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The Role of Country of Origin and Marketing Communications in Shaping Student Identification with Transnational Higher Education Partners

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to make valuable recommendations towards development and implementation of strategies to strengthen student relationship with both TNE partners. The study will highlight the main marketing communication channels that are effective in different countries facilitating the student recruitment process and strengthening the reputation of both partners.

Methodology: This study is based on positivist philosophy. It will utilise a mono-method survey strategy to gather quantitative data based on a developed and pilot tested questionnaire. Data analysis will involve structural equation modelling.

Findings: It is expected that this study will contribute to theory as well as managerial practice and strategic decision making in transnational higher education partnerships by focusing on domains of Country-of-origin and marketing communications. This research is on-going.

Research Implications: It will likely have implications towards corporate marketing strategy, corporate culture and building a good relationship with students. It will help to close the gap between how managers wish students would see an institute and how students perceive it.

Originality and Value: The study is novel in assessing the role of COO and MC in attracting students in TNHE courses offered by two institutions from different countries and its focus on examining the extent to which students distribute their loyalty and advocacy intentions between the partner HEIs.

Keywords: Transnational Higher Education, TNHE, Country of Origin, Marketing Communications, Institutional Attractiveness, Student Identification, Student Satisfaction, Student Advocacy

1. Introduction

Transnational higher education (TNHE) is delivered through international branch campuses and partnerships where the learners are located in a different country from the one where the awarding institution is based (Huang, 2007, Ziguras and McBurnie, 2011, Wilkins et al., 2012). In last two decades, there has been tremendous growth and increase in the demand of transnational higher education globally. For instance, the UK is a leading provider of transnational programmes offering different modes of delivery in different countries, earning a total revenue of £25.2 billion in 2019 (GOV, UK). This proliferation has attracted researchers in marketing and management to examine student identification with cobranded programmes and factors behind their identification (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003, Marin and Ruiz, 2007, Aspara and Tikkanen, 2011, Podnar, 2011). Following the well-documented benefits of consumer-brand identification (Balaji et al., 2016), these higher education institutions are acting as brands with potential to create a strong sense of identification in their students (Balmer and Liao, 2007). Furthermore, due to intense competition at home and reduced government funding, it is important for UK universities to recognise the strength and strategic importance of building good relationships with students at foreign partner institutions.

Researchers and theorists have shown that the extent to which people identify with an organisation is dependent on the attractiveness of the organisational identity (Dutton et al., 1994, Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). In transnational higher education, it is presumed that country of origin (COO) and marketing communications (MC) play a particularly important role in attracting students towards an institution. However, there is a need to provide empirical evidence to support the notion that COO and MC attract the attention of students and facilitate their decision to choose a transnational higher education institution. Literature shows that COO improves a customer's evaluation of the product and can have a great impact on consumer decision-making (Johansson, 1989). On the other hand, marketing communications increase awareness and heighten interest in purchasing the product/course (Petersen and Kumar, 2009). In higher education, MC supports students in a way that students often lack the experience and knowledge to make accurate judgements regarding service quality prior to enrolment.

1.1. Research Aim

Drawing on literature findings, the aim of the study is to examine the student identification with transnational partners (local and foreign partners) by assessing partners' attractiveness. Country of origin (COO) and marketing communications (MC) are used as determinants of partners' attractiveness. The study will also analyse to what extent student identification with local and foreign partners leads to student satisfaction and advocacy for both.

1.2. Research Objectives

The research objectives are listed as below. These are expected to evolve and grow as the study progresses.

- To study the antecedents of student identification and its consequences through a systematic review of extant literature.
- To refine and further develop the proposed preliminary dual conceptual model.
- To evaluate the extent to which COO influences the attractiveness of both the local and the foreign partner from the perspective of students.
- To evaluate the extent to which MC influences the attractiveness of both the local and the foreign partner from the perspective of students.
- To test the relationship between institution attractiveness and student identification with both partners.
- To assess the influence of student identification with both partners on student satisfaction and advocacy.
- To examine the mediating effect of student satisfaction between student identification and advocacy.

2. Literature Review

The study will involve a systematic literature review to explore the concepts in depth. A preliminary review of literature has been conducted which supported the formation of an initial conceptual framework.

2.1. Country of Origin (COO)

COO is defined as the country of manufacture or production where a product originates from and is conveyed through marketing communications (Caemmerer, 2009). COO is found to be an influential element of corporate and brand identity (Melewar, 2003), which enhances product quality perceptions (Veloutsou and Taylor, 2012) and consumer-based brand equity (Pappu et al., 2006). Country of origin has been proven to have considerable influence on consumer attitudes, perception, and behaviours across a wide range of products and services (Pappu et al., 2006, Mohd Yasin et al., 2007). However, researchers have also found that the impact of country of origin cannot be explained entirely by a quality signalling process (Hong & Wyer, 1989, 1990; Li & Wyer, 1994). In addition to its role as a quality signal (Bilkey & Nes, 1982; Steenkamp, 1990), COO also has other symbolic and emotional meanings for consumers. Another common theme associated with country of origin is the norm to purchase home-grown or domestically manufactured product. It is a common preference among many consumers to opt for locally produced goods and services (Shimp & Sharma,1987). Researchers such as Gürhan-Canli and Maheswaran (2000), stated that culture is a multidimensional construct, and might have significant influence on COO as a variable due to the prevalence of the many distinct cultures around the world. For instance, consumers who have an affinity towards a country perceive it as an "in-group" entity because they either think of it as attractive or it is a part of their social identity (Nes et al., 2014). Magnausson et al. (2019), stated that brands that develop a brand identity congruent with the country of their origin, are likewise perceived positively where the consumers have a positive perception of the country.

In cobranding context, scholars such as Bluemelhuber et al. (2007) argued that country of origin influences consumer attitude towards cobranded products. It is claimed that students identified themselves more with the foreign institution due to reputation and credibility of its country (Wilkins et al., 2018a, Heffernan et al., 2018). Therefore, the study proposes that COO positively impacts local and foreign partners' attractiveness in case of TNHE.

- H1a: COO positively impacts local partner's (LP) attractiveness in TNHE.
- H1b: COO positively impacts foreign partner's (FP) attractiveness in TNHE.

2.2. Marketing Communication (MC)

Marketing communication is defined as all strategies, tactics, and activities involved in getting the desired marketing messages to intended target markets, regardless of the media use (Potluri, 2008). Marketing communications represent the voice of a brand and the means by which companies can establish a dialogue with consumers concerning their product offerings. It can be delivered in many ways, ranging from mass advertising of TV, radio, magazines, and newspapers to the more personalised media such as direct mail. Marketing communications allow brands to stand out and help consumers to see an understand their competitive advantage (Lane Keller, 2001). To make informed purchase decisions, customers require information about the features of the product or service, price and where or how they can find it. In other words, effective communication channels add value to a product or service by increasing customer confidence about their purchase. Marketing communication channels are especially important because they help create powerful associations and a sense of credibility, confidence, and reassurance. Scholars such as Melewar and Walker (2003) emphasised the importance of meeting local needs by minor adaptation in marketing communications mix to add value and for greater brand affinity on a local level. This study will assess the information shared through marketing communications that has created points-of-difference among students for local and foreign partners that otherwise would not be possible. Therefore, it is proposed that:

- H2a: MC positively impacts local partner's (LP) attractiveness in TNHE.
- H2b: MC positively impacts foreign partner's (FP) attractiveness in TNHE.

2.3. Institutional Attractiveness (IA) and Student Identification (SI)

Institutional attractiveness (IA) in the consumer–company context is likely to be a necessary condition for identification (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). The preliminary literature review shows that institutional attractiveness is related to customer identification with a company/brand (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003, Marin and Ruiz, 2007, Currás-Pérez et al., 2009). According to social identity theory, an individual's identification with a brand depends on their evaluation of its attractiveness and particularly whether it helps them satisfy at least one of their self-definition needs such as self-distinctiveness and self-continuity (Ashforth and Mael, 2004). Ahearne et al. (2005) stated that a brand's attractiveness is based on the extent to which a customer's evaluation of its characteristics is favourable and allows the brand of have enduring and distinctive qualities. Peluso and Guido (2012) described brand attractiveness as '*the extent to which users perceive a company to be capable of attracting and motivating stakeholders to interact with it'*. Sung (2011) stated that when a corporate brand's features fulfil the consumer's needs, the consumers perceive the corporate brand as more attractive and distinct than other brands, which leads them to identify with the brand. Several empirical studies have been conducted in various sectors that highlight the direct relationship between a product or brand's attractiveness and customer identification. Kim et al. (2001) provided empirical evidence by confirming a significant positive relationship between the attractiveness of brand personality and customer identification with a brand in telecommunications sector.
Therefore, it is proposed that:

- H3a: Local partner (LP) attractiveness positively impacts student identification with the local partner.
- H3b: Foreign partner (FP) attractiveness positively impacts student identification with the foreign partner.

2.4. Student Satisfaction (SSAT)

Satisfaction is defined as fulfilment of one's expectation (Stephenson and Yerger, 2014). In higher education context, students are the direct recipients of services (Douglas et al., 2006). Therefore student satisfaction is an outcome of evaluation of student's educational experience (Casidy, 2013). Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) proposed that consumers who identify strongly with the organisation's performance are likely to be more satisfied with their product selection. Therefore, student-institution identification has a stronger or almost equal impact on student satisfaction (Wilkins et al., 2018). Therefore, it is proposed that:

- H4a: Student identification with local partner positively impacts student satisfaction.
- H4b: Student identification with foreign partner positively impacts student satisfaction.

2.5. Student Advocacy (SADV)

Literature related to organisational and social identification suggests that if a student perceives a strong sense of identification with his/her institution, it leads to favourable outcomes such as loyalty towards and advocacy of the institution (Dutton et al., 1994, Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). Marketing literature states that one of the consequences of organisational identification is customer advocacy or promotion of a brand or company(Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003, Ashforth and Mael, 2004). Advocacy involves recommendation of product or company to others or defending the company's reputation when it is attacked by others (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). Therefore, it is proposed that:

- H5a: Student identification with local partner positively impacts student advocacy.
- H5b: Student identification with foreign partner positively impacts student advocacy.

Furthermore, student satisfaction acts as a mediating factor in the proposed framework. Therefore, this study will examine its mediating role between student identification and advocacy.

- H6: Student satisfaction mediates the relationship between student identification and advocacy.

2.6. Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this section is to guide the researcher to identify the specific theories that can form a theoretical foundation for this study. Following theories underpin the study's context.

2.6.1. Consumer-Company Identification Theory

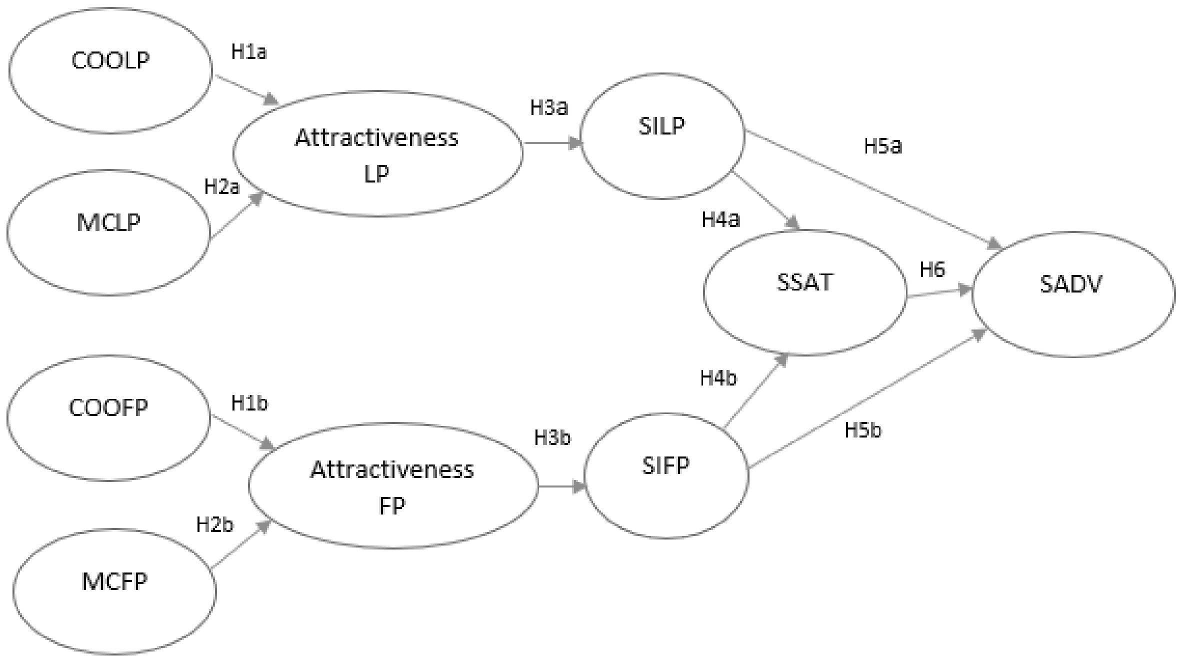
This study's conceptual model is primarily based on consumer-company identification theory (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003), which is based on social identity theory (Ashforth and Mael, 1989) and on organisational identification (Dutton et al., 1994). This theory describes the antecedents and consequences of the consumer-company identification and factors that constitute such identity. According to Bhattacharya and Sen, (2003), consumers are likely to perceive a company's identity in terms of similarity, distinctiveness, and prestige in making decisions if they believe that they know and trust the company's identity. The theory furthers states that consumer perception of identity attractiveness is derived from communication. For consumers to satisfy their self-definition needs, they must perceive company identity as attractive, similar to theirs, distinct from others, and prestigious. This theory provides insight and serves as a foundation to develop the dual conceptual framework for this study and to explore student-HEI identification in the context of students studying a cobranded programme.

2.6.2. Signalling Theory

According to signalling theory, organisations can achieve favourable consumer perceptions and positively affect consumer decision-making at the point of purchase, if they can communicate relevant information and reduce asymmetry in company-consumer information. Two brand names with congruent and complementary attributes on a product can imply that a company's brand is borrowing equity from the partner company's brand (Rao and Ruekert, 1994; Spence, 1973; Swaminathan et al, 2015). Similarly, country of origin may influence stakeholder's decisions by signalling greater quality than local competitors.

2.7. Proposed Conceptual Framework

Based on the above hypotheses, theoretical underpinnings, and extant literature, the following conceptual framework is proposed for this study.



3. Methodology

3.1. Philosophical Assumptions

Research philosophy refers to philosophical assumptions about ontology and epistemology that lead to identification and specification in methodological choices of a research study (Saunders et al., 2009). Ontology is defined simply as the way researchers view the world (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). There are two main ontological stances of Objectivism and Subjectivism.

Objectivists believe that reality exists independent of individual perceptions (Farquhar, 2012). Conversely, subjectivist or relativist stance is based on the assumption that the world is understood by considering the perceptions of individuals or social actors (Burrell and Morgan, 2019). An objectivist ontological stance will be chosen for this study due to presence of singular reality and its favour towards deductive strategies of theory testing. A researcher's ontology is nomothetic or objectivist if they believe that reality exists independently and objectively outside individual perceptions (Farquhar, 2012). Epistemology is the study of what must be added to a belief to convert it to knowledge (Klein, 1998). A researcher's ontological stance guides them towards their epistemological choice. An objectivist or nomothetic ontology leads to realist and positivist epistemologies. The epistemological stance of the researcher in this study is positivism. Positivism is the belief that the social world exists external to perception of individuals and is measurable using objective methods instead of being interpreted subjectively (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). Positivists predominantly attempt to test theories and rely on empirical findings. Empiricism is the belief that observation and measurement form the basis of scientific inquiry (Malhotra, 2017).

3.2. Research Approach

In research, there are three main approaches that can be taken, namely induction, deduction, and abduction. Within an inductive approach, a researcher attempts to develop or generate a theory by observing and exploring phenomena for repeating patterns that signify theoretical linkage between variables. On the other hand, in deductive approach, the investigation begins with a theoretical position or underpinnings found within literature and then attempts to prove or disprove the assumed hypothetical relationships between operative variables. In other words, induction generates theory while deduction tests theory (Saunders et al., 2009). Operationalisation is a key characteristic of deduction. This signifies that variables are examined in a way that allows facts to be quantitatively measured. The third stance of abduction allows a researcher to make logical inferences and to also build theories (Bryman, 2012).

For this study, the researcher will adopt a deductive approach in line with the objectives of theory verification and empirical measurement. Deductive approach is appropriate for this study as it will help achieve the research objectives by testing theory of consumer-company identification by Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) in the context of cobranding in TNHE. The process of deduction is signified by steps such as review of existing literature and the development of hypotheses through the consideration of a theoretical framework.

3.3. Research Design

As data for research can either be quantitative or qualitative, the three choices for research design are either quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods (Maxwell, 2012, Saunders et al., 2009, Yin, 2017). Qualitative research allows for the investigation and understanding of a studied phenomenon within its natural context (Yin, 2017) thus it is suitable for in-depth studies (Saunders et al, 2009). Quantitative research methods on the other hand involve logic and are based on strategies such as experimental and survey strategies used to test hypothesis for reaching generalisable findings (Saunders et al., 2009). Mixed methods are simple where both quantitative and qualitative strategies are used to answer all the research questions or achieve all objectives (Bryman, 2012). Quantitative methods allow researchers to test theories by establishing the relationships between variables. Statistical tools are employed to numerically measure such relationships (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). Quantitative research design will be followed in this study to empirically achieve the objectives of this research, and to validate conceptual model developed through literature review and its underpinning theoretical framework.

3.3.1. Explanatory Research Design

It is crucial to consider the research objectives in order to select a research design. Since the overall aim of this study is to make practical as well as theoretical contributions in cobranding TNHE by testing a proposed conceptual model, this study will be geared towards establishing causal relationships between variables through explanatory research (Saunders et al., 2009).

3.3.2. Research Strategy

Research strategy is a researcher's plan of how they will attempt to achieve the research objectives (Saunders et al., 2009). In section 3.3 above, distinction has been made between available research methods and a quantitative research design has been chosen for this study. This research will be based on a survey strategy. Survey strategy is predominantly linked with the deductive research approach (Saunders et al., 2009). Survey strategies utilising questionnaires are popular because they allow the researcher to collect a standardised dataset from a large sample of respondents efficiently and economically. A survey strategy will also allow the researcher to collect data to be analysed using inferential statistics and descriptive techniques.

3.3.3. Time Horizon

In research, two approaches to time horizon exist. Research can focus on studying a phenomenon at a particular time or over a period of time. These are termed as cross-sectional and longitudinal time horizons respectively (Saunders et al., 2009). This study will follow a cross-sectional time horizon.

3.4. Questionnaire Development

An important step in the research process is instrument development is. Not having built a suitable item pool that defines a construct's domain may lead to unreliable findings. Therefore, the questionnaire for this study will be developed carefully and thoroughly through an in-depth and systematic literature review which will reduce the likelihood of biased responses. An online questionnaire will be designed using Qualtrics. The questionnaire will be divided into three sections. First section will introduce the research, its aim and the importance of participating in the study and how the participant's confidentiality will be ensured. This section will also remind participants to give consent by proceeding with the survey. The next section will be based on asking demographic questions relevant to the study such as gender, age, ethnic background, course enrolled on, and current status of the student. The third main section of the questionnaire will consist of survey questions focusing on both HEIs as the study will examine a dual construct. Both HEIs will be examined separately to investigate the dual nature of students' identification with cobranded TNHE. The research will use a multi-item measurement scale with over four items for all the latent constructs within the conceptual model to reduce any error in measurement and enhance the accuracy of measurement (Peter, 1979; Churchill Jr, 1979).The latent constructs will be measured using a five-point Likert scale of 1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: neither agree nor disagree, 4: agree and 5: strongly agree. This measurement scale has been commonly utilised and is well-accepted in empirical research on consumer-brand identification and specifically for student-HEI identification research (Karaosmanoğlu et al., 2011; Tuškej et al., 2013; Lam et al., 2012; Balaji et al., 2016; Fazli-Salehi et al., 2019; Myers et al., 2016; Pinna et al., 2018). Since the foreign HEIs targeted for this study are partnered with British HEI and deliver courses in English, the language of the questionnaire will be British English and the wording will be carefully selected to make it simple to understand by the participants. Both the layout as well as the overall length of the questionnaire will be carefully considered while developing the questionnaire.

Scales for Country-of-Origin will be taken from Aichner (2014) and Mohd Yasin et al. (2007). Marketing Communication from Potluri (2008). Student HEI identification scales will be modified from Abrams et al. (1998). Similarly scales for satisfaction and advocacy can be adapted from Karaosmanoğlu et al. (2011) and Wilkins et al. (2012) respectively.

3.5. Sampling and Data Collection

The country where the accreditor partners are located for this study is the UK, a key provider of TNHE in many other countries. UK transnational higher education partners from destinations such as Sri Lanka, China, Hong Kong, Greece, and Oman will be chosen to collect data. The focus of the study is to collect data from institutions or service providers that are in any form of partnership with UK universities. The whole populations of selected partner institutions will be targeted in these destinations to study the demographic and cultural differences that exist in these countries. There will be no requirement for direct access to individual participants' contact information which eases the privacy concerns of partner institutions. Instead of approaching students, the researcher will approach the management of partner institutions with a request to distribute the survey with an introductory message and QR code with their student bodies.

Commonly a probability-based sampling technique is used alongside a survey strategy to select a sample size (Saunders et al., 2009, Bryman, 2012). These techniques include simple random sampling, systematic random sampling, stratified random sampling, and cluster sampling to name a few. Such sampling techniques, however, require the sampling frame or the identities of the entire population to be known. As stated earlier, the researcher will not seek direct, full access to student lists. This eliminates the need for sampling through probability-based techniques. Nevertheless, a sample size can be determined using the sample size formula, as the population of students in selected partners is around 12,500 and the researcher will assume a commonly used 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error (Saunders et al., 2009). Thus, a sample of around 385 usable completed surveys is needed. The data collection should surpass this requirement by a wide margin.

Before the data gathering phase, a pilot test will be carried out to check reliability and revise the questionnaire if needed.

3.6. Data Analysis Techniques

During the pilot study, the reliability of the items used for measurement will be tested. The test for reliability will determine if the items are interrelated. Cronbach's Alpha is a commonly used method of making such an assessment (Churchill Jr and Peter, 1984).

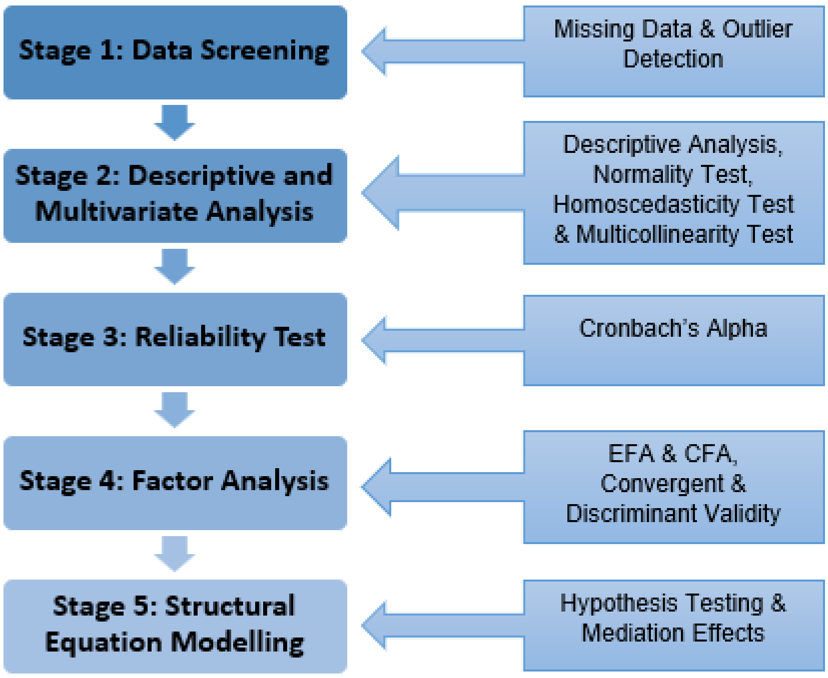
The data analysis for the main study in this research project will be undertaken in several stages. **Stage 1** will be cleaning the data, meaning that incomplete responses with missing data and anomalous outliers will be cleared.

Stage 2 will involve descriptive statistics, assessing the sample size achieved along with the demographic profile of the sample considering factors such as age, gender, subject or course, level of study, ethnic background, country of birth etc. This stage also performs the multivariate analysis to satisfy the assumptions of multivariate techniques including normality, homoskedasticity, and multicollinearity using SPSS and AMOS. This technique also supports to eradicate any remaining outliers using graphs that are plotted in SPSS.

Stage 3 will assess the reliability of the latent constructs that are part of the conceptual model.

Stage 4 will be comprised of factor analysis and performs the study's EFA or exploratory factor analysis using SPSS and CFA or confirmatory factor analysis using AMOS. Under CFA, a construct validity via convergent and discriminant validity will be assessed before the hypotheses testing.

Stage 5 will begin with the final model fit specification with hypotheses. Mediation analysis performed through bootstrapping technique using AMOS is also explained in this stage. After this stage, the results of the empirical findings will be discussed in relation to the study's aim and objectives in the light of extant literature to address the study's contribution to the new knowledge.



4. Data Analysis

4.1. Pilot Study

The first step in preparing for the main study data gathering is to test the questionnaire on a sample of the population and perform analysis to ascertain the reliability of the instrument.

4.1.1. Pilot Study Data Gathering

The pilot study data gathering was carried out by engaging with transnational partners of UK HEIs in Pakistan, Greece and Oman. The study employed an online survey distribution and gathering method using Qualtrics. A total of 88 responses were received within the pilot data gathering window. After removing entries with incomplete responses, 59 valid and usable responses were retained for the pilot dataset.

4.1.2. Pilot Study Data Analysis

Data from the pilot dataset was analysed using SPSS version 29. This involved assessing the reliability using Cronbach's alpha. The accepted threshold for items is a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.7 and 0.5 is the minimum retention criterion. Constructs such as Country of Origin (both partners), Marketing Communications, Partner Attractiveness, Student Identification, Student Satisfaction, and Student Advocacy were all evaluated. Most items within all constructs met the threshold while items below 0.5 were examined in their context and retained to preserve theory coherence. They can later be removed from the main study dataset if they impact the reliability significantly. Aside from the reliability, the pilot study also confirmed the clarity and relevance of the items. It demonstrated that the questionnaire is ready to be deployed for the main study.

5. Conclusion

Extensive literature exists on corporate brands in international context. It is evident that the success of corporate brands relies on their strategies to add value in the foreign markets. In other words, on how corporate brands translate their core value proposition in foreign markets (Melewar, T.C. and Walker, C., 2003). It is seen that universities are adopting different ways of entering international markets. This study examines UK transnational academic partnerships where the local partner is a service provider and located in different country while the foreign partner is a course developer and accreditor and exists in the UK. Furthermore, this study contributes to existing literature in global corporate branding and transnational higher education context by knowing and empirically examining how UK universities promote their corporate brand proposition in foreign markets via marketing communications of the local partner. Students' attitude towards cobranded HEIs will be assessed in terms of their level of attraction for both partners. Country-of-origin also adds value to global brand building. Literature explains that students identify strongly with institution when they find it attractive and distinct from others. Therefore, marketing communications (MC) and country of origin (COO), both contribute to attracting students to transnational higher education institutions. The study provides empirical evidence with explanation of factors that have a greater impact on institution attractiveness, and which in turn build positive student identification with the cobranded HEI. Literature has identified several consequences of student identification. Therefore, the impact of identification on student satisfaction and advocacy for cobranded HEIs will also be assessed in this study.

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