International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

The Moderating Effect of University Reputation on the Relationship between Website Quality and Destination Selection by Prospective International Students

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DOI : https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi.5.1024.2826

ABSTRACT

Purpose – "This study aims to uncover the factors affecting the destination of international students to pursue their studies at Ahlul-Bayt International University (ABU Tehran), focusing on the university's website and its reputation. It will specifically target all international students at ABU.

Design/methodology/approach – The research employs a quantitative methodology, with questionnaires being disseminated to participants." 192 international students from

ABU participated in the survey, providing their feedback. The SMART PLS was used to analyze relationships and test hypotheses

Findings – The findings suggest a meaningful and favorable connection between the university website quality, the university's reputation, and the intention of international students in choosing destination selection ABU.

Research limitations/implications – "This study acknowledges several limitations that future research could address. The limited timeframe of six months restricted data collection to 192 participants from Ahlul-Bayt International University (ABU), potentially impacting the generalizability of findings to all international students in Iranian universities. Future studies with larger, more diverse samples are recommended to explore the multifaceted influences on international student preferences, including individual, cultural, and institutional factors.

Implications –, university reputation is shown to have a moderating effect; a strong reputation can amplify the positive impact of a high-quality website. These findings highlight the need to consider reputation as a key variable in educational marketing models, demonstrating how it interacts with digital tools to shape student decision-making.

Keywords: University website quality, reputation, destination selection

1. Introduction

The global competition to attract international students is intensifying, with enrollments surging from 2 million in 2000 to over 6.4 million in 2021 (UNESCO, 2021). While Iran hosts a significant number of international students, primarily from neighboring countries, its numbers pale in comparison to countries like Turkey (UIS, 2023). This highlights the need for countries like Iran to not only retain their current international student population but also attract new students.

Understanding the factors influencing international student destination selection is crucial in this endeavor. Previous research emphasizes the importance of university reputation and the quality of education as key determinants (Soutar and Turner, 2002; Choudaha, 2015). Additionally, in today's digital age, university websites play a critical role in shaping perceptions and influencing student choices (Chen & Zimitat, 2006). A high-quality website can enhance an institution's reputation, build trust, and ultimately attract prospective students (Bai et al., 2008).

This research investigates the influence of university website quality on the destination selection process of prospective international students, with a particular focus on the moderating role of university reputation. By examining this relationship, the study aims to provide valuable insights for universities seeking to enhance their international student recruitment strategies.

Problem Statement

"To what extent do university website quality and reputation influence student destination choices?"

Research Objectives

1. To Examine the effect of university website quality influence on international student destination selection.

2. To Examine the moderating effect of university reputation between University Website Quality and International student destination selection.

Research Hypothesis

The following research hypotheses will be formulated:

1. The effect of university website quality influences the international student destination selection.

2. The effect of university reputation moderating between University Website Quality and International student destination selection.

Research Questions

1. Does university website quality influence on international student destination selection?

2. Does university reputation effect the relationship between University Website Quality and International student destination selection?

Conceptual Framework
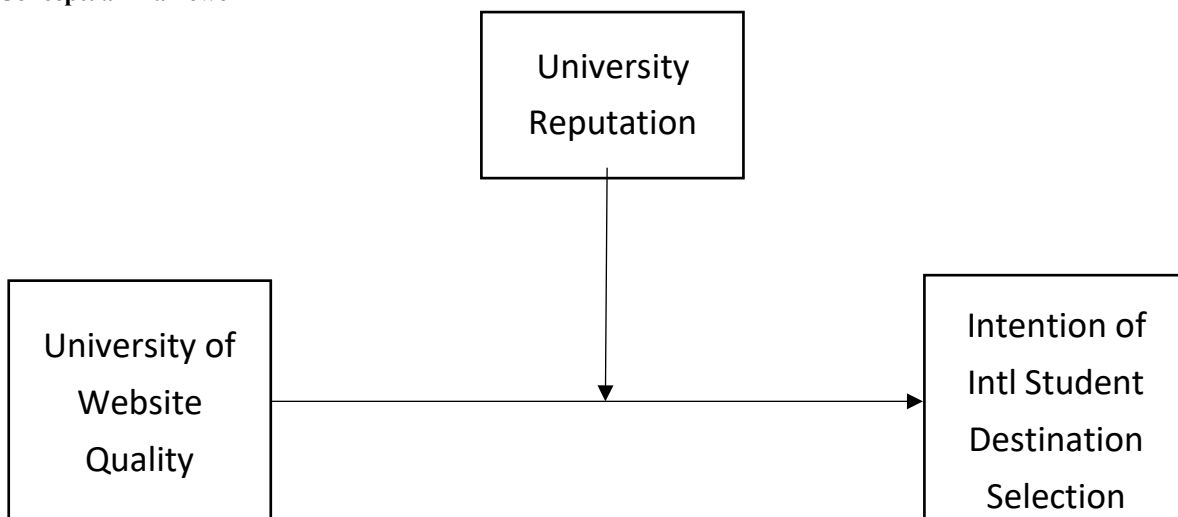
2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Importance of Website Quality

In today's digital landscape, websites are crucial for any organization, acting as a public face and a platform for information dissemination. A well-designed website is essential for establishing credibility and attracting users (The Importance of a Web Site, 2004; Shaik, 2005). To be effective, websites must be user-friendly, visually appealing, and provide easily accessible, relevant content (Taub, 2006; Nielsen, 2006; Wentzell, 2003).

Beyond basic functionality, educational institutions, in particular, should leverage their websites to share valuable resources, promote programs, attract prospective students, and foster a sense of community (Bhachech, 2009; Dennis, 2016). However, a poorly designed user interface can hinder these goals, making it difficult for users to find the information they need.

2.2 Website Quality and Intention of Student Destination Selection

In today's digital age, university websites have become essential marketing tools, serving as primary information sources for prospective students (Mogaji, 2016; Thorlacius, 2007). Studies highlight the strong correlation between website quality and student enrollment, emphasizing the need for engaging and informative online platforms (Klaseen, 2002; Gomes and Murphy, 2003; Jayawardena, Ross, and Grace, 2020).

Effective university websites go beyond basic functionality, incorporating visually appealing design elements and user-friendly interfaces to create a positive user experience (Vejlgaard, 2004; Engholm, 2002; Alsudani and Casey, 2009). However, research suggests that many university websites are

overly system-oriented, failing to prioritize the needs and perspectives of prospective students (Jayawardena, Ross, and Grace, 2020; Mentes and Turan, 2012; Lipnack and Stamps, 2008).

While online resources are important, studies also show that prospective students rely on a combination of online and offline sources when making enrollment decisions, including traditional resources like college visits and word-of-mouth referrals (Soo & Elliott, 2010; Lipnack and Stamps, 2008). Factors such as academic reputation, program offerings, financial aid, and location remain significant influences (Soutar & Turner, 2002; Argyriou et al., 2006; Zhang & Hagedorn, 2011).

Therefore, universities must strive to create comprehensive and engaging websites that cater to the needs of prospective students while acknowledging the multifaceted nature of the college selection process.

2.3 Moderating effect of university reputation between University Website Quality and International student destination selection

Reputation is a powerful force in higher education, shaping prospective students' perceptions and influencing their enrollment decisions. It's built on stakeholder perceptions of an institution's quality, prestige, and ability to deliver value (Oxford Dictionary, 2012; Fombrun and Rindova, 1999; Kotler and Fox, 1995). While defining quality in higher education can be complex (Harvey and Green, 1993), an institution's perceived reputation for quality often outweighs its actual quality in the eyes of prospective students (Kotler & Fox, 1995).

Factors like academic reputation, faculty expertise, program offerings, and even admission selectivity contribute to a university's overall reputation (Jager, 2009; Gray, 2003; Cubillo et al., 2006; Bourke, 2000). Universities can strategically communicate their strengths through various channels, including their websites, to shape positive perceptions among prospective students (Mpinganjira, 2009). A strong reputation not only attracts students but also enhances an institution's competitive edge within the higher education landscape (Rambewela and Hall, 2009; Sheiry, 2012).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Methodology

This quantitative study investigates the relationship between university website quality, university reputation, and international student destination selection. Data were collected from a sample of 186 international students at ABU Tehran, representing a diverse range of nationalities and academic levels. A simple random sampling technique was employed, ensuring equal opportunity for participation.

The study utilized a structured questionnaire, divided into two sections. The first section gathered demographic information, while the second section measured the three core variables using a five-point Likert scale. University Website Quality was measured using a 7-item scale adapted from Yoo and Donthu (2001). Destination Selection was measured with a 3-item scale based on Xu and Chen (2006). University Reputation was assessed using a 5-item scale, drawing upon Nguyen and LeBlanc (2001) and Sung and Yang (2008).

Data analysis was performed using SmartPLS 4.0 software. Descriptive statistics, reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha), and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) were employed to analyze the relationships between variables.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Response Rate

A total of 192 surveys were distributed to students worldwide. All equipment was returned to the researchers. This resulted in a 100% response rate for this survey.

Table 4.1

Response Rate

Description	Total (Set)	Percentage (100%)
Questionnaire distributed	192	100
Questionnaire returned	192	100

Profile of Respondents

4.2. Gender

The gender distribution of respondents shows 57.3% male and 42.7% female, contrary to claims by Bottcher et al. (2016), Hurst (2019), and Van Mol (2022), who argue that male students dominate study abroad programs in the Western world. Several studies (Lam & Hsu, 2006; Ivy, 2010; Bhati & Anderson, 2012; Ozoglu et al., 2015; Harazneh et al., 2018) also highlight the predominance of men in study abroad communities.

Table 4.2 Gender

Gender	Responses	Percentage
Male	110	57.3
Female	82	42.7
Total	192	100

4.2.1 Distribution

Figure 4.2.1 shows the age distribution of respondents, with 79.2% (152 respondents) in the 18-28 age group, 19.8% (38 respondents) in the 29-39 range, and 1.0% (2 respondents) aged 40-50. These findings highlight the age diversity of the study participants. While the ideal age for studying abroad is subjective, the notion that "there are no limits to the acquisition of knowledge regardless of age" (Samiyllaha, 2021) applies here.

Age	Responses	Percentage
18 – 28 years	152	79.2
29 – 39 years	38	19.8
40 – 50 years	2	1
Above	0	0
Total	192	100

4.2.2 Nationality of Respondents

The data shows a diverse distribution of nationalities among respondents. Afghan participants made up 41.1% (79 respondents), followed by 29.2% (56) from Pakistan, 19.8% (38) from Nigeria, and 3.1% (6) from India. Additionally, 6.8% (13) identified as "Others," with representation from countries such as Congo, Ghana, Uganda, and Syria. This highlights the varied national composition of the study.

Table 4.2.2   Nationality of Respondents

Nationality	Responses	Percentage
Pakistan	56	29.2
Nigerian	38	19.8
India	6	3.1
Afghanistan	79	41.1
Other	13	6.8

4.2.3 Level of Education

The findings show that 34.4% (66 respondents) held a bachelor's degree, 63.5% (122) had a master's degree, and 2.1% (4) held a Ph.D. This provides a clear depiction of the educational qualifications within the study cohort.

Level of Education of the Respondents **Table 4.2.3**

Level of education as international student	Responses	Percentage
Undergraduate	66	34.4
Masters	122	63.5
PhD	4	2.1
Total	192	100

4.2.4 Field of Study of Respondents

The results show that 24.5% (47 respondents) pursued International Relations, 4.7% (9) studied Persian Literature, 3.1% (6) chose Economics, and 32.8% (63) studied Business Management. Additionally, 17.2% (33) focused on Architectural Engineering, 5.7% (11) pursued Information Technology, and 12% studied other diverse fields. This provides a detailed overview of the academic distribution among the respondents.

Table 4.2.4 Field of Study of Respondents

Field of Study	Responses	Percentage
Business Management	47	24.5
Architectural Engineering	33	17.2
Information Technology (IT)	11	5.7
International Relation	23	12.0
Persian Literature	9	4.7
Economics	6	3.1
Others	63	32.8
Total	192	100

4.2.5 Distribution of the Universities

Udoyen (2019) defines a study group as the target population from which a research sample is drawn. This study's population consisted of 192 undergraduate and postgraduate international students at Ahlul-Bayt International University, Tehran University. International students were selected due to the frequent use of this demographic in studies examining the influence of university website quality on prospective international students' destination selection, with university reputation as a moderating variable.

Table 4.2.5 Population Distribution of the international students in Universities

Educational Region	Number of Students
Ahlul-Bayt International University	192
Total	192

4.3 Model analysis

Using the two-step method described by (Barclay et al., 1995) to evaluate the measurement model and the structural model, reliability, validity, and path-coefficient assumptions pertaining to multi collinearity, normalcy, and bias were measured prior to performing PLSSEM tests.

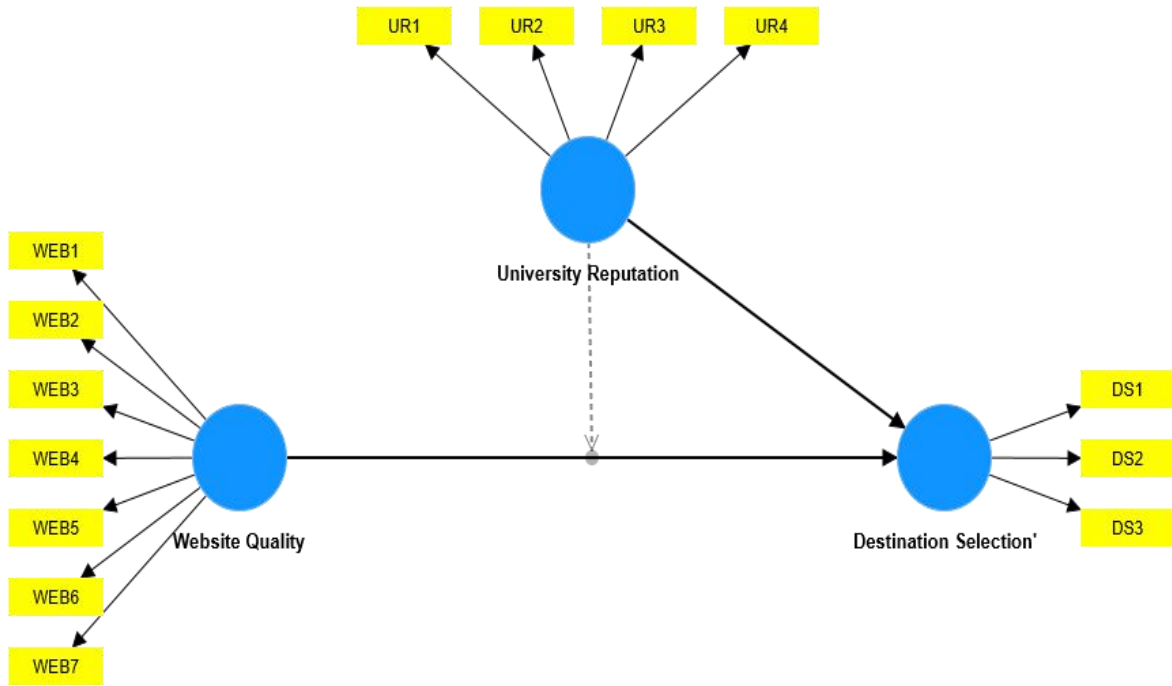### 4.3.1 Assessment of Measurement Model

Figure 4.4.1　Research Model
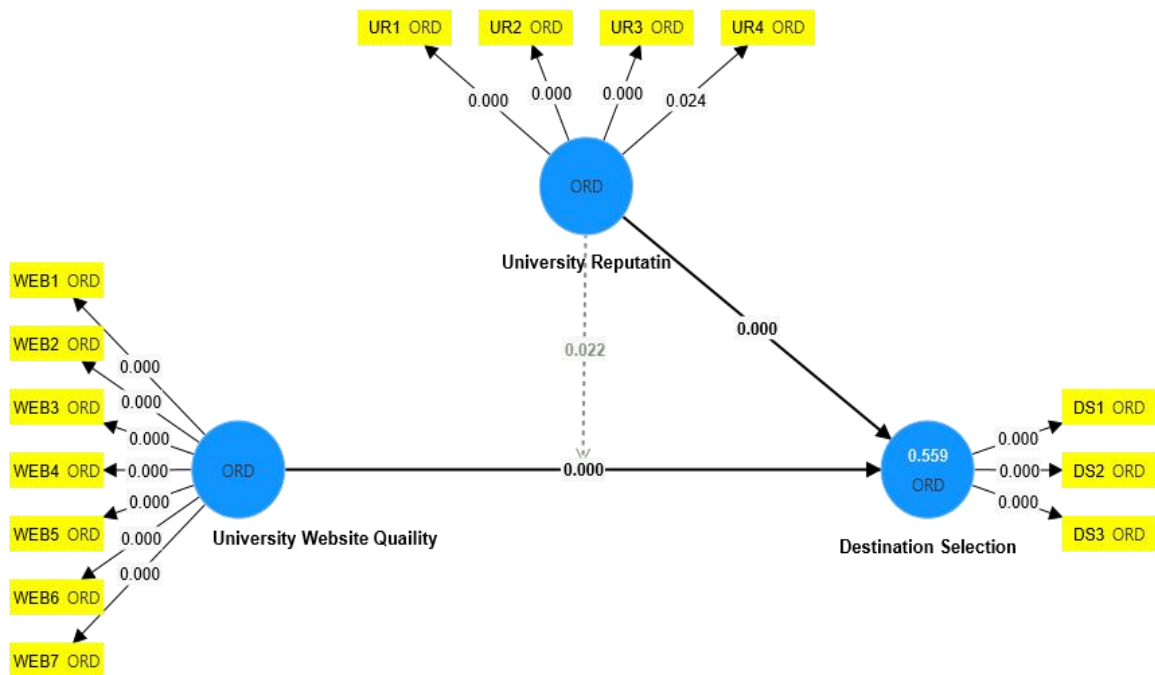
Source: 2024

4.3.2 P-Value

Figure 4.4.2 Research Model -P/LS Algorism

Source: Research 2024
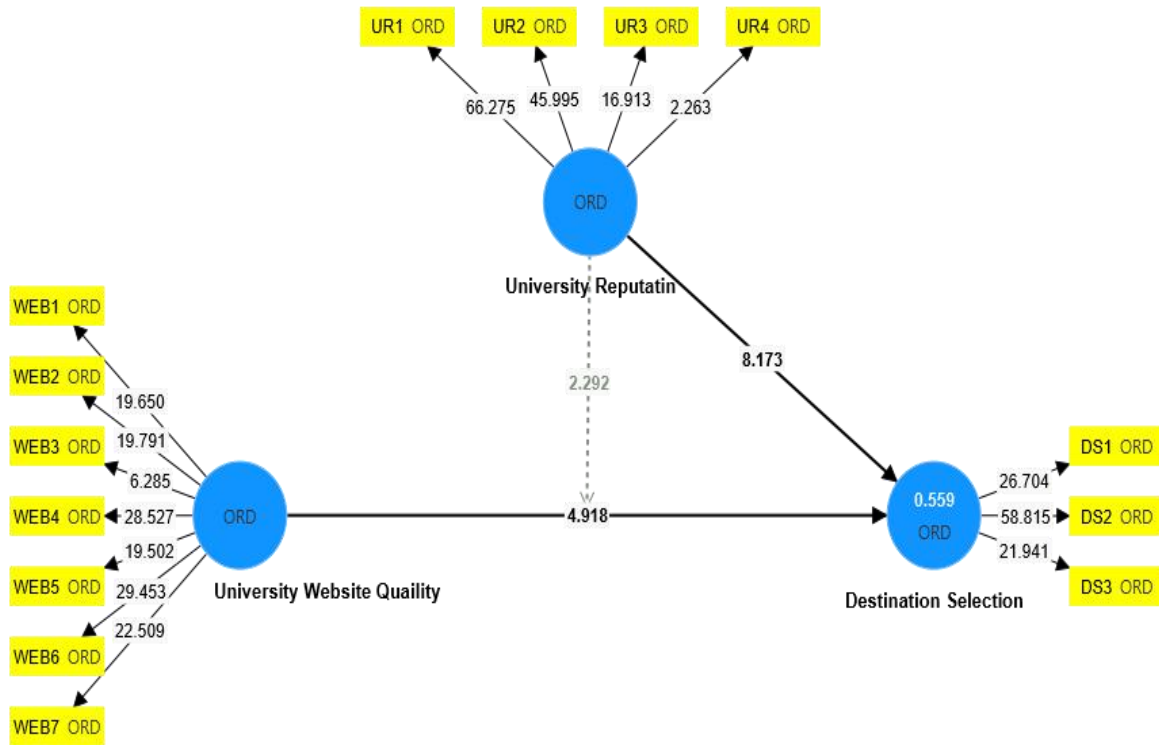
4.3.3 T-Value

Figure 4.4.3 Research Model -P/LS Algorism

Source: Research 2024

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
WEB	0.855	0.872	0.890	0.540
DS	0.768	0.778	0.867	0.685
UR	0.750	0.818	0.848	0.598

4.4 Internal Consistency Reliability (Cronbach's Alpla)

Internal consistency reliability assesses how well indicators measure the same construct. Bagozzi (1981) linked it to convergent validity, and reliability measures like Cronbach's Alpha and composite reliability (Rho_C) from Jöreskog (1971) are commonly used to evaluate it (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). A Cronbach's Alpha value above 0.7 indicates acceptable reliability, while values below 0.6 are considered poor (George & Mallery, 2003; Sekaran, 2003). The table below shows Cronbach's Alpha values for each construct, reflecting their reliability.

Table 4.4 Cronbach's Alpha

Variable	Cronbach's alpha
WEB	0.855
DS	0.768
UR	0.750

Source: SmartPLS 4

4.5 Indicator reliability (Composite Reliability (rho_c)

Composite reliability, denoted as rho_c, evaluates the consistency of latent constructs in Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). It reflects how well multiple observed variables measure a construct. A value above 0.7 indicates a robust measurement model, while lower values may signal issues with convergent validity or item reliability (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). In this study, all constructs have composite reliability values exceeding 0.7.

Table 4.5 Composite reliability

Variable	Composite reliability (rho)
WEB	0.890
DS	0.867
UR	0.848

Source: SmartPLS 4

4.6 Convergent Validity (Average Variance Extracted)

Step three in examining convergent validity involves using Average Variance Extracted (AVE), which measures how much variance a construct explains in its items (Hair et al., 2019). According to Chin (2010), an AVE above 0.50 is acceptable, indicating the construct explains more variance than error. In this study, all AVE values exceed the 0.50 threshold.

Table 4.6 Average Variance Extracted (AVE)

Variable	Average variance extracted (AVE)
WEB	0.540
DS	0.685
UR	0.598

Source: SmartPLS 4

4.7 Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity assesses the degree to which constructs are statistically distinct (Hair et al., 2014). The Fornell-Larcker Criterion is a common method for evaluating discriminant validity, requiring the square root of each construct's AVE to be greater than its correlation with other constructs (Kline, 2015). In this study, all constructs meet this criterion, indicating meaningful distinctions between them and establishing proper discriminant validity, as shown in the table.

Variable	Fornell-Larcker criterion		
	DS	UR	WEB
DS	0.827		
UR	0.697	0.773	
WEB	0.572	0.496	0.735

Source: SmartPLS 4

4.8 Assessment of Structural Model

The structural model was evaluated to assess the strength of relationships between latent and endogenous variables. This analysis validates the structural model by confirming these interrelationships. Model fit was assessed using indices such as the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardized Root Mean Residual (SRMR) (Ringle & Sarstedt, 2017).

4.9 Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

The R-squared value of 0.566 indicates that 56.6% of the variability in Destination Selection is explained by the independent variable, suggesting a good model fit. The adjusted R-squared of 0.844 accounts for model complexity, providing a more reliable measure. However, high R-squared values should be interpreted cautiously, as they may indicate overfitting (Gujarati & Porter, 2009).

Table 4.9 R- Square

	R-square	R-square adjusted
DS	0.566	0.599

Source: SmartPLS 4

4.10 Fitness of the Model:

Key metrics were considered in assessing the structural equation model (SEM) fit. The SRMR values for both the Saturated and Estimated Models (0.071) suggest a decent fit, with values closer to 0 being ideal (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The dG (Gamma) values (0.218) indicate similarities between the models, pointing to possible specification issues (Byrne, 2012). According to Jöreskog and Sörbom (1996), the d ULS (Unweighted Least Squares) values (0.533) show a better fit with lower values. High Chi-square values (235.376) suggest potential fit issues, though these should be interpreted with consideration for sample size and complexity (Bentler & Bonett, 1980). The NFI values (0.815) indicate a reasonable fit closer to 1. Overall, the indices provide insight into the model's suitability

Table 4.10 Model fit

Variance	Saturated model	Estimated model
SRMR	0.071	0.071
d_ULS	0.533	0.533
d_G	0.218	0.218
Chi-square	235.376	235.186
NFI	0.815	0.815

Source: SmartPLS 4

4.11 Test of Hypothesis:

H1: University website quality influences the international students for Destination Selection.

The PLS-SEM analysis showed that University Website Quality significantly influences international students' Destination Selection, with a p-value of 0.000 (<0.05) and a T-value of 8.173 (>1.96). This supports the hypothesis that University Website Quality affects Destination Selection, leading to the acceptance of the hypothesis and rejection of the null hypothesis (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991).

H2: University Reputation influences the international students for Destination Selection. As Participants indicated that university reputation plays a key role in their selection process, with many highlighting academic quality as a major influence. According to Zhang Shuai and Dai Lang (2017), university reputation is the second most important factor for international students. Since H2's p-value (0.000 < 0.05) and T-value (4.918 > 1.96) meet the acceptance criteria, the hypothesis is accepted.

H3: University Reputation moderates the relationship between University Website Quality and international student's destination selection.

Contrary, the results from the PLS-SEM analysis revealed that, University reputation has significant moderating influence on the relationship between University Website Quality and intention of international student's destination selection. The P-value of the moderating effect is (0.022<0.05) which is less than our acceptance rate of 0.05 and T-value is greater than our acceptance rate 2.292 (2.292>1.96). This implies that hypothesis two which stated that, University reputation moderates the relationship between University website quality and intention of international student's destination selection and the hypothesis is significant and is accepted and therefore we reject null hypothesis Rosenthal, R., & Rosnow, R. L. (1991).

Table 4.11 Hypothesis testing

	P-values	T-values
UR -> DS	0.000	8.173
WEB -> DS	0.000	4.918
UR x WEB -> DS	0.022	2.292

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

5.0 Introduction

This chapter will give a conclusion for the overall study based on the analysis result on previous chapter. Besides that, this chapter will summarize the overall research which had been perform, discussion reviewing, Practical and Theoretical Implication and limitation of the study will be explained in this chapter. Furthermore, conclusion and summary also will be discussed and researcher will give several recommendations for reader on the future study.

5.1 Discussion

The Internet is becoming a more vital communication tool in this era of digital technology. This study showed that Google is a popular search engine among respondents and that category communication characteristics have a significant impact on students' choice of study destination. This could have to do with the fact that earlier studies were carried out when the Internet was not as widely used and significant as it is now. This survey confirms earlier findings that over half of students find an institution's website using search engines. Murphy and Gomes (2003). Considering this, higher education establishments would profit from listing their websites in the top search engines to draw in foreign students. Students and their families must make a major financial commitment when choosing a good higher education institution (Mazzarol, 1998). Prospective students select priorities and weigh the benefits and cons of departing aspects of an institution to make an informed decision (Soutar & Turner, 2002). This study aims to determine whether international students' choice to attend Ahlul Bayt International University (ABU) is influenced by the reputation of the university, the quality of the university's website, or both. The discussion that follows is predicated on the study's conclusions and research questions.

5.2 The effect of university website quality influences the international student destination selection.

The study delved, the literature on student decision-making processes and the higher education industry to find the answers to these concerns. Building on the observations of earlier writers, the research has developed a framework that enumerates the problems that have been found to affect international students' decision-making processes, or, to put it another way, to influence future students' purchasing intentions. Websites were rated as most effective direct marketing communication tools in their institution selection choice ((Andrew & Kurtz 2010). The study validated its model on a sample of students from Ahlul-Bayt International University in Tehran as part of the empirical part of the study. Examining how university website quality influences international students' choice of destination was the intent of the study. H1 was accepted.

5.2.2 Effect of university reputation moderating between University Website Quality and International student destination selection.

According to Howard (2002), college rankings are typically portrayed as instruments for decision-making during the university application process. According to a 2009 study by Jager and Soontiens, students' decisions on which higher education platform to use are heavily influenced by a university's reputation. For this reason, the university reputation is crucial for both future students and guidance on finishing the selected course. When selecting overseas students, students typically consider a university reputation and quality more highly. According to Oladipo and Sugandi's study from 2022, enhancing universities' levels of internationalization and offering excellent learning resources to foreign students—like scholarships and curricula that are exclusively in English, for example—have turned into effective recruitment tactics. The decision to study highly selectively at ABU is significantly influenced by the university's reputation, as seen by the positive link that exists between the two variables and the P-value and T-value of that decision. H2 was accepted.

5.3 Theoretical and Practical Implications

5.3.1 Practical Implications

To attract international students, universities should prioritize user-friendly websites with strong visuals, easy navigation, and comprehensive information. This includes fast loading times, mobile optimization, and interactive elements like virtual tours. A strong online presence can be bolstered by showcasing a university's reputation through rankings, alumni successes, and partnerships. Universities can further engage prospective students through personalized content based on their location and interests, including localized information relevant to international students.

5.3.2 Theoretical Implication

This research emphasizes the significant role university websites play in attracting international students. By integrating the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Information Systems Success Model (ISSM), the study reveals how a website's user-friendliness, perceived usefulness, and information quality influence student choices. Furthermore, university reputation is shown to have a moderating effect; a strong reputation can amplify the positive impact of a high-quality website. These findings highlight the need to consider reputation as a key variable in educational marketing models, demonstrating how it interacts with digital tools to shape student decision-making.

5.4 Limitation of Study

"This study acknowledges several limitations that future research could address. The limited timeframe of six months restricted data collection to 192 participants from Ahlul-Bayt International University (ABU), potentially impacting the generalizability of findings to all international students in Iranian universities. Future studies with larger, more diverse samples are recommended to explore the multifaceted influences on international student preferences, including individual, cultural, and institutional factors. Findings suggest Iranian universities, including ABU, should prioritize internationalization efforts such as global partnerships, enhanced academic reputation, and supportive campus environments to attract a wider pool of international students."

5.5 Recommendation for Future Research

"This study highlights the importance of a strong online presence and reputation in attracting international students to ABU. Future research should explore broader dissemination of these findings, potentially through public forums and targeted outreach, to better inform prospective students. Additionally, expanding research to include perspectives from various stakeholders (e.g., parents, peers, employers) and exploring the influence of external factors (e.g., global events, health crises) on university selection would provide a more comprehensive understanding of this complex decision-making process. Finally, employing diverse methodologies, such as in-depth interviews alongside surveys, could yield richer, more nuanced data."

5.6 Conclusion

Based on the result of this study that University Website Quality Influence on Intention of

Prospective International Student for Destination Selection: University Reputation as Moderating Variable. The answers support the hypothesis and show the relationship between university website quality and university reputation, influencing international students who select to study at ABU. Thus, the findings answer research questions. Of these three variables, the university website quality and university reputation have the greatest impact on international students' decisions to choose to study at ABU. Therefore, ABU also needs to maintain and improve the university website and university reputation.

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