Research Article

Decision to Choose a Private University of New Students in Ho Chi Minh City

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The total number of university admission wishes that candidates nationwide register for each year is always over 3 million wishes, but in almost no year in the period of 2021 - 2024, the enrollment target is not enough to meet the number of registrations. The decrease in the number of candidates participating in university admission not only affects the human resources for society but also makes it difficult for schools to maintain operations and develop. With qualitative and quantitative research methods, it is convenient to survey 224 new students of universities: Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology, Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance, Hoa Sen University, Van Lang University. The results of testing using PLS Smart SEM software show that the factors of Geographical location, Communication, Support, Tuition, Internship opportunities, Brand, Personal characteristics have an impact on the decision to choose a school through the intermediary factor of Trust. From there, some management implications are proposed for managers of private universities in Ho Chi Minh City to achieve high efficiency in enrollment activities. **Keywords:** decision, new student, choose a private universities, ho chi minh city.

INTRODUCTION

Admissions situation of non-public universities in Ho Chi Minh City for the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 school years. According to statistics, in 2023, the number of candidates taking the national high school graduation exam will be only about 900,000 candidates, a decrease of 15% compared to 2022 (Nguyen et al., 2023; Tran et al., 2023). The Ministry of Education and Training announced that as of 5:00 p.m. on July 30, 2024, when the university admissions portal closed, more than 733,000 candidates had submitted applications, an increase of 73,000 compared to last year. Le Nguyen (2024) In fact, about 1/3 of university entrance candidates fail to be admitted. Therefore, private universities in Ho Chi Minh City must compete fiercely with public and international universities to attract students. Universities not only need specific policies and programs to increase their competitiveness in attracting new students, but also need to improve training quality, expand cooperation, and develop sustainably.

To overcome these challenges, universities need to be flexible, creative and cooperative in developing and implementing admission policies and measures suitable to the new situation. The novelty of the study is the mediating factor Trust affecting the decision to choose a school of new students as well as using PLS Smart SEM software to test the model and research hypotheses, measuring the level of influence of factors affecting the decision to choose a private university of new Vietnamese students in the new normal period through evaluating the Outcome Measurement Model and measuring the Structural Model.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Private University

Universities in Vietnam under the national education system are organized into the following types: public universities, private universities, private universities, 100% foreign-owned universities operating under the Charter

of Vietnamese universities (According to Article 7, Law on Higher Education 2018). In general, private universities are schools established by individuals and organizations and operate under their own mechanisms and mainly operate on tuition fees collected from students and investors. In Ho Chi Minh City, there are currently the following universities: Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology, Saigon University of Technology, Hong Bang International University, Hung Vuong University of Economics and Finance, University of Foreign Languages and Information Technology, Nguyen Tat Thanh University, Van Hien University, Van Lang University, Hoa Sen University, Saigon International University, RMIT University, FPT University..

New student

Freshmen are those who have graduated from high school or are candidates who have passed the first-year entrance exam at many universities across Vietnam. Students are individuals who are studying and doing scientific research at higher education institutions, pursuing higher education programs, including college and university programs (Article 59-Law on Higher Education, 2018). In fact, students are part of the university's product, not the final customer. This will also be a great pressure on universities, managers must identify the main factors that influence students' decision to choose a school to attract new students to the school.

Students - Customers of the University

After graduating from high school, if students want to go to university, they will find out information about the university such as the school's location, admission scores, majors, tuition fees, facilities, teaching staff, etc. through the media and relatives. Next, they will evaluate the above information based on their own conditions and desires to make a decision on which school to enroll in. After a period of training at the school, they will evaluate whether they are satisfied or not satisfied with that university. In fact, students are part of the university's product, not the end customer. However, when considering the aspect of the decision-making process in choosing a school to study, students are also customers of the university.

Decision to choose University

Choosing a college is a complex process. Kotler et al. (2005) emphasize that it involves a series of consecutive activities from identifying needs, personal motivations, to collecting information, evaluating options, and finally making a decision. The concern is not only about interests or aspirations, but also about financial ability, as Nguyen (2018) points out, when high school students choose a college, they need to consider these factors. In particular, Nguyen (2021) adds that the decision to choose a college is also the result of analyzing, processing information from various sources and comparing educational institutions. Therefore, choosing a college is not only about meeting students' learning and experience needs, but also about combining students' expectations with the criteria that the college can meet, creating a foundation for thoughtful and long-term choices.

3-stage university admission process

In his study "A Model of College Choice," Chapman (1981) identified five major factors influencing college choice decisions: student communication efforts, cost, influence of others, and student abilities and preferences. Accordingly, both intrinsic factors (related to family and student) and extrinsic factors (characteristics and communication efforts of the school) have a major impact on students' decisions. Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) divided the college choice process into three stages: orientation (including socioeconomic and educational attitudes), search (information from the school and family achievements), and decision making (quality of the school). Burns (2006) tested this model at a school in the United States, confirming the influence of the above factors.

Related research projects

Ming (2010) proposed factors influencing Malaysian students' university choice. The research results showed that university choice is influenced by "Standard University Characteristics Group", which includes location, educational programs, reputation, facilities, tuition fees, financial aid, employment opportunities and "Student Communication Effort Group", which includes advertising, admissions representatives, interaction with secondary schools and campus tours.

Nguyen et al. (2011) identified seven factors influencing students' choice of Ho Chi Minh City Open University, including efforts to provide information to high school graduates, quality of teaching and learning, students' personal characteristics, future career prospects, ability to graduate, family influence, and extra-family influence.

Le et al. (2014) synthesized groups of factors influencing students' choice of additional courses at Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology, including benchmarks, reputation, communication, location, facilities, lecturers, tuition fees, and support. The analysis showed that benchmarks were excluded from the formal theoretical model.

Le et al. (2018) surveyed "Decisions to choose Business Administration students in 2018-2019 at private universities in Vietnam" and considered direct investigation factors, including location, facilities, tuition and policies, reputation, attractiveness of the program, communication and personal characteristics. Among these factors, communication was the most influential factor in this decision.

Factors influencing student choice in the private higher education sector in Kurdistan-Iraq were studied by Qasim et al. (2020) through a survey design with a self-developed questionnaire, which was sent to first-year students at private universities. Through a survey sample of 518 students and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), the results indicated that the university characteristics that had the greatest impact on students' decisions were reputation/accreditation, teaching quality, employability, and facilities, consistent with existing literature. In contrast, tuition fees were not a significant factor. Therefore, the study suggests that universities should consider increasing tuition fees and using additional revenue to enhance reputation, teaching quality, and accreditation, while strengthening relationships with local employers.

Do (2021) identified and measured the main factors influencing high school students' decisions to choose a university. The research model included independent variables belonging to three main groups of factors: (1) student factors, including views on higher education, school choice, and career choice; (2) environmental factors, such as advice from others; (3) school factors, including tuition fees, curriculum, employment opportunities after graduation, school reputation, extracurricular activities, facilities, and alumni network.

Mai (2022) conducted a study to determine the factors influencing the decision to choose a university of high school students in Da Nang city. The scope of the study mainly focused on high school students in Da Nang city, especially grade 12 students. Students are influenced by many factors when deciding to choose a school, which may include fixed characteristics of the school such as reputation, training quality, facilities; their own ability to recruit students; suitable tuition fees or influence from relatives. The research results show that the influencing factors are arranged in order from high to low as tuition fees, training quality, opportunities for advancement in learning, future employment and the school's ability to recruit students.

Conducted at seven private universities in Dhaka, Emon et al.'s (2023) study found that students' university choice decisions were significantly influenced by family monthly income, tuition fees, outside employment opportunities, parental income, transportation costs, program availability, academic reputation, rankings, financial aid, and international recognition. In addition, factors such as personal preferences, parental opinions, location, surrounding amenities, on- and off-campus facilities, and security also played essential roles.

Identifying factors influencing the decision to choose a school is very important for educational institutions. Through the analysis of documents, the author points out three basic steps: from post-secondary orientation, to considering potential schools and analyzing to decide to choose a specific school. Notably, eight prominent factors such as reputation, school characteristics, media, consulting opinions, geographical location, training programs, tuition fees, personal characteristics and job opportunities (Nguyen Van Canh, 2023).

Factors influencing high school students' decision to choose a university include many different factors, ranging from financial aspects, academic reputation, employment opportunities to opinions from family and friends. The theoretical models reviewed above are the foundation for developing a practical model in this study, which aims to deeply analyze how these factors influence and guide students in their decision-making process regarding choosing a university. These models not only provide a theoretical basis but also facilitate flexible application to real-life situations, making the study more applicable in assessing and supporting students' learning decisions.

RESEARCH METHODS

Qualitative research methods

The qualitative research aims to find out information about factors affecting the decision to choose a private university of new students of private universities in Ho Chi Minh City. The author has researched and consulted domestic and foreign research models to build a research model. The qualitative research process is mainly conducted through interviews with 10 experts in the field of University Management. The purpose of this process is to review

and evaluate the suitability of factors affecting the decision to choose a private university of new students of private universities in Ho Chi Minh City in the new normal period. Synthesize the opinions of the members and come to a consensus on the research model including the factors: Geographical location, Communication, Support, School Fees, Job Opportunity, University Brand, Personal Characteristics, which influence the Decision to choose a university through the intermediary factor of Trust, which has a direct and indirect impact on the decision to choose a school of new students of private universities in Ho Chi Minh City.

Quantitative research methods

Quantitative research was conducted through data collected from questionnaires distributed directly to new students. The questions were measured based on a 5-level Likert scale. The research was conducted from November 1, 2024 to November 30, 2024 with 240 survey forms. The collected data was 224 valid forms. Primary data was processed using PLS Smart SEM software to test the model and research hypotheses, measuring the level of influence of factors affecting the decision to choose a school of new students of private universities in Ho Chi Minh City in the new normal period through two steps:

- Step 1_ Evaluate the outcome measurement model with values: *Outer Loadings, Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability, AVE, Discriminant*

- Step 2_ Measure the structural model with values: *VIF, Original sample, P-value, R^2, f^2*

RESEARCH MODEL AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

Research model

Through studying the theoretical basis and related research works of domestic and foreign authors, the group of authors has inherited and developed previous research topics of authors Chapman (1981), Cabrera and La Nasa (2000), Burns (2006), Ming (2010), Nguyen et al. (2011), Le et al. (2014, 2018), Qasim et al. (2020), Do (2021), Mai (2022), Nguyen (2023), Emon et al. (2023); Wihardjo et al., 2024 to build a model affecting the decision to choose a private university of new students in Vietnam. Factors such as Geographical location (ULO), Communication (UCOM), Support (USUP), School Fees (UFEE), Job Opportunity (UJOB), University Brand (UBRA), Personal Characteristics (SCHA) have an impact on the Decision to choose a university (SDEC) through the intermediary factor of Trust (STRU). The research model shows that the higher the new students' Confidence, the greater the possibility of deciding to choose a school. In the model, the Confidence factor is the mediating variable and Brand has a direct impact on the Confidence factor and the decision to choose a school of Vietnamese new students.
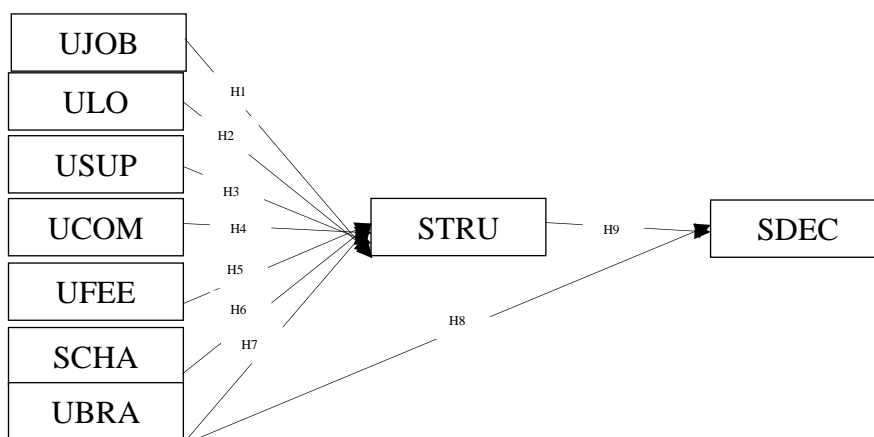

Figure 3: Proposed research model

Hypothesis's research

H1: Job Opportunity has a positive (+) impact on New Student's Trust.

H2: Geographic location has a positive (+) impact on New Student's Trust.

H3: Support has a positive (+) impact on New Student's Trust.

H4: Communication a has a positive (+) impact on New Student's Trust.

H5: School Fees have a positive (+) impact on New Student's Trust.

H6: University Brand has a positive (+) impact on the Decision to choose a university of new student.

H7: University Brand has a positive (+) impact on New Student's Trust.

H8: Personal Characteristics have a positive (+) impact on the Decision to choose a university of new student.

H9: New Student's Trust has a positive (+) impact on the Decision to choose a university of new student.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Evaluation of the results measurement model

The first analysis shows that the observed variable USUP3 has an external loading value < 0,708 and the factor UFEE is eliminated because the correlation coefficient with the factor STRU is too small = 0,018, hypothesis H5 is eliminated. The second analysis gives the following results:
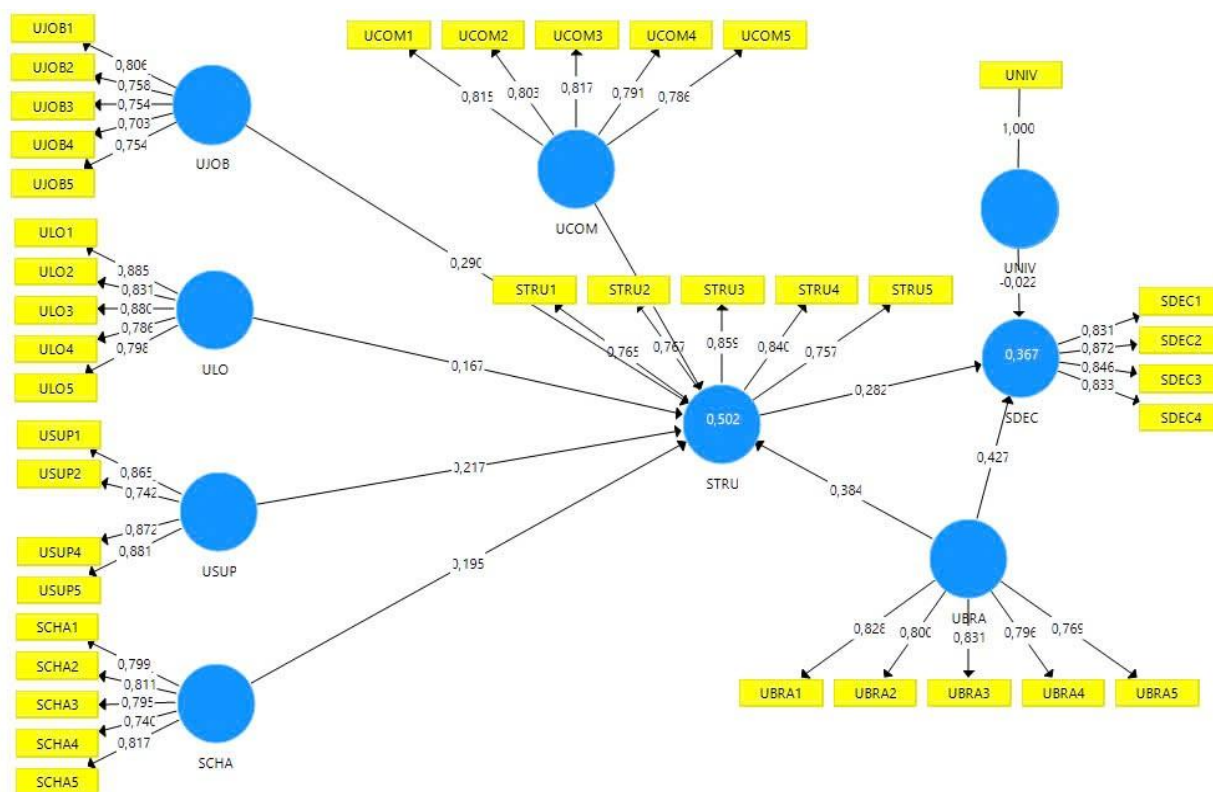
Figure 1: Measurement model results chart

- **Outer loading**

Bảng 1: Outer loading

	SCHA	SDEC	STRU	UBRA	UCOM	UJOB	ULO	USUP
SCHA1	0,799							
SCHA2	0,811							
SCHA3	0,795							
SCHA4	0,740							
SCHA5	0,817							
SDEC1		0,831						
SDEC2		0,872						
SDEC3		0,846						
SDEC4		0,833						

STRU1			0,765				
STRU2			0,767				
STRU3			0,859				
STRU4			0,840				
STRU5			0,757				
UBRA1				0,828			
UBRA2				0,800			
UBRA3				0,831			
UBRA4				0,796			
UBRA5				0,769			
UCOM1					0,815		
UCOM2					0,803		
UCOM3					0,817		
UCOM4					0,791		
UCOM5					0,786		
UJOB1						0,806	
UJOB2						0,758	
UJOB3						0,754	
UJOB4						0,703	
UJOB5						0,754	
ULO1							0,885
ULO2							0,831
ULO3							0,880
ULO4							0,786
ULO5							0,798
USUP1							0,865
USUP2							0,742
USUP4							0,872
USUP5							0,881

Source: Author's data analysis

Table 1 shows that all outer loadings of observed variables are > 0,708. This shows that the level of association between observed variables and latent variables is high and the latent variables explain 50% of the variation of observed variables, so reliability is acceptable (Hair et al., 2014).

- **Scale reliability and Average Variance Extracted (AVE)**
  Table 2: Assessment of scale reliability and AVE

	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
SCHA	0,853	0,894	0,628
SDEC	0,867	0,909	0,715
STRU	0,858	0,898	0,638
UBRA	0,864	0,902	0,648
UCOM	0,862	0,900	0,644
UJOB	0,814	0,869	0,571
ULO	0,894	0,921	0,700
USUP	0,863	0,906	0,709

Source: Author's data analysis

Table 2 shows that all Cronbach's Alpha and Composite reliability (rho_c) coefficients are > 0,7. All eight latent variables (SCHA, SDEC, STRU, UBRA, UCOM, UJOB, ULO, USUP) are reliable. AVE > 0,5 indicates that the scale has convergent validity. It also means that the average latent variable will explain at least 50% of the variation of each observed variable. (Hair et al., 2019; quoted from Agus & Yuli, 2021).

Distinguishing value

Table 3: Discriminant values _ HTMT

	SCHA	SDEC	STRU	UBRA	UCOM	UJOB	ULO	USUP
SCHA								
SDEC	0,086							
STRU	0,311	0,543						
UBRA	0,110	0,631	0,511					
UCOM	0,149	0,239	0,380	0,073				
UJOB	0,076	0,227	0,443	0,143	0,150			
ULO	0,128	0,057	0,276	0,061	0,221	0,105		
USUP	0,067	0,181	0,272	0,054	0,096	0,080	0,070	

Source: Author's data analysis

Table 3 shows that all HTMT(ij) < 0,85, achieving discriminant validity between two latent variables i and j. Thus, the discriminant validity of the latent variables is guaranteed (Henseler et al., 2015; quoted from Agus & Yuli, 2021).

- **Structural model evaluation**
- **Magnification factor VIF**

Table 4: VIF

|	SCHA	SDEC	STRU
SCHA			1,031
SDEC			
STRU		1,254	
UBRA		1,254	1,025
UCOM			1,063
UJOB			1,032
ULO			1,049
USUP			1,006

Source: Author's data analysis

All VIF values of the 7 effects were < 3, ranging from 1,006 to 1,254, so the model did not have multicollinearity (Hair et al., 2019).

- **Bootstrapping Inspection**

The study used bootstrapping technique with a replicate sample size of (n = 450) with an initial sample size of 224 observations. The estimation results showed that the original weights were significant with the average bootstrapping weights because all weights were within the 95% confidence interval. Thus, the estimates in the model can be concluded to be reliable (Le et al., 2023).

• **Hypothesis testing**
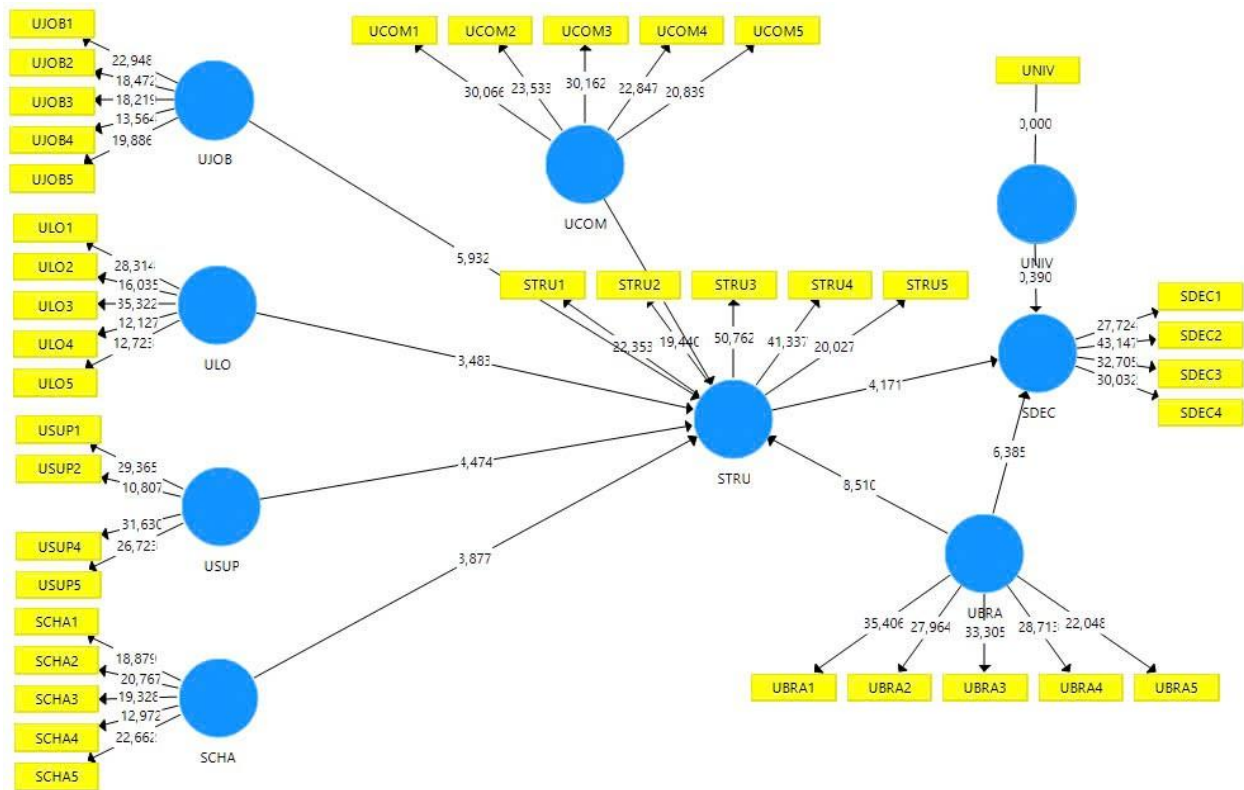
Picture 2: The chart shows the results of the bootstrapping structural model.

Bảng 5: Kê´t qua̓ kiểm định các gia̓ thuyê´t của nghiên cứu

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P Values
SCHA -> STRU	0,195	0,196	0,048	4,100	0,000
STRU -> SDEC	0,282	0,290	0,069	4,074	0,000
UBRA -> SDEC	0,427	0,428	0,070	6,099	0,000
UBRA -> STRU	0,384	0,382	0,047	8,249	0,000
UCOM -> STRU	0,218	0,221	0,054	4,061	0,000
UJOB -> STRU	0,290	0,294	0,046	6,356	0,000
ULO -> STRU	0,167	0,168	0,048	3,463	0,001
UNIV -> SDEC	-0,022	-0,023	0,060	0,373	0,709
USUP -> STRU	0,217	0,219	0,047	4,664	0,000

Source: Author's data analysis

The results of Table 4 show that all the P values of the effects are < 0,05. Therefore, these effects are statistically significant. Hypotheses H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, H7, H8, H9 are accepted.

Original samples:

- 2 variables affect to SDEC are STRU (O=0,282) and UBRA (O=0,427).

- 6 variables affect to STRU are SCHA (O=0,195), UBRA (O=0,384), UCOM (O=0,218), UJOB (O=0,290), ULO (O=0,176) and USUP (O=0,217).

The standardized effects of these Original samples are in order from strong to weak PECHA -> DECI (0,410), PECHA -> TRU (0,343), GELO -> TRU (0,316),..., TUI -> TRU (0,101). The estimates are all positive, so these factors all have positive effects on DECI AND TRU. PECHA has the strongest effect on TRU because it has an Original sample

of 0,343. GELO has the second strongest effect on TRU because it has an Original sample of 0,316... TUI has the weakest effect on the TRU coefficient because it has an Original sample of 0,101.

- **R², f²**

Bảng 6: R Square, R Square Adjusted

	R Square	R Square Adjusted
SDEC	0,366	0,360
STRU	0,502	0,488

Source: Author's data analysis

The results in Table 6 show that the adjusted R² of SDEC = 0,360. In other words, 36.0% of SDEC is explained by STRU. Similarly, 50,20% of STRU is explained by SCHA, UBRA, UCOM, UJOB, ULO, USUP. The rest is due to errors and other factors. The closer the adjusted R2 is to 1, the higher the explanation level of the independent variable to the dependent variable

. **Table 7: f Square**

	SCHA	SDEC	STRU
SCHA			0,074
SDEC			
STRU		0,100	
UBRA		0,225	0,288
UCOM			0,089
UJOB			0,164
ULO			0,053
USUP			0,094

Source: Author's data analysis

The results of Table 7 show the value of f²:

o   The two variables affecting SDEC are STRU (f2=0,100) and UBRA (f²=0,225).

o the 6 variables affecting STRU are SCHA (f2=0,074), UBRA (f2=0,288), UCOM (f2=0,089), UJOB (f2=0,164), ULO (f2=0,053) and USUP (f2=0,094).

UBRA has the strongest impact on STRU because f2=0,288. Next is UJOB which has the second strongest impact on STRU because f2=0,164... ULO has the weakest impact on STRU because f2=0,053.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research results, the authors propose to private university administrators in general and department administrators operating in the fields of Communications - Consulting - Admissions some management implications as follows:

Brand

Brand is the factor that has the strongest impact on students' trust in choosing a university (UBRA → SDEC = 0,427; UBRA → STRU = 0,384). Raising awareness and prestige in the eyes of the public, especially students and new students, is the top goal of private universities. To achieve this, promoting the brand through multiple channels, from online (website, social networks) to traditional (press, television, events, seminars, exhibitions, fairs, admissions consulting, scholarships) is the key solution. However, besides promotion, the difference from public and self-financed public schools is the deciding factor. That difference is reflected in flexible training programs (multi-disciplinary, multi-degree, multi-form), a team of lecturers with rich practical experience, prestigious international cooperation, modern facilities, a dynamic and creative learning environment, open job opportunities and special admission policies (such as incentives for athletes and excellent students). Only when creating unique values, can private universities attract and retain students.

Internship opportunities

Internship opportunities are the second strongest factor influencing students' confidence in choosing a university (UJOB → STRU = 0,290). Improving internship and employment opportunities for university students requires a strong commitment from the school, demonstrated through proactively connecting with the labor market, developing comprehensive skills and providing effective job information. Specifically, the school needs to establish strategic partnerships with businesses, and coordinate to build specialized internship programs to meet actual recruitment needs. At the same time, focusing on developing soft skills (teamwork, communication, problem solving, etc.) through extracurricular activities, skill seminars and specialized training in job application skills is a key factor to help students confidently integrate into the working environment. Finally, the school needs to build a transparent information system, connecting students with suitable internship and job opportunities through electronic information portals, job exchanges, and specialized job fairs, while enhancing consultation and support for students in the job search process. Close coordination between the school, businesses and students, along with the school's continuous efforts to act as a bridge, will optimize internship and job opportunities, contributing to improving the quality of human resources.

Media

Communication is the third strongest factor influencing students' confidence in choosing a university (UCOM → STRU = 0,218). This shows that there is fierce competition among non-public universities, especially in Ho Chi Minh City, requiring effective communication, a key factor influencing new students' decision to choose a university. Good communication means great attraction. Therefore, schools need to promote multi-channel communication: newspapers, television, admissions consulting (online and in person). Social networks (Facebook, TikTok, Instagram) need to build a distinctive image, websites and printed publications (banners, posters) provide concise and complete information. In addition, participating in admissions consulting days is necessary. More importantly, building sustainable relationships with alumni (meetings), employers (recruitment fairs, signing cooperation agreements), current students (traditional fairs, union activities) and lecturers (seminars, cultural and sports activities) will strengthen the reputation and attractiveness of the school, creating a sustainable competitive advantage.

University support

School support plays an equally important role as communication activities in students' confidence in choosing a university (USUP → STRU = 0,217). The success of higher education depends on supporting students before and after admission, creating high-quality human resources. Before admission, information about training programs, tuition fees, financial aid, and career prospects (including employment rates and alumni salaries) should be transparent. Activities such as counseling days, seminars, and online connections help students experience and orient their careers. After admission, transition support is very important, including personalized academic advising, psychological support, and study and research skills training. Access to resources (library, laboratory) should be ensured. Connecting with businesses through internships and extracurricular activities helps students gain experience and increase their job opportunities. Investing in student support is investing in the future, creating high-quality human resources. Transparency, comprehensive support and career guidance are the keys to success..

Geographical location

The weakest factor is the Geographical Location factor on Students' Confidence in Choosing a University (ULO → STRU = 0,167). Geographical location is the most important factor influencing students' decision to choose a university, especially in big cities. Convenience in traveling, close to home or part-time job, is the top priority. Traffic jams further increase the attraction of schools with convenient locations. Many private universities in Ho Chi Minh City, such as HUTECH, University of Economics and Finance, have cleverly taken advantage of this by locating their campuses in central districts, on major roads, easy to access. Prime locations not only save time and travel costs for students but also open up many part-time job opportunities, helping to cover living expenses. Moreover, studying close to home helps stabilize housing, creating favorable conditions for participating in extracurricular activities, balancing between studying and other activities. Therefore, expanding training facilities in central areas is a smart strategy, helping universities attract students and increase competitiveness in the education market. Geographical convenience brings practical benefits, contributing significantly to students' decisions to choose a school.

Trust

Based on the analyzed research results, it can be affirmed that trust has a strong impact on students' decision to choose a private university (STRU → SDEC = 0,282). Therefore, building and developing the school's image should be prioritized through international standard and high-quality training programs, along with the connection between training levels. In addition to implementing new training programs, schools should also adjust current programs to ensure that the output quality is suitable for the needs of society and employers, while strengthening the connection with businesses. The reputation of the school is a long-term process, including many factors affecting the results of teaching and training of new generation students. Overall, the school needs to carry out positive activities to make its brand recognized and trusted in the community, especially by students and parents, to encourage them to send their children to study. Each student is a representative of the school, and their presence contributes to enhancing the school's brand. In short, efforts must be made to make the school's diploma accepted and appreciated by society.

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