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Tunisia as an Emerging Higher Education Hub: The Perspective of International Students from Different Nationalities in private and Public Universities

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Abstract

This research investigates the factors that affect the decision of international students when choosing Tunisia as a higher education destination. Despite Tunisia's growing appeal to international students, particularly those from sub-Saharan Africa, its progress in attracting international students remains modest. Through a survey administered to 284 international students currently studying in Tunisia, this study examines three key determinants: social media, advertising, and brand image. Using structural equation modelling via AMOS, we analysed how these factors vary between public and private universities, as well as across different student nationalities. Our findings reveal that while all three determinants significantly influence destination choice, the effect of brand image is moderated by the public/private nature of the institution. Interestingly, nationality did not have any moderation role in the link between these determinants and destination choice. These findings provide valuable insights for higher education administrators and policymakers in developing effective strategies to enhance Tunisia's position as an emerging higher education hub.

Keywords: *International Students, Destination Choie, Higher Education Hub, Brand Image, Social Media; Tunisia*

Introduction

The choice of a higher education destination is crucial to students' academic and professional development (Collins et al., 2022). In today's globalized world, countries actively compete to attract international students, as their presence enhances a country's image and brings economic benefits (Sin et al., 2019). In this competitive landscape, emerging destinations strive to position themselves as attractive alternatives to traditional education hubs. However, Tunisia has not positioned itself as a leading destination in this global race (Mefteh, Bouhajeb, & Smaoui, 2016). Tunisia's higher education system comprises 13 universities, including a virtual university for distance learning, as well as 203 public and 72 private institutions. This diverse educational landscape, combined with its strategic geographic location between Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, positions Tunisia as a potential educational hub. In addition, the Higher Institutes of Technological Studies (ISET) offer Tunisian and foreign students the opportunity to study a variety of disciplines, from pure sciences and humanities to social sciences and medicine.

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Each year, an increasing number of international students arrive in Tunisia to continue their post-secondary education. According to the Tunisian Ministry of Higher Education, the number of foreign students rose from 6,276 in the 2015-2016 academic year to 7,385 by 2018-2019, and reached 8,331 in 2019-2020, with 90.3% of them being African. While this steady growth demonstrates Tunisia's increasing attractiveness, there remains significant potential for diversifying the international student population and strengthening its position in the international higher education market. To improve this situation, higher education administrators must better recognize the variables influencing foreign students' decisions when selecting a study destination (Gutema et al., 2024).

Given the importance of education to society (Azzahra., 2024), numerous studies worldwide have explored the determinants of foreign students' destination choices (Collins et al., 2022; Gutema et al., 2024; Utari et al., 2024; Braimah et al., 2024). However, limited academic research exists on Tunisia, making it an ideal case for this study. Furthermore, identifying such determinants is important for creating effective strategies to attract and retain international students in an increasingly competitive environment. Therefore, this research aims to identify the key factors that influence foreign students' decision to choose Tunisia as their study destination.

By focusing specifically on social media, advertising, and brand image as key determinants, this paper is to present insights into the determinants that affect foreign students' choice of Tunisia as an educational destination. The study addresses several key questions: What are the main determinants that guide foreign students in selecting a study destination? How do these factors specifically affect the choice of Tunisia? Additionally, the research explores the moderating effects of the type of university (public or private) and the nationality of the student on the relationship between these determinants and the choice of Tunisia.

The aim of this research is to deepen theoretical knowledge by defining a typology of these determinants, presenting a conceptual model that links them to destination choice, and identifying moderating effects within this model. The study will empirically test the proposed model, offering insight into how these factors affect international students' decision; hence ultimately, we can provide recommendations to higher education administrators for enhancing Tunisia's position as an emerging higher education hub.

Review of Literature

Factors Affecting Foreign Students' Decisions to Study Abroad

Students graduating from high school decide whether or not to go to university. If they choose to continue their education at a university, they then have to decide which one to attend, and whether in their country or abroad. The determinants of a student's choice as to which destination to attend have been widely examined by scholars from different disciplines (Yue et al., 2024; Jon, 2024; Douglas et al., 2024; Kim Khanh & Ngoc, 2024).

In a study conducted by McMahon (1992), as the first stage, students should determine whether to continue their learning journey in their country or abroad. The choice of a host country comes just after deciding to complete their study outside their home country. At this choice, many pull factors emerge to select a country and then choose a certain institution at this country. To reach these three stages, McMahon (1992) explored international students' decision to study abroad using a theoretical framework, which involves the interplay of a conglomerate of "push" and "pull" factors. Push factors such as the home country's cultural, economic, political and

academic aspects, operate within the student's home country. These factors stimulate the student's curiosity and motivate him to pursue foreign studies. On the opposite side, "Pull" factors operate within a host country. This concept is critical for understanding the factors which affect students' choice of their study abroad and selection of a specific country. They function in combination with the previously described "push".

The research conducted by Lam, Ariffin & Ahmad (2011) adopted quantitative method to explore the contributing and the motivational factors that influence the decision of international student by applying the 'push-pull' model. The results of their research showed that "enhancing job prospects" was among the top push factors; while "quality of institution" was the top pill factor.

Several other "pull" variables make a specific destination more appealing than other destinations, such as quality of institution, institution's reputation, partnership, staff, innovation, technology adoption, and promotion and marketing efforts. This research pays attention to "pull" factors, especially social media, advertising and image brand of the institution as main factors in the choice of student destination study.

Social Media

In their research, Sobaih et al, (2020) presented the hegemony of social media on higher education students by stipulating that having become powerful platforms, social media has the potential to boost students' learning, ease interactions between them and possibly with their teachers by encouraging them to better practice with distance learning. The rise of social media and the internationalization of higher education have become progressively associated with each others (Abubakar & Al-Mamary, 2025). The choice to study abroad is a multi-step process (Hebb, 2024). Students can use social media to gather information in a short amount of time and at a minimal cost (Aldahdouh et al., 2020; Hamid et al., 2024). In response to this, Verbik and Lasanowki (2007) admet in their study that in order to attract international students, leading international educational institutions in use more proactive and creative marketing approaches and strategies.

In higher education marketing, social media marketing has become a major topic of study. This is a type of Internet marketing that makes use of social networking sites as a marketing strategy. (Brech et al., 2017). For communication and marketing purposes, social media marketing makes use of the Internet, particularly social networking websites (Brech, Messer, Vander Schee, Rauschnabel, & Ivens, 2017). It was adopted in many international contexts, such as Polish universities (Brendzel-Skowera & Lukasik, 2016); Egyptian universities (Sobaih et al., 2020), Indian universities (Sobaih et al., 2023).

Facebook is a key social networking site in Lithuania, where universities have a presence (Zailskaite-Jakste & Kuvykaite, 2012). According to this study, institutions with high reputation attracted Facebook followers, but a huge fan base has a negative influence on student involvement. It was found that Facebook was adopted by universities as a communication platform with others. In Canadian context (Bélanger et al., 2014), Twitter was reported as the most used platform between users, albeit Facebook was adopted by some institutions for sharing information. In Australian universities (Palmer 2013), Twitter was also identified as a top platform with high levels of re-tweeting. In American context (Linvill et al., 2015) Pinterest is adopted by institutions. A recent study by Bushara et al., (2023) showed that social media has a significant impact on perceived value, buying intention and electronic word of mouth in the food

industry. Accordingly, we hypothesize that:

H1: Social media has a positive impact on destination choice

Advertising

Advertising is sort of marketing that are often paid to deliver a message for individual readers, viewers, or the general public by an advertiser or company in order to achieve specified objectives. (Kotler & Armstrong, 2003; Trifonova, 2018; Hu et al., 2025). Clayton et al., (2012) reveal five common themes in communications and advertising used by 115 American universities. According to these authors, institutions do not create unique messages. A study conducted by Papadimitriou & Ramirez, (2015), indicates that, despite the huge range of types of institutions, the most important substance of promotional campaigns in five United State cities is similar. The campaigns focused on students and their careers. In Malaysia, Jan and Ammari (2016) confirmed the positive effect of online advertising on potential students' decision making process. Therefore, we suggest:

H2: Advertising positively impacts destination choice

Brand Image

According to Minh et al., (2025), branding allows a company to establish a sustainable, distinct brand in the market and gain a competitive edge. A brand identified as a "symbol" (Razmus, 2025), "distinctive design" (Raffaelli et al., 2025). It distinguishes a product or a company and expresses a high value (Sánchez-Iglesias et al., 2024). Research (Delmestri et al., 2015) on higher education institutions globally showed differences between western universities and universities in other countries. Western universities adopt more dominant visual types of icons than other universities. Chapleo (2015), explored in his research branding of higher education in the United Kingdom. He found that business branding could be adopted in higher education context; albeit future research is required to explore this assumption. In this vein, Lomer et al., (2018) argued that universities in UK are branded as high-quality organizations globally. Regarding private education, Judson et al. (2006) found that students reported positive communication with these institutions. de Heer & Tandoh-Offin, (2015) counted the advantages of branding in the following: differentiation of the university from its rivals; positive behavioral intention from all stakeholders, including staff and students and acceptance of high tuition charges from students.

Brand image is a corporate asset, used to distinguish the organization from the others as well as contributing to sustainability and value creation (Lee & Chen, 2018). This means that when organizations have good brands, it has a competitive advantage over its rivals. The study of Brown & Mazzarol (2009) showed that university's positive image significantly affects students' perceived value and satisfaction. Furthermore, it affects students' commitment and performance. Another study by Chen (2016) found a positive relationship between brand image and student satisfaction, which ultimately create positive behavioral intention among students. Based on this discussion, we suggest:

H3: Brand image has a positive impact on choice of destination.

Moderating variables

In this study, we hypothesize that nationality and the type of university whether it is private or public moderate the relationship between the determinants on the choice of Tunisia as an

educational destination.

Based on a study conducted by Yusuf, Ghazali & Abdullah (2017) among 200 local and international students in order to examine the variables that affect students' choice of a public higher institutions over private institutions in Malaysia, seven variables were studied. The results indicate that only four of the hypotheses were accepted. The variables affect students' choice of university for study include: facilities, cost, network effect and its location. In addition to these variables, university reputation and scholarship provision are important variables.

Le, (2020) stated several variables that affect students' choice of private a Vietnamese university. The variables are prestige, location, facilities, attractiveness of the field and media. This analysis found that location is the top significant variable to develop the private university's brand. Additionally, brand plays a determining role in students' trust when they choose a university for a study. Regarding the selection of a university, new students' major priority is still the media. As a result, institutions should take advantage of this factor to improve their attraction.

H4: The private/public nature of Tunisian universities moderates the relationship between the determinants of foreign student choice and destination choice

H4.1: The private/public nature of Tunisian universities moderates the relationship between social media and the choice of destination.

H4.2: The private/public nature of Tunisian universities moderates the relationship between advertising and the choice of destination.

H4.3: The private/public nature of Tunisian universities moderates the relationship between Brand image and the choice of destination.

According to a study conducted by Xu, Morgan & Song (2009), which undertook a comparison of behavior of dual nationalities of undergraduates, some similarities between the two have been found. In other aspects, the two groups differed significantly. The UK students prioritized entertaining, socializing, and enjoying outdoor journey, whereas the Chinese undergraduates prioritized viewing sightseeing and understanding different cultures and histories.

Another study elaborated by Sakakida, Cole & Card (2004) between two different cultures considering Japanese students as collectivist, and from the other side American students as individualist. This study confirmed that the two nationalities have various cultural trends and travel favorites.

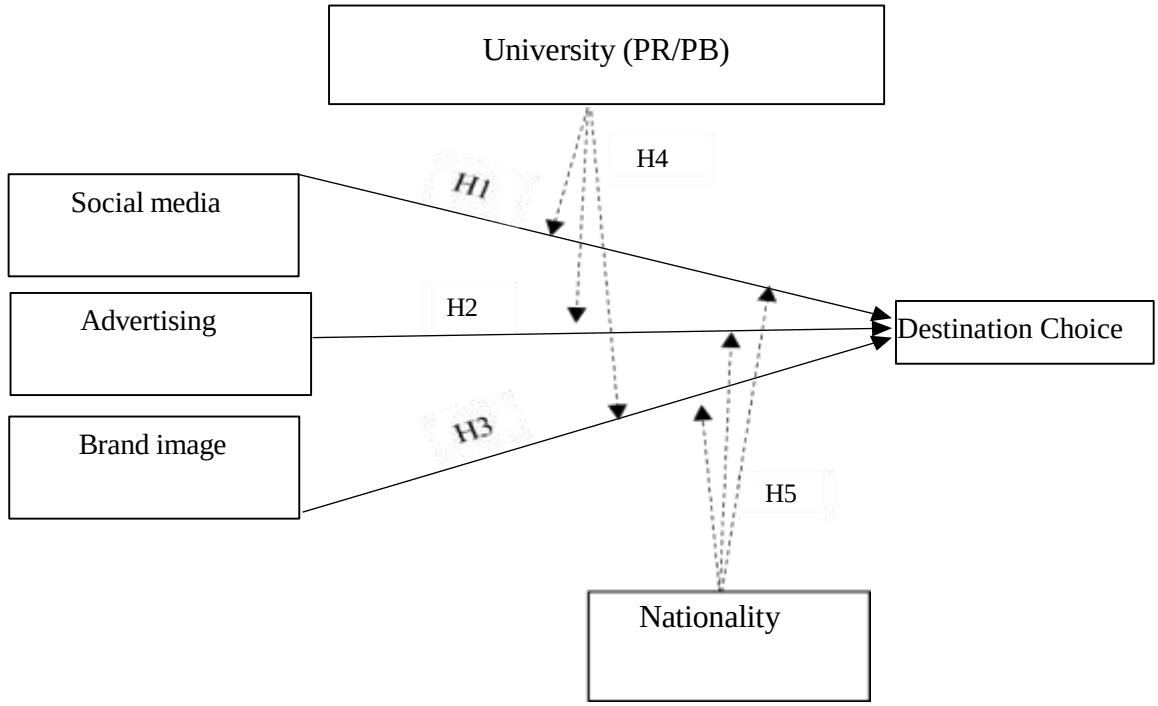
In a study among 523 students from UK and China, five cross-national groups in travel market were found specifically; the conservatives, the enthusiasts, the adventurers, the fun seekers, and the learners (Xu, Morgan & Moital, 2011). Based

H5: The nationality of the foreign student moderates the impact of the determinants of choice for foreign students on their choice of destination.

H5.1: Nationality moderates the link between social media and destination choice.

H5.2: Nationality moderates the link between advertising and destination choice.

H5.3: Nationality moderates the link between brand image and destination choice.



The conceptual framework that comes from all these hypotheses is Figure 1.

Method

This study adopted a sample of 284 foreign students who had chosen Tunisia as their destination for higher education. Data was gathered using an electronic questionnaire posted on university students' Facebook pages. Several reminders were sent out to ensure a representative number of responses. After verification, 284 questionnaires were retained and will be used for analysis

Criteria	**Modalities**	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Gender	Women	165	58.1
	Men	119	41.9
Age	Between 18 and 22	116	40.85
	Between 23 and 27	67	23.6
	Between 28 and 32	52	18.3
	Over 32	49	17.25
Level of study	Bachelor	154	54.23
	Professional and research master's degree	35	12.32
	PhD	95	33.45
Country of origin	South Africa	186	65.5
	Other (North Africa, Gulf States, European countries)	98	34.5
Types of university	Public establishments (Faculties, Schools, Institutes)	152	53.52

	Private establishments (Faculties, Schools, Institutes)	132	46.48

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample

The study was undertaken in harmony with the ethical principles of the social sciences. Participants were talked about the research purpose and gave their approval before completing the questionnaire. Respondents' confidentiality and anonymity were carefully guaranteed throughout the research process. Participation was entirely voluntary, with each respondent able to leave from the study when they want this..

Results

Measurement Results

Once the data had been collected using the questionnaire, we carried out a the required analysis. The first was an exploratory analysis to evaluate the quality of the scales to purify the instrument. Hence, a principal component analysis (PCA) combined with an internal consistency analysis was adopted. The next analysis is confirmatory in nature and is designed to validate the dimensions found in the exploratory analysis. In addition, this analysis will study the relationships between the factors, using structural equation models.

First-Order Model

The questionnaire items had minimum and maximum values ranging from 1 to 5. The averages varied between 3.67 and 4.04, with standard deviation varying between 1.218 and 1.270 (Table 2), indicating that collected data are more dispersed and less condensed around the mean (Bryman and Cramer, 2012).

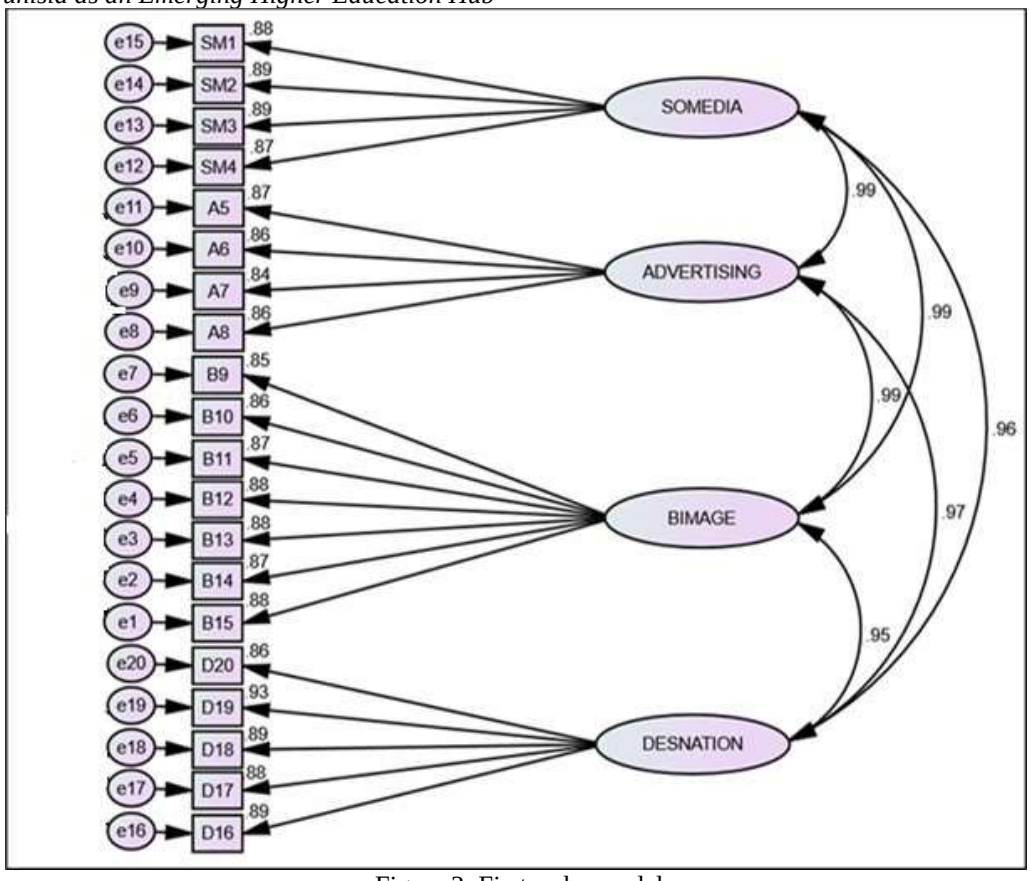


Figure 2: First order model

Based on Table 2 below, we can see that the x^2/ddl ratio is equal to "3.806", which is well below 5. The SRMR shows a value of 0.0261, while the RMSEA reveals a value of 0.033 based on the residuals, that are near zero. The CFI, TLI, IFI, and NFI are correspondingly 0.945 - 0.929 - 0.946 - 0.928, that are near zero 1. Thus, it could be concluded that the goodness of fit of this model stays fairly good.

The symmetry coefficient (Skewness) and the kurtosis coefficient (Kurtosis) were adopted to check the normal distribution or Gaussian curve (Evrard et al, 2000). The results in Table 2 showed that skewness and kurtosis coefficients did not interrupt the normality assumption (Kline, 2015); hence all variables support the normal distribution (Table 2).

Item		**N**	**Min**	**Max**	**M**	**SD**	**Skewness**	**Kurtosis**
	Social media							
SM1	It's easy to express my opinion via social media about Tunisian universities.	284	1	5	3.99	1.237	-1.165	.315
SM2	It's easy to pass on my opinion about Tunisian universities or	284	1	5	4.01	1.240	-1.197	.369

	chat with other users on social media.							
SM3	It's possible to have two-way interaction about Tunisian universities on social media.	284	1	5	3.95	1.263	-1.147	.262
SM4	It's possible to share information with other users via social media when talking about Tunisian universities.	284	1	5	3.95	1.219	-1.102	.241
	Advertising							
A5	Advertising makes information on Tunisian universities readily available	284	1	5	3.95	1.250	-1.146	.289
A6	Advertising is a convenient source of information about universities	284	1	5	3.89	1.234	-1.093	.247
A7	Advertising provides relevant information about Tunisian universities	284	1	5	3.73	1.218	-.929	.049
A8	Advertising informs me of the latest available information about universities	284	1	5	3.83	1.234	-1.066	.243
	Brand Image							
B9	Compared to other universities, Tunisian ones are of high quality	284	1	5	3.72	1.220	-.972	.129
B10	Tunisian universities have a rich history	284	1	5	3.67	1.237	-.940	.050
B11	I can reliably predict the performance of Tunisian universities	284	1	5	3.68	1.270	-.937	-.030
B12	Tunisian universities are world-renowned	284	1	5	3.67	1.257	-.927	-.016
B13	Tunisian universities have a wealth of experience	284	1	5	3.67	1.222	-.993	.171
B14	Tunisian universities are well represented	284	1	5	3.91	1.241	-1.100	.234
B15	Tunisian universities are student-oriented, regardless of background	284	1	5	3.90	1.237	-1.096	.240
	Destination Brand Choice							
D16	I would visit Tunisia one day to learn more about its universities.	284	1	5	4.01	1.235	-1.216	.426
D17	I still consider Tunisian universities my first choice	284	1	5	4.02	1.254	-1.325	.702

D18	I fully intend to visit some Tunisian universities	284	1	5	4.04	1.246	-1.250	.449
D19	My friends/family would be disappointed if I started visiting destinations other than Tunisia.	284	1	5	4.04	1.246	-1.357	.774
D20	I frequently search online for information on Tunisian universities in order to book an early visit.	284	1	5	3.95	1.250	-1.169	.329

Table 2: Descriptive statistics

"Model fit: ($\chi 2$ (146, N = 284) = 555.643 $p < 0.001$, normed $\chi 2 = 3.806$, RMSEA = 0.033, SRMR = 0.0261, CFI = 0.945, TLI = 0.929, NFI = 0.928, IFI= 0.946, *** $p < 0.001$". Min = minimum, Max = maximum, M = mean, SD = standard deviation, skewness = symmetry coefficients, kurtosis = kurtosis coefficient.

Convergent and Discriminant Validity of Measurements

To assess whether the variable items, which are presumed to measure the same phenomenon, are correlated, we used convergent validity through the CR, which must be strictly greater than 0.7, and the AVE, which must be strictly greater than 0.5. The results presented in Table 3 show that convergent validity was verified for all the variables (Joreskog, 1988). Indeed, Joreskog's α for social media (SM), advertising (A), brand image (B) and destination brand choice (D) are strictly greater than 0.7 (see Table 3). Discriminant validity adopted to check if the two hypothetically variables are similarly distinct in practice. Hence, the square root of the AVE was checked, which should be higher than the correlations it has with the other factors (Fornell and Larcker1981).

Factors and items	**SL**	**CR**	**AVE**	**MSV**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**
1-Social Media, ***(α = 0.932)***		.934	.779	0.685	**.883**			
It's easy to express my opinion via social media about Tunisian universities.	.88							
It's easy to pass on my opinion about Tunisian universities or chat with other users on social media.	.89							
It's possible to have two-way interaction about Tunisian universities on social media.	.89							
It's possible to share information with other users via social media when talking about Tunisian universities.	.87							
2-Advertising, ***(α = 0.964)***		.917	.735	0.664	.815**	**.857**		

Advertising makes information on Tunisian universities readily available	.87							
Advertising is a convenient source of information about universities	.86							
Advertising provides relevant information about Tunisian universities	.84							
Advertising informs me of the latest available information about universities	.86							
3-Brand Image, ***(α = 0.929)***		.956	.757	0.685	.828**	.812**	**.870**	
Compared to other universities, Tunisian ones are of high quality	.85							
Tunisian universities have a rich history	.86							
I can reliably predict the performance of Tunisian universities	.87							
Tunisian universities are world-renowned	.88							
Tunisian universities have a wealth of experience	.88							
Tunisian universities are well represented	.87							
Tunisian universities are student-oriented, regardless of background	.88							
4-Destination Brand Choice, ***(α = 0.933)***		.950	.793	0.656	.810**	.802**	.798**	**.890**
I would visit Tunisia one day to learn more about its universities.	.86							
I still consider Tunisian universities my first choice	.93							
I fully intend to visit some Tunisian universities	.89							
My friends/family would be disappointed if I started visiting destinations other than Tunisia.	.88							
I frequently search online for information on Tunisian universities in order to book an early visit.	.89							

Table 3: Convergent and Discriminant Validity
Note: SL = standard loading; CR = Composite Reliability, AVE = Average Variance Extracted; MSV = Maximum Shared Value

Furthermore, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) scores for SM (0.779), A (0.735), B (0.757) and D (0.793) are well ahead of the Maximum Shared Variances (MSV) that show the next values respectively (0.685, 0.664, 0.685, 0.656) for each of the above variables. Therefore, discriminant validity is ensured (Hair et al, 2014). In addition, the intercorrelation scores for each factor should be higher than the values on the diagonal indicating the square roots of the factor-specific AVEs (Table 3, in bold).

Interpretation of Results from Structural Equation Modelling

Structural equation modelling was conducted to verify the specific effects of SM, A and B, on D. The results have fit the data (Table 4). They show a Chi-square related to its degree of freedom x^2/ddl (2.801). An excellent index. As suggested by Jöreskog and Sörbom (1989), the ratio is satisfactory when the x^2/ddl ratio stays below 3. Moreover, the RMSEA index is equivalent to 0.035, i.e. near zero confirming satisfactory fit (Didellon & Valette-Florence, 1995). The indices IFI=0.978, NFI = 0.988, TLI = 0.982 and CFI = 0.988 have acceptable values. The standardised RMR, SRMR equal to 0.0252, was excellent, i.e. near zero. Hypotheses were examined and showed significant and positive relations with $p < 0.001$ (see Table 4).

With regard to the general model, its robustness is estimated through the coefficient of the value of (R^2=0.863), (See Tables 4) that represents the proportion of D explained by SM, A and R in the regression model. In fact, based on SM, A and R, we can explain around 87% of the variance in D experienced by foreign students regardless of their nationality and the public or private nature of the Tunisian universities they are applying to.

Results of the structural model	**β**	**Tvalue**	**P**	**R^2**	**Results**
H1- $SM^{pb} \rightarrow D^{pb}$	0.729	8.870	***		Confirmed
H2- $A^{pb} \rightarrow D^{pb}$	0.618	8.679	***		Confirmed
H3- $B^{pb} \rightarrow D^{pb}$	0.203	3.579	***		Confirmed
H4- $SM^{pv} \rightarrow D^{pv}$	0.743	10.175	***		Confirmed
H5- $A^{pv} \rightarrow D^{pv}$	0.437	8.184	***		Confirmed
H6- $B^{pv} \rightarrow D^{pv}$	0.385	7.302	***		Confirmed
H7- $SM^{an} \rightarrow D^{an}$	0.840	11.384	***		Confirmed
H8- $A^{an} \rightarrow D^{an}$	0.372	7.221	***		Confirmed
H9- $B^{an} \rightarrow D^{an}$	0.216	4.599	***		Confirmed
H10- $SM^{on} \rightarrow D^{on}$	0.673	8.336	***		Confirmed
H11- $A^{on} \rightarrow D^{on}$	0.573	8.417	***		Confirmed
H12- $B^{on} \rightarrow D^{on}$	0.392	6.411	***		Confirmed
D				0.863	

Model	R	**R Square**	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.929[a]	**.863**	.862	.42205

a. Predictors: (Constant), BMAGE, ADVERT, SOMED

Table 4: Results of the Structural Model with Standardised Estimates

Model fit: ($\chi 2$ (300, N = 284) = 840.586 p < 0.001, normed $\chi 2$ = 2.801, RMSEA = 0.035, SRMR = 0.0252, CFI = 0.988, TLI = 0.982, NFI = 0.988, IFI= 0.978, *** p < 0.001.

With regard to the structural model involving the moderator variable of public universities (see figure 3); SM, A and B show significant and positive effects on D; whose standardised regression weights are respectively as follows (β= 0.729, p <0.001), (β= 0.618, p <0.001) and (β= 0.203, p <0.001).

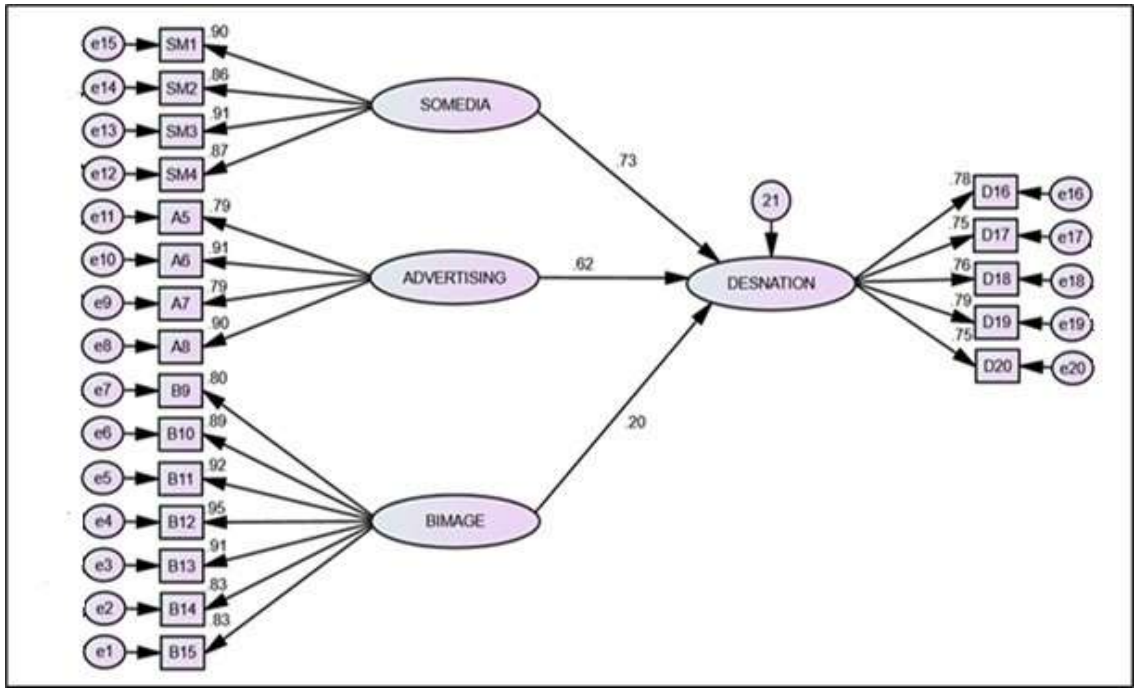


Figure 3: The Structural Model Involving the Moderating Variable of Public Universities

As for the structural model involving the moderator variable of private universities (see Figure 4); SM, A and B also disclose significant and positive effects on D; whose standardised regression weights are respectively as follows (β= 0.743, p <0.001), (β= 0.437, p <0.001) and (β= 0.385, p <0.001).

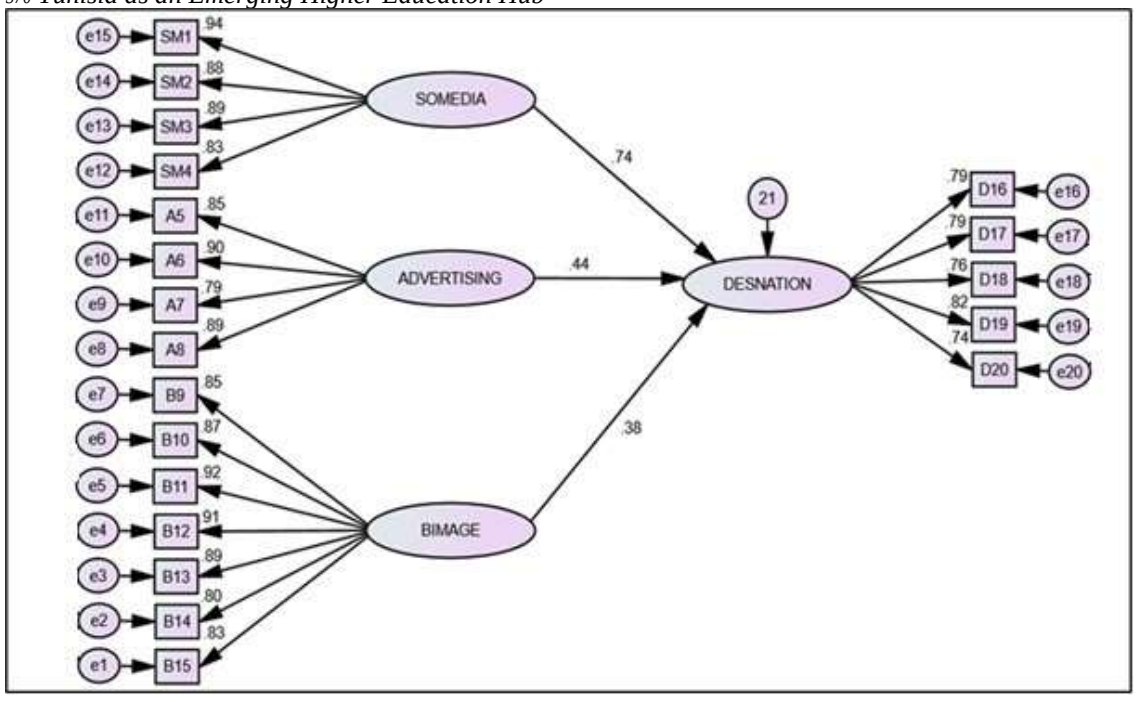


Figure 4: The Structural Model Involving the Moderating Variable of Private Universities

Using the Pairwise Parameter Comparisons and the technique offered by AMOS, namely the critical ratios for the differences between the parameters, we were able to compare A_PUB with A_PRIV (.294), C_ PUB with C_ PRIV (2.329) and B_ PUB with B_ PRIV (-2.090), see table 1 (Appendix A) , and we found that only the intersection between C_ PUB and C_ PRIV gives a value greater than 1.96. Thus, the public and/or private nature of the university acts as a moderating factor in the link between the brand image and the choice of destination brand.

With regard to the structural model involving the moderating variable of African nationality (see figure 5); SM, A and B show significant and positive effects on D; whose standardised regression weights are respectively as follows (β= 0.840, p <0.001), (β= 0.372, p <0.001) and (β= 0.216, p <0.001). That of the other nationalities, (see Figure 6); SM, A and B reveal, for their part, significant and positive effects on D; whose standardised regression weights are respectively as follows (β= 0.673, p <0.001), (β= 0.573, p <0.001) and (β= 0.392, p <0.001).

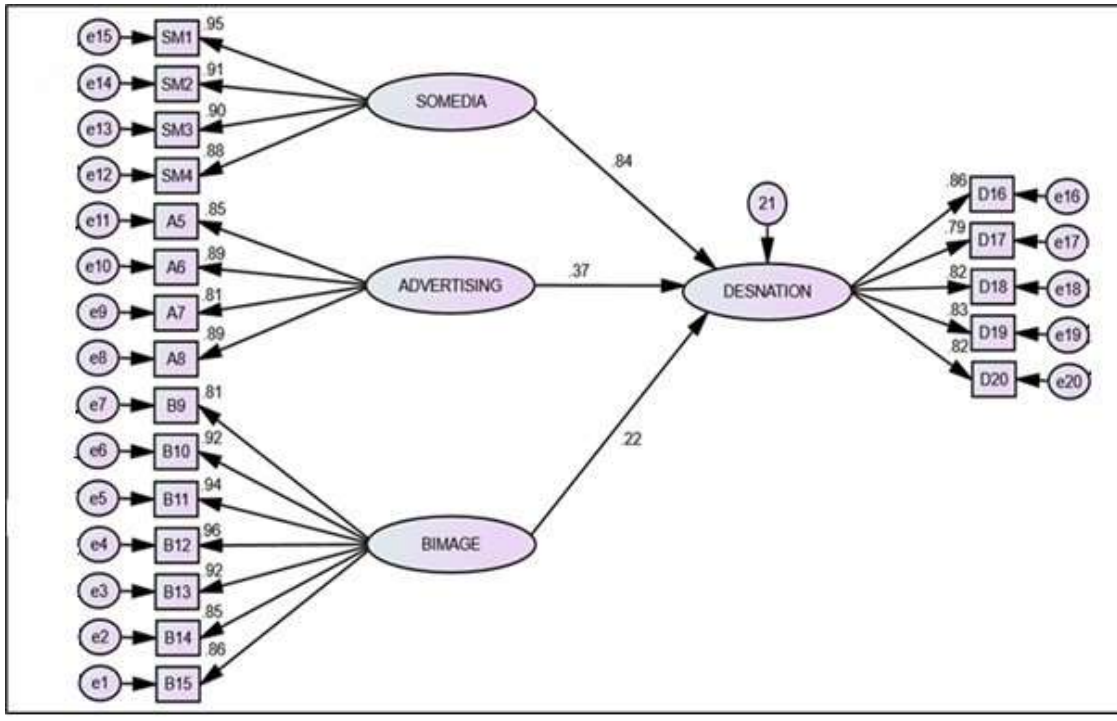


Figure 5: The Structural Model Involving the Moderating Variable of African Nationality

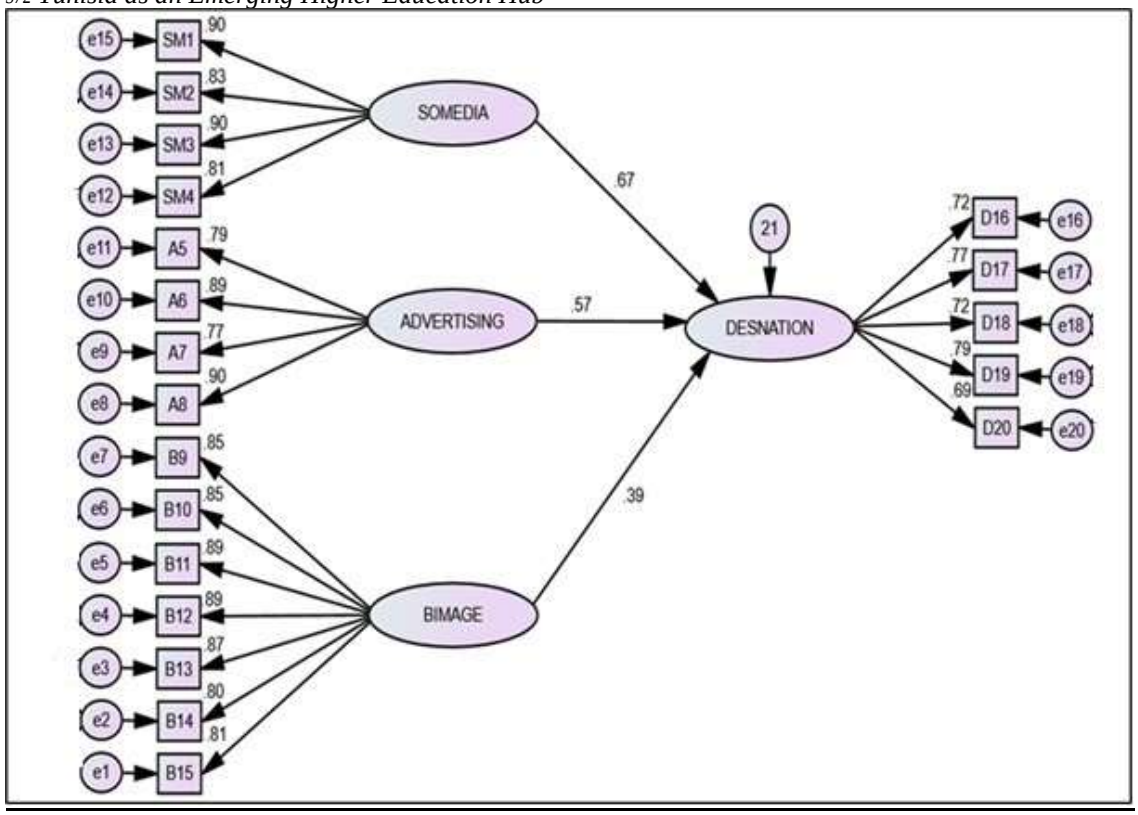


Figure 6: The Structural Model Involving the Moderating Variable of Other Nationalities

Again using Pairwise Parameter Comparisons and the technique that AMOS offers us, i.e. the critical ratios for the differences between the parameters, we were able to compare A_AFRICANS with A_OTHERS (-2.153), C_AFRICANS with C_OTHERS (1.709) and B_AFRICANS with B_OTHERS (1.364), and we found that no value is greater than or equal to 1.96. As a result, nationality cannot be a moderating variable for the model as a whole (See Table 2, Appendix A).

Discussion and Implications

This research reveals several significant results that are worth discussing. First, all hypotheses regarding the direct impact of social media (SM), advertising (A) and brand image (B) on destination choice (D) were empirically validated. These findings are in line with the work of Sobaih et al. (2020) concerning the influence of social media, Hu et al. (2025) for the impact of advertising, and Minh et al. (2025) for the importance of brand image. The validation of these hypotheses highlights the crucial importance of these three determinants in the process of choosing a study destination by international students.

Secondly, our analysis of moderating effects revealed some particularly interesting results which help to enrich our understanding of the validated direct relationships. On the one hand, nationality does not moderate the relationship between the determinants and the selection of Tunisia as a study destination. Indeed, whether the student is of African nationality or of another origin in no way affects the direct effects between the determinants of choice and the choice of destination. This result concurs with the results of Xu et al (2011) who demonstrated that cultural variables, particularly

nationality, do not systematically have a moderating effect on the selection of study destinations. On the other hand, the type of establishment has a moderating role, but only on the link between brand image and choice of destination, unlike the relationships involving social media and advertising.

This result concurs with the study of Le (2020), who shows that brand image plays a decisive role in the context of private establishments. This result supports those of Panda et al. (2019) and Gao et al. (2024), show that a university's brand image carries a symbolic meaning that enables it to stand out from its competitors in a non-market domain.

This brand image is deeply rooted in the institution's historical reputation and the academic excellence it has developed in its areas of expertise. In the context of globalization in higher education, this reputation is an invaluable intangible asset that is passed down from generation to generation. Graduates, as institutional ambassadors, help to perpetuate this image through their professional networks and word-of-mouth, creating a virtuous cycle of reputation-building.

This generational transmission mechanism creates a lasting differentiation which, paradoxically, can be more effective than traditional communication strategies via social media and advertising. In this way, the strength of an established brand image becomes a source of inspiration and a decisive criterion of choice for future students, particularly in an increasingly competitive educational environment.

As recommended by Sobaih et al (2025), like Russian dolls, the affective, cognitive and conative dimensions are interdependent. In this respect, it is incumbent on decision-makers to consider the importance of their interweaving. Indeed, the affective dimension (generating feelings of stimulus towards the university and, by extension, the destination) is a stage that depends on the cognitive dimension (raising awareness of the university and, by extension, the destination). This, in turn, will give rise to the conative dimension, or the attitude of asking for the same university, or even the same destination, again and again.

Starting from the premise that students are the first ambassadors of their universities, it is up to the universities to work harder on their brand image to stand out from their rivals. In this panoply of options offered to today's students, universities will come out on top if they succeed in communicating their philosophy through an indelible brand image.

Conclusion

This research explored the factors that affect the decision-making process of international students in their selection of Tunisia as a study destination. Although our results confirm the significant impact of social media, advertising and brand image on this choice, they also reveal significant nuances regarding the moderating effect of the type of institution, particularly with regard to brand image.

The study adds to the current literature by many aspects. Firstly, it contributes to a better understanding of the determinants of the choice of study destinations in the specific context of a developing country, Tunisia, where research on this subject remains limited. Secondly, it highlights the particular importance of institutional branding, especially in the private higher education sector, underlining the need for strategic differentiation of institutions.

In managerial terms, our results suggest several practical implications for Tunisian higher education institutions. It seems crucial to develop an integrated communications strategy that capitalizes on the three levers identified - social media, advertising and brand image - while taking account of the specific characteristics of the sector (public/private). Institutions in particular need to invest in building and maintaining a strong brand image, as this is a determining factor in the choice of

international students.

In the current context of globalization of higher education, it is becoming imperative for Tunisia to strengthen its competitive position through the accreditation of its university training programs at all levels. Accreditation is a strategic lever that can guide policymakers and university managers in developing more effective strategies for diversifying the origin of international students beyond the African continent and developing partnerships with internationally renowned universities. Indeed, program accreditation is not only a guarantee of quality for potential students, but also a sine qua non for establishing lasting academic collaborations with prestigious institutions. This focus on certified academic excellence would enable Tunisia to strengthen its position as an attractive study destination and build a sustainable position in the international higher education sector, beyond its current base of predominantly African students.

Nevertheless, this study has certain limitations that pave the way for future research. Other potential determinants need to be explored, such as the cost of education, quality of life, post-graduate career opportunities and the cultural environment. In addition, a longitudinal approach would provide a better understanding of how international students' choices change over time.

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Appendix A: Table 1 Pair Parameter Comparison

Pairwise Parameter Comparisons (Default model)

Critical Ratios for Differences between Parameters (Default model)

	A_PUB	C_PUB	B_PUB	A_PRIV	C_PRIV	B_PRIV
A_PUB	.000					
C_PUB	-5.701	.000				
B_PUB	-1.629	4.693	.000			
A_PRIV	.294	5.960	1.703	.000		
C_PRIV	-3.515	2.329	-2.346	-4.614	.000	
B_PRIV	-3.301	2.725	-2.090	-4.431	.385	.000

Table 2: Pair Parameter Comparison

Pairwise Parameter Comparisons (Default model)

Critical Ratios for Differences between Parameters (Default model)

	A_AFRICANS	C_AFRICANS	B_AFRICANS	A_OTHERS	C_OTHERS	B_OTHERS
A_AFRICANS	.000					
C_AFRICANS	-7.421	.000				
B_AFRICANS	-5.863	2.107	.000			
A_OTHERS	-2.153	4.466	2.827	.000		
C_OTHERS	-5.419	1.709	-.241	-3.443	.000	
B_OTHERS	-4.073	3.317	1.364	-2.022	1.825	.000

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