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Personal values matter: international students' university selection

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ABSTRACT

Although personal values are considered the critical psychological factor influencing individuals' motivation, behavior, and preferences, their role in influencing international students' university selection criteria has been largely overlooked. To fill this gap, 47 international students at a private Southwest university in the United States were interviewed and analyzed through the Means-End Chain (MEC) approach. The Hierarchical Value Model shows that achievement, self-direction (thought and action), security (personal and societal), and hedonistic values were the most important values influencing their choices. By adopting the MEC approach, this study contributes to education psychology literature by highlighting the importance of personal values in determining international students' university selection criteria.

Introduction

In the past few years, the admission of students to universities in developed countries (e.g. the US and UK) has steadily declined. For example, in the U.S. alone, undergraduate enrollment declined by 6% between 2019 and 2023, resulting in nearly 1 million fewer students (Welding 2024). To overcome this issue, U.S. universities have shifted their focus to non-traditional students (Caylor 2024), including mature students, transfer students, minority students, veterans, and international students (Nugent 2018). According to Nietzel (2023), international students are attractive to U.S. universities because they are well-prepared for academic success and pay full tuition fees. According to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2006), the term international student describes internationally mobile students who intend to leave their country or territory of origin and move to another country or territory to study (p. 33). In the 2022–3 academic year, international students contributed more than USD 40 billion to the U.S. economy (Stewart 2023). According to a 2023 Homeland Security Investigation report, international students in 2023 came from a variety of countries, including India (378 K), China (331 K), South Korea (63 K), Canada (44 K), Brazil (42 K), Vietnam (31 K), Japan (28 K), Taiwan (28 K), Nigeria (26 K), and Mexico (24 K). Despite this positive outlook, Greenfield (2024) warns that U.S. universities are in danger of losing their attractiveness.

To remain attractive, scholars have explored what drives international students to attend universities and found that a university's location and students' country of origin significantly impact their decisions. For example, Vietnamese students in Australia focus on gaining international work experience, language skills, and a global perspective (Nghia 2015); collectively, students from Asia studying in Australia are heavily influenced by cultural and parental guidance (Sheehan and Riddle 2022).

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Chinese students are drawn to U.S. universities for their educational quality, freedom, and opportunities for immigration (Austin and Shen 2016). Indian and U.K. students in the Netherlands prioritize top-ranked institutions and strong career prospects (King and Sondhi 2018). Cultural connections are key for students from Central Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe studying in Turkey, whereas those in Malaysia are attracted by affordability, safety, and religious familiarity (Ahmad and Frederick 2016; Özoğlu, Gür, and Coşkun 2015). According to Lipura and Collins (2020), these rationales can be categorized into three perspectives. The first perspective, the 'push–pull model,' explains that a cost–benefit analysis is the primary factor in students' decision-making (Ke, Junfeng, and Xiaojing 2022). The second perspective, 'transnational and social context network model,' describes the importance of social connections, and the last perspective, 'capital accumulation, social reproduction and becoming,' focuses on the degree of competitiveness. According to Tran and Vu (2016), this competitiveness reflects the desire for personal transformation. These findings show that international students' selection criteria for studying abroad are multidimensional, complex, and affected by internal (psychological) factors such as cognitive and affective, and external (non-psychological) factors such as culture, family, and situation. Between these two factors, Bordia et al. (2018) argue that psychological factors play a more important role in determining international students' selection criteria.

As a critical psychological factor, personal values act as a barometer to determine what is important in life (Herjanto and Amin 2021). Psychologically, Schwartz (2017) suggests personal values are enduring beliefs guiding individuals' choices. These beliefs affect emotions, motivations, goals, standards, and priorities (Schwartz 1999), shaping preferences (Herjanto and Amin 2021) and decisions (Fearon et al. 2018). Rokeach (1973) suggests that personal values are long-lasting beliefs that lead individuals to behave in ways that are personally and socially acceptable. Accordingly, personal values are personally related to individuals' sense of purpose (Pownall, Harris, and Blundell-Birtill 2022), which drives them to find ways to achieve their goals (Lizzio 2006). Despite the importance of this concept, to the best of the authors' knowledge, there is limited research exploring how various personal values impact international students' university selection criteria. Accordingly, Al-Dmour, Al-Dmour, and Al-Dmour (2024) urgently call scholars to investigate this phenomenon. Thus, this study seeks to extend the literature by examining this relationship, specifically in the context of international students in U.S. universities.

Therefore, focusing on personal values in this study is important because personal values strongly influence decision-making processes, including how international students choose a university. Gaining a better understanding of international students' personal values may help universities develop relevant strategies to attract more international students. Veludo-de-Oliveira, Ikeda, and Campomar (2006) argue that the MEC (Means-End Chain) approach is the most effective method for investigating personal values. Compared with the attributes-based method and conjoint analysis approach, MEC offers a deeper and more comprehensive explanation of individuals' decision-making and goals. While attribute-based methods and conjoint analysis focus on comparing and prioritizing important product attributes, MEC takes a further approach by describing why such attributes relate to individuals' motivation and personal values. Additionally, this approach allows scholars to conduct a detailed and in-depth analysis, identifying the most important route to a subject's accurate mental framework (Castellano, Khelladi, and Menvielle 2017). Furthermore, scholars also have found the MEC approach useful for exploring personal values in cross-cultural contexts. For example, Li, Zhao, and Yang (2012) used the MEC approach to study how customer preferences for personal values vary across Chinese subcultural backgrounds. More recently, the MEC approach helped Öztürk (2024) to reveal that white meat consumption among Muslims in the U.K. is motivated by spiritual values; in contrast, Muslims in Turkey are motivated by values like security, hedonism, and achievement. The argument above shows that MEC is effective in identifying and explaining the key factors and their importance to individuals when making decisions (Borgardt 2020).

Furthermore, the MEC is viewed as a useful approach for exploring relationships between individuals' goals (what they want) and values (why they want it) (Gutman 1997) from cognitive and motivational viewpoints (Grunert and Grunnert 1995). To illustrate, from a motivational perspective, MEC

discloses consumers' purchasing motives, while from a cognitive perspective, this approach represents the cognitive structures related to such purchases (Reynolds and Gutman 2001). Operationally, the MEC approach explains that individuals' end goals result from how they perceive certain attributes or reasons and the consequences they relate to them. Through this process, individuals learn to view products or services based on their attributes, the consequences they experience from using them, and how these products or services help them reach important personal goals that fit with their values (Gutman 1997). For example, international students may evaluate university features – such as the quality of programs and career support – and consider how these features will help them build skills and connections. In this way, the student connects what the university offers to their goal of career success, aligning with their values. To our knowledge, this study is the first study to utilize the MEC laddering approach to investigate international students' university selection criteria. Consequently, the study aims to address two research questions:

RQ1: Which personal values influence international student selection criteria?

RQ2: What are the most dominant personal values determining their university selection?

Literature review

Personal values

Schwartz (2017) conceptualizes personal values as the distinct beliefs that guide how individuals standardize and evaluate their individual and social environment based on what is good and worthy, which consequently influences their thoughts, preferences, and behaviors. This definition shows that personal values are highly personal and social (Steinert 2023) and shape individuals' perceptions, self-concept, and reactions to social issues. Accordingly, personal values generate specific attitudes that motivate certain behaviors (Pincus 2024). Accordingly, personal values are considered important guidelines used by individuals to survive by promoting their well-being and interactions with others (Schwartz 1992). Thus, experts conclude that personal values are focal to an individual's psychological state (Nazirova and Borbala 2024; Rokeach 1973). Theoretically, Schwartz (2017) suggests that personal values are universal and can be classified into four main categories. The first, self-transcendence, focuses on the well-being of others and includes values like benevolence (dependability vs. caring) and universalism (tolerance vs. concern vs. nature) values. The second category, conservation, centers on maintaining the status quo and includes values like conformity (interpersonal vs. rules), tradition, and security (societal vs. personal). The third category, self-enhancement, prioritizes the quest for self-interest. This category includes power (resources vs. dominance) and achievement. Finally, the last category, openness to change, encourages innovation and contains values like stimulation and self-direction (thought vs. action). Schwartz (2017) also notes that values of humility, face, and hedonism overlap between these categories. Finally, Herjanto (2013) concluded that these four main categories can be considered inward values (openness to change and self-enhancement) and outward values (conservation and self-transcendence). Thus, understanding the effect of personal values will offer an invaluable understanding of how such values shape international students' motivations, priorities, and decision-making processes.

Personal values studies in an educational context

The importance of personal values in the success of universities in attracting students is not unnoticed; studies in this area focus on two different lines of investigation. The first line focuses on the outcomes of personal values, specifically investigating how personal values influence students' satisfaction and loyalty to the university. For example, Arambewela and Hall (2013) found that Asian international students' satisfaction in Australian universities is determined by security (sense of belongingness and local community acceptance), power (image and prestige and university

facilities), hedonism (pleasure) and achievement (self-efficacy) respectively. These findings align closely with the Asian cultural values described by Kim, Atkinson, and Yang (1999). In other words, Asian international students' learning experience and satisfaction in Australia are determined by their aspirations and socially based personal values, such as collectivism, respect for hierarchy, and family pride through success. A few years later, Jamaludin et al. (2016) discovered that international students' loyalty in Norway was determined by personal values of universalism through subjective well-being. Jamaludin et al. (2016) further explain that universalism values promote harmonious relationships (i.e. selflessness, appreciation, tolerance, understanding, and protection of others' welfare) and unity with nature. This value fits with Norwegian's way of life, which stresses the welfare of society and clean nature (Jamaludin et al. 2016). The shared values between international students and Norwegians heighten international students' subjective well-being, further improving their loyalty to their university. According to Schertzer and Schertzer (2004), studies investigating student satisfaction and loyalty are relevant since both are vital factors in maintaining student retention.

The second line concentrates on how personal values help students achieve their learning and growth goals. For example, Matthews, Lietz, and Darmawan (2007) investigated the effect of personal values on college students' different learning approaches and found that different personal values link to different learning approaches. They find that self-aggrandizement is connected to an achievement learning approach, whereas conservatism and self-directedness are associated with surface and deep learning approaches, respectively. Finally, Matthews, Lietz, and Darmawan (2007) benevolence is connected to the learning strategies approach. More recently, Herjanto et al. (2023) explored the effect of personal values on undergraduate students' major selection. This research found that, to a larger extent, inward values (self-enhancement and openness to change) and hedonism and, to a lesser extent, outward values (benevolence) are responsible for university students selecting marketing as their major (Herjanto et al. 2023). Herjanto et al. (2023) argue that understanding personal values can help universities attract potential students by designing and offering courses that fit with students' values (Herjanto et al. 2023). The studies above provide evidence that personal values affect students' preferences in educational settings. Despite this understanding, none of the studies examined how personal values influence international students' university selection. For this reason, we propose that investigating personal values should be extended since a better understanding could enhance international student enrollment.

Methodology

Research design

This study investigates the underlying personal values behind international students' university selection. Since personal values are mainly associated with hidden and unconscious aspects of consumer behavior and are less discussed in the context of university selection, our study has taken an exploratory, qualitative approach. This approach is suitable for less investigated topics (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill 2007) because (a) it uncovers comprehensive information that can improve the current understanding of the role of personal value (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson 2015) in affecting university selection.

Means-end chain (MEC) approach

Nunkoo and Ramkissoon (2009) assert that the MEC approach is one of the most suitable methods to capture personal values. This approach focuses on how students organize their thoughts and perceptions of attributes, benefits or consequences, and values for a specific context, like selecting a university (Overby, Gardial, and Woodruff 2004). Gutman (1997) explains that attributes are the concrete or abstract qualities of products or services that individuals perceive, while consequences are

the functional, social, or psychological benefits of using such products, and finally, personal values reflect an enduring belief that guides individuals' behavior. Consequently, Nguyen (2020) suggests that this procedure identifies, describes, and builds a roadmap to show the relevant linkages between attributes (A), their consequences (C), and international students' personal values (V).

Laddering

To effectively capture underlying personal values, Reynolds and Gutman (2001) and Gutman (1997) recommend the laddering technique, which shows how individuals' personal values (goals) are connected to benefits or attributes. These connections are organized and presented in a hierarchy format, forming a ladder. According to Kasambala, Kempen, and Pandarum (2016), this technique helps researchers develop a personalized interview format that aids in identifying underlying motivations behind imperative attributes or consequences critical to the participants. Operationally, Reynolds and Gutman (2001) categorized laddering techniques into a soft laddering approach that utilizes in-depth interviews and a hard laddering approach that uses the self-administered questionnaire. Considering time and budget constraints, this study employs the hard-laddering approach since it is considered quick to administer and cost-effective (Reynolds and Gutman 2001). This approach allows participants to respond honestly to semi-structured, self-administered surveys (Jiang, Scott, and Ding 2019), which helps discover participants' genuine perceptions and beliefs in the most detailed manner (Menvielle, Menvielle, and Tournois 2014).

Subject and data gathering method

The participants of this study were international students enrolled in a mid-sized private university in the Southwestern United States. This university was selected because it is recognized for its diversity and includes a student body representing over 70 countries. The research team utilized Qualtrics online survey platform to gather information from the participants because it is cost-effective, flexible, scalable, and requires minimal staffing resources (Gu and Chan 2019). The questionnaire started with a screening question, 'Are you an international student?' to ensure the eligibility of the participants, followed by demographic-related questions to understand the characteristics of participants. Then, participants were asked open-ended questions about their primary attributes in selecting U.S. universities (e.g. please list the three most important attributes that influenced your decision to select and study at the U.S. universities). Subsequently, the questionnaire continued to explore detailed inquiries regarding each attribute (e.g. Q1. Please explain why the FIRST factor you identified was important to you.; Q2. Why does your response in Q1 matter to you? Q3. How does your answer in Q2 relate to the goals you aspire to achieve in your life?) Following the laddering technique's guidance, the questionnaire repeated the questioning process for the SECOND and THIRD attributes using the same questions. To ensure the thoroughness and accuracy of responses, Brühlmann et al. (2020) recommend that participants elaborate and provide answers of at least 50 words for substantive responses to open-ended questions.

Procedure

Following Herjanto et al.'s (2023) multiple-step procedural approach, two authors independently conducted a data-cleaning and coding procedure to determine associations between attributes, consequences, and personal values. To ensure the adequacy, richness, and robustness of data for the MEC approach, Allman et al. (2009) recommend a minimum sample of 40, which Kilwinger (2020) also considers sufficient for the exploratory study. In this study, we gathered fifty-seven international student responses, however, 16 were removed due to incomplete answers, resulting in a 72% response rate. Consequently, 41 responses were included in our analysis. Scholars suggest that this sample size is sufficient Allman et al. (2009) for explaining, validating, and interpreting

the findings (Learmonth et al. 2017) and suitable for journal publication (Dworkin 2012). Table 1 provides a summary of participants' demographic profiles and shows that 81% of the sample is between the ages of 18–24, 63% are female, about 37% identify as Hispanic and White, respectively, and 59% identified Business Administration as their major.

After initial data-cleaning and coding, the two authors compared and discussed findings and resolved any inconsistencies through scholarly discussion, involving the third author as an adjudicator to help settle any differences. After resolving disagreements, the two authors analyzed the content of the 41 responses. The content analysis procedure helped develop codes from unique interconnected themes (Herjanto and Franklin 2019). Each code is characterized by attributes, consequences, and values, which organize all responses (data) into distinct elements. To maintain the robustness and reliability of such analysis, Gaur, Herjanto, and Makkar (2014) recommend conducting Holsti intercoder reliability and following 85% minimum threshold consistency. The result of the inter-coder reliability analysis showed agreement rates of 98%, 99%, and 97% for attributes, consequences, and values across external and internal elements. These findings meet Holsti's 85% minimum threshold.

Secondly, following Lin Chin Feng and Ting's (2019) recommendation, the authors developed an implication matrix. This matrix allows for computation and illustration of the frequency of direct and indirect links among elements (Bianchi, Reyes, and Devenin 2020). Based on this newly developed implication matrix, the authors employed Miles and Rowe's (2004) formula to calculate the abstractness and centrality of recorded attributes. The abstractness represents participants' consciousness of their behavioral attributes, while centrality reflects the intensity of connections among attributes, their consequences, and personal values. The values of abstractness and centrality range from 0 to 1, representing varying levels of abstractness and strength of connections (centrality) to other concepts, behavioral attributes, consequences, and personal values orientations. On one hand, the lower the abstract value, the less abstract behavioral attributes are to the respondent. On the other hand, the higher the centrality value, the stronger connections. Analyzing abstractness and centrality helps researchers identify core attributes and motivations underlying personal values, important for understanding individual decision-making (Miles and Rowe 2004).

Thirdly, the HVM model was formed by synthesizing an implication matrix utilizing Herjanto et al. (2023) top-down three direct relations score cutoff procedure to outline the interconnections among values. Hence, attributes and consequences with fewer than three connections are considered less significant and excluded from the HVM model. Using a three-cutoff criterion helps researchers

Table 1. Participants' brief demographic profiles.

Characteristics		Total	Percentage
Age	18–24	33	81%
	25–34	8	19%
Gender	Female	26	63%
	Male	15	37%
Ethnicity	Asian	5	12%
	African	4	10%
	Hispanic	15	37%
	White	15	37%
	Other	1	2%
	Prefer not to say	1	2%
Major	Business Administration	24	59%
	Marketing	6	15%
	Finance	4	10%
	International Business	2	5%
	Management	1	2%
	Social Work	1	2%
	Criminal Justice	1	2%
	Kinesiology	1	2%
	Psychology	1	2%

standardize the number of ladder results, include significant findings only, and simplify the interpretation of meaningful laddering (Herjanto et al. 2023). Figures 1 and 2 offer the final HVM of international students' U.S. university selection attributes, and Table 2 provides the degree of abstractness and centrality based on the three cutoff approaches.

Findings

HVM findings

The HVM maps show that external and internal attributes impact international students' university selection. External attributes refer to external factors perceived as fundamental for achieving their goals, whereas internal attributes reflect internal factors or skills that help international students accomplish their goals. The external attributes category consists of family-related attributes, opportunities (scholarship, career, and study abroad), good income, and quality of education. The internal attributes category comprises personal growth, experience, networking, and language skills.

External attributes category

This category has three values: security (personal and societal), self-direction (action), and achievement. Security values share similar strengths with self-direction (action) and achievement values. However, security values are considered the most complex because they are affected by six attributes. The first attribute, '*family-related reasons*,' and the second attribute, '*good income*,' were connected through the consequence of 'supporting family financially' and reinforced by 'making my family happy, becoming a role model, and prioritizing family.' The third attribute, '*scholarship opportunities*,' and the fourth attribute, '*study abroad opportunities*,' were linked to 'personal growth' and supported by both 'making my family happy, becoming a role model, and prioritizing family' and 'personal success and contributing to society.' The fifth attribute, '*career opportunities*,' was tied to 'personal growth and career readiness.' Two paths supported personal growth: 'making my family happy, becoming a role model, and prioritizing family,' and 'personal success and contributing to
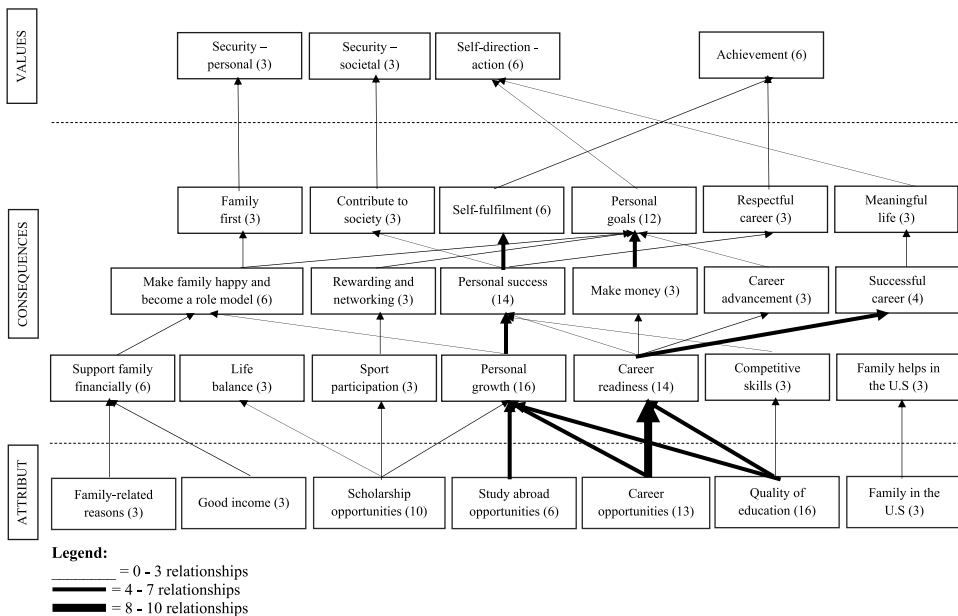

Figure 1. Hierarchical value map – International students' external attributes.
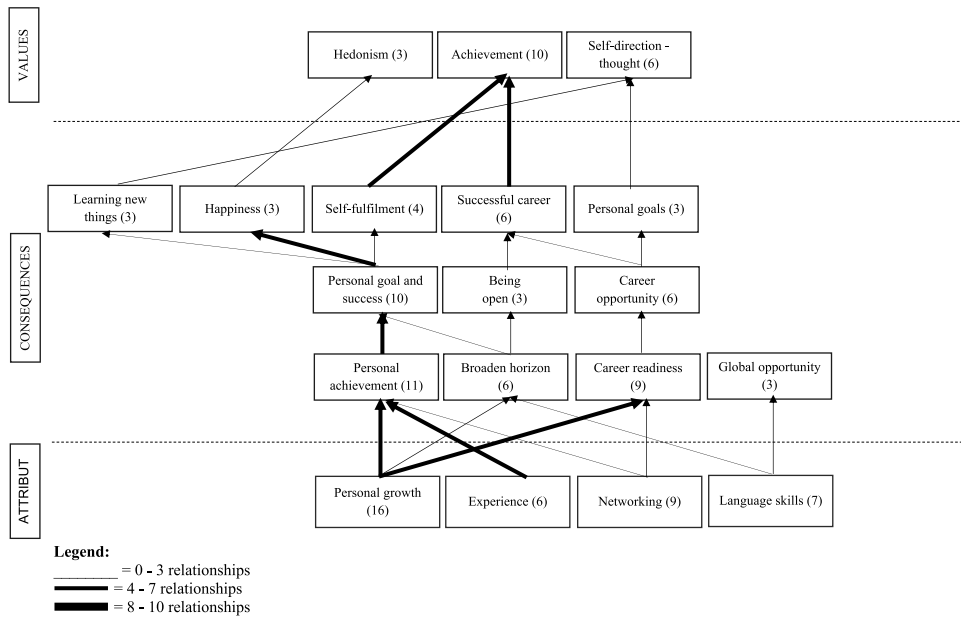
Figure 2. Hierarchical value map – International students' internal attributes.

society.' In contrast, career readiness was supported solely by 'personal success and contributing to society.' Finally, the attribute of '*quality of education*' was linked to the consequences of 'personal growth, career readiness, and competitive skills.' Personal growth was facilitated through the same two paths mentioned above, while career readiness and competitive skills were supported only by 'personal success and contributing to society.'

Self-direction (action) values are developed through five attributes. The first attribute, '*family-related reasons*,' and the second attribute, '*good income*,' were related to consequence of 'support family financially' and supported by 'make my family happy and become a role model and personal goals.' The third attribute of '*scholarship opportunities*' was connected to consequence of 'sports participation' and further facilitated by 'rewarding and networking, and personal goals.' The fourth attribute (*career opportunities*) and fifth attributes (*quality of education*) were affiliated with consequence 'career readiness' and supported by 'make money, career advancement, successful career, personal goals, and meaningful life.'

Table 2. Abstractness and centrality of international student attributes.

Attributes	Abstractness	Centrality
External attributes		
Good income	0.053	0.083
Family-related reasons	0.053	0.083
Scholarships	.025	0.174
Study abroad	0.026	0.165
Career opportunity	0.016	0.274
Quality of education	0.020	0.213
Family members in the U.S.	0.111	0.039
Internal attributes		
Personal growth	0.019	0.639
Experience	0.071	0.169
Networking	0.063	0.193
Upgrade Language skills	0.250	0.048

The achievement values have the simplest roadmap because four attributes form the path. The first attribute (*scholarship opportunities*) and second attribute (*study abroad opportunities*) were related to consequence 'personal growth' and intensified by 'personal success, self-fulfillment, and respectful career.' The third attribute '*career opportunities*' was connected to consequence 'career readiness' and strengthened by 'personal success and respectful career.' The last attribute of '*the quality of education*' was linked to two consequences (personal growth and competitive skills) and reinforced by 'personal success, self-fulfillment, and respectful career.'

Internal attributes category

Three personal values – achievement, self-direction (thoughts), and hedonism – emerged within the internal attributes category. Among these, achievement values are regarded as the most complex, as three attributes generated them. The first attribute, '*personal growth*,' was connected to the consequences 'broadened horizons and career readiness' and was supported by 'personal goal and success, being open, career opportunities, self-fulfillment, and successful career.' The attribute '*networking*' was linked to 'career readiness' and strengthened by 'career opportunities and a successful career.' The last attribute, '*language skills*,' was associated with the consequence 'broadened horizons' and reinforced by personal goals and success, being open, self-fulfillment, and a successful career.'

Self-direction (thought) values were formed by the attributes of '*personal growth'* and '*networking.'* Personal growth was connected to the consequences of 'personal achievement,' 'broadened horizons,' and 'career readiness,' and strengthened by 'personal goals and success,' 'career opportunities,' and 'learning new things.' Networking was connected to 'personal achievement' and 'career readiness,' reinforced by the same factors. Finally, Hedonism values were driven by the single attribute of '*personal growth*,' which was associated with 'personal achievement and broadened horizons' and enhanced by 'personal goals and success' and 'happiness.'

Dominant personal values

The HVM indicates that the following four personal values, security (personal and societal), self-direction (action and thoughts), achievement, and hedonism influence international students' university selection. High-security international students are concerned with maintaining harmony and the status quo (Schwartz 2017). In our study, security value is characterized by focusing on education that maintains stability, welfare, and relationships with family and others. For example, respondents regard knowledge as a platform to contribute positively to society and family welfare. Additionally, respondents with high achievement values perceive a university degree as essential to building a respectful career and fulfilling self-fulfillment. Similarly, high-hedonism international students may sense a degree as a tool to obtain happiness. This study confirms Arambewela and Hall (2013), who found that personal values of security, achievement, and hedonism influence the satisfaction of international students from Asia in Australia. Finally, students with high self-direction (action and thoughts) view their degree as a tool to develop a meaningful life and satisfy their personal and educational goals. Thus, they are willing to dive deep into their studies to prepare themselves for life after university. This finding aligns with Matthews, Lietz, and Darmawan (2007), who discovered that international students with strong self-direction values tend to prefer and are motivated by a deep learning approach (i.e. making connections to previously learned material) over other learning approaches such as surface learning, achievement learning, or other learning strategies.

Discussion

Table 2 shows various external and internal attributes impacting international students' university selection behavior. The abstractness value suggests that 'career opportunity' (0.016) and 'quality

of education' (0.020) are the two most important attributes in the external attributes category. In comparison, 'personal growth' (0.019) and 'networking (0.063) are the two most influential attributes in the internal attributes category. The findings suggest that in the context of external attributes, international students are aware of and consider career opportunities to be important criteria for selecting a university. To illustrate, the Higher ED Immigration Portal (2024) explains that in 2000, nearly 230,000 international students in the U.S. participated in the optional practical training (OPT) program, which allowed them to gain invaluable work experience that potentially led to job opportunities and increases their chances of staying in the United States of America. This demonstrates that selecting a foreign university in the right country is perceived as a ticket to employment, which further potentially offers opportunities to immigrate (Wang 2018) and obtain a better income (Plamper, Siivonen, and Haltia 2023). To international students, having employment symbolizes an opportunity (Nilsson and Ripmeester 2016) and a new beginning (Papadiuk and Nancy 2021). Thus, choosing the right university is viewed as a good investment that generates financial (i.e. good income) and non-financial gains (i.e. a new beginning and acceptance) (Herjanto et al. 2023).

Secondly, the findings indicate that international students choose universities that offer high-quality education. For these students, high-quality education reflects a university's reputation or ranking (Ke, Junfeng, and Xiaojing 2022) and its ability to offer real-world internship experience, career prospects, world-class facilities, and multicultural and networking experiences (Shorelight 2023). Consequently, these factors are considered essential for securing their future (Basu 2016; Roy et al. 2019). According to Soysal, Baltaru, and Cebolla-Boado (2024), university rankings are particularly important because international students regard these rankings as a reflection of their identity. According to signaling theory, individuals are inclined to inform evident self-credibility or self-quality to other parties (Spence 2002). Hence, when students believe they have received a high-quality education, they tend to exhibit their qualifications and take pride in themselves. In this way, a high-quality education serves as a signaling device to show their capabilities, attract potential employers, and control their destiny (Hwang 2016).

In the context of internal attributes, the findings suggest that international students are concerned about their future careers. As Weissman (2024) reported, more than half of college graduates in the U.S. are underemployed. One reason for this issue is that the slow job market leads to a competitive job market (Chen 2024; Pinto and Pereira 2019). Students should have technical knowledge, relevant skills, and competencies in their main and supporting study areas (Harvey 2001) to be competitive in the job market (Clarke 2018). For example, business students with communication and computer competencies, or engineering students with business literacy might be perceived as better candidates in the job market. Therefore, it is reasonable for international students to ensure personal growth by attending the right universities, as they believe these universities offer an environment to develop the various essential skills, necessary and relevant knowledge, and experiences to achieve their dream job (Shorelight 2023).

Further, the study indicates that international students are also concerned with networking opportunities. In the early career stage, networking helps students connect with mentors and job opportunities (Otamiri and Erekosima 2023). Networking also relates to building the right relationships, as is done with members of sororities and fraternities (McClain et al. 2015). Having good relationships with such members also increases opportunities to obtain prestigious and good-paying jobs, as these members usually support each other by sharing information and referring members from their sororities and fraternities to someone they know within an organization (McClain et al. 2015). For instance, Mike Torres, the engagement manager at LevelUP, concludes that networking serves as a support system and resource that can help students secure better job opportunities (Torres 2017). Accordingly, networking is an important ingredient for students' future success (Mileski et al. 2016).

The centrality value indicates that personal growth is the most important attribute in the internal attributes category because it is the most attached attribute and offers multiple routes to 11 consequences and three personal values. This complexity signifies that international students believe

personal growth enables them to achieve their goals and future success through different routes. Luyckx et al. (2017) argue that by experimenting with various routes, international students can fulfill intrinsic (i.e. learning new things, being open, happy, and self-fulfillment) and extrinsic goal orientation (i.e. career opportunities). Accordingly, Tran and Vu (2016) concluded that international students are objective and nurture their sense of responsibility for their dreams.

Networking, the second most connected attribute, has nine consequences and three personal values. This indicates that international students regard networking as their main criterion for choosing the right universities because networking allows them to select different routes to achieve their goals. To such students, robust and frequent networking events are attractive because they will help international students find a job quickly (Arthur and Popadiuk 2013) and allow them to reflect on themselves and enhance their self-efficacy (Taha and Cox 2016). For example, by attending networking events, international students can learn from other attendees who oversee the company they want to apply for, how to contact and communicate their intentions, and how to show and present their abilities to that person. This knowledge can potentially help them secure interviews and job opportunities.

In contrast, the career opportunities attribute is the most central in the external attributes category (12 consequences and four personal values). According to the RippleMatch (2023) 2022–2023 survey, more than half of college graduates are not confident about their career prospects after graduation. One of the reasons for this phenomenon is that nearly 40% of employers avoid hiring recent college graduates, and almost 60% of company executives believe that these graduates are not ready for the real workforce (Intelligent 2024). Our sample shows that to improve their 'career opportunities,' and to change this stigma, international students desire to prepare themselves for career challenges and focus on personal growth. According to Uğur, Constantinescu, and Stevens (2015), personal growth reflects high self-awareness, which further improves their developmental outcomes through their willingness to improve their cognitive learning and effective process. Students believe such characteristics will positively contribute to their goals, family, and society.

Quality of education is the second most important attribute connected to eight consequences and four personal values. Nagare (2021) suggests that current employers tend to hire graduates with teamwork skills (including communication, commitment, accountability, and teamwork skills), problem-solving skills (including active listening, analysis, and solution-oriented skills), and a strong work ethic attitude. According to Hashim (2015), these skills help students with planning and decision-making which are very much needed in business. Accordingly, universities that provide opportunities to develop such skills are very attractive to international students (De Prada, Mareque, and Pino-Juste 2022).

The HVM shows that achievement, security (personal and societal), self-direction (action and thought), and hedonism significantly impact international students' university selection. Achievement values are the most dominant, appearing 16 times across internal and external categories. These values encourage students to improve their competency to meet social standards (Schwartz 2017) through personal growth, experience, networking, and language skills attributes. Our sample suggested these attributes broaden their horizon and improve their career readiness and personal achievement to gain their personal goals or future success. According to Lam and Lau (2014), students with high achievement values show their self-efficacy in achieving their objectives and enjoy the process. To illustrate, one of the participants suggested that to optimize their time, they needed to maintain both academic success and personal development while enjoying the process. Subsequently, high achiever students view this process as a tool to become more assertive and the way to fulfill their ambitions (Schwartz 2017) which in turn encourages them to enroll in university (Hazelkorn 2020).

Self-direction-thought is the second most dominant value with 12 mentions. This value only appeared in the internal attributes category. This is reasonable because thought is an internal process that leads to a cognitive state allowing students to alter their cognitive framework (Armstrong, Peterson, and Rayner 2012). Thought helps students organize information and use such

information to identify connections between various attributes and consequences. Thus, thought reflects an international student's ability to build personal perspectives, including evaluating and selecting the right university. Our sample suggests that their thought was generated by learning new things and motivation to achieve personal goals attribute. These findings show that students focus on self-improvement and are committed to their life goals, aligning with Tian and Lu (2018) who found that young people view self-improvement as their above-and-beyond efforts to contribute to their own and society's welfare positively.

On the contrary, self-direction-action value appeared only in the external attribute category. This value refers to how individuals can freely and independently control their actions (Schwartz 2017). The HVM map shows that selecting scholarships, studying abroad, evaluating education quality, and participating in career events represent self-direction-action. Our sample indicates that independence reflects balancing financial (making money) and non-financial (meaningful life) risks. These balancing skills allow students to fulfill their personal and professional responsibilities. Such characteristics help students evaluate and choose the right university independently. This finding confirms Herjanto et al.'s (2023) study, which identified that the degree of self-direction determines marketing students' satisfaction.

The next important value is security. Schwartz (2017) asserts that security values promote harmony and stability. Schwartz (2017) classifies the security value into personal (self-safety) and societal security (societal stability and order). Our findings show that both types of security reflect external attributes. This suggests that international students are concerned with maintaining their image in society (Nghiêm-Phú and Nguyễn 2020) and seeking a sense of belonging among peers (García, Garza, and Yeaton-Hromada 2019). They prioritize family and societal expectations as life goals to maintain this image. Failing to meet these expectations can be seen as a failure, leading students to choose universities with quality education, scholarships, study abroad opportunities, and strong career prospects. Studying abroad enhances their self-image, makes their families proud (King and McInerney 2014), and allows them to contribute positively to their home society (Singh, Nachatar, and Jamil 2021).

The last value orientation is hedonism, which reflects happiness or enjoyment (Herjanto et al. 2023). The sample indicates that a source of their joy is the ability to choose the right university to help them achieve their future goals. According to Herjanto et al. (2023), this viewpoint is considered a self-validation of their ability and subsequently improves the sense of enjoyment. This finding validates Arambewela and Hall (2011) who also found that hedonism affects international postgraduate students.

Conclusion

This study confirms that selecting a university is a multidimensional and intricate process. The data revealed that four personal values, including achievement, self-direction (thought and action), security (personal and societal), and hedonism, play an important role in determining international students' university selection criteria. This study shows that to attract international students, universities should understand these personal values and and communicate how they address them. Without understanding and addressing such values, universities will be perceived as less appealing; consequently, international students might feel less confident and choose a university that supports their personal values.

Implications

Recent studies investigated the influence of personal values on college students' motivation, preference, and behavior, and only a handful of studies have delved into the role of personal values on students' university selection from a qualitative approach (Finley and Fountain 2021). This study enriches the breadth of empirical research by concentrating on international students' university

selection from the MEC framework. International students are considered distinct (Wekullo 2019), so understanding their personal values can provide valuable insights into tapping this segment. This study revealed that international students' university selection is determined by internal and external attribute categories that further formed four different personal values (achievement, self-direction (thought and action), security (personal and societal), and hedonism). Thus, international students primarily select their university based on personal welfare values, such as achievement, self-direction (thought and action), and hedonism, and to a lesser extent, by other welfare values such as security (personal and societal). This shows that international students believe that a university degree is a ticket to future success and self-improvement.

Additionally, this study also offers several practical implications. To improve students' sense of achievement, international students should be encouraged to showcase their experiences (Optional Practical Training (OPT), internships, or alike) on professional social media sites such as a university's LinkedIn page and other university social media platforms. Additionally, the university should develop a strong alumni network of international students and invite them to become mentors, university ambassadors, and guest speakers in school recruitment events or classes. Further, universities are recommended to collaborate with businesses to explore the possibility of offering OPT for their international students. This can be achieved by developing practical courses that meet the needs of businesses. Therefore, universities are advised to involve business professionals in developing syllabi, invite them to be teaching team members, and use real business case studies as student projects.

To fulfill and enhance self-direction values, we recommend that universities offer updated information on websites and social media that provides comprehensive information on academic programs, campus culture, support services, and student life. Next, we recommend universities offer international students the opportunity to choose elective courses that allow students to tailor their education to their needs and wants. This approach may enhance and fulfill the self-direction values. Further, to increase a sense of security, universities may (a) consider offering mentorship for students, where students can freely discuss their concerns without worrying about being judged or penalized, (b) encourage and allow students to share their mental maps, that includes physical and emotional security and social harmony, which could offer university officials a tangible indicator on how the university could help their students. Finally, (c) students and the university can work together to develop an 'internal social harmony index' that measures diversity, peer support, campus events, and conflict resolution. Additionally, a university should introduce an 'invest to hire' program that allows business professionals to invest in potential students in their earlier academic years for businesses' future recruitment. Companies may select and invest in the students and shape them to their future business needs and expansion. Finally, support services and university staff play a significant role in providing students with a good experience. Training on customer service and knowledge sharing between departments is encouraged so students can promptly obtain the answers they need without going around campuses and wasting time. In addition to training staff and faculty, incentives could be offered to staff and faculty who provide the best service to students outside the classroom.

Limitations and future research

The present study has several limitations. First, data was collected from a single private mid-sized Southwest university in the United States with a sample skewed toward international students from European and Hispanic countries with a business administration major. Consequently, the findings may not apply to other majors, ethnicities, or regions. Future research could include more diverse participants from various majors or disciplines and be conducted in different regions or countries. Additionally, future researchers should examine whether international students' country of origin and ethnicity lead to differences in personal values and identify which values are most important for these students. Secondly, although our total sample is acceptable, it can be considered relatively small, and therefore, the findings may only tap the top of the

iceberg. Future research should include a larger sample to avoid similar limitations. Third, this research may have experienced general issues associated with a hard laddering approach with semi-structured self-administer surveys. Thus, in the future, scholars may consider employing a soft laddering approach combined with an open-ended survey technique.

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