Evaluating the Influence of University Reputation and Environment on Student University Choice: The Mediating Role of Satisfaction in Hebei Province, China

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of university reputation and environment on students' university choice in Hebei Province, China, with student satisfaction as a mediating variable. As higher education in China continues to expand and become more competitive, understanding the factors that influence student decision-making is crucial. A quantitative research design was employed, gathering data from a sample of 288 first-year students across several universities in Hebei Province. The results reveal that while the university environment does not directly affect university choice, it significantly influences student satisfaction, which in turn strongly impacts students' decisions. University reputation was found to have a direct and significant effect on both student satisfaction and university choice. These findings highlight the critical roles of university reputation and student satisfaction in shaping students' university choices, suggesting that universities should focus on enhancing their reputation and creating a supportive environment to attract and retain students. The study provides valuable insights for university administrators and policymakers aiming to improve recruitment and retention strategies in a competitive educational landscape.

Keywords: University Reputation, University Environment, Student Satisfaction, University Choice, Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

Higher education has become increasingly vital in shaping the economic and social landscapes of nations, particularly in rapidly developing economies like China (Mok, 2020). As the world transitions into a knowledge-based economy, the role of higher education institutions (HEIs) as incubators for innovation, technological advancement, and the cultivation of human capital has never been more critical (Zaidi et at., 2023). Globally, countries recognize that robust higher education systems are essential for sustaining long-term economic growth and fostering societal progress. In this context, the choices that students make regarding their higher education paths are significant not only for their personal and professional futures but also for the broader economic development of their regions and nations (Chandra et al., 2019).

In China, the higher education system has undergone profound changes since the late 20th century, particularly following the Reform and Opening-up policy initiated in 1978 (Shen & Zhang, 2022). This period marked a dramatic shift in China's approach to education, leading to an unprecedented expansion of its higher education sector. The gross enrollment rate in higher education in China surged from 30% in 2012 to 57.8% in 2021, reflecting the government's commitment to building a highly educated workforce capable of driving innovation and supporting industrial transformation (Gui & Alam, 2024). This expansion, while creating more opportunities for students, has also intensified competition among universities, both within China and internationally, as institutions strive to attract top talent and build strong academic reputations.

Hebei Province, located in northern China, is a microcosm of these national trends. The province is home to a diverse array of universities, ranging from well-established institutions with prestigious reputations to newer universities aiming to carve out their niches in an increasingly competitive educational landscape. The number of universities in China, including those in Hebei, has grown significantly, reaching 3,012 in 2021 according to the Ni (2023). This growth has provided students in Hebei Province with a wider range of choices, but it has also made the university selection process more complex and challenging.

In this competitive environment, factors such as university reputation and the university environment have become critical determinants in the decision-making process of prospective students. University reputation, which includes elements such as faculty quality, research output, alumni success, and performance in global rankings, plays a pivotal role in shaping the perceptions and choices of students (Uslu, 2020). A strong reputation not only attracts high-caliber students but also enhances the overall standing of the institution within the academic community and beyond (Emon et al., 2023). Similarly, the university environment, encompassing aspects such as campus life, extracurricular activities, and the quality of student support services, significantly influences student satisfaction, which in turn affects their ultimate choice of university (Kelejan ,2022). The importance of understanding these factors cannot be overstated, particularly in regions like Hebei Province, where the educational landscape is rapidly evolving. Despite the recognized significance of university reputation and environment, there is a noticeable gap in the research concerning their impact on student decision-making in China. Moreover, the mediating role of student satisfaction in this context remains underexplored, highlighting the need for a more nuanced understanding of the factors that drive student choices in the Chinese higher education system.

1.1 1.1 Problem Statement
The transition from high school to university represents a critical juncture in a student's life, characterized by significant decisions that can have long-lasting implications for their personal and professional development (Schreiner, 2020). Among these decisions, the choice of which university to attend is perhaps the most consequential. This choice is not merely an academic decision; it is a complex process influenced by a variety of factors, both tangible and intangible, that collectively shape a student's future trajectory. In the context of Hebei Province, where the higher education sector is expanding and becoming increasingly competitive, students face a myriad of challenges in navigating the university selection process.

The complexity of this decision-making process is exacerbated by the sheer number of available options and the diverse array of factors that must be considered. Tangible factors, such as the availability of specific academic programs, the quality of facilities, and the physical infrastructure of the university, are relatively straightforward to assess. However, intangible factors, such as the university's reputation and the overall university environment, play an equally, if not more, critical role in influencing student choices. University reputation, in particular, has been identified as a key determinant in the university selection process, encompassing a range of attributes including academic excellence, research capabilities, and the success of alumni (Khoshtaria , 2020). These attributes collectively contribute to the perceived value of the university in the eyes of prospective students and their families.

In addition to reputation, the university environment—comprising the quality of campus life, the availability of extracurricular opportunities, and the level of support services—plays a significant role in shaping student satisfaction. A positive university environment can enhance student satisfaction, which in turn can influence the final decision on university choice (Chandra, 2019; Santos, 2020). However, despite the importance of these factors, there is limited research specifically focusing on how university reputation and environment influence student decision-making in China, particularly in the context of Hebei Province. Furthermore, the mediating role of student satisfaction in this relationship remains underexplored, leaving a critical gap in the understanding of the university selection process in this region.

Given the rapid expansion of higher education in China and the increasing competition among universities, there is an urgent need to investigate the factors that most significantly influence students' university choices. This

study seeks to address this need by examining the impact of university reputation and environment on students' decisions to attend specific universities in Hebei Province, with a particular focus on the mediating role of student satisfaction. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for universities as they seek to attract and retain students in a highly competitive market. Additionally, insights from this study could inform policy decisions and marketing strategies aimed at enhancing the appeal of universities in Hebei and similar regions.

1.2 1.2 Significance of the Study

This study holds significant implications for various stakeholders within the higher education sector, including university administrators, policymakers, and students themselves. For university administrators, especially in Hebei Province, understanding the factors that influence student decision-making is essential for developing effective recruitment and marketing strategies. In a competitive environment where universities must differentiate themselves to attract high-caliber students, insights from this study can guide institutions in enhancing their reputation and improving the university environment they offer.

For policymakers, the findings of this study can inform the development of strategies and policies that support student decision-making. As higher education plays a pivotal role in fostering economic and social development, it is crucial that students can make informed choices that align with their personal and professional aspirations (Cheah, 2023). By understanding the factors that drive university choice, policymakers can design interventions that enhance the overall quality and accessibility of higher education in China (Tratnik, 2019).

Finally, for students and their families, this study offers valuable insights into the university selection process (Ifenthaler & Yau, 2020). In a rapidly changing and increasingly competitive higher education landscape, making an informed decision about where to pursue higher education is critical. By shedding light on the impact of university reputation and environment, and the role of student satisfaction, this study can help students make choices that will positively influence their academic and professional futures.

Hence, this study aims to explore the impact of university reputation and environment on student decision-making in Hebei Province, China, with student satisfaction as a mediating factor. By doing so, it contributes to the broader understanding of higher education in China and provides practical insights for stakeholders involved in the sector. As the higher education system continues to evolve, understanding the factors that influence student choice will be crucial in ensuring that the sector remains competitive and responsive to the needs of students.

1.3 1.3 Research Question

RQ1: What is the impact of university reputation on students' university choice among students in Hebei Province, China?

RQ2: What is the impact of university environment on students' university choice among students in Hebei Province, China?

RQ3: What is the mediating role of student satisfaction between the relationship of university reputation, university environments and development, and student's university choice among students in Hebei Province, China?

RQ4: What is the impact of student satisfaction on student's university's choice among students in Hebei Province, China?

2. 2.0 Literature Review

The existing literature underscores the complex and interrelated nature of university reputation, environment, student satisfaction, and university choice in higher education. University reputation is a key factor in attracting students, often serving as a proxy for the institution's quality in education, research, and career prospects. This reputation is shaped by both academic achievements and the social and cultural environment, influencing student perceptions and decisions. Similarly, the university environment plays a crucial role in shaping the student experience, where a positive and supportive environment enhances satisfaction, aiding in student retention and attracting new students. Student satisfaction is a pivotal mediating variable, linking university reputation and environment to the final decision of university choice. Satisfied students are more likely to remain at their chosen

institution and influence future students through positive recommendations. This highlights the importance for universities to focus on the holistic development of students, meeting both academic and non-academic needs. The decision-making process for university choice is influenced by these factors, where students weigh the perceived benefits against costs and alternatives. While reputation and environment shape initial perceptions, the final choice is often mediated by overall satisfaction. This suggests that universities need to adopt a comprehensive approach that addresses all aspects of the student experience. Overall, the literature provides a strong foundation for understanding the factors influencing student's university choice in Hebei Province, guiding universities in enhancing their reputation, environment, and focus on student satisfaction to attract and retain students in a competitive landscape.

2.1 2.1 University Reputation

University reputation has long been recognized as a significant determinant of students' university choice. Reputation is often built over time, influenced by factors such as academic excellence, research output, faculty quality, and alumni success. A university's reputation serves as an indicator of its perceived value, not only to students but also to employers, policymakers, and the broader academic community. In the context of Hebei Province, China, where competition among universities is intensifying, reputation plays a critical role in attracting high-caliber students. Reputation is often measured by global rankings, which evaluate universities based on various metrics, including academic performance, research impact, and internationalization (Lewicka, 2022). These rankings influence prospective students' perceptions, guiding their decision-making process. For students in Hebei Province, a university's standing in such rankings can be a decisive factor, particularly when considering the long-term implications for career prospects and social mobility. Moreover, the reputation of a university is not solely dependent on its academic prowess (Stack, 2020). The social environment, including the diversity of the student body, inclusivity, and campus culture, also contributes significantly to how a university is perceived. A university that is known for fostering a supportive and engaging social environment is likely to be more attractive to students who value a holistic educational experience that extends beyond academic achievements (Cachón-Rodríguez et al., 2021). This is particularly relevant in a region like Hebei, where universities are striving to enhance their appeal in a competitive market.

2.2 2.2 University Environment

The university environment encompasses a wide range of factors that influence a student's overall experience. These factors include the physical infrastructure, quality of campus facilities, availability of extracurricular activities, and the general atmosphere of the institution. A positive university environment can significantly enhance student satisfaction, which in turn influences their decision to enroll (Chandra, 2019). In Hebei Province, as in other regions, the university environment is a crucial consideration for students. Modern infrastructure, such as state-of-the-art laboratories, libraries, and recreational facilities, contributes to a conducive learning environment. Moreover, the availability of extracurricular activities, including student organizations, clubs, and leadership opportunities, plays a significant role in personal development and can be a determining factor for students when choosing a university (Smolíková, 2021). The learning environment also includes the quality of teaching, and the level of support provided by the institution. Universities that prioritize high-quality teaching, provide ample support services, and create an inclusive environment are likely to see higher levels of student satisfaction (Zhang, 2019). This satisfaction is crucial for retaining students and ensuring their success. In a competitive educational landscape, universities in Hebei Province must focus on enhancing their environments to attract and retain top students.

2.3 2.2 Student Satisfaction

Student satisfaction is a critical mediating variable in the relationship between university reputation, environment, and students' university choice. Satisfaction encompasses various aspects of the student experience, including academic quality, social life, support services, and the overall campus environment. Satisfied students are more likely to remain at their chosen university, perform better academically, and recommend the institution to others (Chandra, 2019). In the context of Hebei Province, understanding the drivers of student satisfaction is essential for universities aiming to improve their recruitment and retention strategies. Research has shown that students' satisfaction with their university experience is influenced by both the tangible aspects of the institution, such as

facilities and resources, and intangible factors, such as the quality of social interactions and the sense of community on campus (Venkateswarlu et al., 2020). Moreover, in a highly competitive environment, student satisfaction can be a key differentiator that influences university choice. Student satisfaction also plays a crucial role in mediating the impact of university reputation and environment on university choice. A university with a strong reputation and a positive environment is likely to generate higher levels of student satisfaction, which in turn increases the likelihood that students will choose to attend that university (Pedler, 2022). This mediating effect underscores the importance of creating a supportive and engaging environment that meets the needs and expectations of students.

2.4 2.3 Student's University Choice

The decision-making process for university choice is complex and multifaceted. Students weigh a variety of factors, including academic reputation, environment, financial considerations, and personal preferences. The literature on university choice highlights the importance of understanding the factors that influence students' decisions, particularly in regions like Hebei Province, where the higher education landscape is rapidly evolving. University choice is often influenced by the perceived value of the institution, which is shaped by its reputation and the quality of its environment. Students are more likely to choose a university that is perceived to offer a high-quality education, excellent career prospects, and a supportive environment. Additionally, the availability of financial aid, scholarships, and other forms of support can also play a significant role in the decision-making process (Dominic et al., 2021).

In Hebei Province, where universities are competing for top students, understanding the factors that influence university choice is critical. By focusing on enhancing their reputation and environment, universities can improve student satisfaction, which in turn influences students' university choice. This relationship underscores the interconnectedness of these variables and the importance of adopting a holistic approach to university management and marketing.
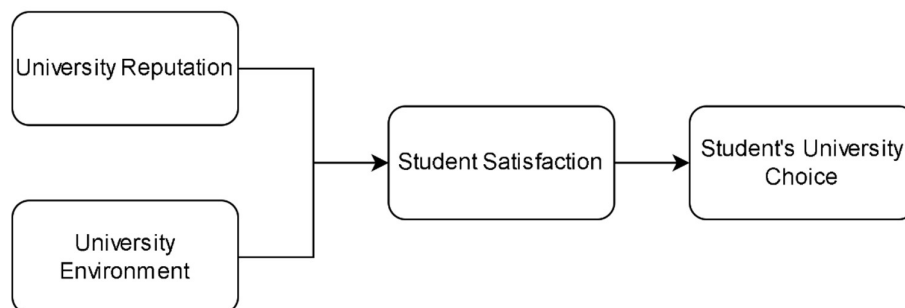
2.5 2.4 Research Framework

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

3. 3.0 Methodology

A quantitative research design was deemed suitable for this study due to its ability to quantify relationships between variables and test hypotheses systematically (Sürücü, 2020). Quantitative research methods are particularly effective in studies like this one, which seek to examine the relationships between multiple variables—university reputation, university environment, student satisfaction, and students' university choice. By employing a deductive approach, this study tests existing theories and hypotheses regarding the factors influencing students' university choice. The study uses a correlational research design, which allows for the examination of relationships between the independent variables (university reputation and university environment) and the dependent variable (students' university choice), with student satisfaction as a mediator. This design is appropriate because it enables the identification of associations between variables without manipulating them, thus providing insights into how these factors interact in real-world settings.

The population targeted in this study comprises first-year students enrolled in bachelor's degree programs at provincial universities in Shijiazhuang City, the capital of Hebei Province. The universities selected for this study

include Hebei University of Economics and Business, Hebei Normal University, and Shijiazhuang Tiedao University. These institutions were chosen due to their diverse academic offerings and their significance within the provincial higher education landscape. Together, they represent a wide spectrum of academic disciplines, ensuring that the study's findings are applicable across different fields of study within the province. The total population of first-year students in these universities is approximately 2,994. To ensure the representativeness of the sample, proportional stratified random sampling was employed. This method ensures that each university's proportion in the sample reflects its proportion in the population, thereby enhancing the generalizability of the study's findings.

The sample size for this study was determined using the G*Power software, which is widely recognized for its accuracy in calculating the required sample size for various statistical analyses. The parameters set for this calculation included a medium effect size ($f2 = 0.15$), an alpha error probability of 0.05, and a power level of 0.95. These settings are standard for social science research and ensure that the sample size is sufficient to detect meaningful effects in the data. Based on these parameters, the minimum sample size required was calculated to be 153 participants. However, to enhance the robustness of the study, the Raosoft Sample Size Calculator was also used, which suggested a sample size of 341 participants for a 95% confidence level. By selecting the higher recommended sample size, the study ensures greater statistical power and accuracy, ultimately enhancing the validity of the research findings.\

Data for this study was collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to the selected sample of first-year students. The questionnaire was designed using a 5-point Likert scale, which is effective for capturing respondents' attitudes and perceptions across a range of variables. The questionnaire was divided into several sections, each corresponding to the key variables in the study: university reputation, university environment, student satisfaction, and university choice. The data collection process was conducted online using Google Forms, which provided a secure and efficient means of gathering responses. Online surveys were chosen due to their convenience, cost-effectiveness, and the ability to reach many respondents quickly. Participants were assured of their anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses, which encouraged honest and accurate reporting. To maximize response rates, the survey was open for a period of one month, during which participants were sent reminders to complete the questionnaire. The data collection process yielded 341 completed responses, which were then subjected to data cleaning to remove any incomplete or invalid entries, resulting in 288 usable responses.

The collected data was analyzed using a combination of IBM SPSS 26.0 and SmartPLS 4 software. The analysis followed a four-step process, beginning with descriptive statistics to summarize the demographic characteristics of the sample and the distribution of responses across the variables. This was followed by correlation analysis to identify the relationships between the variables. Next, the study conducted normality tests and Multicollinearity Statistics (Variance Inflation Factor, VIF) to ensure that the data met the assumptions required for regression analysis. Hierarchical regression analysis was then used to test the study's hypotheses, specifically examining the mediating role of student satisfaction in the relationship between university reputation, environment, and university choice. The use of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with SmartPLS 4 allowed for a more sophisticated analysis of the relationships between the variables, including the direct and indirect effects. SEM is particularly useful in studies involving multiple variables and complex relationships, as it can simultaneously estimate multiple regression equations. This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of how university reputation and environment influence students' university choice through the mediating effect of student satisfaction.

4. 4.0 Findings
The unit of analysis in this study was first year students enrolled in social science programs in Hebei Province, China. Three demographic items were included in the questionnaire: gender, age, and family income.

4.1 4.1 Demographics of Respondents

Table 1: Respondent's Demographic Table

Variable	Level	Frequency	Valid Percent
Gender	Male	208	52
	Female	192	48
Age	18	117	29
	19	126	31
	20	157	40
Family Income	$5000 or less	95	23
	$5000- $10,000	124	31
	$10,000 or more	181	46

Table 1 shows a near-even gender distribution, with males at 52% and females at 48%. Most respondents are aged 18-20, and family income varies, with 46% reporting $10,000 or more.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Constructs

Construct	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Student's University Choice	4.294	0.721	0.85
Student Satisfaction	4.779	0.713	0.728
University Environment	4.051	0.880	0.624
University Reputation	4.742	0.757	0.958

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics, indicating generally positive perceptions across constructs: student satisfaction scored the highest (mean = 4.779), followed by university reputation (mean = 4.742), university choice (mean = 4.294), and university environment (mean = 4.051). The data suggest strong overall satisfaction, with some variability, particularly in perceptions of the university environment.

4.2 4.2 Multicollinearity Test

The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) statistic is utilized to assess multicollinearity in the indicators, as recommended by Fornell and Bookstein (1982). According to Hair et al. (2016), multicollinearity is generally not a serious concern if the VIF value is below 5. Table 3 presents the VIF values for the indicators in this study, and all values are well below the recommended threshold, indicating that multicollinearity is not an issue. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) can be a powerful method for analyzing relationships among variables, even when there is multicollinearity among predictor variables. However, when predictors are highly interdependent, multicollinearity can lead to poor and misleading model results, with biased standard errors and coefficient estimates. High correlations among predictors, typically a correlation coefficient above 0.5, indicate significant multicollinearity (Garson, 2008). In this study, the correlation coefficients among all variables were examined and found to be less than 0.8, further confirming that multicollinearity is not a problem. Additionally, using SmartPLS 4, the VIF values were calculated, and all were found to be below 4, reinforcing that multicollinearity is within acceptable limits.

Table 3: Multicollinearity Statistics (VIF) for indicators

	VIF
SUC1	2.436
SUC2	2.224
SUC3	1.982
SUC4	2.476
SUC5	1.772

SUC6	1.228
EN1	1.830
EN2	2.260
EN3	2.459
EN4	1.826
EN5	1.956
EN6	1.853
SS1	3.145
SS2	1.753
SS3	1.576
SS4	2.171
SS5	1.584
SS6	1.649
UR1	1.798
UR2	1.698
UR3	2.360
UR4	1.844
UR5	1.148
UR6	1.934

4.3 4.3 Reliability Test

The reliability analysis shows strong internal consistency across all constructs. Student's University Choice (SUC), University Environment (EN), Student Satisfaction (SS), and University Reputation (UR) all have high Cronbach's Alpha values (ranging from 0.874 to 0.925), indicating good to excellent reliability. Composite Reliability values are also high, confirming the consistency of these constructs. The AVE values, all above 0.6, suggest that a substantial portion of variance is captured by the indicators, affirming the robustness of the measurement model used in this study.

Table 4: Construct Reliability Analysis (Cronbach Alpha and Composite Reliability)

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
SUC	0.905	0.905	0.927	0.678
EN	0.874	0.888	0.904	0.611
SS	0.925	0.926	0.941	0.727
UR	0.880	0.881	0.909	0.625

4.4 4.4 Discriminant Validity

Table 5 presents the discriminant validity of the constructs using the Fornell-Larcker criterion. Discriminant validity is established when the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct (shown on the diagonal) is greater than the correlations between the constructs (off-diagonal values). In this table, the square roots of the AVE values are as follows: SUC (0.823), EN (0.782), SS (0.853), and UR (0.791). Each of these values is greater than the corresponding off-diagonal correlations, indicating that each construct is distinct from the others. This confirms that the constructs in the study—Student's University Choice (SUC), University Environment (EN), Student Satisfaction (SS), and University Reputation (UR)—exhibit good discriminant validity, meaning they are measuring different underlying concepts effectively.

Table 5: Discriminant Validity- Fornell & Larcker Criterion

	SUC	EN	SS	UR
SUC	**0.823**			
EN	0.222	**0.782**		
SS	0.706	0.323	**0.853**	
UR	0.654	0.336	0.537	**0.791**

4.5 4.5 Path Coefficient Result

The path coefficients analysis in Table 6 reveals several key relationships. University Environment (EN) does not directly influence Student's University Choice (SUC), as indicated by a non-significant path (p-value of 0.654), but it has a significant positive effect on Student Satisfaction (SS) with a p-value of 0.000. This suggests that while the environment may not directly drive university choice, it enhances student satisfaction, which in turn plays a crucial role in decision-making. Student Satisfaction (SS) strongly influences Student's University Choice (SUC), with a highly significant path (p-value of 0.000), highlighting that satisfied students are more likely to choose a university. Additionally, University Reputation (UR) significantly impacts both Student Satisfaction (SS) and Student's University Choice (SUC), with p-values of 0.000 in both paths, underscoring the importance of reputation in attracting and retaining students. Overall, the results demonstrate that while the university environment indirectly affects university choice through satisfaction, reputation and satisfaction are the most direct and influential factors in students' decisions.

Table 6: Path Coefficients

Path	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
EN -> SUC	-0.015	0.029	0.448	0.654
EN -> SS	0.134	0.032	4.073	0.000
SS -> SUC	0.431	0.033	13.107	0.000
UR -> SUC	0.300	0.041	7.146	0.000
UR -> SS	0.496	0.039	12.732	0.000

5. 5.0 Results

Table 7: Hypothesis Testing Result

Hypothesis	Path	Result
H1: University Environment has a significant impact on Decision on University Choice to Study.	EN--------> SUC	Not Supported
H2: University Reputation has a significant impact on Decision on University Choice to Study.	UR---------> SUC	Supported
H3: Environments has a significant impact Student Satisfaction	EN-----------> SS	Supported

H4: University Reputation has a significant impact on Student Satisfaction.	UR----------> SS	Supported
H5: Student satisfaction has a significant impact on Decision on University Choice to Study.	SS----------> SUC	Supported
H6: Student Satisfaction mediates the relationship between University Environment and Decision on University Choice to Study.	EN-->SS--> SUC	Supported
H7: Student Satisfaction mediates the relationship between University Reputation and Decision on University Choice to Study.	UR-->SS--> SUC	Supported

The hypothesis testing results provide critical insights into the relationships among university environment, university reputation, student satisfaction, and students' decisions regarding their university choice. Starting with the hypothesis that University Environment has a significant impact on students' Decision on University Choice to Study (H1), the analysis revealed that this direct relationship was not supported by the data. This finding suggests that while the university environment is undoubtedly important, it does not directly influence students' choice of university. Instead, its impact may be more indirect, influencing other factors such as student satisfaction, which subsequently affects university choice. In contrast, the hypothesis 2 was supported. This confirms that a strong university reputation, often linked to academic excellence, research output, and successful alumni, plays a crucial role in attracting students. Students are more likely to choose a university that is well-regarded and perceived as prestigious, highlighting the importance of reputation in the competitive higher education landscape.

The study also supported the hypothesis that University Environment has a significant impact on Student Satisfaction (H3). This indicates that a positive and supportive university environment significantly enhances student satisfaction. Factors such as campus facilities, extracurricular activities, and overall campus life contribute to students feeling satisfied with their university experience, which is essential for both student retention and academic success. Similarly, the hypothesis 4 was also supported. This finding underscores the importance of reputation not only in attracting students but also in ensuring they are satisfied with their choice. A reputable university tends to provide a more fulfilling and enriching experience, which in turn boosts student satisfaction. Furthermore, the study confirmed that Student Satisfaction has a significant impact on students' Decision on University Choice to Study (H5). This highlights that student satisfaction is a crucial determinant in university choice. Satisfied students are more likely to remain at their chosen institution and positively influence the decisions of future students through word-of-mouth recommendations.

The role of student satisfaction as a mediating variable was also validated. The hypothesis that Student Satisfaction mediates the relationship between University Environment and Decision on University Choice to Study (H6) was supported, indicating that while the university environment may not directly influence university choice, it does so indirectly through its impact on student satisfaction. This mediation effect highlights the importance of creating a supportive and engaging environment to foster satisfaction, which then leads to a higher likelihood of students choosing that university. Finally, the hypothesis that Student Satisfaction mediates the relationship between University Reputation and Decision on University Choice to Study (H7) was supported. This finding confirms that a university's strong reputation enhances student satisfaction, which in turn positively influences their decision to attend the institution. It demonstrates the interconnectedness of these variables, where both reputation and environment work through student satisfaction to affect university choice.

In summary, these findings emphasize the significant roles of university reputation and student satisfaction in influencing students' decisions about where to study. While the university environment does not directly impact university choice, its influence on satisfaction is crucial. Universities aiming to attract and retain students should

focus on building a strong reputation and ensuring high levels of student satisfaction through a positive environment and comprehensive support services.

6. 6.0 Conclusion

This study has provided a comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing students' university choices in Hebei Province, China, with a particular focus on the roles of university reputation, university environment, and student satisfaction. The findings reveal that university reputation and student satisfaction are the most critical determinants in students' decision-making processes. While the university environment itself does not directly impact the choice of university, it significantly enhances student satisfaction, which in turn strongly influences the final decision.

University reputation was found to have a direct and positive effect on both student satisfaction and university choice. This highlights the importance of maintaining and improving the perceived value of an institution, not only in terms of academic excellence and research output but also in the broader social and cultural contexts that contribute to a university's standing. A strong reputation attracts students by signaling quality and future success, which are crucial in a highly competitive educational landscape.

Student satisfaction emerged as a pivotal mediating variable, linking both the university environment and reputation to the ultimate choice of university. The results underscore the necessity for universities to foster a positive and supportive environment that meets students' academic and non-academic needs. This holistic approach to student experience not only boosts satisfaction but also encourages students to select and remain at a university, which can further enhance the institution's reputation through positive word-of-mouth and alumni success.

In conclusion, universities in Hebei Province, and by extension, in similar regions, should focus on strategies that enhance both their reputation and the quality of the student experience. By doing so, they can significantly increase student satisfaction, which is a key driver of university choice. The findings of this study offer valuable insights for university administrators and policymakers aiming to attract and retain students in an increasingly competitive higher education environment. These insights also contribute to the broader understanding of the factors that shape student decision-making in the context of China's rapidly evolving higher education system.

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