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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Students' choice of university in transnational education: the factors influencing their decision to study at a country-branded university

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ABSTRACT

This research identifies the factors – which include country brand authenticity – that students perceived had influenced their decision to study at a country-branded university (CBU). An online survey was used to obtain data from 1,199 higher education students studying at Canadian, Chinese and United States-affiliated universities located in Bangladesh, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates. It was found that the institution's reputation, perceived service quality, country brand authenticity, and financial factors each influenced at least 70 per cent of our research participants in their decision to study at the CBU. In all three institutions, country brand authenticity achieved a higher mean score and rank position than financial factors. With country brand authenticity driving the institution choices of nearly three-quarters of the surveyed students, transnational education institutions should place greater emphasis on their authentic foreign country ties in future marketing. To our knowledge, this is the first study to investigate the factors influencing students' decision to study at a CBU, and to consider the role of country brand authenticity in these decisions.

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Transnational education (TNE); country-branded universities (CBUs); student choice; country brand authenticity; reputation; service quality

Introduction

This research investigates the factors that influence students' choice of university in transnational education (TNE), and specifically the factors influencing their decision to study at a country-branded university (CBU). In the past, TNE was most commonly associated with educational programs and providers crossing national borders (Knight, 2016; UNESCO/Council of Europe, 2001). More recently, Wilkins and Huisman (2024, 2025) suggested

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that TNE may be recognized as a form of education that involves transferring or adopting elements of one country's higher education system, as well as that country's culture and values, in another country. This conceptualization of TNE has since been adopted by UNESCO/Council of Europe (2025) in its revised definition of TNE: 'A subset of cross-border education where study programs, or sets of courses, or educational services borrow or transfer elements of one country's higher education system (or non-country specific education systems) from or to another country'. Using this definition, both international branch campuses and CBUs are types of institutions that operate in the TNE sector. Whereas international branch campuses transfer an institution's name, curricula, and programs across national borders, CBUs may be regarded as 'borrowing' certain aspects of a foreign country's higher education system. In both types of institution, students may perceive that they are receiving a foreign education (Wilkins & Huisman, 2024, 2025).

It may be assumed that students who choose to study at a TNE institution want to receive and experience a 'foreign' education. Students may perceive that foreign higher education systems are superior or more attractive compared to the local system (Ashour, 2018; Long, 2020); that TNE institutions are more prestigious and provide a higher quality of education (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2017; Li, 2020); and that, after graduation, a 'foreign' degree will generate superior economic returns (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2017; Hill & Sughnani, 2021). Due to nation branding, individuals may perceive the identities and images of one country to be more favorable than those of other countries (Kim & Bamberger, 2025). Consequently, a university's country of origin or the country/nation branding may influence students' perceptions of the institution's image attractiveness and educational quality, which may in turn influence students' institution choices (Kim & Bamberger, 2025; Wilkins et al., 2023).

The concept of country brand authenticity is the theoretical construct used to frame this research. A brand refers to those features of an organization, such as its name and product specifications, that enable it to differentiate itself from competitors. The name of any CBU signals to students that the institution adopts certain aspects of a particular foreign nation's higher education system, which is a key feature of the institution that may lead students to consider it unique. However, a CBU's brand will only be attractive and believable to students if they perceive it as authentic. To our knowledge, no research has yet investigated the impact of perceived country brand authenticity on students' institution choices, which provides the rationale for this research.

The data for this research were collected in CBUs because these institutions need to emphasize their country brand authenticity convincingly in order to promote perceptions of high education quality among students. While most international branch campuses feature in global rankings, few CBUs are included. Universities from the main Anglophone countries are also likely to be recognized globally as having reputations for high quality. Given that students are greatly influenced by institutional reputations (Soysal et al., 2024) and rankings (Katsumoto et al., 2024), these give an advantage to international branch campuses in student recruitment. Therefore, CBUs may have to rely more on country brand authenticity as a signal of quality.

Research aim and research question

The purpose of this research was to identify the factors that had influenced students' decision to study at a CBU. Specifically, the research aimed to discover the extent to which each of the four dimensions of country brand authenticity had influenced students' choice of institution. Thus, the study's central research question may be stated as, 'To what extent do students' perceptions of a CBU's country brand authenticity influence their decision to study at that institution?'. Reputation and perceived service quality, as well as financial factors, are well-known to strongly influence students' institution choices (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015; Marginson, 2006; Molesworth et al., 2011; Yang, 2023), but it is not known whether students' choices are influenced more by the factors related to country brand authenticity or the factors that are not related to country brand authenticity.

Country-branded universities (CBUs)

CBUs are usually independent institutions that operate in the private higher education sector. They have a country in their name, which is intended to convey the national education system that is used. Examples of such institutions – with their affiliated countries shown in italics – include the *American* University of Beirut, *British* University in Dubai, Egyptian *Chinese* University, *French* University in Armenia, Kazakh-*Russian* International University, and Vietnam *Japan* University. There are more than 120 CBUs globally, and although at least 80 of these institutions are branded as American, CBUs are also branded as Australian, British, Canadian, Chinese, French, German, Japanese, and Russian. CBUs should be recognized as domestic institutions, since they have not crossed national borders.

CBUs may be established and operated by the host country government, a wealthy individual or organization in the country where the institution is located, or they may be the result of international collaborations between different national governments or organizations based in both the host and affiliated countries. These institutions may receive funding and/or strong support from a foreign partner or partners (indicating real affiliated country connections), or they may operate without any substantial foreign backing or patrons. Also, CBUs may be accredited in the host or affiliated country, and they may award their own degrees or the degrees of a university or universities in the affiliated country. While CBUs are locally founded independent institutions that operate under their own name, international branch campuses are owned or controlled (using franchise and licensing agreements) by the parent institution whose name the branch bears.

International branch campuses and CBUs both aim to offer students a foreign education experience. However, while international branch campuses may be able to claim indexical authenticity, because the education and student experience at the branch is identical or very similar to the provision at the main campus, CBUs are only able to claim iconic authenticity (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Iconic authenticity implies that while CBUs cannot be regarded as providing the original, genuine thing, an authentic reproduction of the affiliated country's higher education system delivers for students an education and experience that is typical in the affiliated country.

This research investigates the extent to which country brand authenticity is important to students, and specifically the extent to which it influenced their decision to study at a CBU.

Students' choice of university

The factors influencing students' institution and international destination preferences have become central themes within the student choice literature. This literature has established that the most common factors influencing students' institution choices are location (Vrontis et al., 2007); institutional image (Li, 2020; Nghiêm-Phú & Nguyễn, 2020); image of the source or affiliated country (Chee et al., 2016; Cubillo et al., 2006; Dai et al., 2024; Herrero-Crespo et al., 2016; Nghiêm-Phú & Nguyễn, 2020); institutional reputation (Azzone & Soncin, 2020; Briggs, 2006; Chee et al., 2016; Hill & Sughnani, 2021); perceived educational quality or uniqueness, e.g. to develop intercultural and foreign language competence (Chee et al., 2016; Yang, 2023); perceived quality of facilities and services (Nuseir & El Refae, 2022); and links with other organizations, e.g. employers (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The individual's personal characteristics and preferences also influence their decision-making, such as their desire for convenience (e.g. to continue living in the family home), use of information sources, and sensitivity to the level of tuition fees and associated costs of studying at any particular institution (Briggs, 2006; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015;Liu et al., 2023; Nuseir & El Refae, 2022; Sim et al., 2021; Wilkins et al., 2012).

Students seeking a 'foreign' higher education can study abroad as international students or remain in their home country and enroll at an international branch campus or CBU. Despite the differing geographical contexts, the two sets of students (international and home-based) often exhibit convergent needs and wants, and are influenced by a similar set of factors, one of which is country image. Thus, the international student choice literature may explain the factors that influence students to enroll at a CBU. Although international students typically consider a range of factors when selecting an institution at which to study, which include costs, safety/security, cultural factors and proximity to their home country, expected quality of education is often cited as one of the strongest influences, which is often assessed through perceived higher education image and reputation in the host country (Pawar et al., 2020; Shanka et al., 2006; Wen & Hu, 2019).

The vast majority of students at CBUs are domestic, not international, students (Ashour, 2018; Long, 2020). Previous research has established that an institution's country of origin or country affiliation influences students' institution choices (Nghiêm-Phú & Nguyễn, 2020; Wilkins et al., 2023). For example, Chee et al. (2016) found that students in Malaysia perceived that an institution from a developed country (the United Kingdom) had a superior image, reputation, and quality compared to an institution from a developing country (India). In particular, the success of the American economy and American universities during the last few decades has promoted the Americanization of higher education globally (Juusola et al., 2015). This has encouraged even CBUs with few or no ties to the United States to brand themselves as 'American'.

Institution reputation, perceived educational quality, country image, and financial factors are among the most cited factors influencing the institution choices of higher education students (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015).

Reputation

A university's reputation may refer to the overall evaluation of the extent to which the institution is substantially good or bad (Weiss et al., 1999), or as a collective assessment

of the institution's ability to provide valued outcomes to students (Fombrun et al., 2000). A university's reputation may greatly influence its standing in the community, the perceived worth of its degrees, and the trust of its stakeholders, thereby shaping how students connect and identify with the institution (Amado-Mateus et al., 2024). Chapleo (2007) argues that because higher education has become marketized in most developed countries, institutions have had to develop strong reputations in order to be competitive and attractive to students. Previous research has concluded that a university's reputation may have a strong influence on students' institution choices (Azzone & Soncin, 2020; Briggs, 2006; Chee et al., 2016; Hill & Sughnani, 2021). In fact, the popularity of global rankings, as well as commercial and social media discourse, has encouraged students to often place more emphasis on institutional reputation than education quality in their decision-making (Marginson, 2006).

Perceived service quality

Students may participate in higher education to derive both use and exchange value benefits. Whereas exchange value refers to the post-graduation economic benefits of a degree from a particular institution, use value is essentially concerned with the intrinsic value gained, such as knowledge acquisition and skills development. Learning and personal development may be key objectives of an individual, and these may act as important sources of satisfaction. For students seeking use value, perceptions of service quality may be an important criterion in their decision-making (Latif et al., 2019).

The term 'service quality' may be used to include the quality of teaching and learning, support services, extra-curricular activities, and student life in general (Latif et al., 2019). An institution may be considered to offer high service quality when the educational and student experiences provided meet or exceed students' needs, wants, and expectations. Students may determine an institution's likely service quality by considering the credentials of the academic staff; student teacher ratios; the facilities, equipment and resources available at the campus; and word of mouth received from existing or past students (de Silva, 2024; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015).

Some of the information required by students may be provided on institution websites and in prospectuses/viewbooks, but individuals may also assess the effectiveness with which the institution responds to pre-registration enquiries and how well it organizes open days. Previous research has concluded that the perceived service quality of different universities may have a strong influence on students' institution choices (Briggs, 2006; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015; Shah et al., 2013; Yang, 2023).

Country brand authenticity

Brand authenticity is commonly defined in terms of its dimensions or brand-related attributes, such as originality, quality, integrity, continuity of heritage, and symbolic meaning (Akbar & Wymer, 2017). According to Moulard et al. (2021), an institution's country brand may be regarded as authentic if students and other stakeholders perceive that it corresponds with, or is true to, the referent, i.e., that to which the institution is being compared. Therefore, to achieve country brand authenticity, a CBU

needs to be perceived as being sufficiently similar in all important respects to universities in the affiliated country.

Students often use country image as a cue to infer the possible attributes and benefits of a particular institution or higher education system (Chee et al., 2016). CBUs benefit from their foreign branding because students worldwide hold favorable images of the countries with which these institutions are affiliated (Brodie & Benson-Rea, 2016). A number of studies have found that country of origin or country affiliation influences students' institution choices (Chee et al., 2016; Dai et al., 2024; Herrero-Crespo et al., 2016; Nghiêm-Phú & Nguyễn, 2020). Given that in most service settings, consumers generally prefer authentic brands over less authentic ones (Södergren, 2021), we assume that students also prefer universities that are perceived as authentic.

The factors that may influence a student's perception of an institution's country brand authenticity include (1) *student experience and development* (e.g. is the student experience at the CBU similar to that which would be received at an institution in the affiliated country, in terms of extracurricular activities, campus facilities and support services, and does the institution's culture and values reflect those in the affiliated country, e.g. no discrimination and freedom of expression?); (2) *teaching and learning* (e.g. is the CBU's curriculum structure, program content, and teaching methods similar to those of institutions in the affiliated country?); (3) *affiliated country connections* (e.g. is the CBU and its programs accredited in the affiliated country, and does it have partnerships with institutions in the affiliated country?); and (4) *human resources* (e.g. are academic staff nationals or citizens of the affiliated country, and did they achieve their doctorate or previously teach in the affiliated country?) (Wilkins et al., 2025).

Financial factors

Vrontis et al.'s (2007) student choice model includes the individual's (or family's) socio-economic status. Students who want a foreign education have two main options: to study abroad as an international student or enroll in a TNE program in their home country. TNE is often a forced choice, because studying abroad is unaffordable for many students, while some students may enroll in TNE due to individual circumstances, such as employment, or for cultural reasons (Dai et al., 2024; Fang & Wang, 2014; Wilkins et al., 2012). When evaluating alternative institutions, students may consider the required financial outlay in comparison to likely future economic returns (Latif et al., 2019).

The marketization and commoditization of higher education globally has required students to pay tuition fees, so financial costs have become a greater consideration in the institution choice decision-making of many students (Molesworth et al., 2011). The financial factors associated with participation in higher education include tuition fees, scholarships, loans, location-specific expenses like housing and travel, and the availability of financial aid. Previous research has indicated that financial factors are one of the main influences on students' institution choices, particularly in TNE (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2017; Dao & Thorpe, 2015; Kim et al., 2025; Le et al., 2020).

Method

Sample and data collection

The self-selected volunteer participants in this study were undergraduate students who were enrolled at one of three CBUs that have different country affiliations (American, Canadian, and Chinese), and which are located in different countries (Bangladesh, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates). The data were collected using an online questionnaire, which was completed by participants in Google Forms or Microsoft Forms. To obtain a large sample and high response rate, the majority of participants were invited by lecturers to complete the questionnaire during lessons. The questionnaire was also distributed via email and social media, such as WhatsApp groups. An attempt was made to achieve broadly representative samples in each institution in terms of students' genders and nationalities. Study abroad students were excluded, as their views of authenticity would likely be different to the students who were not from the affiliated country, which is the focus of this research.

A total of 1,199 usable responses were obtained from the three institutions. Power sample analysis was conducted using G*Power 3, to determine whether the sample size used in this study was adequate as proposed by Faul et al. (2007). Based on the G*Power results, 208 is the sample size required to achieve 0.95 statistical power with a medium effect size of 0.0625 at a significance level of 0.05. Our sample of 1,199 participants substantially exceeds the minimum acceptable sample size.

All responses were usable since the questionnaire could not be submitted until all questions had been answered. Although the sample cannot be considered representative of students at all CBUs, it is sufficiently large to identify clear patterns among students' perceptions and choice influencing factors. Ethics approval for the research was granted by the research ethics committee of the lead author's institution. Each participant in the research provided informed written consent as part of the online survey process. Table 1 provides a summary profile of the survey participants.

Measures

The student choice literature suggests that institution reputation, perceived service quality, institution brand, and financial costs are key factors that influence students' institution choices (Azzone & Soncin, 2020; Briggs, 2006; Chee et al., 2016; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). Specifically, for the case of CBUs, we consider an institution's country affiliation as the dominant feature of its brand, so we use country brand authenticity as the indicator to assess the extent to which students' institution choices are influenced by the university's country brand.

Country brand authenticity has previously been conceptualized as having four dimensions, namely (1) teaching and learning, (2) student experience and development, (3) affiliated country connections, and (4) human resources (Wilkins et al., 2025). In this study, the 28 items related to these four dimensions were treated as a single factor representing country brand authenticity. Hence, our model of students' self-reported choices consists of four factors, namely (1) institution reputation, (2) perceived service quality, (3) country brand authenticity, and (4) financial factors. The research seeks to discover the relative strength of influence of each of these four factors in determining students'

Table 1. Summary profile of the survey participants.

Institution code	A	B	C
Affiliated country	Canada	China	United States
Campus location	United Arab Emirates	Egypt	Bangladesh
Sample size	411	465	323
Gender	Male: 41.1% Female: 57.4% Other/prefer not to say: 1.5%	Male: 44.7% Female: 53.8% Other/prefer not to say: 1.5%	Male: 74.9% Female: 25.1% Other/prefer not to say: 0%
Nationality	South Asian: 27.3% Gulf Arab: 23.4% The Levant: 13.1% Egyptian: 5.6% Other (e.g. Iranian, Iraqi, Sudanese, Filipino, European, North American): 30.7%	Egyptian: 99.8% Gulf Arab: 0.2%	Bangladeshi: 100%
Main subject studied	Social sciences (e.g. business, media studies, psychology): 62.8% Applied sciences (e.g. computer science, public health): 26.3% Other (e.g. architecture, multidisciplinary): 10.9%	Social sciences (e.g. business): 60.0% Applied sciences (e.g. engineering, pharmacy): 31.6% Humanities (e.g. English, Chinese): 1.5% Natural and formal sciences: 0.6% Other (e.g. foundation, not yet specialized): 6.2%	Applied sciences (e.g. computer science, engineering): 96.6% Humanities: 1.2% Natural and formal sciences: 0.9% Social sciences: 0.6% Other: 0.6%
Year in program	1st: 43.6% 2nd: 20.0% 3rd: 16.8% 4th: 17.7% 5th: 0%	1st: 42.4% 2nd: 0% 3rd: 48.6% 4th: 7.7% 5th: 1.3%	1st: 61.0% 2nd: 0% 3rd: 26.0% 4th: 11.1% 5th: 1.9%

institution choices. In particular, we were interested in discovering whether the factors related to country brand authenticity have more or less influence in determining students' institution choices than the factors that are not related to country brand authenticity.

Each of the four factors that may have influenced students' choices was measured using pre-existing validated scales adopted from the literature. All these scales had previously demonstrated satisfactory internal reliability. For each item in the questionnaire, students were asked to rate the extent to which the factor had influenced their final institution choice. The study participants used a seven-point Likert scale for all items, where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree.

Institution reputation was measured using a four-item scale proposed by Heffernan et al. (2018). Examples of items include 'This university is a highly regarded university' and 'This university is respected by employers'. To measure perceived service quality, a unidimensional scale adapted from Latif et al. (2019) was used to capture the six components of service quality in higher education, namely (1) teachers and teaching, (2) administrative and support services, (3) knowledge transmission, (4) extracurricular activities, (5) institutional improvement, and (6) leaders' responsiveness to students' needs.

Country brand authenticity, incorporating its four dimensions, was measured using a total of 28 items, as proposed by Wilkins et al. (2025). The items are concerned with

things such as institution and program accreditation; international partnerships; curriculum structure; program content; teaching and learning methods; extracurricular activities; nationalities of academic staff; and the institution's culture and values. Finally, financial factors were measured using a four-item scale adapted from Dao and Thorpe (2015). The items measure the extent to which students' choices were affected by (1) the tuition fees charged, and the availability of (2) flexible payment plans, (3) flexible tuition (i.e. changing the pace of study), and (4) scholarships or financial aid.

Data analysis

All of the quantitative data analysis was performed using Jamovi software v2.3.28 (available at http://www.jamovi.org).

Results

The data analysis was performed on the 1,199 completed questionnaires. To assess construct validity and the model fit, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was undertaken. The measurement model consists of four variables (reputation, perceived service quality, country brand authenticity, and financial factors) and a total of 42 indicators. The results indicate that the data has an acceptable fit with the model: $\chi^2 = 6235$ ($df = 789$, $p < 0.01$); comparative fit index (CFI) = .912; Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) = .907; and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .068. The values of all estimates are >.60 and significant ($p < .001$), and all variables demonstrate strong internal reliability (all Cronbach's alpha values are above 0.80). The highest variance explained by one variable is 22.9%, suggesting that common method bias is unlikely to be an issue with the data. The average variance extracted (AVE) for each variable is >.50, indicating satisfactory convergent validity, and the square root of the AVE for each variable is larger than the correlation between the variable and every other variable, indicating satisfactory discriminant validity.

The descriptive statistics reveal that the institution's reputation achieved the highest mean score and rank position in each of the three CBUs (Table 2). In two of the institutions, perceived service quality was ranked as the second highest influence on the students' decision to study at the CBU. In all three institutions, country brand authenticity achieved a higher mean score and rank position than financial factors. This result is quite impressive given that the preferred choice of many students who want an international or foreign higher education is to go abroad as an international student, and

Table 2. Mean values and ranks of the factors influencing students' choice of institution.

Factor	Mean (standard deviation)	Overall ranks	Canadian-affiliated institution ranks	Chinese-affiliated institution ranks	United States-affiliated institution ranks
Reputation	5.89 (1.20)	1	1	1	1
Perceived service quality	5.70 (1.30)	2	3	2	2
Country brand authenticity	5.53 (1.23)	3	2	3	3
Financial factors	5.29 (1.45)	4	4	4	4

TNE at home is chosen only because the students cannot afford to go abroad. For example, in a study by Fang and Wang (2014), 'high financial costs' was cited as the second most influential reason for the individual *not* pursuing higher education abroad.

The institution's reputation, perceived service quality, country brand authenticity, and financial factors each influenced at least 70% of our research participants in their decision to study at the CBU (Figure 1). Some 27.6% of our total sample *strongly* agreed that reputation had influenced their institution choice, and just under three-quarters of the participants agreed (to any extent) that they had been influenced by considerations related to country brand authenticity.

A one-way between groups multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed to investigate whether the factors influencing students' choice of CBU differ across groups categorized by (a) the institution's country affiliation, and the student's (b) gender, (c) nationality, and (d) discipline area. For the entire model comprising the dependent variables of reputation, perceived service quality, country brand authenticity, and financial factors there appears to be a significant difference based on the institution's country affiliation: $F(8, 2384) = 10.1$, $p < .001$; and the student's gender: $F(12, 3154) = 4.10$, $p < .001$; nationality: $F(20, 3948) = 4.80$, $p < .001$; and discipline area: $F(16, 3639) = 1.99$, $p < .01$. The descriptives are provided in Table 3.

To better interpret the MANOVA results, univariate ANOVAs were performed as post hoc analysis (Table 4). The ANOVA results for students' gender confirm significant group differences across genders for all of the variables in our model. For the institution's country affiliation, reputation and country brand authenticity are significant, while perceived service quality and financial factors are not significant. For students' nationality, only reputation and country brand authenticity show significant differences across groups. Although the MANOVA results indicated a significant difference across groups for students' discipline area, the univariate tests show the result as nonsignificant. This may be explained by the fact that the multivariate test takes account of the correlation between dependent variables and so it has more power to detect group differences (Field, 2009).

While the initial results indicate that country brand authenticity influences, at least to some extent, the majority of students in their institution choices, we do not know yet whether there are particular dimensions within the country brand authenticity construct that have more or less influence. The descriptive statistics reveal that teaching and learning achieved the highest mean score and rank position in two of the three CBUs (Table 5). The results indicate that teaching and learning, student experience and development, and

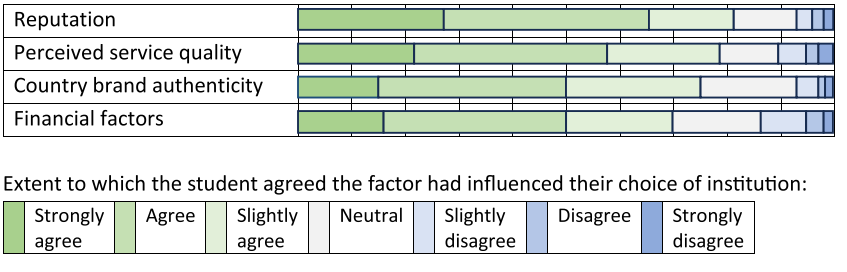


Figure 1. Strength of factors influencing students' choice of institution.

Table 3. MANOVA descriptives for factors influencing students' choice of institution – mean (standard deviation).

		n	Reputation	Perceived service quality	Country brand authenticity	Financial factors
Affiliated country	Canada	411	5.98 (1.19)	5.60 (1.39)	5.62 (1.19)	5.35 (1.51)
	China	465	5.90 (1.19)	5.79 (1.21)	5.42 (1.29)	5.28 (1.44)
	United States	323	5.75 (1.20)	5.68 (1.29)	5.57 (1.18)	5.21 (1.40)
Gender	Male	567	5.96 (1.10)	5.69 (1.28)	5.53 (1.18)	5.27 (1.41)
	Female	619	5.85 (1.25)	5.73 (1.28)	5.57 (1.25)	5.33 (1.48)
	Other/not reported	13	4.54 (1.70)	4.06 (2.00)	4.14 (1.48)	3.94 (1.50)
Nationality	Bangladeshi	327	5.76 (1.20)	5.68 (1.28)	5.57 (1.17)	5.52 (1.39)
	Egyptian	487	5.88 (1.21)	5.76 (1.25)	5.42 (1.29)	5.29 (1.45)
	Gulf Arab	108	5.94 (1.21)	5.67 (1.37)	5.65 (1.21)	5.19 (1.77)
	South Asian	97	6.15 (1.07)	5.63 (1.41)	5.62 (1.13)	5.29 (1.33)
	The Levant	54	6.15 (1.03)	5.69 (1.48)	5.94 (1.10)	5.56 (1.58)
	Other	126	5.88 (1.24)	5.54 (1.30)	5.56 (1.22)	5.38 (1.41)
Discipline area	Social sciences	567	5.82 (1.22)	5.72 (1.27)	5.57 (1.21)	5.25 (1.46)
	Applied sciences	539	5.96 (1.16)	5.69 (1.31)	5.51 (1.24)	5.34 (1.43)
	Humanities	11	5.34 (1.78)	5.24 (2.01)	4.92 (1.74)	5.00 (1.80)
	Natural and formal sciences	6	6.00 (0.91)	6.22 (0.94)	5.94 (1.04)	5.54 (1.34)
	Other	76	5.97 (1.19)	5.56 (1.29)	5.47 (1.24)	5.20 (1.56)

affiliated country connections can each have a strong influence on student decision-making. However, in each of the three institutions, human resources achieved the lowest mean score and rank position.

Country brand factors related to teaching and learning, student experience and development, affiliated country connections, and human resources each influenced at least 65% of our research participants in their decision to study at the CBU (Figure 2). Although fewer students overall were influenced by affiliated country connections compared to 'teaching and learning' and 'student experience and development', affiliated country connections was the dimension of country brand authenticity with the highest number of 'strongly agree' responses.

Table 4. Univariate test results.

Group	Factor	Sum of squares	*df*	Mean square	*F*	*p*
Institution affiliation	Reputation	9.62	2	4.81	3.38	< .05
	Perceived service quality	7.81	2	3.91	2.32	*ns*
	Country brand authenticity	9.30	2	4.65	3.10	< .05
	Financial factors	3.42	2	1.71	0.81	*ns*
Gender	Reputation	27.7	2	13.85	9.85	<.001
	Perceived service quality	35.5	2	17.76	10.70	<.001
	Country brand authenticity	25.8	2	12.89	8.66	<.001
	Financial factors	24.6	2	12.29	5.87	<.01
Nationality	Reputation	16.97	5	3.39	2.39	< .05
	Perceived service quality	5.56	5	1.11	0.66	*ns*
	Country brand authenticity	18.11	5	3.62	2.42	< .05
	Financial factors	7.38	5	1.48	0.70	*ns*
Discipline area	Reputation	9.27	4	2.32	1.63	*ns*
	Perceived service quality	5.65	4	1.41	0.84	*ns*
	Country brand authenticity	6.38	4	1.60	1.06	*ns*
	Financial factors	4.54	4	1.13	0.54	*ns*

Note: *ns* = not significant.

Table 5. Mean values and ranks of the country brand factors influencing students' choice of institution.

Factor	Mean (standard deviation)	Overall ranks	Canadian-affiliated institution ranks	Chinese-affiliated institution ranks	United States-affiliated institution ranks
Teaching and learning	5.63 (1.24)	1	1	1	2
Student experience and development	5.55 (1.30)	2	2	3	1
Affiliated country connections	5.47 (1.38)	3	3	2	3
Human resources	5.35 (1.44)	4	4	4	4

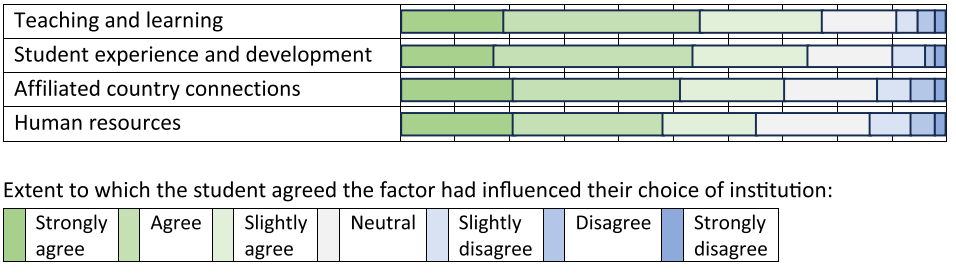


Figure 2. Strength of country brand factors influencing students' choice of institution.

A one-way between groups MANOVA was performed to investigate whether the country brand factors influencing students' choice of CBU differ across groups categorized by (a) the institution's country affiliation, and the student's (b) gender, (c) nationality, and (d) discipline area. For the entire model comprising the dependent variables of teaching and learning, student experience and development, affiliated country connections, and human resources, there appears to be a significant difference based on the institution's country affiliation: $F(8, 2384) = 9.94$, $p < .001$; and the student's gender: $F(12, 3154) = 2.27$, $p < .01$; and nationality: $F(20, 3948) = 4.57$, $p < .001$; but the student's discipline area is nonsignificant: $F(16, 3639) = 1.05$, $p = 0.40$. The descriptives are provided in Table 6.

Univariate ANOVAs were performed as post hoc analysis (Table 7). The ANOVA results for students' gender confirm significant group differences across genders for teaching and learning, student experience and development, affiliated country connections, and human resources. For the institution's country affiliation and students' nationalities, only 'teaching and learning' and 'student experience and development' show significant differences across groups. The remaining results are nonsignificant.

Discussion

Reputation

The results of this research confirm the importance of university reputation in influencing students' institution choices, which supports the findings of previous studies, such as

Table 6. MANOVA descriptives for country brand factors influencing students' choice of institution – mean (standard deviation).

		n	Teaching and learning	Student experience and development	Affiliated country connections	Human resources
Affiliated country	Canada	411	5.82 (1.15)	5.59 (1.32)	5.52 (1.41)	5.40 (1.47)
	China	465	5.46 (1.33)	5.42 (1.34)	5.45 (1.38)	5.32 (1.38)
	United States	323	5.65 (1.19)	5.67 (1.21)	5.43 (1.35)	5.32 (1.48)
Gender	Male	567	5.64 (1.18)	5.52 (1.27)	5.47 (1.34)	5.36 (1.37)
	Female	619	5.65 (1.27)	5.60 (1.31)	5.49 (1.40)	5.37 (1.49)
	Other/not reported	13	4.21 (1.70)	4.10 (1.37)	4.26 (1.62)	3.94 (1.41)
Nationality	Bangladeshi	327	5.64 (1.19)	5.66 (1.21)	5.43 (1.34)	5.32 (1.48)
	Egyptian	487	5.46 (1.33)	5.41 (1.35)	5.42 (1.39)	5.30 (1.40)
	Gulf Arab	108	5.85 (1.10)	5.63 (1.30)	5.51 (1.47)	5.38 (1.47)
	South Asian	97	5.88 (1.01)	5.52 (1.39)	5.48 (1.33)	5.48 (1.42)
	The Levant	54	6.10 (1.09)	5.89 (1.11)	5.84 (1.38)	5.84 (1.44)
	Other	126	5.68 (1.24)	5.57 (1.29)	5.52 (1.42)	5.27 (1.47)
Discipline area	Social sciences	567	5.67 (1.20)	5.61 (1.29)	5.49 (1.37)	5.34 (1.48)
	Applied sciences	539	5.61 (1.27)	5.51 (1.30)	5.45 (1.40)	5.37 (1.41)
	Humanities	11	5.05 (1.73)	4.93 (1.81)	4.96 (1.79)	4.55 (1.93)
	Natural and formal sciences	6	6.07 (0.87)	5.61 (0.96)	5.49 (1.43)	5.34 (1.17)
	Other	76	5.57 (1.27)	5.42 (1.37)	5.44 (1.33)	5.42 (1.29)

Table 7. Univariate test results for country brand factors.

Group	Factor	Sum of squares	*df*	Mean square	*F*	*p*
Institution	Teaching and learning	27.25	2	13.63	8.97	< .001
Affiliation	Student experience and development	12.85	2	6.42	3.82	< .05
	Affiliated country connections	1.63	2	0.81	0.43	*ns*
	Human resources	1.72	2	0.86	0.41	*ns*
Gender	Teaching and learning	26.5	2	13.25	8.71	< .001
	Student experience and development	29.0	2	14.50	8.68	< .001
	Affiliated country connections	19.3	2	9.66	5.10	< .01
	Human resources	26.1	2	13.06	6.36	< .01
Nationality	Teaching and learning	37.48	5	7.50	4.95	< .001
	Student experience and development	19.66	5	3.93	2.34	< .05
	Affiliated country connections	9.22	5	1.84	0.97	*ns*
	Human resources	17.39	5	3.48	1.68	*ns*
Discipline area	Teaching and learning	6.07	4	1.52	0.99	*ns*
	Student experience and development	9.54	4	2.38	1.41	*ns*
	Affiliated country connections	3.50	4	0.88	0.46	*ns*
	Human resources	9.12	4	2.28	1.10	*ns*

Note: *ns* = not significant.

those undertaken by Azzone & Soncin, 2020; Briggs, 2006; Chee et al., 2016; and Hill & Sughnani, 2021. Students rely on institution reputations when making choice decisions because higher education is a credence service for which it is very difficult to assess quality and value. Therefore, students use institution reputation as an indicator of quality. Students may also expect that obtaining their degree from a university with a superior reputation will yield superior post-graduation career opportunities and economic returns (Nogales et al., 2020; Sekhri, 2020).

Perceived service quality

Perceived service quality is the second most influential factor affecting the institution choices of our research participants. Previous research has found that individuals tend to evaluate service organizations holistically, rather than focusing on particular organization or product features or attributes (Wilkins et al., 2024). Therefore, perceived service quality is a useful concept for students to consider, since it may include the quality of teaching and learning, support services, extra-curricular activities, and student life in general (Latif et al., 2019).

Country brand authenticity

All four dimensions of country brand authenticity had influenced at least two-thirds of our research participants. Given that students who choose to study at a TNE institution may be assumed to want an international or foreign education, it is perhaps unsurprising that perceived country brand authenticity influences their institution choices. It is more surprising, however, that factors related to country brand authenticity are more influential than financial factors, particularly given the economic hardship being experienced by many individuals worldwide since the COVID-19 pandemic. When considering country brand authenticity, it is logical for students to focus on 'teaching and learning' and 'student experience and development', as these are aspects of the institution's service provision that will directly impact upon them on a day-to-day basis. Many CBUs operate in countries that have less well-developed higher education systems, and therefore students may choose to study at a CBU to experience the latest teaching methods, including student centered learning, and to develop critical thinking, problem solving, team working, communication, and foreign language skills.

Cai et al. (2024) found that many Chinese students regard TNE as 'studying overseas without going abroad'. These students value their interactions with Western teachers and the opportunity to develop independent and critical thinking skills, as well as intercultural and language competences, which can facilitate future graduate education overseas or careers in international companies (Cai et al., 2024). Among our research participants, affiliated country connections were *very* important to more than 20% of the total sample. Students may perceive that institutions and programs that are internationally accredited will be higher quality and respected more highly by employers, and that partner institutions in the affiliated country may offer study abroad or progression opportunities.

More than half of the CBUs in existence are affiliated to the United States, and when the British, Canadian, French and German affiliated institutions are added to these, it would be easy to assume that the CBU concept is associated with Western countries. However, there are also several Chinese, Japanese and Russian-affiliated CBUs. Our results suggest that the Western countries may possess characteristics or attributes that are valued more highly by students, but these characteristics and attributes may vary quite considerably across different countries. For example, United States-affiliated institutions often emphasize the liberal arts education model, a broad curriculum, community involvement, and liberal values, which embrace the concepts of diversity and

freedom of expression. These qualities are reflected in the vision, mission and objectives of American International University-Bangladesh (AIUB, 2026).

In contrast, Chinese and Japanese-affiliated institutions often emphasize innovation and technological knowhow, creativity, entrepreneurship, sustainable development, and satisfying the needs of industry and societies. These institutions strive for interactions with businesses in both the affiliated and home countries. The vision, mission and objectives of the Egyptian Chinese University illustrate its collectivist institutional focus: 'to build human and material capacities and achieve sustainable development' and 'to create a graduate who keeps pace with the requirements of the current labor market and has the ability to contribute and push the wheel of production forward' (ECU, 2026).

It is surprising, therefore, that the univariate tests show the relationship between the student's discipline area and the influence of country brand authenticity as nonsignificant. It is possible that students perceive the features and attributes of non-Western countries as being less country- or region-specific, as Western institutions also aim to innovate, engage in knowledge transfer, and satisfy the needs of industry and societies.

Conclusion

Contributions and implications

The findings of this research offer both theoretical and practical contributions. This is one of the first studies to 'test' the concept of country brand authenticity in a TNE context. The majority of students perceived that all four dimensions of country brand authenticity had, to some extent, influenced their institution choice. Existing generic student choice models (e.g. Vrontis et al., 2007) do not include country-related factors. Although choice models for international students (e.g. Cubillo et al., 2006; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) may include country-related factors, these are concerned with dimensions such as city image, city environment, socioeconomic level, climate, and cultural proximity. In contrast, our country brand authenticity construct is concerned with education-related matters like teaching and learning styles, and student experience activities associated with the affiliated country. Thus, adding our conceptualization of country brand authenticity to future student choice models is a valuable theoretical contribution.

Our contribution is particularly timely as it was only recently that UNESCO formally recognized country-branded universities as transnational education institutions (UNESCO/Council of Europe, 2025). Conceptually, this is important, for while international branch campuses originate from the affiliated country, country-branded universities are actually local domestic institutions that rely on offering iconic authenticity. Finding that such domestic institutions may benefit from country brand authenticity in influencing students' choices is an important practical contribution of the research.

For practitioners in TNE, the findings offer several valuable insights. It was found that in addition to the institution's reputation and perceived service quality, country brand authenticity had influenced the choice decisions of almost three-quarters of our student sample. TNE institutions may in future make more effort to emphasize in marketing communications their features and attributes that reinforce their country authenticity. Exchange partnerships may afford shared learning through courses or experiences in diverse nations. Alternatively, CBU institutions could consider personal characteristics

such as gender or socio-economic status in their marketing. The findings may guide TNE institutions in areas beyond marketing, such as pedagogical frameworks, quality assurance, and student development, retention and success.

Research limitations

The survey questionnaire was designed to identify the key factors that had determined students' institution choices. The research did not consider different long-term motivations or ambitions of students with regard to immigration, international employment opportunities and further study. Students may perceive that international branch campuses are better positioned than CBUs to arrange internships or further study in the institution's home country. However, we decided to ignore such motivations and perceptions, as many students likely enrol in higher education without a clear vision of their future, and their objectives may change during their years of undergraduate study, which would make case comparisons difficult.

The research assumed that students have appropriate knowledge and understanding about the institution. When students agreed with items such as 'Curricula (courses of study) are based on the curricula of Canadian partner institutions', 'The university and/or its programs are accredited in the United States', 'Students may participate in study abroad in Canada', and 'Some academic staff are nationals or citizens of the United States', they were indicating the perceived features of their institution that they valued and which influenced their institution choice decision.

In a small number of instances, students agreed with statements that were not accurate. For example, three students at one institution said that they were motivated by program accreditation in the affiliated country, but their institution does not have foreign accreditation. Given our large sample size ($n = 1{,}199$) and rigorous data processing procedures, the very small number of inaccurate responses received would not have impacted the validity of the self-reported data. Identifying the gaps between students' 'wants' and the current provision enables institutions to take the necessary actions to improve their offerings to students. Alternatively, some students may have given a low score for 'study abroad in the affiliated country' because they were not aware that this is offered or possible, in which case the institution needs to improve its communications with students.

Future research opportunities

This research achieved relatively consistent results across three institutions that are located in three different countries and which have three different country affiliations. However, there are many different types of TNE institution – such as international branch campuses, international joint/binational universities, and private colleges offering franchised programs – so replication studies are necessary to confirm that the findings of this research are generalizable globally. In particular, future research could investigate the extent to which students desire or prefer the claimed indexical authenticity of international branch campuses over the iconic authenticity offered by CBUs.

Students in different countries will likely have different objectives, values, and levels of knowledge about higher education in different countries, and this may affect both their

perceptions and their decision-making. For example, the majority of TNE students in the United Arab Emirates are expatriates, many of whom consider themselves global citizens and who intend to emigrate to a Western country post-graduation (cf. Levatino, 2015). In contrast, the majority of TNE students in Egypt may have no ambition to emigrate. Therefore, future research should also be undertaken in different countries. Most importantly, to convincingly establish the link between country brand authenticity and students' choices of institution, it would be necessary to have a sample composed of institutions with different country affiliations that were all located in the same country. Finally, longitudinal studies could assess the degree to which students' pre-enrolment perceptions and motivations proved accurate and realizable post-enrolment.

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