

The Potential Moderating Factors in International Student's Choice of Study Destination

Evelyn Hendriana^{1,2}

¹*IPMI International Business School, Jl. Rawajati Timur I No. 1, Kalibata, Jakarta, Indonesia*
²*PhD Candidate, Putra Business School, University Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia*

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Abstract: As people tend to associate higher education with cultural capital, many upper- and middle-class families push their children to continue their education at tertiary level. It is evident that people in developing countries perceive foreign education qualification is better than the qualification offered by local institutions, which encourages them to send their children abroad. The emergence of new education hubs such as Singapore, Malaysia, China, and South Korea intensifies the competition to attract international students among host countries and international higher education providers. Hence, the government of host countries and marketers must know the factors influencing international student's choice of study destination. The objective of this paper is to extend the current knowledge on international student's decision by including personality traits and cultural values as moderating factors of international student's choice.

1 INTRODUCTION

The number of international student population keeps increasing that reached 4.6 million students in 2015, where most of them were from Asian countries (OECD, 2017). The phenomenon of international student mobility can be investigated from supply-side and demand-side. The issues of international higher education from supply-side are related to value-creation process, internationalization strategies, and marketing strategies performed by higher education institutions. On the other hand, the demand-side focuses on students' choice of international higher education (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2015). The emphasis of this paper is on demand-side, which are student's choice factors to study abroad at individual level.

Decision to study abroad is a complex process that requires high involvement of the prospective students. It is due to the characteristics of higher education as pure service that limit the ability of prospective students to assess its quality prior to purchase (Basha et al., 2015). Not only having high performance risk, studying abroad also involves high financial risk since it requires high amount of investment and commitment particularly for students

who want to study in a developed nation (Basha et al., 2015; Foster, 2014; Maringe and Carter, 2007).

The majority of earlier studies on international students' choice to study abroad apply push-pull model. This model explains international student mobility by examining the dynamic relationship between home and host countries. Push-pull model classifies choice factors into elements from home country that push students to study abroad and the attractiveness of host country that pull the students to choose that location (Wilkins et al., 2012; Zheng, 2014).

Even though push-pull model provides comprehensive analysis of students' choice factors to study abroad, it has some limitations. Push-pull model is critiqued due to its tendency to overemphasize the external factors and give little attention on individual characteristics (Li and Bray, 2007). There is also a debate on its assumptions about student's rationality and fully informative (Maringe and Carter, 2007). Another weakness is it does not explain the process how push-pull factors affecting students' decision to study abroad (Goel et al., 2010).

While decision to study abroad is influenced by various external and internal factors, there is relatively small number of work in international

student's choice that focuses on student's intrinsic factors. Some of these studies were utilizing theory of planned behavior (TPB) to explain the effect of attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control on international student's choice to study abroad (e.g. Li et al., 2013; Schnusenberg and de Jong, 2012).

Theory of planned behavior provides a simple but powerful theoretical foundation to understand human behavior. However, the relationships between variables in this theory were inconsistent when tested in different countries. It indicates the relationship may be contingent to situations and other factors. Furthermore, TPB tends to neglect the potential effect of other variables such as individual characteristics and cultural values on the relationship between the variables composing the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 2011; Wang, Gault, Christ, & Diggin, 2016).

Based on the aforementioned arguments, this paper attempts to explore several potential moderators that may increase the predictive value of theory of planned behavior in explaining international students' decision to study abroad.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW, RESEARCH GAP AND PROPOSED HYPOTHESES

2.1 Application of Theory of Planned Behavior in International Student's Choice

Fishbein and Ajzen developed theory of planned behavior (TPB) as refinement of theory of reasoned action. This theory is rooted from socio-psychological theories of choice. This theory assumes consumers, in this context are prospective students are not able to make precise calculation on their decision (Maringe and Carter, 2007).

Due to the weak explanatory power on the direct relationship between attitude and behavior, TPB uses behavioral intention as a predictor of human behavior (Ajzen, 2011). Theory of planned behavior explains the determinants of intention and the process how these factors affect behavioral intention. This theory is effective in predicting human behavior by combining cognitive and psychological activities to explain decision process. The theory assumes individual's behavioral intention to perform the behavior is determined not only by his/her personal evaluation toward the behavior, but

also by the expectation of significant others and his/her control with respect to the behavior (Ajzen, 2012).

In the context of international students' decision-making, attitude toward studying abroad is the output of cognitive process that forms individual's behavioral beliefs about overseas study. Previous studies found that attitude toward studying abroad gave the highest influence on students' intention to study abroad (Petzold and Moog, 2018; Goel et al., 2010; Schnusenberg and de Jong, 2012). However, these studies put more emphasis only on the expected outcomes from overseas study.

Unlike the conclusive results of the relationship between attitude and intention toward studying abroad, the findings on the influence of subjective norms and perceived behavioral control on intention to study abroad are inconclusive. For instance, the relationship between subjective norms and intention to study abroad was significant in the study performed on Asian students as reported by Li et al., (2009), Li et al., (2013), and Wang et al., (2016). However, the relationship between these two variables was insignificant in the US (Goel et al., 2010; Schnusenberg and de Jong, 2012; Wang et al., 2016). It implies the relationship may be contingent to other factors. As suggested by Ajzen (2011), it would be interesting to explore other factors that may influence attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control to obtain a better explanation of human behavior.

2.2 Extending Theory of Planned Behavior to Explain International Student Mobility

In the studies of international student's choice, scholars were likely to focus on student's beliefs toward the expected benefits as the determinant of attitude toward studying abroad (e.g. Muthaly et al., 2013; Petzold and Moog, 2018; Zhuang et al., 2015). In reality, prospective student tends to evaluate the options from various aspects since international higher education is a risky decision. The student makes decision not only based on his/her evaluation on the outcomes from studying abroad, but also his/her assessment upon destination image and institution image.

Prospective student holds certain beliefs toward the destination and target institution. These elements are related to the pull factors that form individual's beliefs on destination country and institution. González et al., (2011), Anderson and Bhati (2012), and Bamber (2014) reported that students tended to

choose a destination that had favorable image. Earlier studies also indicated the significant effect of institution image on student's choice to study abroad (Hemsley-Brown, 2012; Jon et al., 2014; Wilkins and Huisman, 2011).

Student's beliefs toward the outcomes from studying abroad, the destination image, and institution image form the individual's overall cognitive attitude toward the study destination, which finally affects his/her intention to study in a particular destination. Referring to theory of planned behavior (TPB), the first proposed hypothesis is:

P1: Student's attitude toward the study destination positively affects his/her intention, which in turn influences his/her choice of study destination

Individual characteristics may influence one's attitude toward the behavior. The individual characteristics that possibly will increase predictive value of the theory of planned behavior include personality traits which are rarely been examined in international marketing for higher education. Every individual has specific psychological characteristics that distinguish him/her from others. One of the most popular personality approaches in contemporary psychology is big-five personality model. The big-five personality model consists of neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Schiffman et al., 2010).

Despite their needs to gain benefits from studying abroad, some students want to adjust easily in the host country. As reported in some studies, some students prefer to study in the host country sharing some similarities or having historical linkage with their home country (Anderson and Bhati, 2012; Jon et al., 2014), while other students are willing to study in the host country that is different from their home country (Bamber, 2014; Basha et al., 2015).

From the five personality traits, openness is seen to have relationship with student's decision to study abroad. Studies by Miao and Harris (2012) and Li et al., (2013) showed that students who had interest to and gain the most benefits from studying abroad were usually possessed extraversion and novelty-seeking personality. The positive relationship between attitude and student's intention toward the study destination is expected to be stronger among students with high level of openness. When a student holds positive attitude toward a particular study destination, he/she is likely to have a higher preference to study in that destination. This tendency will be stronger if the student has a high degree of openness since he/she is more willing to experience new things and more appreciate the quest for knowledge. Thus, I propose the following

proposition about the relationship between attitude, intention, and openness:

P2: Student's degree of openness will moderate the relationship between attitude and intention to study in a particular destination.

While attitude toward studying abroad refers to personal evaluation of the behavior, subjective norm indicates the socially expected behavior (Ajzen, 2012). It implies the individual's beliefs on the judgment of significant others about studying abroad. The significant others may include parents, other family members, peers, teachers, and colleagues. An individual tends to behave as expected by their social referents (Ajzen, 2012).

A study by Presley et al., (2010) showed that subjective norms had a significant effect on students' decision to study abroad. Similarly, Li et al., (2009) and Li et al., (2013) also reported that subjective norms positively influenced Mainland Chinese students' intention to study at offshore campus.

Consistent to TPB, the following proposed hypothesis is:

P3: Subjective norms positively influences student's intention to study in a particular study destination, which later on affects his/her choice of study destination

As aforementioned, the findings on the influence of subjective norms on intention to study abroad are inconclusive. A comparative study by Wang et al. (2015) found that subjective norms had a significant positive influence on Taiwanese students' decision to study abroad, but the effect was not significant among American students. Similar findings are reported on the studies on Asian students (Li et al., 2009; Li et al., 2013) and on American students (Goel et al., 2010; Schnusenberg and de Jong, 2012). It indicates cultural values may have some influence on the relationship.

Unlike American students, Asian students adopt collectivism values. In East Asia, Confucian values also have significant role in influencing the way of living of the people. Either collectivism or Confucian values emphasize the need to respect the important others, including the elderly. People adopting these cultural values tend to seek advice from others and appreciated the opinion given by significant others (Lee and Morrish, 2012). As the consequence, the decision to study abroad on Asian students were highly influenced by significant others, especially parents.

Asians are emphasizing social harmony, which compels them to know their position in the society

and to act according to their position. Asians are highly regard social hierarchy, such as between parents and children. In the context of studying abroad, Asian parents will use various persuasion tactics to send their children abroad and the children tend to follow their parents' will (Bamber, 2014; Bodycott and Lai, 2012; Lee and Morrish, 2012). Therefore, the effect of subjective norms on intention to study in a particular destination will be greater among students holding strong collectivism or Confucian values. The proposed hypothesis regarding the moderating effect of Asian cultural values as follows:

P4: Asian cultural values (collectivism or Confucian values) will moderate the positive relationship between subjective norms and student's intention to study in a particular destination.

Filial piety as one of the Confucian philosophies is not only presented by the acts of respecting the elderly and never behaving against their parents, but also by taking care of parents as they age (Lee and Morrish, 2012). As reported by Bodycott and Lai (2012) and Lee and Morrish (2012), Chinese parents placed career prospect as the most important criteria when considering sending their children abroad. They were willing to make large investment for their children's education. Some parents expected their children to get employment in other countries and migration opportunities because their children's life in foreign country would be better than if their children returned to China. By having better life, the children will become the pride of the family and able to finance their parents in the future. Thus, another proposed hypothesis related to moderating effect of cultural value is:

P5: Asian cultural values (collectivism or Confucian values) will moderate the positive relationship between attitude and student's intention to study in a particular destination.

The last antecedent in TPB is perceived behavioral control. Perceived behavioral control represents individual's perception on the degree of easiness or difficulty to perform the behavior (Ajzen, 2012). In this context, perceived behavioral control is related to the availability of resources and opportunities that enable the students to study abroad. Financial constraints, academic capabilities, and availability of administrative support may facilitate or impede student's intention to study abroad.

Studies by Presley et al., (2010), Schnusenberg and de Jong (2012), and Li et al., (2013) found that perceived behavioral control has significant effect on students' intention to study abroad. However,

Goel et al., (2010) reported that perceived behavioral control gave significant influence on intention to study abroad only if behavioral beliefs were not exist. Referring to TPB model, this paper proposed the following hypothesis:

P6: Perceived behavioral control influences student's intention, which in turn affects student's decision to study in a particular destination.

The proposed hypotheses are presented in Figure 1.

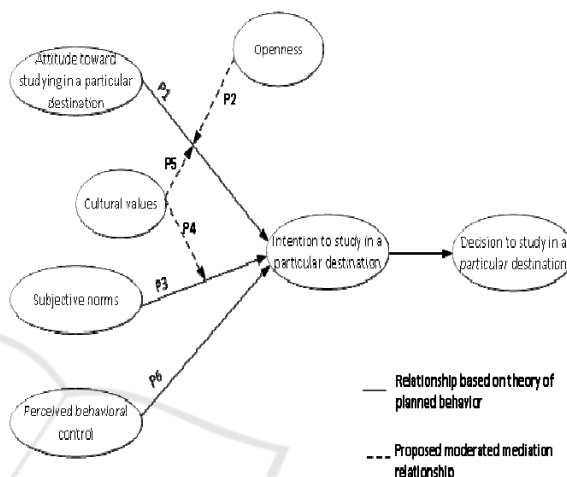


Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework.

3 CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Acknowledging the significant number of international students studying abroad, it is important for government of host country and marketers of international higher education to understand the underlying factors that influence international student's decision to choose a particular study destination.

There are two main theories used to explain international student's choice to study abroad: push-pull model and theory of planned behavior. This paper uses theory of planned behavior that is looking at the intrinsic factors influencing student's decision to study abroad. This paper proposes to extend theory of planned behavior by including personality traits, namely openness, and Asian cultural values as the moderators that may influence student's choice of study destination.

The proposed conceptual framework needs to be tested using quantitative approach. The populations of the study are prospective undergraduate and

postgraduate students. A comparative study involving students from collectivist and individualist countries would be interesting to look at the significance of cultural values in influencing the relationships between variables of interest in this framework. The collected data could be analyzed using multiple regression analysis or structural equation modeling.

By having comprehensive understanding on international student's decision-making, government and marketers may identify the importance of each element in influencing international student's choice of study destination and determine the appropriate strategy to market their services. Marketers may emphasize some elements such as the uniqueness of host country and institution to trigger the effect of openness on students' decision, and design marketing programs to attract significant others who may influence Asian students' choice to study abroad.

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