“Shaping futures: How student experience and perceived quality drive college preferences for postgraduate studies in Bandung, Indonesia”

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SHAPING FUTURES: HOW STUDENT EXPERIENCE AND PERCEIVED QUALITY DRIVE COLLEGE PREFERENCES FOR POSTGRADUATE STUDIES IN BANDUNG, INDONESIA

Abstract

Postgraduate education plays a key role in developing skilled human resources and advancing knowledge. With increasing competition among universities in Indonesian cities such as Bandung, understanding the factors that influence students' choices of master's programs is crucial. This study aims to critically examine the role of student experience and perceived quality of higher education in shaping students' decision-making processes regarding the selection of postgraduate institutions. This study was conducted at 14 private universities in Bandung, Indonesia. The study population consisted of 70,284 students, with 400 respondents selected across 29 study programs that offered master's degrees. A proportional random sampling method was used. The research hypotheses were tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with SmartPLS. The findings indicate that student experience significantly impacts perceived quality (ß = 0.662, p = 0.000). Perceived quality also has a positive and significant effect on college preferences (ß = 0.366, p = 0.000). In addition, student experience significantly influences college preferences (ß = 0.148, p = 0.006). Furthermore, student experience indirectly affects college preference through perceived quality (ß = 0.242, p = 0.000). These results highlight that perceived quality is a major factor influencing college preferences. This study underscores the importance of student experience and perceived quality in shaping students' preferences for postgraduate institutions. By enhancing positive student experiences and ensuring high educational quality, universities can strengthen their appeal and support students in making informed decisions about their postgraduate education.

Keywords student, experience, service, quality, preference, college, master's degree, higher education

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INTRODUCTION

People widely recognize higher education as a key driver of a nation's economic success, particularly in advancing knowledge and producing qualified professionals. Competition among universities, especially in attracting postgraduate students, has intensified recently. The number of postgraduate students enrolled at each university fluctuates annually, reflecting the dynamic nature of this competition. People perceive universities as quality education providers, largely because of their reputation for producing competent graduates (Tang & Hussin, 2013).

From 2018 to 2022, the number of private universities in Indonesia declined by 5.96%, from 3,171 to 2,982, with West Java, particularly the city of Bandung, hosting the highest concentration of these institutions. In 2024, Indonesia had 4,495,453 undergraduates, including

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663,307 in West Java and 216,106 in Bandung. Undergraduate (S1) enrollment in Bandung experienced fluctuations, with a 3.69% decrease from 2019 to 2020, followed by a 4.98% increase from 2021 to 2022. In contrast, enrollment in master's (S2) programs in Bandung increased steadily, growing by 15.6% between 2019 and 2021 and by 11.8% from 2021 to 2022, reaching 9,403 students in 2022. However, the proportion of S1 graduates continuing to S2 programs slightly declined, from 4.5% in 2020 to 4.35% in 2022, indicating a marginal decrease in preference for pursuing master's education. Although the total number of S2 students in Bandung has continued to grow, the declining proportion of S1 graduates pursuing further study suggests underlying factors affecting this decision. This trend raises important questions about what influences students' decisions to continue their education at the postgraduate level, particularly in an increasingly competitive university environment.

In response, universities are placing greater emphasis on delivering positive student experiences and improving perceived educational quality. A supportive and engaging campus environment encourages students to pursue further studies at the same institution. Facilities and services that enhance the learning process are reflections of a university's quality.

Previous studies have shown that brand experience significantly influences brand preference. Tsai et al. (2015) found this to be true in the context of tablet PCs, while Yasri et al. (2020) reported similar findings in other sectors. However, there is still limited research on how students' experience influences brand preference in the context of higher education. Chang and Liu (2009) demonstrated that brand experience affects brand preference in the service industry, a finding echoed by Wang (2013) in the food sector, Pool et al. (2018) in fashion, and Dam (2020) in electronics retail. Despite this growing body of evidence, studies specifically exploring the influence of perceived quality on brand preference in higher education remain scarce.

However, despite the growing body of research on the influence of brand experience on brand preference across various sectors, limited studies have specifically explored how student experience and perceived educational quality affect brand preference within the context of higher education.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of "student experience," initially focused on academic aspects such as teaching and curriculum (Harvey et al., 1992), has since expanded to encompass various elements of university life. These include extracurricular activities, student support services, and social interactions with faculty and peers (Govender & David, 2023; Baranova et al., 2011). Consistent with this, Arambewela and Maringe (2012) stated that student experience is a total life experience that includes both academic and non-academic experiences as a student. According to Govender and David (2023), academic services, teaching quality, student attitudes, support services, and perceived education quality all play a key role in shaping students' perceptions. Similarly, Baranova et al. (2011) emphasize the importance of both classroom learning and broader campus interactions in evaluating higher education quality. Koris et al. (2015) explain the significance of classroom conduct, research, teaching strategies, communication with service staff, and curriculum design in shaping students' evaluations of education quality. These various elements suggest that student experience is a multifaceted construct, influenced by both academic and non-academic factors.

Perceived quality is another key concept in evaluating higher education institutions, reflecting students' subjective assessments of university services. Parasuraman et al. (1988) define service quality as the gap between student expectations and actual experiences, particularly in teaching, campus facilities, and support services. Zeithaml (1988) expands on this definition by distinguishing between objective quality, which refers to technical excellence, and perceived quality, which is shaped by students' rational and emotional evaluations. Su and Tong (2015) highlight that perceived quality influences students' future decisions, such as satisfaction and

retention, with students more likely to stay at institutions that meet or exceed their expectations. Hill (1995) stresses the importance of teaching competence, curriculum quality, class sizes, and academic staff availability in shaping perceptions of academic quality. These factors, in turn, affect student engagement and learning outcomes. Non-academic factors such as campus facilities, student support services, and extracurricular activities also play a significant role in shaping students' perceptions of educational quality (Joseph et al., 2005; Russell, 2005). Together, both academic and non-academic factors influence students' decisions to stay at or leave an institution, making it essential to understand how these factors interact when assessing educational quality.

Student experience and perceived quality can significantly influence students' preferences when deciding to continue their studies at the postgraduate level. College brand preference refers to students' tendency to favor a university based on perceptions of its reputation, academic offerings, campus environment, and student services. Maguire and Lay (1981) define this preference as students' inclination to choose a university based on rational considerations such as academic quality and affordability, alongside emotional factors like prestige and reputation. In an increasingly competitive higher education sector, branding has become essential in helping universities establish a distinct identity that appeals to prospective students through academic programs, campus facilities, and student life (Chapleo, 2010). The literature on college brand preference highlights several factors influencing students' choices. According to Kayombo et al. (2020) stated that the determinants of student preferences in choosing a university are teaching quality, fees, course availability, facilities, and employability. Similarly, Dao and Thorpe (2015) highlight that facilities and services, programs, cost, offline and digital information, opinions, communication channels, program improvements, and promotion are also among the key criteria students consider when selecting a university. This institutional identity shapes students' perceptions and plays a pivotal role in their decision-making process.

While much of the literature has explored brand preference in the context of higher education, it is equally important to consider how brand experience and perceived quality influence these preferences, as demonstrated across various industries. Obermeit (2012), for instance, identified rational factors such as financial aid, curriculum, reputation, and location as key influences on university choice. Similarly, Agrey and Lampadan (2014) explained that student choice is determined by both physical and non-physical support systems, the provision of a conducive educational environment, employment opportunities, athletic facilities, student life, and extracurricular activities, as well as a secure and welcoming atmosphere. Ebrahim et al. (2016) emphasized the role of emotional attachment, often formed through positive interactions and a strong sense of belonging. Similarly, Naaz et al. (2024) noted the impact of social status, prestige, and personal goals in shaping brand preference. Expanding on this, Rai and Bhattarai (2024) argued that self-congruity and brand personality, where students perceive alignment between their personal identity and the university's brand, can further enhance their preference. Thus, managing a university's brand is critical in fostering loyalty through marketing strategies, alumni engagement, and a supportive campus culture.

Insights from consumer-based studies also offer valuable perspectives on how experience and perceived quality influence brand perception. Ding and Tseng (2015) found that brand experience positively affects quality perception in restaurant settings, while Biedenbach and Marell (2010) demonstrated a similar effect on brand equity in B2B services. In the soft drink industry, Alvi et al. (2019) also concluded that brand experience plays a significant role in shaping brand equity. In the context of higher education, Harvey et al. (1992) argued that student experience is central to determining educational quality; this notion has been further supported by studies such as Daly and Barker (2005), Pereda et al. (2007), and Arambewela and Maringe (2012), who emphasized the need to understand how students perceive their academic environment.

Although these studies have broadened our understanding of brand preference across sectors, the current study differs by focusing on the specific factors influencing students' intentions to pursue postgraduate education in Bandung, Indonesia. While much of the prior research has concentrat-

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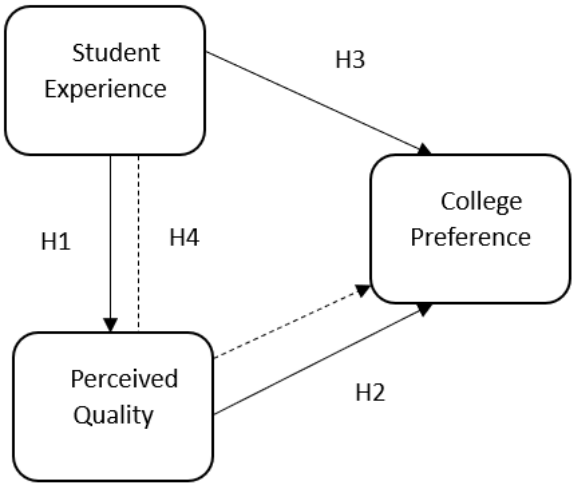

Figure 1. Conceptual framework

ed on product-based or service-based experiences, this study focuses on academic experiences, particularly student experience and perceived quality, as predictors of university brand preference.

Building on these findings, perceived quality also emerges as a consistent driver of brand preference in both business and educational contexts. Liu and Smeesters (2010) found that perceived brand quality influences preferences for both domestic and foreign brands. In hospitality and travel, Cobb-Walgren et al. (1995) and Chen and Chang (2008), respectively, reported that brand equity significantly affects consumer preferences. Wang (2013) found similar results in the food industry, while Chang and Liu (2009) emphasized the same in services. Additionally, Liu et al. (2014) demonstrated how perceived brand quality mediates brand choice when linked with environmental and societal concerns, a finding also echoed by Hansopaheluwakan et al. (2020). These studies underscore the broader importance of perceived quality, yet few have explored this dynamic within the educational domain.

Moreover, previous research in various industries has shown that brand experience strongly influences brand preference. Tsai et al. (2015) showed this in the tablet PC market, Yasri et al. (2020) in traditional food products, and Virgarani and Budiarti (2021) in beauty goods. These studies, however, focus on short-term consumer decisions, while the current study investigates long-term academic choices shaped by the student experience. The key distinction lies in the sample population and context; previous research examined consumers, whereas this study explores students making significant educational commitments.

In addition to brand preference and perceived quality, several studies have explored how these elements influence decision-making behaviors such as purchase intention. Hellier et al. (2003) found that in a superannuation company, brand preference influences perceived quality and purchase intention. Similarly, Chen and Chang (2008) and Hansopaheluwakan et al. (2020) demonstrated how perceived quality indirectly affects purchase intention through brand preference in airline and consumer product contexts. While insightful, these studies remain grounded in consumer behavior.

In contrast, the present study shifts the focus toward educational decision-making by examining how students' experience and perceived quality influence students' choices to pursue master's programs, specifically within the context of universities in Bandung, Indonesia. This transition from a consumer-centric to an academic-centric perspective highlights the unique contribution of this study, offering a more profound understanding of how educational institutions can attract and retain students through meaningful and high-quality learning experiences.

This study aims to critically examine the role of student experiences and the perceived quality of higher education in shaping their decision-mak-

ing processes regarding the selection of postgraduate institutions. Specifically, this study explores the roles of student experience and perceived quality in shaping college brand preference at universities in Bandung, Indonesia. In this study, the following hypotheses are proposed based on insights from the literature:

H1: *Student experience positively influences perceived quality.*

H2: *Perceived quality positively influences college preference.*

H3: *Student experience positively influences college preference.*

H4: *Student experience positively and significantly influences college preference through perceived quality.*

Figure 1 illustrates the research model.

2. METHODS

This study focuses on the population of 70,284 students enrolled at 14 private universities in Bandung, Indonesia, that offer a master's program. The study utilized 35 indicators and required a minimum sample size of 350 respondents, calculated as 35 x 10. Hair et al. (2010) stipulate that the minimum sample size should be 5 to 10 times the number of items (indicators). This study utilized a sample size of 400 to enhance representativeness. The Likert Scale Summated Rating method rates each item using seven answer alternatives, ranging from 1 to 7 with criteria 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (quite disagree), 4 (less agree), 4 (quite agree), 5 (agree), and 7 (very agree). The questionnaire was distributed by visiting each campus and providing a Google Form for participants to complete over five months, from January 2025 to May 2025. The main target respondents are students in their 7th-8th semesters, although students in their 3rd-4th and 5th-6th semesters also participated in responding to meet the required number of respondents. Here is the link to the research questionnaire data (https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1gl88G1isS88W9Wh_jExEpacJr6s-Gzb0/edit?usp=drive_link&ouid=114877880372834604802&rtpof=true&sd=true). Data were analyzed using smart PLS 4.0. Obstacles to establishing validity arise from multiple aspects; hence, to evaluate study data outcomes, researchers must use a variety of construct validity techniques (Sarstedt & Mooi, 2014).

Tables 1 to 4 show that the respondents in this study, totaling 400, consist of 49% males and 51% females and are distributed across 29 study programs, the most numerous being management. Most respondents fall within the age range of 21-25 years. Students aged 21-25 years are mostly in their 7th-8th semesters. The respondents consisted of 51% male students and 49% female students. Meanwhile, there were three age groups of respondents, namely 16-20 years at 22 percent, 21-25 years at 77%, and 26-30 years at only 2%. This indicates that the majority of respondents aged 21-25 years who were targeted to respond were likely to continue their Master's studies. The majority of the respondents targeted were students who were in their upper semester, namely semesters 7-8, namely 57%, followed by students in semesters 5-6 at 23% and students in semesters 3-4 at 20%. Asking about the possibility of continuing your studies should be addressed to students in the upper semester, but students in the upper semester are very rarely on campus, this is because they only take a few courses. The majority of the respondents targeted were students who were in their upper semester, namely semesters 7-8, namely 57%, followed by students in semesters 5-6 at 23%, and students in semesters 3-4 at 20%. Asking about the possibility of continuing the studies should be addressed to students in the upper semester, but students in the upper semester are very rarely on campus, this is because they only take a few courses. The majority of respondents came from management study programs at 27% (107 students), followed by communication science study programs at 10% (39 students), accounting at 7.75% (31 students), legal studies at 7.75 (31 students), and industrial engineering at 6% (26 students), while other study programs were in a small percentage. This shows that the number of management study programs is the study program that has the greatest opportunity to enroll in a master's study program because it has the largest number of undergraduate students. Meanwhile, the sample size for each study program is calculated proportionally.

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Table 1. Respondents' criteria based on gender

Gender	Frequency	%
Male	196	49
Female	204	51
Total	400	100

Table 2. Respondents' criteria based on age

Age (Year)	Frequency	%
16-20	86	21
21-25	307	77
26-30	7	2
Total	400	100

Table 3. Respondents' criteria based on academic term

Academic term	Frequency	%
3-4	81	20
5-6	90	23
7-8	229	57
Total	400	100

Table 4. Respondents' criteria based on the study program

No.	Study Program	Frequency	%
1	Management	107	26.75
2	Communication Science	39	9.75
3	Accounting	31	7.75
4	Legal studies	31	7.75
5	Industrial Engineering	24	6
6	Civil Engineering	19	4.75
7	Informatics	17	4.25
8	Visual Communication Design	16	4
9	Business Administration	15	3.75
10	Information Systems	15	3.75
11	Psychology	11	2.75
12	Law	10	2.5
13	Electrical Engineering	8	2
14	Mechanical Engineering	7	17.5
15	Food Technology	7	17.5
16	International Relations	6	1.5
17	Interior Design	6	1.5
18	Public Relations	5	12.5
19	Medicine	4	1
20	Architecture	4	1
21	Islamic Religious Education	3	0.75
22	Regional and City Planning	3	0.75
23	Government Science	3	0.75
24	Product Design	3	0.75
25	Chemical Engineering	2	0.5
26	Public Administration	1	0.25
27	Public Administration Science	1	0.25
28	Business Administration	1	0.25
29	Mathematics Education	1	0.25
Total		400	100

3. RESULTS

Table 5 shows that the lecturers at 14 private higher education institutions in Bandung, Indonesia, are quite disciplined (5.3) in starting the lectures and quite disciplined in starting or ending classes. The teaching conducted by lecturers is quite systematic (5.4). The lecturer's delivery of the lecture material lacks clarity (4.5), is quite capable (5.2) of motivating the class, and has successfully used a fairly interactive teaching method (5.4), encouraging student participation in discussions. The academic guidance level from the academic advisor falls into the fairly directed category (5.3). Periodic monitoring of student study progress falls into the adequately monitored category (5.2). Students report feeling quite happy (5.3) and enthusiastic (5.2) during class. Overall, respondents' feedback on the student experience falls into the fairly good category (5.1), meaning that private universities have succeeded in creating a reasonably good student experience. The students perceive the teaching method, academic advice, and classroom climate as quite good.

Table 5. Respondent's perception of student experiences

Item	Average Score	Category
The discipline of lecturers in teaching	5.3	Quite disciplined
The systematics of teaching	5.4	Quite systematic
The clarity with which lecturers deliver the material is impressive	4.5	Not clear
The ability of lecturers to motivate	5.2	Quite capable
The ability of lecturers to involve students in discussions is important	5.4	Quite capable
Academic guidance from the academic advisor	5.3	Quite focused
Monitoring students' study progress	5.2	Well monitored
The feeling of happiness in the classroom	5.3	Quite enjoyable
The excitement of being in the classroom is palpable	5.2	Quite excited
Category of student experience	5.1	Quite good

Table 6 shows that campus facilities (sports fields, prayer rooms, and toilets) at private universities in Bandung are quite available (5.4). The avail-

Table 6. Respondent perceptions of perceived quality

Item	Average Score	Category
The availability of campus facilities, such as the sports field, prayer room, and restroom, is a concern	5.4	Available enough
The library offers a wide selection of books and journals	5.5	Available
Availability of a computer or practical laboratories	5.4	Quite complete
Ease of passing courses	4.8	Quite easy
Academic Achievement Index	5.2	Quite achievable
The availability of campus tuition assistance	4.6	Available enough
The availability of off-campus tuition assistance	4.8	Available enough
The speed at which academic staff assist and serve is impressive	5	Quite fast
The speed of academic staff in assisting and serving	4.3	Not fast enough
The level of speed of the study program in serving and directing	5.3	Quite fast
Category of perceived quality	5	Quite good

Table 7. Respondent perceptions of college preference

Item	Average Score	Category
This campus is a priority for continuing master's degrees	4.5	Not good
I prefer this campus over other campuses to continue my master's studies	4	Not good
This campus is my first choice for continuing my master's degree	3.8	Not very good
I will likely choose this campus to continue my master's degree	3.7	Not very good
Category of college preference	4	Not good

ability of books and journals in the library falls into the available category (5.5), which means that 14 PTS in Bandung already have the books and journals needed by students. The computer lab, or practical lab, is quite complete (5.4) to support the learning process. The academic standards at 14 private universities in Bandung are quite accessible (4.8) for students. The performance index achievement level falls into the fairly achieved category (5.2). Educational scholarships, both from within and outside, are categorized as quite available, with an internal educational scholarship score of 4.6 and an external scholarship score of 4.8. Academic staff and study program services are quite fast (5 and 5.3), while finance staff assistance is slow (4.3). Overall, the perceived quality of private universities falls into the fairly high-quality category (5). This indicates that private universities in Bandung, Indonesia, are capable of providing adequate educational services such as physical facilities, academic achievement, scholarships, and responsiveness.

Table 7 demonstrates that a priority campus for continuing studies, a master's degree, falls into the lower priority category (4.5) for continuing studies. This campus is less popular than other campuses for continuing studies (4). The first-choice campus for continuing studies for a Master's degree falls into the category of not being the first choice (3.8) for continuing studies. The possibility of choosing this campus to continue S2 studies falls into the category of not choosing the campus (3.7) to continue coursework, meaning the campus is still being considered for continuing studies, but it is not the main priority for students. Overall, college preference falls into the category of low preference or dislike (4), indicating a lack of student preference to continue their studies at the same campus. The lack of student preference may be caused by students still favoring public universities over private ones, wanting to find more prestigious universities, and the feeling of boredom if continuing their studies at the same university.

Table 8 shows the results of the convergent validity test. All indicators have outer loads above 0.7, meaning each one accurately represents what it is supposed to measure. The AVE value for each dimension is above the threshold value of 0.5.

Figure 2 shows that the first-order structural model explains how each indicator can influence each dimension. All outer loading values exceed 0.7, signifying the validity and suitability of all indicators for data processing.

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Table 8. Convergent validity: first order

Variable	Dimensions	Items	Outer loading	AVE
Student Experience	Teaching Method	X11	0.774	0.669
		X12	0.875	
		X13	0.814	
		X14	0.803	
		X15	0.821	
	Academic Advice	X16	0.934	0.876
		X17	0.938	
	Classroom Climate	X18	0.943	0.890
		X19	0.944	
Perceived Quality	Physical Facilities	Y11	0.850	0.756
		Y12	0.884	
		Y13	0.875	
	Academic Achievement	Y14	0.905	0.840
		Y15	0.928	
	Scholarship	Y16	0.910	0.809
		Y17	0.889	
	Responsiveness	Y18	0.885	0.795
		Y19	0.911	
		Y110	0.880	
College Preference	Priority college	Z1	0.877	0.868
	Preferred college	Z2	0.946	
	First preference	Z3	0.957	
	Possibility of choosing a college	Z4	0.945	

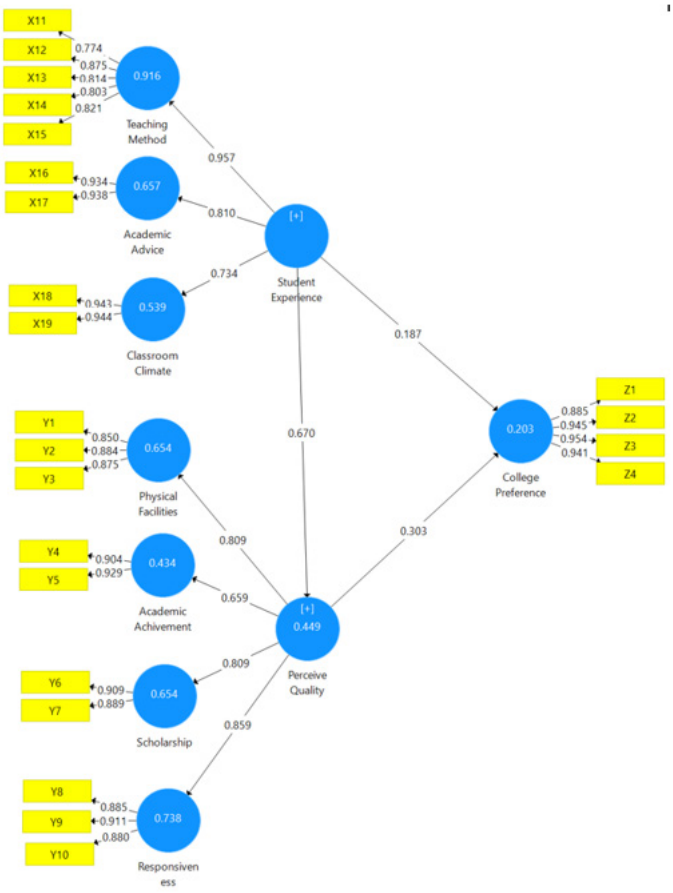

Figure 2. First-order structural model

Table 9. Convergent validity: second order

Variable	Dimensions/Indicator	Outer Loading	AVE
Student Experience	Teaching Method	0.915	0.795
	Academic Advice	0.810	
	Classroom Climate	0.801	
Perceived Quality	Physical Facilities	0.714	0.868
	Academic Achievement	0.792	
	Scholarship	0.839	
	Responsiveness	0.774	
College Brand Personality	Prestige	0.870	0.610
	Cosmopolitan	0.863	
	Conscientiousness	0.939	
College Preference	Priority college	0.877	0.711
	Preferred college	0.946	
	First preference	0.957	
	Possibility of choosing a college	0.945	

Table 10. Construct reliability and validity

Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	AVE
College Preference	0.949	0.949	0.963	0.868
Perceived Quality	0.796	0.796	0.868	0.621
Student Experience	0.795	0.820	0.881	0.712

Table 9 shows that all dimensions and indicators have outer loadings above 0.7. Most of the indicators in this table have high outer loadings, indicating that these indicators measure the variables. All AVE values above 0.5 indicate excellent convergent validity, meaning the construct can explain more than half of the variance of its indicators.

Figure 3 presents the second-order structural model that measures student experience, perceived quality, and college preference. All indicators have a loading factor above 0.7, indicating a good measurement of the latent variable represented.

Table 10 shows that Cronbach's alpha, rho_A, and composite reliability show that indicators

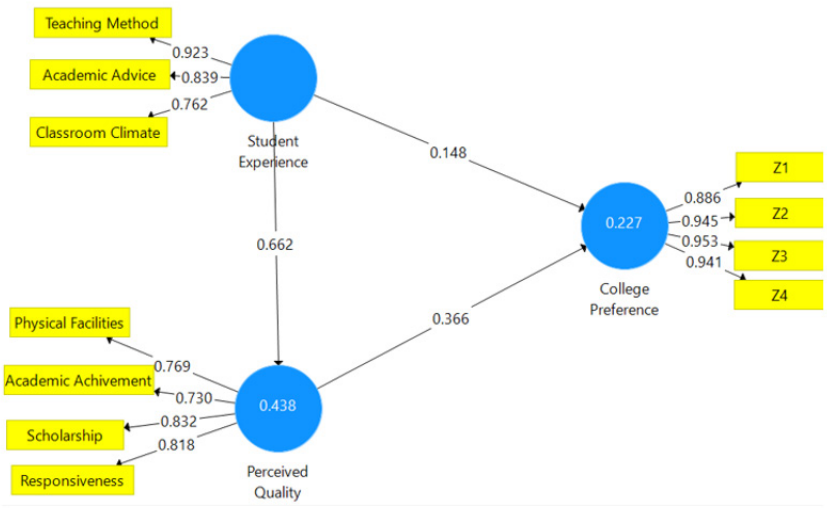

Figure 3. Second-order structural model

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Table 11. Fornell-Larcker criterion

Constructs	College Preference	Perceived Quality	Student Experience
College Preference	0.932	–	–
Perceived Quality	0.463	0.788	–
Student Experience	0.390	0.662	0.844

Table 12. Cross loading

Constructs	Student Experience	Perceived Quality	College Preference
Teaching Method	0.923	0.643	0.366
Academic Advice	0.839	0.444	0.288
Classroom Climate	0.762	0.444	0.333
Physical Facilities	0.553	0.769	0.246
Academic Achievement	0.478	0.730	0.501
Scholarship	0.498	0.832	0.411
Responsiveness	0.560	0.818	0.279
Priority college	0.378	0.450	0.886
Preferred college	0.357	0.419	0.945
First preference	0.361	0.414	0.953
Possibility of choosing a college	0.353	0.439	0.941

for each construct consistently measure it, with values over 0.7. All AVE values are greater than 0.5, meaning that these structures explain more than half of the variation in the indicators. This is a strong sign of convergent validity.

Table 11 shows that the correlation analysis reveals that college preference is most strongly influenced by perceived quality (0.932), suggesting that students who perceive a college as high quality are more likely to prefer it. There is a moderate positive correlation between college preference and student experience (0.390), indicating that students who prefer a college tend to report slightly better experiences, though the relationship is weaker. Meanwhile, perceived quality and student experience have a moderate to strong positive correlation (0.662), meaning students who see the college as high quality generally report better experiences, but this relationship is still weaker than the one between college preference and perceived quality. Overall, perceived quality plays a significant role in shaping both college preference and student experience.

Table 12 demonstrates that the variables with higher cross-loading values include student experience, perceived quality, and college preference. Thus, it can be said that there is a strong correlation and a low correlation between each variable's indicator and the other variables.

Table 13 shows that the path coefficient of 0.662 indicates that the student experience has a strong positive effect on perceived quality. The T-statistic is 19.054, and the P-value is 0.000, which shows this result is very significant (*H1* is accepted). Perceived quality also significantly influences college preference, with a path coefficient of 0.366, a T-statistic of 6.208, and a P-value of 0.000 (*H2* is accepted). The student experience has a positive impact on college preference, shown by a smaller path coefficient of 0.148, a T-statistic of 2.736, and a P-value of 0.006 (*H3* is accepted). This means there is a meaningful, though moderate, effect.

Table 14 shows that the indirect effect coefficient of 0.242 indicates that student experience positively influences college preference through perceived quality, confirming *H4*. With a T-statistic

Table 13. Path coefficient and hypothesis testing

Direct Effect	Original Sample (O)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T-Statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P Values	Conclusion
Student Experience → Perceived Quality	0.662	0.035	19.054	0.000	H1 accepted
Perceived Quality → College Preference	0.366	0.059	6.208	0.000	H2 accepted
Student Experience → College Preference	0.148	0.054	2.736	0.006	H3 accepted

Table 14. Specific indirect effect

Specific Indirect Effect	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P Values	Conclusion
Student Experience → Perceived Quality → College Preference	0.242	0.241	0.041	5.855	0.000	H4 Accepted

of 5.855 and a P-value of 0.000, this effect is highly significant. Since student experience, directly and indirectly, impacts college preference via perceived quality, this represents partial mediation. Perceived quality serves as a partial mediator rather than a full mediator.

4. DISCUSSION

The study results show that student experience significantly influences perceived quality. This means that universities must continue to improve aspects related to the student experience. The study's findings are consistent with Alvi et al. (2019), Ding and Seng (2015), Arambewela and Maringe (2012), and Biedenbach and Marell (2010). Previous researchers found that brand experience affects the perceived quality of goods, while the results of this study found that student experience affects perceived quality at the university. However, in line with Harvey et al. (1992), student experience plays the most important role in assessing the quality of higher education. If students are satisfied with their experience, they will have a more positive perception of campus quality. Student experience can be measured through teaching methods, academic advice, and classroom climate. This is in accordance with what was expressed by Koris et al. (2015), who stated that the dimensions of student experience consist of feedback from students, graduation, course design, rigor, grading, communication with service personnel, classroom behavior, individual studies, classroom studies, teaching strategies, and course design.

Furthermore, perceived quality positively influences college preference, indicating that universities with better-perceived quality are more likely to be chosen. This aligns with studies by Hansopaheluwakan et al. (2020) and Liu et al. (2014). However, previous researchers found that perceived quality affects brand preference for goods, whereas this study found that perceived quality affects college preference. Narang (2012) highlights quality dimensions, including academics and personality development. Universities should enhance quality assurance, academic excellence, and branding to attract students.

In addition, the results show that student experience also significantly impacts college preference, suggesting universities must improve experiences across all stages, from admissions to graduation. Effective marketing strategies, student testimonials, and digital enhancements can highlight positive experiences, consistent with Virgarani and Budiarti (2021), Yasri et al. (2020), and Tsai et al. (2015). However, previous researchers found that brand experience affects brand preference for goods, whereas this study found that perceived quality affects college preference.

Finally, this study also identifies a mediation effect, where student experience influences college preference indirectly through perceived quality. In other words, better student experiences enhance perceived quality, which in turn increases students' preference for the institution. This mediating relationship is supported by the findings of Hansopaheluwakan et al. (2020), Chen and Chang (2008), and Hellier et al. (2003). While previous research primarily focused on brand experience and preference in consumer contexts, this study contributes to the limited literature by demonstrating the same mechanism in the higher education sector.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to critically investigate how students' experiences and perceptions of higher education quality influence their choices of postgraduate programs. The study indicates that although student experience and perceived quality are adequate, they would rather not pursue higher

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education at the same university. So, the campus leaders need to improve how the school is seen, boost the quality of both academic and non-academic services, and improve communication and student involvement to spark more interest in further studies at the same institution. Additionally, private universities can encourage students to pursue higher education by offering financial support in the form of scholarships and assistance, as well as providing accelerated pathways from undergraduate (S1) to graduate (S2) programs.

The findings further suggest that student experience, which includes teaching methods, academic advice, and classroom climate, can enhance perceived quality and increase students' preference for continuing their studies. Perceived quality, which includes physical facilities, academic achievement, scholarships, and responsiveness, can further strengthen the preference for higher education. Furthermore, student experience can indirectly increase this preference through its impact on perceived quality. However, perceived quality does not fully mediate the relationship between student experience and college preference. Both student experience and perceived quality contribute to increasing students' preference for pursuing a master's degree at private universities in Bandung, Indonesia.

This study differs from previous research by focusing on higher education institutions as the research object, in contrast to studies that examined variables with different objects. Consequently, this study advances our understanding of customer behavior in higher education marketing by offering new perspectives on the factors influencing college preferences.

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the influence of student experience and perceived quality on college brand preference among postgraduate students at private universities in Bandung. Despite its limitations, the findings underscore the importance of enhancing the student experience and maintaining high educational quality to improve university appeal. Future research is encouraged to broaden the scope by involving alumni, expanding the geographical area, and integrating other relevant variables such as perceived value and brand personality to build a more comprehensive understanding of student decision-making in higher education.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE

Student Experience

1. Lecturer's discipline in teaching
2. Systematic teaching carried out by lecturers
3. Lecturer's clarity in delivering lecture material
4. The lecturer's ability to motivate lectures
5. Lecturer's ability to involve students in discussions
6. Level of academic guidance from the guardian lecturer
7. Periodic monitoring of student study progress by the guardian lecturer
8. Feelings when in class
9. The atmosphere in class

Perceived Quality

1. Availability of campus facilities (sports fields, prayer rooms, and toilets)
2. Availability of books and journals in the library
3. Computer laboratory or practicum equipment
4. The level of ease in passing courses
5. Level of achievement index achievement
6. Availability of tuition assistance from the campus
7. Availability of tuition assistance from outside the campus
8. Speed of academic staff in helping and serving
9. Speed of financial staff in helping and serving
10. Speed of the study program in serving and directing

College Preference

1. This campus is a priority campus for continuing Master's studies
2. I prefer this campus to other campuses to continue my Master's studies
3. This campus is my first choice of campus to continue my Master's studies
4. It is likely that I will choose this campus to continue my Master's studies

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