

*Work in Progress*

# Xenocentrism and preference for foreign graduate education: Role of perceived academic prestige in a cross-national SEM study

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**Abstract:** Xenocentrism (XEN) is a psychological and sociocultural construct that affects individual preferences in identity-related domains. The primary aim of this study is to examine how XEN influences undergraduate students' preferences for foreign versus domestic graduate education, with a particular focus on the mediating role of perceived academic prestige (PAP). Although prior research has conceptualized XEN in the realm of consumer behavior, this study extends its application into higher education decision-making. This study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional, cross-national design to test hypothesized relationships among XEN, PAP, and students' preferences for foreign graduate programs. The research design is grounded in theory-driven SEM modeling for the simultaneous analysis of direct, indirect, and moderated effects across two postcolonial emerging economies: the Philippines and the Dominican Republic. This study investigates novel empirical evidence and theoretical insights into how xenocentric beliefs affect students' preferences for foreign graduate education, with a focus on the mediating role of PAP. It examines how these relationships vary across country contexts. These outcomes will contribute to academic discourse, inform institutional strategy, shape public policy, and enhance student empowerment.

**Keywords:** Xenocentrism, social identity theory, perceived academic prestige.

## 1. Introduction

In the evolving landscape of global higher education, students' choices regarding graduate study are shaped not only by pragmatic considerations, such as affordability, academic quality, and career outcomes, but also by symbolic meanings and culturally embedded belief systems. Among these, xenocentrism has emerged as a critical yet underexplored orientation, defined as the belief in the inherent superiority of foreign products, institutions, and cultural norms over domestic ones. Xenocentrism (XEN) is a psychological and sociocultural construct that affects individual preferences in identity-related domains (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2016; Diamantopoulos et al., 2025). Within consumer behavior theory, XEN has been shown to influence evaluations, symbolic consumption, and behavioral intentions, particularly in emerging and postcolonial societies (Cleveland & Balakrishnan, 2019). While this literature has established the role of XEN in shaping attitudes toward foreign brands and cultural products, its application to educational decision-making remains limited. However, symbolic consumption frameworks (Elliott, 1997; Holt, 1995) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) suggest that higher education choices, particularly the pursuit of graduate programs, may reflect deeper aspirational, reputational, and identity-based motives. The rising trend of outbound student mobility from low- and middle-income countries has traditionally been explained through structural and economic lenses: institutional prestige, cost, visa policies, and employment prospects (Bodycott, 2009; Ivy, 2001; King & Sondhi, 2018). However, recent research has begun to highlight the role of cultural and psychological drivers, such as perceived global legitimacy and symbolic value, in shaping preferences for graduate programs. Camacho et al. (2022) demonstrated that

formal education may inadvertently foster xenocentric attitudes by presenting foreign academic models as global benchmarks. Similarly, Camacho et al. (2020) found that XEN significantly predicted purchase intentions, with admiration for foreign products as a mediator, a mechanism that is likely to extend to educational institutions as well. This intersection of symbolic belief systems and educational aspiration is particularly salient in postcolonial settings such as the Philippines and the Dominican Republic. In these contexts, historical dependencies, linguistic influences, and global academic hierarchies shape students' perceptions of the legitimacy of domestic versus international education (Alatas, 2003; Bhabha, 1994). The admiration for foreign academic institutions may thus reflect not only rational evaluation but also cultural internalization of perceived inferiority, a form of epistemic dependency (Alatas, 2003). This trend has tangible implications. Xenocentric preferences can contribute to under-enrollment in local graduate programs, reduced public investment in national education systems, and increased brain drain. Conversely, understanding these cultural orientations enables higher education institutions to reframe their global positioning through more targeted branding, curriculum internationalization, and partnership strategies that engage with student values, not just metrics.

### *1.2. Problem statement*

Despite the growing importance of international student mobility in shaping global education systems, the cultural and psychological underpinnings of these choices remain insufficiently understood. Existing research on graduate program preferences has primarily emphasized structural drivers, such as institutional reputation, tuition affordability, scholarship access, and labor market opportunities, while overlooking the symbolic and identity-based motivations that shape educational aspirations (King & Sondhi, 2018; Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001). Among these neglected factors is XEN, a belief system that values foreign institutions and devalues local ones (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2016; Camacho et al., 2022). While XEN has been extensively examined in consumer behavior research (Camacho et al., 2020; Camacho & Miranda, 2025; Diamantopoulos et al., 2019; Rojas-Mendez & Chapa, 2020), where it predicts preference for foreign brands and symbolic consumption, it remains under-theorized in contexts involving identity-defining decisions, such as the pursuit of graduate education. This conceptual blind spot hinders the development of more comprehensive models of educational choice and undermines institutional strategies designed to address student mobility trends in emerging economies.

This gap is particularly salient in postcolonial and semi-peripheral societies, such as the Philippines and the Dominican Republic, where global hierarchies of knowledge and prestige continue to inform public discourse and private decisions. In these contexts, foreign graduate programs are often perceived not only as academically superior but also as socially and symbolically desirable, reinforcing the internalization of cultural inferiority and the pursuit of foreign validation (Alatas, 2003; Bhabha, 1994; Hazelkorn, 2015). Additionally, the interplay between XEN and perceived academic prestige (PAP) has not been systematically examined. While prestige is often assumed to be a rational indicator of institutional quality, it is also a socially constructed evaluative frame that is filtered through cultural belief systems, including xenocentric attitudes (Marginson, 2006; Spence, 2002). As a result, students may choose foreign graduate programs not on the basis of objective comparisons but because these programs align with an idealized notion of global legitimacy and social advancement (Cleveland & Balakrishnan, 2019). Compounding this theoretical gap is the lack of cross-national empirical research comparing how xenocentric attitudes manifest across sociocultural contexts. While both the Philippines and the Dominican Republic exhibit high levels of outbound student mobility, their historical trajectories, language policies, and regional affiliations suggest potentially distinct configurations of prestige perception and cultural admiration. Without comparative insights, educational policy and institutional planning remain reactive rather than strategic. The lack of empirical inquiry into how XEN interacts with academic prestige to shape graduate education choices, particularly in the Global South, hinders our understanding of educational inequalities, brain drain dynamics, and the symbolic dimensions of internationalization.

### *1.3. Purpose of the study*

The primary aim of this study is to examine how XEN, a belief in the superiority of foreign institutions and cultural norms, influences undergraduate students' preferences for foreign versus domestic graduate education, with a particular focus on the mediating role of PAP. While prior research has conceptualized XEN in the realm of consumer behavior, this study extends its application into higher education decision-making, thereby offering an innovative contribution to the literature on symbolic consumption, postcolonial identity, and global student mobility (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2016; Camacho et al., 2020; Holt, 1995; Alatas, 2003). By employing a cross-national comparative approach, the study investigates how this psychological and cultural orientation operates in two postcolonial, globally oriented societies: the Philippines and the Dominican Republic. These two contexts, while distinct in their historical trajectories and regional affiliations, share characteristics that make them ideal for comparative analysis, namely, high levels of outbound student mobility, institutional

exposure to international rankings and partnerships, and persistent perceptions of domestic academic inferiority (Boddycott, 2009; Hazelkorn, 2015; Marginson, 2006). The research seeks to determine:

- Whether xenocentric beliefs among students are predictive of a stronger preference for studying abroad.
- Whether this relationship is mediated by students' perceptions of academic prestige associated with foreign institutions.
- And whether these dynamics differ contextually across national boundaries, shaped by sociohistorical and cultural frameworks (Bhabha, 1994; Cleveland & Balakrishnan, 2019).

In doing so, the study not only addresses a critical gap in the XEN literature but also offers practical insights for domestic universities, policymakers, and international education recruiters. By identifying the psychological mechanisms underlying foreign education preferences, this study provides a conceptual model that bridges symbolic beliefs and real-world educational behaviors.

#### *1.4. Significance of the Study*

This study makes a multifaceted contribution to international education, consumer psychology, and cultural studies by examining how xenocentric attitudes shape educational aspirations in the Global South. Investigating the mediating role of PAP reveals how symbolic values, beyond objective metrics, drive students' decisions about graduate programs. Using a cross-national sample from the Philippines and the Dominican Republic, the study deepens our understanding of how global cultural hierarchies and internalized beliefs affect institutional choices, identity formation, and long-term national development goals. Although prior studies have focused on consumer goods (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2016; Rojas-Méndez & Chapa, 2020), this study demonstrates that xenocentric dispositions also operate in symbolic consumption contexts, such as graduate school selection (Elliott, 1997; Holt, 1995). It further advances educational sociology by integrating frameworks from signaling theory (Spence, 2002) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) to conceptualize how prestige functions as a cultural signal of value and belonging. Notably, it contributes to the emerging literature on academic dependency and postcolonial educational hierarchies, providing empirical grounding for the theoretical claims made by scholars such as Alatas (2003) and Bhabha (1994). It also opens avenues for future research on symbolic behavior in other noncommercial settings, such as healthcare, politics, and sustainability-oriented education (Cleveland & Balakrishnan, 2019). At the institutional level, the findings provide actionable insights for domestic universities and graduate program directors seeking to understand and respond to students' symbolic and cultural aspirations. If xenocentric attitudes indeed shape perceptions of prestige, then institutional branding strategies, partnership models, and curriculum design must move beyond reliance on rankings alone. Instead, universities may need to reassert localized forms of excellence, engage in culturally resonant storytelling, and promote homegrown intellectual legitimacy (Hazelkorn, 2015; Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001). International recruiters may also benefit from understanding how and why certain foreign institutions are idealized, enabling more authentic, ethical, and student-centered recruitment practices.

For policymakers in low- and middle-income countries, this study highlights how unexamined cultural narratives and inherited hierarchies contribute to outbound student mobility, brain drain, and the underutilization of domestic capacity. While internationalization is often viewed as a marker of modernity and prestige, unchecked xenocentric motivations can produce symbolic inequality and structural dependency (Alatas, 2003; Marginson, 2006). The findings can inform national strategies to strengthen graduate education systems, counteract prestige bias, and foster public narratives that promote educational sovereignty and academic pride. For ministries of education, this means investing not only in infrastructure but also in the cultural legitimacy of national academic projects.

From a societal perspective, the study uncovers how postcolonial mindsets and global cultural hierarchies shape youth aspirations and identities. If foreign institutions are viewed as inherently superior, this may erode national self-esteem, contribute to cultural alienation, and perpetuate epistemic marginalization (Alatas, 2003; Bhabha, 1994). Understanding these mechanisms can help civil society organizations, student advocacy groups, and educators promote critical global citizenship and balanced worldviews that validate both local and international knowledge systems. Building on theoretical models from consumer behavior, signaling theory, and cultural psychology, this study investigates the psychological and symbolic factors that shape students' preferences for graduate programs in two postcolonial, emerging-market contexts. The following research questions guide the study:

1. To what extent are xenocentric attitudes present among undergraduate students in the Philippines and the Dominican Republic, and do these attitudes vary by national context?
2. How do xenocentric beliefs influence students' preferences for enrolling in foreign versus domestic graduate programs?
3. How do specific dimensions of XEN, namely:

4. Preference for foreign institutions, o perceived inferiority of domestic education, and
5. Admiration for foreign academic norms, related to students' perceptions of academic prestige?
6. Does PAP mediate the relationship between students' XEN and their preference for foreign graduate programs?
7. Are there significant differences between Filipino and Dominican students in the strength and direction of the relationships among XEN, PAP, and foreign graduate program preference?
8. Does national context moderate the structural relationships among XEN, PAP, and graduate program choice, indicating culturally contingent effects?

The research objectives are:

- To examine how XEN influences undergraduate students' preferences for foreign versus domestic graduate programs in the Philippines and the Dominican Republic, with particular attention to the mediating role of PAP and the moderating influence of national context, the following are the specific objectives.
- To measure the levels and dimensions of XEN among final-year undergraduate students in the Philippines and the Dominican Republic using a validated multidimensional instrument (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2016; Rojas-Méndez & Chapa, 2020).
- To analyze the direct relationship between XEN and students' preference for pursuing graduate education abroad, operationalized as a behavioral intention.
- To assess the influence of distinct dimensions of XEN, including:
- Preference for foreign institutions, o Perceived inferiority of domestic education, o Admiration for foreign academic values, on students' perceptions of academic prestige.
- To evaluate whether PAP mediates the relationship between XEN and graduate program preference, based on signaling theory and symbolic consumption literature (Spence, 2002; Holt, 1995).
- To compare the magnitude and structure of the hypothesized relationships across countries, identifying similarities and differences between Filipino and Dominican student populations using multi-group SEM analysis.
- To test for moderation by national context, examining whether the effects of XEN and academic prestige on student preferences vary based on sociocultural, linguistic, or historical differences between the two countries (Bhabha, 1994; Marginson, 2006).

## 2. Literature Review

This study is anchored in the theory of XEN and extends its application to the domain of graduate education preferences, using a framework that incorporates PAP as a mediating construct. The literature review integrates perspectives from consumer behavior, cultural psychology, signaling theory, and educational sociology, with a specific focus on symbolic value and postcolonial identity.

### 2.1. Xenocentrism (XEN)

Xenocentrism refers to the systematic preference for foreign products, institutions, and cultural norms over domestic counterparts, often grounded in a perceived inferiority of local offerings (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2016). It is a multidimensional construct comprising preference for foreign offerings, perceived inferiority of domestic alternatives, and admiration for foreign norms and values.

Initially, in the business field, conceptualized in marketing, XEN has been shown to influence both attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, particularly in developing and transitional economies (Diamantopoulos et al., 2025; Rojas-Méndez & Chapa, 2020). In China, for example, Mueller et al. (2016) found that young consumers associated foreign brands with modernity and global identity, suggesting a generalized symbolic preference tied to aspirational identity formation. In educational contexts, XEN may manifest as a belief that foreign universities offer inherently superior training, global recognition, and social mobility, despite objective measures of quality (Camacho et al., 2022). This perception is shaped by global media, international rankings, and policy discourses that routinely valorize institutions in the Global North. In emerging markets, XEN is often reinforced through formal education itself, as curricula, textbooks, and pedagogical standards frequently emulate Western models (Altbach & Knight, 2013). These dynamics contribute to a symbolic hierarchy that undermines domestic academic confidence and fuels outbound mobility.

Higher education, especially graduate study, is not only a functional investment but also a symbolic act of identity construction (Elliott, 1997; Holt, 1995). Students' decisions to study abroad may reflect aspirational identities linked to modernity, global belonging, and social distinction (Cleveland & Balakrishnan, 2019; Cleveland & Laroche, 2007). In this view, foreign credentials function as "positional goods" (Hirsch, 1976),

whose value derives from their symbolic distance from the local and the ordinary. XEN contributes to this symbolic logic by elevating the status value of foreign institutions, particularly when students internalize the notion that global equals better (Cleveland et al., 2009). This aligns with Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, where international education represents a form of elite cultural distinction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Marginson, 2006).

*H1. XEN is positively associated with students' preference for foreign graduate programs.*

## *2.2. Perceived academic prestige (PAP)*

Perceived academic prestige plays a central mediating role in translating xenocentric beliefs into behavioral preferences. Prestige is a socially constructed, relational attribute tied to recognition, visibility, and symbolic capital (Marginson, 2006). Students rely on prestige heuristics when comparing graduate programs, particularly when they lack full access to comparative data (Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001). From a signaling-theory perspective (Spence, 1973; 2002), a degree from a high-status foreign university serves as a proxy signal of competence, ambition, and a cosmopolitan outlook—traits highly valued in global labor markets (Hazelkorn, 2015). This signal is particularly salient in environments with weak credentialing trust, where local degrees may be viewed as insufficient for career advancement. Furthermore, prestige is closely tied to institutional narratives, including rankings, global affiliations, and the international composition of faculty (Ivy, 2001; Altbach & Knight, 2013). For xenocentric students, these prestige markers are interpreted not only in functional terms but also as affirmations of global legitimacy, further reinforcing the desire to study abroad.

*H2. XEN is positively associated with the PAP of foreign graduate programs.*

## *2.3. Preference for graduate program location*

Students' preference for foreign graduate education can be viewed as a behavioral expression of deeper symbolic evaluations. Research indicates that students are more likely to pursue international education when they perceive it as offering not only superior outcomes but also enhanced social status, global citizenship identity, and access to transnational networks (Brooks & Waters, 2011; King & Raghuram, 2013). Studies on international student mobility suggest that aspirational migration (the desire to enhance oneself through affiliation with globally recognized institutions) is a powerful motivator in educational choices (Bodycott, 2009; Findlay et al., 2012). This phenomenon is intensified in postcolonial settings, where foreign institutions are imbued with symbolic superiority due to historical legacies of cultural and institutional dependency (Alatas, 2003; Bhabha, 1994).

*H3. PAP is positively associated with students' preference for foreign graduate programs.*

## *2.4. Mediation pathway: Prestige as a mediator*

Building on dual-process models in consumer psychology (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005), this study proposes that XEN influences graduate program preference indirectly through PAP. Camacho et al. (2020) demonstrated that such mediation processes are at play in consumer decision-making, where admiration and symbolic valuation influence the path from belief to behavior.

Additionally, the model posits that national context moderates the strength of these relationships, reflecting each country's unique educational, cultural, and postcolonial trajectories. For example, the Philippines' strong alignment with U.S. academic traditions may amplify the prestige effects associated with American institutions. In contrast, Dominican students may ascribe symbolic value to institutions associated with Spanish or European traditions. Understanding these contextual variations provides insight into how global hierarchies are locally interpreted and how XEN operates within different symbolic and institutional fields (Knight, 2013; Marginson & Rhoades, 2002).

*H4. PAP mediates the relationship between XEN and students' preference for foreign graduate programs.*

## *2.5. Contextual differences: Cross-national manifestations of xenocentrism*

Although XEN is universally expressed, its expression is context-dependent. In the Philippines, American cultural and educational influence remains pervasive, shaping curricula, institutional structures, and student aspirations (Altbach, 2015). English fluency and U.S. alignment contribute to a strong symbolic pull toward American graduate programs. In contrast, the

Dominican Republic reflects a more regionalized academic identity, influenced by Latin American, European (especially Spanish), and increasingly North American models. Perceptions of prestige may thus follow

different heuristics, including cultural proximity, language, and colonial legacy (Camacho et al., 2022; Knight & Raghuram, 2013). Understanding how xenocentric beliefs are moderated by national context is essential to avoid overgeneralization and to support culturally responsive educational policies.

This study posits that national context moderates the strength of the relationships between XEN, PAP, and graduate program preferences. Specifically, we hypothesize that the effects of XEN and perceived prestige on students' educational preferences may differ between the Philippines and the Dominican Republic due to sociohistorical, institutional, and geopolitical differences.

These countries exhibit divergent educational trajectories and international affiliations. The Philippines, shaped by prolonged American colonial influence, maintains an education system that aligns closely with U.S. standards and is characterized by strong English-language instruction and high outbound student mobility to North America. In contrast, the Dominican Republic's higher education system reflects a blend of Latin American and European traditions, with Spanish-language instruction and regional academic integration playing a more prominent role.

These structural differences may shape how students interpret foreign academic prestige and internalize xenocentric beliefs. For instance, students in the Philippines may exhibit greater alignment with U.S.-based academic models, thereby amplifying the influence of XEN on their study-abroad intentions. Conversely, Dominican students may evaluate foreign education through a different symbolic and institutional lens, potentially moderating the strength or direction of key pathways.

*H5. Country context (the Philippines vs. the Dominican Republic) moderates the relationships among XEN, PAP, and students' preferences for foreign graduate programs.*

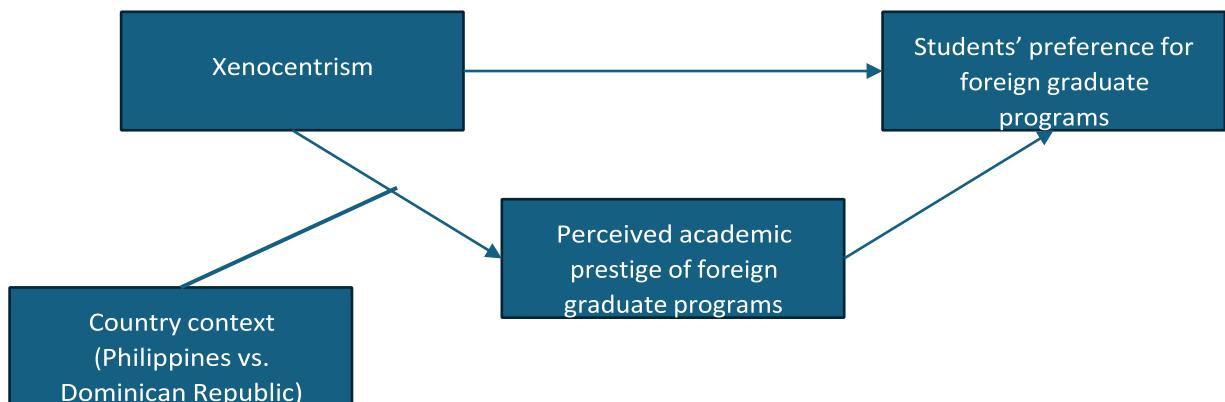


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

### 3. Materials and Methods

#### 3.1. Research design

This study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional, and cross-national comparative design to test the hypothesized relationships between XEN, PAP, and students' preferences for foreign graduate programs. The design is grounded in theory-driven SEM modeling, enabling simultaneous analysis of direct, indirect, and moderated effects across two postcolonial emerging economies: the Philippines and the Dominican Republic.

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is appropriate given the presence of:

- Latent variables (XEN, perceived prestige),
- A mediation pathway, and
- A moderated multi-group comparison (country context).

This design is informed by prior studies that have used SEM to explore complex psychological constructs in cross-cultural settings (Kline, 2015; Hair et al., 2019).

#### 3.2. Target population and sampling method

- Population: Final-year undergraduate students at accredited public and private universities in the Philippines and the Dominican Republic.
- Sampling Method: Stratified convenience sampling, ensuring representation across:

- o Type of institution (public vs. private), o Academic discipline (e.g., social sciences, STEM, business), o Gender identity and urban/rural distribution (if data allow).
- Sample Size: Minimum of 300 respondents per country (total N = 600).

This adheres to recommendations for SEM with mediation and moderation pathways, which require 10–20 participants per parameter (Kline, 2015). Given approximately 20–25 observed variables across latent constructs, a sample size of  $\geq 600$  supports robust model estimation and multi-group invariance testing.

### 3.3. Data collection techniques and instruments

A self-administered online questionnaire will be developed and pilot-tested in both English and Spanish. The instrument will consist of five key sections:

1. Xenocentrism Scale o Adapted from Balabanis & Diamantopoulos (2016).
  - a. Three subdimensions:
    - i. Preference for Foreign Offerings
    - ii. Perceived Inferiority of Domestic Alternatives
    - iii. Admiration for Foreign Academic Norms
    - iv. Each subscale includes 3–5 Likert items (7-point scale).
  - b. Validation studies confirm high reliability ( $\alpha > 0.80$ ).
2. Perceived Academic Prestige (PAP): Adapted from Nguyen & LeBlanc (2001), Ivy (2001), and recent adaptations in global university branding. Items measure perceived reputation, symbolic status, and global recognition of foreign institutions.
3. Graduate Program Preference: Measured as intention to pursue a foreign vs. domestic graduate program within the next 2–3 years: Includes Likert-scale intention measures and one forced-choice behavioral indicator.
4. Moderator: Country Context: Dummy-coded (1 = Philippines; 0 = Dominican Republic) for multi-group comparison.
5. Demographics and Controls: Gender, income bracket, language fluency, past international travel or study, and academic major.
6. Translation and Validation:
  - a. The Spanish version will be translated using the Brislin (1970) back-translation method to ensure linguistic and conceptual equivalence.
  - b. A pilot test ( $n = 30$  per country) will assess item clarity and internal reliability.

## 4. Expected Outcomes and Impact

### 4.1. Outcomes

This study aims to generate novel empirical evidence and theoretical insights into how xenocentric beliefs influence students' preferences for foreign graduate education, with a focus on the mediating role of PAP, while also examining how these relationships vary across different country contexts. These outcomes will contribute to academic discourse, inform institutional strategy, shape public policy, and enhance student empowerment.

### 4.2. Theoretical implications

Extension of XEN Theory. This research extends the scope of XEN theory beyond traditional consumer domains, establishing it as a relevant psychological construct in educational decision-making. While prior work has explored XEN in brand evaluation (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2016; Cleveland & Balakrishnan, 2019), this study applies the construct to symbolic consumption in higher education, an underexamined area with significant sociocultural implications.

Integration of Prestige as a Mediator. By conceptualizing PAP as an attitudinal bridge between xenocentric beliefs and behavioral intentions, the study offers a refined model of how belief systems are translated into action. This builds on signaling theory (Spence, 2002) and dual-process models (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005), aligning with symbolic capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986).

Postcolonial and Cross-Cultural Perspective. The cross-national comparative approach situates the findings within a broader critique of academic dependency and cultural hierarchy (Alatas, 2003; Bhabha, 1994), offering fresh empirical grounding for theoretical claims about epistemic marginalization in postcolonial educational systems.

### 4.2 Practical implications

**Strategic Repositioning for Local Institutions.** Domestic universities can use the findings to identify symbolic gaps in students' perceptions of their institutions' value. This can inform efforts to rebrand local graduate programs, invest in international partnerships, and promote homegrown academic excellence in ways that resonate with students' aspirational frameworks.

**Marketing and Recruitment Guidance.** Both local and international institutions can refine their outreach strategies by recognizing how xenocentric biases shape perceptions of prestige. Messaging that emphasizes authentic global competencies and culturally sensitive positioning may help mitigate automatic biases against foreign preferences.

**Curricular and Pedagogical Innovation.** Findings can inform internationalization efforts in the curriculum and faculty development by helping institutions understand how students perceive symbolic alignment with global standards and whether these perceptions are rooted in substance or belief.

#### 4.4 Policy implications

**Redefining Internationalization.** Policymakers may reconsider the push for outbound mobility and international program dependency by addressing the cultural narratives that sustain educational emigration, particularly in countries experiencing brain drain.

**Promoting Educational Sovereignty.** Ministries of education can use this research to strengthen national graduate education systems through targeted prestige-building initiatives, including rankings reform, domestic scholarship enhancement, and national branding campaigns that elevate the value of local knowledge systems.

**Supporting Equity in Student Opportunity.** The study provides insights into perceptual and psychological barriers that shape educational aspirations, potentially disadvantaging students who cannot afford international study but are culturally primed to undervalue domestic options.

#### 4.5 Limitations and constraints

Self-reported data may be subject to social desirability bias or inaccurate recall, especially in assessing personal attitudes toward domestic and foreign institutions. The study's cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal inferences about the directionality of the observed relationships. Sampling limitations (e.g., reliance on non-random samples from specific universities) may affect the generalizability of findings across the broader populations of the Philippines and the Dominican Republic. Cultural interpretation of scale items may vary slightly across countries, despite translation and adaptation efforts, potentially influencing measurement validity. Furthermore, the model focuses specifically on graduate education preferences and may not fully explain other academic behaviors (e.g., undergraduate study abroad, virtual exchange).

Despite these constraints, the study is well positioned to offer original insights that combine theoretical depth and practical relevance for global higher education systems, particularly those operating in postcolonial and emerging contexts.

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