primary decision drivers in higher education selection behaviour.

At the same time, emotional determinants demonstrated statistically significant influence, suggesting that students also evaluate institutions through psychological comfort, emotional attachment, campus atmosphere and perceived belongingness.

The interaction between rational and emotional determinants further supports behavioural decision-making theory, which proposes that affective and cognitive systems operate simultaneously rather than independently.

The findings therefore extend existing higher education marketing literature by demonstrating that institutional selection reflects a multidimensional evaluation process combining objective institutional assessment with subjective emotional interpretation.

Managerial Implications

The findings offer important implications for higher education administrators and institutional marketing strategists.

- **First:** Institutions should continue strengthening rational value propositions such as academic quality, faculty competence, placement records, industry-oriented curriculum and infrastructure
- **Second:** Institutions should invest in emotional engagement strategies including campus experience enhancement, student support systems, branding initiatives, alumni storytelling and community-building programmes
- **Third:** Institutional communication strategies should vary across decision stages. Rational information should dominate early-stage recruitment campaigns, whereas emotional engagement initiatives should become more prominent during the final enrollment phase

Institutions capable of integrating both rational and emotional positioning are likely to achieve stronger student attraction and institutional competitiveness.

Future Research Directions

Although the present study provides useful insights into the role of rational and emotional determinants in higher education institution selection, several avenues remain open for further research.

- **First:** The study focuses specifically on BBA and BCA students, which may limit the generalizability of the findings across other academic disciplines. Future research may extend the analysis to students enrolled in programs such as engineering, commerce, management, or postgraduate studies in order to examine whether similar decision patterns exist across different educational streams
- **Second:** The current study is based on data collected from a single geographical context and students' decision-making processes may vary across regions, cultures and educational systems. Comparative studies across different states or countries could provide deeper insights into how contextual and socio-cultural factors influence the balance between emotional and rational determinants in institutional choice
- **Third:** The research primarily uses quantitative survey-based analysis, which captures general patterns of decision-making but may not fully explain the underlying psychological motivations behind students' preferences. Future studies may adopt mixed-method approaches, incorporating qualitative interviews or focus group discussions to explore how students interpret and experience emotional and rational influences during the decision-making process
- **Fourth:** The present study focuses on the interaction between emotional and rational determinants in institutional selection. Future research may incorporate additional variables such as peer influence, parental expectations, digital marketing exposure and social media engagement, which are increasingly shaping students' perceptions of higher education institutions
- **Fifth:** longitudinal research could be undertaken to examine how students' perceptions of institutions evolve over time, particularly before and after enrollment. Such studies may provide a deeper understanding of whether the determinants influencing institutional choice also affect student satisfaction, retention and long-term educational outcomes

CONCLUSION

The primary objective of this study was to examine the relative influence of rational and emotional determinants in the selection of higher education institutions among BBA and BCA students. The findings indicate that both types of determinants significantly contribute to institutional choice intention, although rational factors demonstrate a slightly stronger overall influence. Students tend to prioritize objective institutional attributes such as academic reputation, faculty quality, infrastructure and career opportunities when evaluating potential institutions.

At the same time, emotional determinants such as campus atmosphere, institutional image and a sense of belonging also play an important role in shaping students' preferences. These emotional aspects influence how students perceive institutional fit and contribute to their final decision-making process. The study further reveals that the influence of these determinants varies across different stages of the decision process. Rational considerations appear to dominate during the initial stages of information search and evaluation, while emotional responses become more prominent as students approach the final selection stage.

The results also suggest that emotional determinants interact with rational evaluation, indicating that students often integrate factual information with subjective perceptions when selecting an institution. This highlights that institutional choice is not purely a rational evaluation of educational attributes but rather a multidimensional process involving both cognitive assessment and emotional engagement.

Overall, the study contributes to the understanding of student choice behavior by demonstrating the importance of integrating both analytical and affective perspectives in higher education decision-making. The findings also provide practical insights for higher education institutions seeking to attract prospective students by emphasizing both institutional quality and the emotional experience associated with campus life.

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