EXTERNAL FACTORS INFLUENCING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' CHOICE OF STUDY DESTINATION IN CHINA: IMPLICATIONS FOR RECRUITMENT AND MARKETING

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Abstract
The internationalization of higher education has accelerated significantly in recent decades, with countries actively competing to attract international students as part of broader educational, economic, and diplomatic strategies. While China has traditionally been recognized as a major exporter of international students, it is increasingly positioning itself as a global study destination. This study investigates the external factors that influence international students' decision-making processes in selecting China as their study destination, with particular focus on the implications for university recruitment and marketing.A quantitative research design was employed, involving a structured questionnaire distributed to 267 international students at Guangxi University. The study focused on five core objectives: identifying the most influential external factors, assessing the role of third-party actors (especially parents), exploring the main information sources used by students, comparing the influence of digital platforms, personal networks, and education agents, and examining the degree of digital autonomy among students.Key findings indicate that financial factors such as scholarships and affordability, along with perceptions of safety and peer recommendations, are the most influential external drivers. Parental expectations and support also play a significant role, particularly among students from collectivist cultures. Among information channels, digital platforms such as university websites and social media were found to be more impactful than traditional agents or print materials. Furthermore, a strong trend toward digital independence in decision-making was observed.The study concludes that Chinese universities must strengthen their digital presence, involve families in outreach, and leverage student peer networks to remain competitive in the international education market. These insights offer valuable recommendations for refining recruitment strategies and advancing China's role as a preferred global study destination.

Keywords: international students, study destination, China, digital platforms, parental influence, student mobility, recruitment strategy.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the global landscape of higher education has undergone a profound transformation, characterized by increasing internationalization, globalization, and cross-border academic mobility. As nations recognize the strategic value of a globally connected and competitive higher education sector, the mobility of international students has become one of the most significant manifestations of this shift. According to Moskal (2018), international student mobility plays a pivotal role in the broader process of internationalizing higher education institutions, offering benefits not only to host institutions but also to the students themselves, who gain enhanced academic, professional, and intercultural competencies. Driven by global market dynamics, demographic shifts, and the rise of knowledge economies, international education has also become a strategic tool for national development, economic diplomacy, and cultural soft power.

The global flow of international students has historically been dominated by developed countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia. These nations have long benefited from their established academic reputations, quality assurance systems, liberal visa regimes, and strong recruitment strategies. However, the rise of emerging economies in Asia, particularly China, has begun to reshape the international education landscape. While China was traditionally known as a major "sending" country in the international student circuit exporting large numbers of students to Western institutions it is now increasingly positioning itself as a competitive "receiving" destination for international students (Jiani, 2017; Zhang & Liao, 2021).

The shift in China's role from a primary exporter to a significant host of international students is not accidental. It stems from proactive government policies, including substantial investments in higher education infrastructure, the expansion of English-taught programs, scholarship offerings like the Chinese Government Scholarship, and China's broader soft power initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). These developments have contributed to a sharp increase in international student enrollments over the past two decades. However, this growth has not been without challenges. While quantitative expansion has been impressive, concerns regarding the quality of education, institutional rigidity, and cultural adaptation continue to influence international students' perceptions of China's higher education environment (Ding, 2016; Wu, 2019).

Despite China's rising profile as a study destination, research on the factors that influence international students' decisions to study in China remains limited especially regarding the external, or non-institutional, factors. The decision to study abroad is multifaceted, involving a combination of individual motivations (e.g., career goals, academic interest), institutional factors (e.g., scholarships, rankings), and external influences (e.g., recommendations, media, geopolitical context). While internal institutional features such as curriculum quality, research reputation, and campus facilities have been well-documented in previous studies (Chen, 2016; Tian et al., 2020), there is a growing recognition that external factors including family expectations, social networks, agents, government policies, media portrayals, and even political climate play a crucial role in shaping students' choices (Zhai et al., 2019; Schwartz, 2023).

In the Chinese context, this distinction is particularly important. A significant proportion of international students arriving in China come from BRI countries, where state-led diplomacy and bilateral educational agreements may shape student flows more than individual agency or academic merit. Moreover, in many cultures, students' decisions are heavily influenced by parents, extended family, and community expectations. Ke et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of familial influence, noting that the presence of relatives in the host country, parental aspirations, and even sibling experiences can significantly affect the student's final decision. Peng et al. (2022) further supported this view, highlighting that in collectivist societies, educational choices are often viewed as family investments rather than solely individual aspirations.

The availability and credibility of information sources also serve as powerful external influences. With the proliferation of digital platforms and social media, students today are more exposed than ever to virtual narratives about study destinations. Zhai et al. (2019) found that online communities, student blogs, and forums are instrumental in shaping students' perceptions of Chinese universities, sometimes even more than official university marketing efforts. Third-

party educational agents and recruitment consultants also play a mediating role, providing guidance, processing admissions, and shaping expectations (Chen, 2016). However, these sources vary greatly in reliability and may lead to misaligned expectations, which in turn influence student satisfaction and retention.

Further complicating the picture is the broader geopolitical context, including China's diplomatic relations, media representation in international news, and the global perception of Chinese policies. For instance, Perez-Garcia &Nierga (2021) argue that China's efforts to export its educational model through BRI partnerships often face resistance due to contrasting cultural and pedagogical expectations. At the same time, China's domestic educational culture marked by hierarchical structures, rigid administration, and traditional pedagogy can pose adaptation challenges for students accustomed to more flexible learning environments In recent years, there has been a noticeable fluctuation in the number of inbound students, particularly after 2018. This trend has been influenced by several factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing international scrutiny of China's domestic policies, and shifts in global student preferences. These developments underscore the urgency of understanding the nuanced and external drivers of student choice particularly as Chinese institutions and policymakers seek to refine their international recruitment and marketing strategies (Wu, 2022).

This study aims to fill the identified research gap by systematically examining the external factors that influence international students' choice of China as a study destination. Unlike prior studies that focus predominantly on internal institutional attributes, this research emphasizes the roles of family influence, peer networks, educational agents, digital media, and geopolitical context. By doing so, it offers a more holistic understanding of the complex decision-making processes of prospective international students. Understanding these external factors is not only academically significant but also practically relevant for higher education administrators, international recruitment officers, and policymakers. As China continues to expand its educational influence and enhance its attractiveness to foreign students, insights from this study can inform more culturally responsive and strategically targeted marketing and recruitment campaigns. Furthermore, by identifying the external pressures and informational pathways that shape student choices, institutions can better align their service offerings, support systems, and communication strategies with the actual needs and expectations of international students.As the competition for global talent intensifies, China's ability to attract and retain international students will depend not only on the quality of its academic programs but also on its responsiveness to external influences shaping student choice. This study contributes to this strategic endeavor by providing empirical evidence and actionable insights into the external factors that matter most to international students when choosing to study in China.

2. Literature Review

The landscape of global higher education has been undergoing profound transformation, marked by increasing trends of internationalization and globalization. In this context, international student mobility has emerged as a central component of higher education reform and global competitiveness. It plays a vital role not only in the strategic internationalization of universities but also in shaping students' global competencies, intercultural understanding, and employability (Moskal, 2018). For developing nations, in particular, studying abroad represents an opportunity

for students to access better educational resources and broader career prospects. Simultaneously, host countries benefit economically, socially, and academically from inbound student flows.

International education is widely seen as a key mechanism for developing human capital (Kritz, 2015), enhancing global learning outcomes (Henard, 2010), and preparing learners to meet the demands of a dynamic, interconnected world (Sukanya, 2016). The mobility of students across borders also contributes to institutional innovation and international collaboration, while providing substantial economic benefits to host communities through tuition fees, living expenses, and long-term investment in human resources. While traditional study destinations such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia have historically dominated international student recruitment, the global education landscape is shifting. Emerging economies are now becoming attractive study destinations. China, in particular, has experienced significant changes in its role in international student mobility. Once predominantly a "sending country," China is increasingly positioning itself as a major "receiving country" for international students (Jiani, 2017; Zhang & Liao, 2021). The expansion of China's higher education sector now the largest in the world by enrollment (Cai, 2017) has contributed to this transformation. China's rise as a host country has been driven by a range of national strategies and educational policies, including scholarship schemes, increased international cooperation, and the promotion of English-medium programs. These efforts aim to support China's soft power ambitions and align with initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (Perez-Garcia &Nierga, 2021). Nevertheless, China's growing presence as a study destination is accompanied by several challenges, including questions about academic quality, institutional flexibility, and cultural integration (Wu, 2019). According to Wu (2022), outdated teaching practices and rigid administrative structures in many Chinese universities may limit their attractiveness to international students, particularly those from Western backgrounds.

Although much research has explored the internal factors influencing student choice such as university rankings, curriculum quality, and campus facilities there remains a significant gap in understanding how external factors affect international students' decision-making, especially in the Chinese context. This gap is particularly evident given the recent decline in the number of international students entering China after 2018, despite significant governmental support and internationalization efforts (Zhang et al., 2022).

Previous studies (Chen, 2016; Moskal, 2018; Zhai et al., 2019) have emphasized that students' choices are shaped by a mix of "push" and "pull" factors. Push factors refer to unfavorable conditions in the home country, such as limited educational access or political instability, whereas pull factors include positive attributes of the host country, such as academic reputation or career opportunities. However, growing evidence shows that external influences such as the recommendations of family and friends, guidance from educational agents, and exposure to media play a pivotal role in shaping students' perceptions and choices. For instance, family expectations have a strong impact on study decisions in many collectivist cultures. Parents often act as key decision-makers or influencers, particularly when they provide financial and emotional support (Ke et al., 2022; Peng et al., 2022). The presence of relatives or community members in the host country also contributes to a student's comfort level and decision-making. Additionally, peer recommendations and word-of-mouth experiences can either positively reinforce or dissuade interest in particular destinations.

Another significant external influence comes from educational agents and third-party recruiters, who serve as intermediaries between students and institutions. Their role in helping with applications, visa processes, and university selection can shape the entire decision-making pathway (Chen, 2016). However, reliance on agents may also introduce risks, such as misrepresentation of programs or unmet student expectations, particularly in contexts where students lack access to independent sources of information. The rise of digital platforms and social media has further expanded the range of information available to prospective international students. Research by Zhai et al. (2019) and Xiong (2017) reveals that online forums, student reviews, and social media content can significantly influence perceptions of academic life, social integration, and overall satisfaction. Schwartz (2023) extends this analysis by emphasizing the interplay between digital content, social expectations, and institutional reputation, which collectively shape student attitudes and expectations.

Despite the growing international visibility of Chinese higher education, studies such as Ding (2016) and Ma & Zhao (2018) suggest that cultural inconsistencies, communication barriers, and institutional rigidity in China may act as deterrents. Moreover, China's higher education system is often critiqued for limited flexibility, hierarchical classroom environments, and limited space for individual expression factors that contrast sharply with the expectations of many international students (Wu, 2019; Wu, 2022). Perez-Garcia &Nierga (2021) argue that China's soft power strategies, particularly in education, have struggled to resonate in BRI countries due to a failure to localize or adapt to different educational norms and expectations.

In this context, it becomes essential to analyze the external factors that influence international students' choice of China as a study destination. Understanding these factors can help universities and policymakers enhance their recruitment strategies, refine marketing messages, and create culturally inclusive academic environments. While China's educational offering has grown in scale and visibility, qualitative factors such as perceived safety, cultural compatibility, institutional responsiveness, and social networks are increasingly shaping international student behavior.

3. Research objective

To investigate the external factors influencing international students' decision-making process when choosing to study in China and determine the implications for university recruitment and marketing strategies. Based on the study summary provided, here are the objectives of the study:

1. To identify the most influential external factors affecting international students' decisions to study in China.

2. To evaluate the influence of parental expectations and other third-party actors in study destination choice.

3. To determine the primary information sources used by international students when selecting China.

4. To compare the impact of digital platforms, social networks, and education agents on decision-making.

5. To assess the degree of digital autonomy among international students during the decision-making process.

4. Research Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design to examine the external factors influencing international students' decisions to pursue higher education in China. A quantitative approach was deemed appropriate as it enables the collection of standardized data from a relatively large sample, allowing for objective statistical analysis, replicability, and generalizability of findings (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2021).

4.1 Population and Sample

Thetarget population for this study comprised all international students enrolled at Guangxi University during the academic year 2023/2024. According to university records, the total number of international students enrolled at that time was 780. This population included undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students across various faculties and national backgrounds. To determine the appropriate sample size, the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination table was used. For a population of 780, the recommended sample size at a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error is 260 respondents. To account for non-response or incomplete questionnaires, 300 students were approached, and ultimately 267 valid responses were received, yielding a valid response rate of approximately 89%. Table 1, shows the population and sample size determination

Table 1: Population and Sample Size Determination

Description	alue
Total international student population	80
Confidence level	5%
Margin of error	5%
Recommended sample size (Krejcie& Morgan)	60
Questionnaires distributed	00
Valid responses received	67
Response rate	9%

4.2 Sampling Technique

A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure fair representation across key demographic variables, including nationality, academic program, and year of study. This approach enhances the representativeness of the sample and reduces sampling bias.

4.3 Research Instrumentation

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, which was adapted from validated instruments used in prior studies on international student decision-making (Wang & Chen, 2008; Song & Liu, 2014). The adaptation process included tailoring items to the Chinese context and

aligning the constructs with the research objectives of this study. The questionnaire was subjected to expert review to ensure content validity.

The questionnaire used in this study was structured into four main sections. Section A focused on collecting demographic information, including participants' age, gender, nationality, academic level, and program of study. Section B addressed push factors, examining the conditions in students' home countries that motivated their decision to pursue education abroad. Section C explored pull factors, highlighting the specific attributes of China and Guangxi University that attracted students to choose this study destination. Section D investigated external influences, such as family expectations, guidance from education agents, the role of social networks, and the impact of online information sources. All questionnaire items employed closed-ended questions using a five-point Likert scale (e.g., 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) to ensure consistency and facilitate straightforward quantitative analysis.

4.4 Data Collection Procedures

Questionnaires were administered both in paper format and electronically (via Google Forms), depending on student availability and preference. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained before participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained.

Table 2: Mean Impact of External Sources

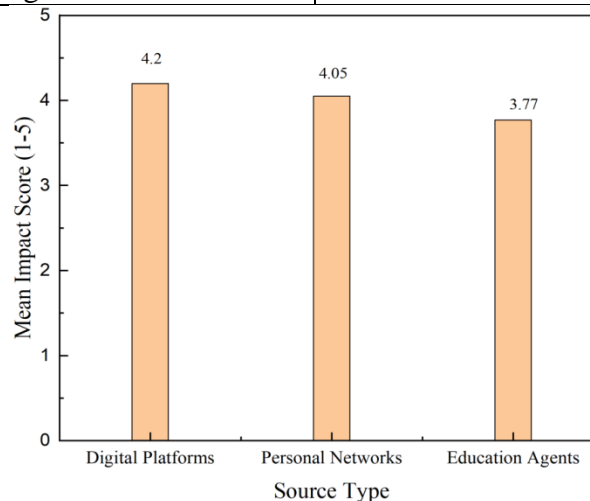| Source Type	Mean Impact Score (1-5)
Digital Platforms	4.2
Personal Networks	4.05
Education Agents	3.77

Figure 1: Relative Impact of Information Sources on Student Decision-Making

5. Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the quantitative analysis based on responses from 267 international students at Guangxi University. The findings address each of the revised research objectives, which focus on identifying the most influential external factors, examining third-party influence, exploring primary information sources, comparing source impacts, and assessing digital autonomy.

Research Objective 1: To identify the most influential external factors affecting international students' decisions to study in China.

Descriptive statistics revealed the following key external factors influencing student decisions (mean score on a 5-point Likert scale):

Table 3: Descriptive statistics revealed the following key external factors influencing student decisions (mean score on a 5-point Likert scale):

External Factor	Mean Score
Availability of scholarships and funding	4.32
Safety and political stability in China	4.18
Affordable tuition and living costs	4.11
Recommendations from friends or relatives	4.02
China's international influence and reputation	3.97

These results suggest that financial, safety, and word-of-mouth social factors are paramount in shaping international students' choices.

Research Objective 2: To evaluate the influence of parental expectations and other third-party actors in study destination choice.

The survey data showed:

76.8% of students agreed that parents encouraged or supported their choice.

42.3% said parents were a major decision-making influence.

17.9% claimed full independence in their decision.

These findings indicate that parental involvement remains significant, especially among students from collectivist cultural regions. In addition, some students highlighted family members' previous study or work experiences in China as impactful.

Research Objective 3: To determine the primary information sources used by international students when selecting China.

The top information sources have been shown in table 4.

Table 4: official digital content and trusted peer networks for making informed decisions

Information Source	% of Respondents Using It
University websites	72.7%
Social media (YouTube, Facebook)	65.9%
Friends or relatives in China	60.2%
Education agents or consultants	58.8%
Alumni networks	46.3%
Online forums	38.6%

These findings confirm that students primarily rely on official digital content and trusted peer networks for making informed decisions.

Research Objective 4: To compare the impact of digital platforms, social networks, and education agents on decision-making.

Students rated the influence of three major source categories on a 5-point scale:

Digital Platforms (university websites, social media): 4.20

Personal Networks (friends, alumni, relatives): 4.05

Education Agents: 3.77

As seen in the histogram, digital platforms have the highest perceived influence, followed closely by personal networks. The lower influence of agents suggests a shift toward independent, online research for most students.

Research Objective 5: To assess the degree of digital autonomy among international students during the decision-making process.

The following trends indicate a rise in digital independence:

67.4% of respondents began their research independently online.

56.1% said they made their decision primarily based on digital content.

Only 21.3% relied solely on agents or institutional outreach.

This indicates a growing trend of digitally autonomous student decision-making, especially among tech-savvy, undergraduate international students.

5.6 The Key Findings

Table 5: Summary TheKey Findings

Objective	Key Finding
1	Financial support, safety, and recommendations are the top external motivators.
2	Parental expectations strongly shape decisions, particularly in collectivist cultures.
3	Students primarily use university websites, social media, and personal contacts for information.
4	Digital platforms have the strongest influence; personal networks and agents follow.
5	A majority of students show high digital autonomy in researching and choosing China.

6. Discussion

6.1 Discussion of Research Objectives and Key Findings

6.1.1 Objective 1: To identify the most influential external factors affecting international students' decisions to study in China

The findings revealed that the most influential external factors were financial-related (e.g., scholarships and affordability), perceived safety and stability, and social recommendations from friends and relatives. These results align with previous studies (Wang & Chen, 2008; Zhai et al., 2019), which emphasized the importance of cost-effectiveness and financial support in international student mobility, particularly for those from low- and middle-income countries.

Safety and political stability were also highly valued. This resonates with Moskal's (2018) view that personal security and a predictable social environment are prerequisites for students when considering foreign study. The influence of trusted social contacts (friends and relatives) supports the findings of Ke et al. (2022), who identified peer validation and word-of-mouth as powerful external drivers in destination selection.

6.1.2 Objective 2: To evaluate the influence of parental expectations and other third-party actors in study destination choice

Parental influence was shown to be a significant factor, with over 75% of students acknowledging that parents supported or influenced their decision to study in China. This is consistent with literature emphasizing family decision-making dynamics in collectivist cultures, particularly across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East (Peng et al., 2022).

This supports the notion that international student mobility decisions are often collective rather than individual. Educational agents and family contacts serve as intermediaries who either reinforce or challenge student preferences. These findings suggest that Chinese universities could better tailor their marketing strategies to address the concerns and aspirations of both students and their families.

6.1.3 Objective 3: To determine the primary information sources used by international students when selecting China

University websites, social media platforms, and peer recommendations were the most used sources of information. This confirms the growing role of digital ecosystems in educational decision-making, aligning with findings by Xiong (2017) and Schwartz (2023), who identified a shift from agent-driven to self-guided information-seeking behavior.

Social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram provide real-time, informal, and peer-generated content that students trust more than institutional brochures or advertisements. In contrast, education agents, though still used by more than half of the respondents, are no longer the dominant source of information.

6.1.4 Objective 4: To compare the impact of digital platforms, social networks, and education agents on decision-making

Quantitative analysis indicated that digital platforms had the highest perceived impact (mean score = 4.20), followed by personal networks (4.05), and then education agents (3.77). These results reinforce a global shift in how prospective students engage with information, moving toward a more independent, online, and socially networked approach (Zhai et al., 2019; Chen, 2016).

This trend has important implications: traditional recruitment methods that rely on education fairs and agents may become less effective over time. Universities must optimize their digital

presencethrough social media, search engine visibility, and authentic student testimonialsto engage prospective applicants.

6.1.5 Objective 5: To assess the degree of digital autonomy among international students during the decision-making process

The study revealed that a significant proportion of students exercised digital autonomy, conducting independent research before consulting agents or family. More than half relied primarily on digital content when making their decision.

This finding echoes broader trends in student behavior described by Schwartz (2023) and Zhai et al. (2019), who argue that international students increasingly adopt self-directed, tech-enabled pathways in exploring global education. The implication is clear: universities must not only maintain a strong online presence but also ensure that digital resources are trustworthy, user-friendly, and culturally sensitive.

6.2 Implications for Recruitment and Marketing

The findings of this study offer several important implications for how Chinese universities can enhance their recruitment and marketing strategies to attract international students more effectively. First, institutions should prioritize financial transparency and affordability in their communication, clearly highlighting scholarship opportunities, tuition costs, and living expenses to appeal to cost-conscious applicants. Second, there is a need to strategically leverage digital platforms by investing in search engine optimization (SEO), multilingual website content, student-generated video testimonials, and active engagement on social media channels, all of which directly influence digitally autonomous students. Third, outreach efforts should consider involving familiesparticularly in key markets such as Africa, South Asia, and the Middle Eastby producing culturally appropriate brochures or organizing webinars tailored to parents' concerns and expectations. Additionally, as the reliance on education agents declines, universities are encouraged to diversify their outreach strategies by developing direct digital marketing pipelines and reducing dependency on third-party intermediaries. Lastly, current students and alumni should be engaged as peer ambassadors to share authentic experiences, thereby enhancing trust and credibility through informal, student-to-student networks..

6.3 Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to the broader understanding of international student mobility by expanding the focus from institutional and internal push–pull factors to external and relational influences. It validates existing models while integrating contemporary factors such as digital autonomy and platform reliance. The results suggest a nuanced, networked, and digitally mediated model of decision-making, which may be applicable in other emerging host nations as well.

The discussion confirms that external factorsespecially financial concerns, family influence, social recommendations, and digital mediaplay a crucial role in shaping the decisions of international students considering China as a study destination. The increasing importance of self-researched digital content signals a paradigm shift in how international education is consumed and marketed. Universities in China must respond proactively by integrating digital-first, culturally responsive, and trust-building approaches into their recruitment strategies.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study set out to explore how external factors such as financial considerations, parental expectations, digital platforms, personal networks, and education agents shape the decision-making process of international students. A quantitative methodology was employed, involving 267 respondents from Guangxi University. The research aimed to provide insights that could inform more effective recruitment and marketing strategies for Chinese universities in an increasingly competitive global education environment.The findings confirm that financial concernsincluding scholarship availability and affordabilityare the most influential factors in shaping students' decisions to study in China. Perceived safety and political stability also emerged as key motivators. These results underscore the importance of economic and socio-political context in attracting international students, particularly those from developing regions. Equally significant is the role of recommendations from peers and relatives who have studied or lived in China, highlighting the importance of informal, social sources of influence.Parental expectations also proved to be a major factor, with over three-quarters of respondents reporting family support or involvement in their decision. This aligns with existing literature on the collectivist nature of decision-making in many sending countries, where education is viewed as a family investment rather than a purely individual pursuit. While education agents continue to play a role, their influence is now complementedif not overshadowedby more accessible and diversified digital sources.The study also found that students rely heavily on digital platforms, such as university websites, social media, and online communities, for information about studying in China. These platforms were rated as more influential than both education agents and personal networks. Furthermore, a large proportion of students displayed a high level of digital autonomy, engaging in self-directed online research and decision-making prior to consulting others. This reflects a broader shift toward digital independence among younger generations and confirms the need for institutions to optimize their online presence.

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed for Chinese universities and policymakers. First, institutions should enhance their digital visibility by investing in user-friendly, multilingual websites, virtual campus tours, and social media engagement. Digital content should be optimized for search engines and designed to reflect student-centered experiences. Second, financial informationespecially regarding scholarships, tuition, and living expensesshould be communicated clearly and transparently to build trust and reduce uncertainty among prospective students.Third, recruitment strategies should not overlook the significant influence of families. Creating parent-friendly informational materials and offering parent-focused webinars may help address their concerns and build support for students' choices. Fourth, current students and alumni should be engaged as ambassadors through peer-led marketing efforts, such as testimonial videos, blogs, and informal social media interactions. These authentic voices can bridge the trust gap often found in formal institutional communication. Fifth, while education agents still serve a functional role, their use should be refined. Universities should ensure that agents are accurately representing their programs and values and consider supplementing agent efforts with more direct outreach.For policymakers, there is an urgent need to promote a consistent national image of Chinese higher education. National branding efforts such as the "Study in China" initiative should be strengthened and better integrated across institutional marketing. Furthermore, support should be provided for digital innovation in universities to ensure that institutions, regardless of size or location, can

compete in the global student recruitment market.Despite the contributions of this study, there are limitations that should be acknowledged. The research was confined to a single institutionGuangxi Universitywhich may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported quantitative data, without qualitative validation, may restrict the depth of insight into students' lived experiences. To address these limitations, future research should include multi-site studies involving diverse Chinese institutions and consider using mixed-method approaches to capture both statistical trends and in-depth personal narratives.Future research could also explore how geopolitical dynamics and global media representations of China influence prospective students' perceptions. Another area for investigation is post-enrollment satisfaction and retention, which would offer a fuller picture of whether external expectations align with actual experiences. Moreover, understanding variations across student groupsby region, academic level, or field of studywould help tailor recruitment strategies more effectively.

Generally, this study highlights the importance of understanding external factorsparticularly financial concerns, family influence, digital platforms, and personal networksin shaping international students' decisions to study in China. The results suggest a growing trend toward digital autonomy, a decline in over-reliance on agents, and the increasing importance of peer validation in the decision-making process. For Chinese universities to remain competitive in attracting international talent, a shift toward culturally sensitive, digitally sophisticated, and socially engaged recruitment strategies is essential. By aligning institutional efforts with the real-world decision-making behaviorsof prospective students, China can enhance its standing as a global education hub.

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