Exploring the Mindset of Doctoral Candidates at the University of Tehran: An Analysis from a Causal Layer Perspective

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article type: Research Article	The primary objective of this study was to examine how master's students perceive and think about pursuing doctoral studies at the University of Tehran (UT). The study utilized a qualitative case study method, focusing on causal layer analysis. All 22 doctoral candidates in the higher education field at UT were included in the study, using a full-census sampling method for interviews. By adopting a future studies approach based on causal layer analysis, an examination was carried out to analyze the mental constructs of university students. This approach has four levels: litany, social causes, discourse/worldview, and myth/metaphor. From the analysis of university students' perceptions, four different scenarios were identified: self-development, a strong affinity for UT, utilitarian perspectives, and feelings of disappointment and academic decline. These scenarios were then reassessed using the four levels of causal layer analysis. The study's results illuminate the significant variety and differences in the mental frameworks of university students regarding their future academic goals. Consequently, understanding these mental frameworks is valuable for policymakers in higher education, university administrators, and families who play a role in influencing students' academic decision.

1. Introduction

Throughout history, higher education (HE) has undergone numerous changes. These Changes have been influenced by various factors, such as shifts in social and cultural norms, national and international policies, institutional organizational structures, pedagogical theories, and philosophical ideologies. As a result, higher education institutions (HEIs) that exist today have been shaped by these transformations. It is important to note that these changes are not limited to the past, as higher education continues to evolve and transform itself over time. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the field, it is increasingly important for educational researchers, academic teachers, policymakers, and university strategists to be aware of future trends in HE. This knowledge enables them to have a broader perspective, identify potential future challenges and opportunities, and introduce innovative teaching and learning practices (Gallagher & Savage, 2022). One prominent trend in this regard is globalization. The increasing demands on higher education due to globalization have led to heightened competition among universities (Maresova et al., 2020; Polcyn et al., 2023). This has resulted in a significant competition for attracting students to enroll in various higher learning institutions (Yaping et al., 2023). Nevertheless, a reduction in financial support from governments and other funding sources, coupled with rising expenses associated with delivering academic programs and a growing skepticism regarding the value of higher education, has heightened the competitive pressure faced by higher education institutions (HEIs hereafter). HEIs are now required to offer services that cater to students' expectations for cutting-edge equipment, small class sizes, top-notch academic programs, recreational amenities, and the maintenance or expansion of facilities, all of which add to the financial burdens (Wilkins et al., 2022; Girardin et al., 2023).

However, the demand for higher education persists due to its evolution from being a privilege exclusively available to a select few individuals in society to becoming a prerequisite for achieving success, fulfilling family responsibilities, and addressing the world's most urgent challenges. While traditional education still holds significance, there is also a need for a lifelong, skills-based education that can be accessed by individuals at any life stage (Akour & Alenezi, 2022). The higher education sector is evolving, prompting institutions to seek new strategies for success (Hailat et al., 2021). This has led to intensified competition among universities, with both public and private institutions striving to enhance their offerings in terms of quantity and quality (Martin & Nasib, 2021). The shift in student attitudes towards higher education is significant, reflecting changes in educational perspectives, structures, and funding rather than inherent changes in young people themselves (Mintz, 2021). As a result, the cultivation and preservation of a positive self-image by universities and higher education institutions is currently of great importance. A positive reputation can have the potential to draw in a more qualified group of individuals, such as professors and students, to these universities (Alves & Raposo, 2010). Despite the importance of establishing a favorable perception for higher education institutions, there is a lack of research examining how students and graduates perceive the brand image of universities (Del-Castillo-Feito et al., 2019). Nevertheless, there has been a significant rise in studies aimed at comprehending the mental images held by students and universities in recent times. This trend highlights the increasing interest of researchers and policymakers, particularly in developing countries with large student populations. Hence, the novelty of this research lies in the utilization of the future research method, called causal layer analysis, to examine the perceptions and mental constructs of master's students in relation to their decision to pursue doctoral studies at UT as their future study destination. This approach enables the identification of various scenarios depicting students' desires and intentions in relation to this academic decision. The findings of this study hold significant value for both prospective students considering UT as their study option and university administrators aiming to optimize policies and programs. Thus, the study aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of master's students' perspectives on pursuing doctoral studies at UT through the formulation of a key and overarching question:

Q- How many potential outcomes can be derived from the perspectives and cognitive frameworks of master's students in relation to pursuing further studies at Tehran University for their doctorate degree?

2. Literature Review

Students typically form their understanding of a university's identity and brand image prior to enrollment, and this understanding evolves as they progress throughout their academic path and beyond graduation (McCracken, 1989). In marketing research, the concept of "image" is utilized to depict the true perception of the organization by external stakeholders (Brown et al., 2006). These stakeholders, who may be directly or indirectly impacted by the organization's activities, have a vested interest in the organization's performance (Benneworth & Jongbloed, 2010). The notion of mental imagery has its roots in the latter half of the 20th century, particularly within the realm of behavioral psychology. Initially introduced as a concept, it has since undergone significant evolution. Several factors have contributed to this development, including (1) the rise of cognitive science and advancements in neuroscience, particularly through the application of sophisticated neuroimaging techniques in the analysis of mental imagery; (2) the identification and classification of various psychological elements associated with mental imagery; and (3) the incorporation of clinical practices into the methodological advancements of mental imagery, such as the reconstruction of images and the processing of traumatic memories, all of which have influenced its conceptual growth (Blackwell, 2023). Mental images can be generated from sensory or perceptual experiences, according to Richardson's definition. The mind likely encodes these experiences in the same sensory mode as the original stimulus. Recalling such experiences often results in a mental representation (image) in the same sense as the original (Trusheim, 2021). Mental imagery is predominantly a personal experience, posing challenges in objectively measuring it. To measure imagery, the most common method is to ask participants to self-report the intensity of their imagined experiences (Cumming & Eaves, 2018; Croijmans & Wang, 2022). An Image refers to the perception formed based on an individual's knowledge and comprehension of a particular subject. A positive image of an organization can bring about advantageous consequences, whereas a negative image can be harmful to the organization (Sutrisno et al., 2023; Leuwol et al., 2023). Mental image is very different and more distinct from imagination in terms of conceptual scope. Sometimes, these two concepts are used interchangeably: Mental image doesn't convey anything, while imagination does. It is possible to have multiple interpretations of a photo without imagination. Therefore, mental imagery cannot serve as a psychological attitude for imagination (Arcangeli, 2020).

Mental image is often described as a combination of beliefs and emotions viewed through a cognitive lens. Ivy (2001) defined the mental image of a higher education institution based on the strategies it uses, its implementation, and how it is viewed by individuals. This definition includes components outlined by Alessandri et al. (2006), who distinguished between university identity and image. University identity refers to the intentional and strategic planning carried out by higher education institutes to develop a positive public image, while the image reflects the public's view of the university. Many researchers believe that depicting the university image as distinctive and favorable can play a crucial role in attracting top-tier students and faculty members (Duarte et al., 2010). However, as highlighted by Lafuente-Ruiz-de-Sabando et al. (2018), there must be a shared understanding of the university's mental image, which includes various cognitive elements such as academic aspects, facilities, and equipment, as well as connections to different stakeholders, such as employers, industry partners, and those involved in university social responsibility, and geographical contexts. It can be complex to identify all the factors that shape the university image, particularly when individuals consider different combinations of these elements. Moreover, understanding the intricate interaction of these factors remains challenging, as they are shaped by political, social, cultural, and economic conditions unique to each society, resulting in variations across societies. Therefore, comprehensive examination within the same ecosystem is necessary to understand the complex dynamics of the mental image of students or universities. However, it is crucial to recognize that this perception significantly shapes a student's decision-making process when it comes to choosing a university (Duarte et al., 2010). Consequently, universities must maintain or establish an appealing image to secure a competitive edge (Parameswaran & Glowacka, 1995).

It is worth noting that the outcome of this choice can profoundly impact various aspects of a student's life, including their career trajectory, future place of residence, social circles, and overall satisfaction (Kotler & Fox, 1995). University brand image refers to how a particular group, usually stakeholders, view the university based on their interactions and knowledge of the institution (Wymer,

2013). This perception influences students as they gather information to make decisions about where to study. Additionally, students are influenced by various factors, such as advice from friends, family, faculty, and higher education counselors (Moogan et al., 1999). Measuring the mental image poses a challenge due to the complex and subjective nature of image structure, particularly in service industries where objective measurement criteria are scarce (LeBlanc & Nguyen, 1995). In contrast, Duarte et al. (2010) defined university image as an individual's collective beliefs about the institution. Capriotti (1999) described a representation of a tangible object that fulfills its intended function.

2.1. Study Theory
In the realm of conceptual history, Carl Rogers, a key figure in the development of person-centered therapy, significantly contributed to the establishment of self-determination theory. According to Rogers' theory of self-actualization, individuals adhere to an organismic valuing process, which serves as a cognitive framework, allowing them to trust in their inherent abilities and needs while progressing towards psychological well-being. However, achieving self-actualization necessitates effort within a social context. Rogers posits that an individual's choices represent an endeavor to create meaning and achieve psychological congruence with their personal value system. In essence, behaviors that promote this congruence are deemed meaningful when individuals comprehend the causal relationships between various elements. Conversely, any behavior, emotion, or thought that results in negative or discordant outcomes is considered unworthy of repetition or continuation. Within the humanistic framework, the ideal individual is characterized by an intrinsic drive for novel experiences, self-determination, and independence, while simultaneously fostering genuine and profound connections with others. This individual consistently strives to construct a cohesive and fulfilling future. By examining the parallels between Rogers' perspective and the self-determination theory, articulated by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci, one can discern notable similarities and significant correlations between these two theoretical constructs. This observation further reinforces the notion that Richard Ryan and Edward Deci belong to the third wave of psychology, akin to Maslow and Rogers, with Rogers serving as a particular source of inspiration (Patterson & Joseph, 2007). The self-determination theory encompasses two sub-theories that provide a more detailed understanding of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. These sub-theories, namely Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET) and Organismic Integration Theory (OIT), elucidate the role of social factors in intrinsic motivation and the varying degrees of contextual influences on extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Cognitive evaluation theory posits that intrinsic motivation can either be enhanced or diminished based on the surrounding social and environmental conditions. Drawing from needs theory, Deci and Ryan (2000) contend that interpersonal interactions, rewards, communication, and feedback, which foster a sense of competence during an activity, will bolster intrinsic motivation for that specific task. However, this intrinsic motivation is not achieved if the individual perceives their performance as lacking self-determination or the freedom to choose to engage in the activity. Therefore, for the principles of CET to be valid, motivation must be intrinsic and resonate with the individual. This theory further suggests that intrinsic motivation can be either supported or hindered based on whether the needs for autonomy and competence are fulfilled or obstructed, respectively. It is posited that the fulfillment of autonomy and competence needs is closely tied to our motivational drives. The second sub-theory, organismic integration theory, asserts that extrinsic motivation is contingent upon the degree of autonomy experienced. In essence, extrinsic motivation fluctuates based on the level of internalization and integration of the activity's value. Internalization refers to the extent to which an individual perceives the value of an activity, while integration describes the process through which a person transitions from external regulation to a self-regulated approach (Ackerman, 2018).

Self-determination theory (SDT) provides a comprehensive framework for examining the psychological landscape of doctoral candidates. SDT begins with a meta-theory of human nature, which implies a set of philosophical assumptions about the nature of people. The hypothesis is that individuals are inherently dynamic, naturally inclined to adapt, seek and solve challenges, and integrate new experiences. In SDT, the essential mental concept through which this happens is called organismic integration. It could signify people's proactive, engineered nature to become separated and coherent in their activities (Ryan & Vansteenkiste, 2023). It is a comprehensive theory of human motivation and personality, suggesting that individuals have intrinsic psychological needs for

autonomy, competence, and connection, and fulfilling these needs is crucial for optimal well-being and performance. This theory holds that everyone has three basic psychological needs—autonomy, relatedness, and competence—that motivate self-conscious behavior and participation (Ryan & Deci, 2022). SDT identifies three intrinsic psychological needs that apply universally to all individuals: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. "Autonomy" pertains to the need for individuals to be the source of their actions and choices. "Competence" involves the need to control outcomes and achieve efficiency. "Relatedness" reflects the desire to establish meaningful connections with others (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Motivation serves as a cornerstone for fostering high-quality learning. In SDT, motivation is divided into two distinct categories: extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic motivation is driven by the anticipated outcomes of our actions, which are separate from the actions themselves. In contrast, intrinsic motivation arises from the inherent satisfaction derived directly from the actions rather than being contingent on potential rewards or punishments. The level of motivation in these two categories is determined by how well our fundamental psychological needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy are fulfilled (Partanen, 2020).

This study will analyze the factors influencing the decision to pursue a doctoral degree using the self-determination theory (SDT). This study provides an opportunity to investigate how different factors affect the psychological well-being of doctoral candidates who are continuing their education. Factors such as advisor support, perceived competence, and assistance from peers and family can be scrutinized to understand their effects on candidates' motivation to pursue advanced education. Additionally, this approach explores how various types of motivation, such as intrinsic and extrinsic, influence the mindset of doctoral candidates pursuing further studies. Consequently, exploring how the motivation of these candidates is shaped by a range of factors within the academic environment, including job prospects, peer support, political and economic conditions, and cultural and societal norms, among others, can provide valuable insights into their psychological outlook.

Examining the underlying motivations for pursuing doctoral education in Iran holds significant importance, particularly in light of the country's high unemployment rate among university graduates. Students likely have intriguing motivations and perspectives that lead them to pursue doctoral studies in Iran. Additionally, the application of causal layer analysis, grounded in the future studies approach, represents a novel methodological approach for investigating students' mindsets regarding their decision to pursue doctoral education. By exploring this critical aspect, we can derive valuable insights that benefit higher education policymakers, planners, and university administrators. This research seeks to bridge existing studies' gaps by employing causal layer analysis. It aims to investigate the mental state of master's students as they consider pursuing doctoral studies at the University of Tehran (UT).

2.2. Research Background

This section provides an overview of relevant studies conducted in the field of inquiry. Qazi et al. (2022) delved into the impact of various factors on university reputation and student satisfaction. Their findings indicated that social contributions, research and development, and quality of university services significantly influenced the university's reputation and student satisfaction. Additionally, the university's environment, student guidance, and trust in the institution were identified as critical determinants of the university's reputation. In contrast, factors like university leadership and historical traditions substantially shaped students' satisfaction levels. In a study conducted by Manzoor et al. (2021), titled "Revisiting the 'University Image Model' for Higher Education Institutions' Sustainability," the researchers concluded that fostering satisfaction among students leads to improvements in students' citizenship behavioral outcomes, including advocacy, feedback, helping behavior, and tolerance.

Dorofeeva (2020) conducted a study focusing on the attributes of university brands and their significance from the students' perspective. The results underscored the influence of a competitive university brand on modern Russian students' decision-making process. According to students' viewpoints, a university brand is highly regarded based on its global ranking, the presence of experienced faculty members, positive public perception, extensive international collaborations, and alumni's achievements. In another study, titled "Determinants of University Reputation: Conceptual Model and Empirical Investigation in an Emerging Higher Education Market," Kaushal et al. (2021) explored the factors influencing university reputation. Their research revealed a significant correlation

between the structure of the mental image, students' perceptions, and their levels of satisfaction, attachment, and perceived value. Furthermore, their findings provided evidence for the impact of students' attachment on shaping the university's reputation.

Maunze et al. (2020), in their research, titled "The Influence of Internal Branding on Student Engagement: Insights from a South African University," found that students can exhibit loyalty to their universities even without a formal internal branding program. While the absence of internal branding did not appear to impact their academic commitment, it did harm their brand engagement. In a separate study, titled "Effect of University Heritage and Reputation on the Attitudes of Prospective Students," conducted by Merchant et al. (2015), it was concluded that the university's heritage positively influenced the university's reputation, students' attitudes, their willingness to pay a tuition premium, and their likelihood to recommend the university. Furthermore, students' nationality mediated the relationship between university heritage, reputation, and attitudes.

Aghaz et al. (2015), in their study, titled "Factors Contributing to University Image: Perspectives of Postgraduate Students," conducted an analysis and found that the factors contributing to the university's image encompass a wide range, including both internal and international reputation, the university's members, academic planning, and the overall university environment. The research conducted by Munisamy et al. (2014), titled "Does Reputation Matter? A Case Study of Undergraduate Choices at a Leading University," revealed that the most significant factors influencing students' decisions to pursue further studies were career prospects, university reputation, and the quality of its programs. Personal factors, such as the student's personal development aspirations, played a significant role in considering the university's reputation. Alves and Raposo (2010) explored the impact of university image on student behavior. They concluded that the mental image of a university strongly influences students' satisfaction, and is closely related to their loyalty. In this research, we aim to apply causal layer analysis to investigate the mental image of students as they consider pursuing doctoral studies in Iran. Our study comprehensively examines various factors and levels in Iran, including personal, familial, sociocultural, political, economic, higher education policy, and governance-related aspects.

3. Methodology
3.1. Conceptual Framework
The research is grounded in the interpretivism paradigm, which is based on the premise that individuals' perceptions, thoughts, and the meanings they attribute to their experiences can be comprehended through an exploration of their cultural contexts. This paradigm also embraces a relativist ontology, suggesting that an event can be interpreted in multiple ways rather than being defined by a singular fact ascertainable through a specific methodology. This approach allows for a more profound understanding of events, the intricate issues and phenomena within the specific contexts in which they occur, enabling researchers to discern both what transpired and how it occurred (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022).

3.2. Method
This research employed a qualitative case study methodology, widely utilized in academic research, especially for those interested in qualitative investigations (Baskarada, 2014). Qualitative case studies are highly significant for exploring specific phenomena within a particular context by using diverse data sources and examining them from various perspectives to uncover multiple facets of the phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008). A case study focuses on exploring a real-time phenomenon within its natural context, considering the context's significance (Rashid et al., 2019). This study focuses on the University of Tehran (UT) in Iran during the academic year 2022-2023. UT is a public university and one of Iran's largest higher education institutions, often called "The Mother University" and a symbol of higher education.

3.3. Society and Sampling Method
The research population comprises all doctoral candidates at UT in economics and higher education management. To ensure comprehensive coverage, we employed a full-census sampling strategy involving all 22 candidates who participated in interviews.

3.4. Data Collection

The instrument employed for data collection involved semi-structured interviews, wherein all participants were posed the same set of questions but were permitted to respond in their own manner. The typical length of these interviews ranged from 30 to 50 minutes. Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were strictly observed. Prior to the interviews, participants were made aware of the research's objectives. It was clearly stated that the data collected during the interviews would solely be utilized for research purposes.

3.5. Data Analysis

Causal layer analysis (CLA), developed by Soheil Inayatullah, was used to analyze the mental image of master's students considering pursuing a doctoral degree. Applying this method does not involve predicting the future; instead, it involves scrutinizing a particular subject's transformative context, potentially informing policy development. CLA encompasses four levels: litany, social causes, discourse/worldview, and myth/metaphor. The first level pertains to the unquestioned perception of the current reality. Moving to the second level, we delve into social causation and adopt a systematic perspective. Here, we scrutinize and challenge the data and information presented in the litany. Progressing to the third level involves identifying deep-seated ideological worldviews and discursive assumptions. We explore how various stakeholders shape the litany and system at this stage. Finally, the fourth level delves into the unspoken emotional dimensions. Therefore, this method concludes by examining potential future scenarios (Inayatullah, 1998; 2009; 2014). In conducting our data analysis, we employed the seven-step methodology proposed by Diekelmann et al. (1989). The analytical process comprised the following stages: (1) conducting and repeatedly reviewing the interviews; (2) interpreting and summarizing the interviews while identifying key codes; (3) engaging in discussions regarding the identified codes; (4) reaching out to interviewees to clarify any discrepancies between the text and their interpretations; (5) comparing the content of the interviews with one another; (6) revisiting and presenting the findings; and (7) soliciting expert opinions on the topic for inclusion in the final research report.

3.6. Data Validation

To enhance the credibility of the research, several measures were implemented during the coding phase, including peer debriefing, the involvement of an external auditor, and prolonged engagement. To mitigate errors and clarify any potential misunderstandings among the researchers, the information gathered was presented to the informants for verification. The peer debriefing process involved an external researcher, who is an expert in qualitative research, overseeing and evaluating the study. Furthermore, the researchers maintained a prolonged engagement with the research topic, spanning five months, which facilitated ongoing interaction with the participants. Efforts were also made to enhance the transferability of the findings by thoroughly describing the study's context, underlying assumptions, and research conditions, along with providing comprehensive details. To establish dependability in the research, a detailed auditing trail was created, outlining the processes of data collection, decision-making, interpretation, and analysis throughout the research journey. Additionally, to bolster the confirmability of the findings, measures were taken to minimize the influence of the researchers' thoughts, beliefs, and subjective expectations during data collection and analysis, including the use of field notes in the analytical and interpretative processes.

4. Findings

Based on the results of the data analysis, the student's mental image scenarios were grouped into four distinct categories in response to the key research question: mental imagery centered on self-development, mental imagery driven by a strong affinity for UT, mental imagery rooted in utilitarianism and practicality, and mental imagery shaped by disappointment and concerns about a decline in scientific pursuits. Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of each mental scenario's key concepts (codes) and themes. In the self-development scenario, students emphasize their professional growth and envision a future actively seeking personal and career advancement opportunities.

Table 1. Findings of Mental Imagery Scenario Based on Self-Development

Main theme	Sub-theme	Open codes
Academic attachment	Academic development	Increasing personal knowledge; Being up-to-date in knowledge; Lack of business-like view of gaining knowledge; Improving educational ability; Improving research ability; Increasing technical skills; Being in higher academic rank in the future; Fulfilling personal academic expectation; Increasing information about your specialized field; Personal skills development; Worrying about being a professional researcher; Participation in advancing the academic purposes of society
	Academic interest	Personal interest in the field of study; Interest in teaching job; Internal motivation to continue education; Feeling the need to have academic advancement; Academic self-motivation; Gaining more academic experiences; Personal ambition for gaining knowledge; Returning to academic environment; Having a spirit of personal perfectionism; Personal interest in research; Satisfying the curiosity; Personal motivation; Motivation for gaining knowledge; Becoming premier and well-known graduates; Gaining academic pleasure; Satisfying internal academic needs; Achieving a prominent academic position; Achieving academic credibility; Developing deep and critical thinking skill; Self- appreciation for learning; Creating a sense of academic booming; Personal academic achievement; Being an expert in the field of study; Being academically different
Developing the personality dimensions	Academic personality development	Developing personal advancement path; Intellectual growth; Personal socio-cultural growth; Developing your personal dimensions; Acquiring more professional academic identity; Improving personal ability for greater social impact; Prioritizing personal development
	Psychological development	Encourage a sense of accomplishment; Personal satisfaction; Improving personal confidence; The mentality of being superior; Recruitment as a faculty member in the future; Personal regret in case of not studying at higher levels; A sense of personal worth; fulfilling personal dream; Feeling usefulness in life

Excerpts from student interviews illustrating the mental imagery scenario centered on self-development are provided below: Interviewee (1): "My drive and passion for delving deeper into my field of study were the sole motivations for pursuing further education." Interviewee (2): "I recognized the importance of academic advancement, and that realization led me to believe that enhancing my academic standing was necessary." Interviewee (11): "Self-development, enhancing my self-awareness, and skill improvement are my primary motivations. Essentially, I am pursuing inner fulfillment, and no other incentive drives my decision to continue my education."

Table 2 displays the results of the mental imagery scenario rooted in a strong affinity for UT. The students' deep emotional connection and strong inclination towards UT were pivotal factors influencing their choice to pursue further education in the future.

Below are excerpts from interviews with students reflecting the mental imagery scenario centered on a strong affinity for UT: Interviewee (19): "Firstly, UT is situated in the capital and heart of Iran. It is one of the long-established universities in Iran and even in Asia." Interviewee (4): "A significant reason is UT's authenticity and reputation. It is a top-ranking university in Iran. Secondly, the academic department I intend to study in has a strong presence in my desired field, and some professors conduct research in areas of my interest." Interviewee (7): "UT has the finest professors, and its students produce the best books and papers. Every year, those who achieve the highest scores in the entrance exams choose UT as their educational destination." Interviewee (10): "It is a source of pride to tell someone that I study at UT, and the university's reputation holds value even internationally." Table (3) displays the outcomes of the mental imagery scenario rooted in utilitarianism and practicality. In this context, the primary drivers for pursuing doctoral-level education are financial gains and self-centered considerations. When considering their future studies at the doctoral level, students are mainly motivated by self-benefit.

Table 2. Findings of Mental Imagery Scenario Based on Keen on UT

Main theme	Subtheme	Key concepts
Academic status of UT	High academic quality of UT	Professors with high teaching proficiency; High academic sensitivity of UT; High educational quality; Center of excellence in the country; The most comprehensive university in all fields of study; High-ranking faculty members; Experienced professors; Hard-working faculty members; Having a large number of publications and articles; More specialized and knowledgeable graduates from UT; Accessibility to the world scientific databases in UT; professional behavior of the faculty members of UT; Plenty of teaching aids for faculty members; Rich academic environment of UT; High research ability of professors; Graduates' high critical thinking ability; Question-answering-centered environment of UT; More professional supervision of students' thesis; Interdisciplinary educational programs in UT; High academic level of theses and dissertations; Developing more academic connections through UT; Lots of international interactions in UT; The positive role of UT in global knowledge production; Professional teaching method of the faculty members; More severe academic criteria for admission in UT; Academic humility of faculty members; A pioneer university in country's academic events; Presence of the world's high ranking universities professors in UT; Students' high academic ability; Intense academic competence among students; Highly academically motivated students; The high acceptance rate of UT's graduates in the post-graduate courses
	Efficient management in UT	Many various financial aid to underprivileged students; Providing high-quality education services; More accountability in UT; The UT's efficient administrative management; Specialized workforce in UT; Providing more services in UT; The UT's more connection with industry; The UT's connection with important ministries of country; Professional management in UT
	Additional facilities in UT	The UT's software and technological facilities; Higher amenities; More educational buildings; Different architecture of the UT's buildings and classes; Equipped classrooms; High level laboratory facilities; High level sport facilities; High recreational facilities of the university; The splendor of the university campuses; Rich libraries; enhanced research facilities; More dormitory facilities; The variety of students' dormitory facilities; Proximity of dormitory buildings to the university; Equipped dormitory spaces with facilities
	Mental symbols for studying in UT	UT as the top university of Iran; UT as a brand university; The oldest university of the country; An international university; The presence of educated academic and political figures in UT; The popularity of UT, for instance the photo of UT's main gate on the national currency banknote; A prominent symbol of universities in Asia; Assuming the high credibility of the UT's degree in the society; High authenticity of UT; The UT as the symbol of the mother of higher education in Iran; Extensive advertising from advertising and academic consulting institutions about UT; The mentality of enthusiasm for learning among UT's students; Personal mentality and desire to study in UT; Using the brand of UT to get research projects from external institutes; Nostalgic feeling towards the UT; Using UT's brand for educational migration
Personal attachment to the UT	Psychological attachment to UT	Feeling honored to study in UT; Mentality of academic superiority of UT's graduates; Satisfactory experience of studying in the master's course in UT; Having a sense of pride from studying in UT; Acquiring academic identity through UT
	Academic attachment to UT	More specialized scientific socialization in UT; A rich learning environment in UT; Experiencing a high-quality academic life in UT; Experiencing the academic environment of UT; UT's environment effect on one's personality; Living in an academic rich culture; Changing field of study due to the academic quality of UT; Many learning opportunities at UT; Gaining experience from the working style of UT's faculty members; Multidimensional personality development in UT; Promoting cultural intelligence in the interaction with different cultures in UT; Developing a competitive spirit; Being hard-working; Improving educational ability; Improving research ability; Personal growth through membership in various associations; Developing in the multicultural environment of UT; Acquiring more professional identity
	Others' recommendations for studying in UT	Family and friends' recommendation for studying in UT; Academic recommendations of master's course professors; Being motivated by peer's recommendations about UT; Family and friends' encouragement for continuing education in UT; Other family members educated in UT; Academic background of graduated friends from UT
Socio- cultural status of UT	Social impact of UT	Different social mentality about UT; More social confidence in UT's graduates; Reputation of UT among all people; High status of UT graduates among family and friends; UT playing the lead role in social developments of Iran's history; The high social intelligence of UT's students in social interactions; Greater interaction of UT with society; UT's more social responsibility; Being socially influential
	Cultural impact of UT	More cultural acceptance of UT students; Positive attitude towards UT's graduates by organizations managers; Positive attitude of society towards studying in UT and instilling a sense of accomplishment; Cultural diversity in UT; The important status of UT in country's cultural programs; The significant role of UT in Iran's cultural development; More intimate cultural environment in UT; Dynamic cultural environment in UT; Being hard-working in UT; Rigor academic culture
	Political impact of UT	The center of political evolutions; The initiator of different movements in society; More active students' movements in UT; Numerous academic associations; Government's special attention to UT; Freedom of speech and conflict of opinions in UT

Table 3 .Findings of Mental Imagery Scenario Based on Usefulness-Utilitarianism

Main themes	Subthemes	Key concepts
Social self-interest	Self- interest in society level	Higher social status; To be addressed as doctor in society; Studying at doctoral level as a means of immigration to Tehran; Studying at doctoral level for associating with people of high social level
	Self- interest in family level	Being respected more by family and friends; Positive effect on marriage; Having higher status among family members; Being praised by family and friends; The effect of doctorate on future social status of children
Organizational self-interest	Personal organizational development	Increasing work efficiency; Job promotion in organization; Advancement in one's career; Responding to job requirements; Getting more job benefits; Getting higher job positions; Fulfilling the job purposes; More job advancements; Being selected as the premier employee in the organization; Better job performance; Having managerial positions in the future; Acquiring job-related knowledge; Acquiring more job skills; Having the prospect of changing vocational status in the future; More achievements and job satisfaction
	Self- interest in organizational level	Having a higher status among co-workers; A higher status in workplace; Being more respected in workplace; To be addressed as doctor in workplace; Being well-known in the organization; Being praised in the organization
	Increasing the capacity of personal employability	Increasing the capacity of employability; High acceptance rate of UT's degree in labor market; Economic need to obtain a degree; Increasing job opportunities; Positive attitude of employers toward UT's graduates; Numeral connections of UT professors with business institutions and industries; Providing job opportunities with other organizations after students' graduation; More job-hunting motivation; Better career prospects; Possibly more job opportunities in Tehran after graduation
	Economic aspects of continuing education	Reduction of education expenses according to proximity of the place of residence; Long-term economic outcomes of studying in UT; Economic motivation; Getting paid more in organizations; Speeding up the process of educational migration to other countries; The lower cost of studying in UT compared to studying at a private university

Here are some examples of quotes from students that reflect the mental imagery scenario centered on utilitarianism and practicality: Interviewee (5): "Without a doubt, pursuing a doctoral degree will open up avenues for job promotions, and to be honest, it will garner greater respect from colleagues within our organization. Interviewee (15): "I anticipate that a doctoral degree will lead to enhanced job prospects, ultimately contributing to greater family success." Table 4 outlines the results of the mental imagery scenario associated with disappointment and a decline in the scientific field. This scenario represents a discouraging outlook on pursuing a doctoral degree. It arises from various factors, including government policies and public sentiment, contributing to the unfortunate decision-making process regarding future education.
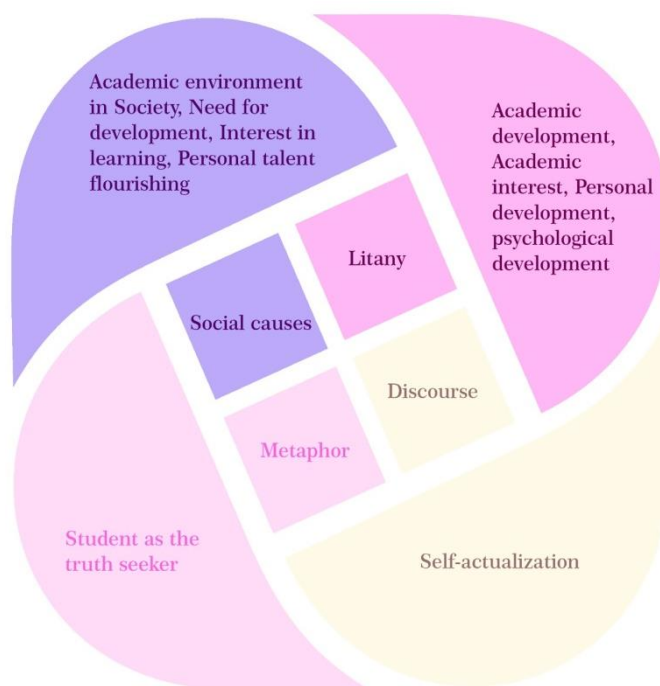
5. Discussion

As previously mentioned, we derived four scenarios from our data analysis regarding students' motivation to pursue doctoral education. We analyzed each scenario's key concepts (codes) in detail and organized them into relevant themes. Table 5 provides an overview of these scenarios.

Within the first scenario, which focuses on self-development through mental imagery, we identified four subthemes: academic development, academic interest, personality development, and psychological development. Figure 1 illustrates the analysis of this scenario utilizing causal layer analysis.

Table 4. Findings of Mental Imagery Scenario Based on Disappointment and Scientific Decline

| Main theme	Subtheme	Key concepts
Inefficient policy-making	Inappropriate policy-making in higher education	Quantitative policy-making related to student population; Inappropriate marketing policies for continuing education by universities; Numerous universities in Iran; Lots of seats available for doctorate in Iran; Increasing the number of low-quality universities in Iran; Monetization of doctorate degree with the expansion of low-quality private higher education institutions; Some fields of study are old and not interdisciplinary; Students' confusion and lack of purposive academic planning; Inappropriate policy in university development planning in Iran; Inadequate development of technical and professional training (skill training); Attracting more graduate students to publish more articles in universities; Inefficiency of student admission system in Iran; Centralized structure in higher education policymaking; Lack of independence in universities; Educational saturation in higher education; Inadequacies in regulations for the promotion of faculty members
	Inappropriate policy-making in labor market	Inadequacy of job and educational qualification in the labor market; Lack of career planning for graduates; Changes in labor market and the need for a degree (specialization of labor market); Lack of job for graduates and forced to continue studying for the doctorate as a way to find a job; High expectations of employers; More competition for employment in the labor market; Lack of consistency between some fields of study with labor market needs and conditions; Inappropriate educational guidance program; Unsuitable situation of the labor market for doing entrepreneurship
Socio-cultural weakness	Cultural weakness	Prevalence of credentialism in society; Desire to attain a doctorate degree; Negative competition in society to obtain a doctorate degree
	Social weakness	Increasing desire of civil servants for higher education; Numerous media advertising for doctorate studies; Decreasing marriage rate and continuing the education among students; Social compulsion to continue education; Ideological tendencies in continuing education; Attractiveness and excessive social desirability for the faculty role; Deferment of military service

Fig. 1. Students' Causal Layer Analysis in the Category of Mental Imagery Based on Self-Development

Within this scenario, the litany level includes these four subthemes: the academic environment within society, the need for personal development, a genuine interest in learning, and the desire to nurture individual talents. At the higher level of communication, this can be seen as a search for self-improvement in the future, and in this context, we can liken the student to a truth-seeker. Self-actualization, as proposed by Maslow, represents the highest human need and involves utilizing one's

abilities most creatively and effectively. On the other hand, self-efficacy is characterized by a belief in one's potential and capacity to overcome challenges and achieve goals (Ordun & Akün, 2017). These self-actualization processes are integral to the learning journey: Self-awareness entails recognizing one's interests, desires, preferences, personality traits, and temperament. Introspection entails comparing one's self-awareness findings with the professional requirements of their chosen field. Self-improvement is the deliberate cultivation of the necessary attributes for success in one's professional endeavors (Shipunova et al., 2019). In reality, self-actualization is the most elevated level of human improvement where one's full potential is realized. Instruction is one of the leading ways of accomplishing self-actualization. Students with self-actualization optimize their capacities to fulfill past desires (Farimani & Shahri, 2020; Gopinath, 2020).

Consequently, self-actualization is achieved by fully realizing the student's potential, which cannot be attained solely through quality education in institutions. A critical factor in achieving student self-actualization success is maximizing available inputs by providing optimal services to create quality outcomes. This achievement will also enhance student satisfaction (Suyudi et al., 2022). Academic institutions play an important role in students' lives. As educational professionals, schools and colleges foster students' growth and development according to their abilities and potential, this development allows students to learn about their skills and potential and take charge of their own lives to create efficient strategies for attaining their objectives (Salleh et al., 2021). Figure 2 delves into the causal layer analysis of the mental imagery scenario centered on a strong affinity for UT.
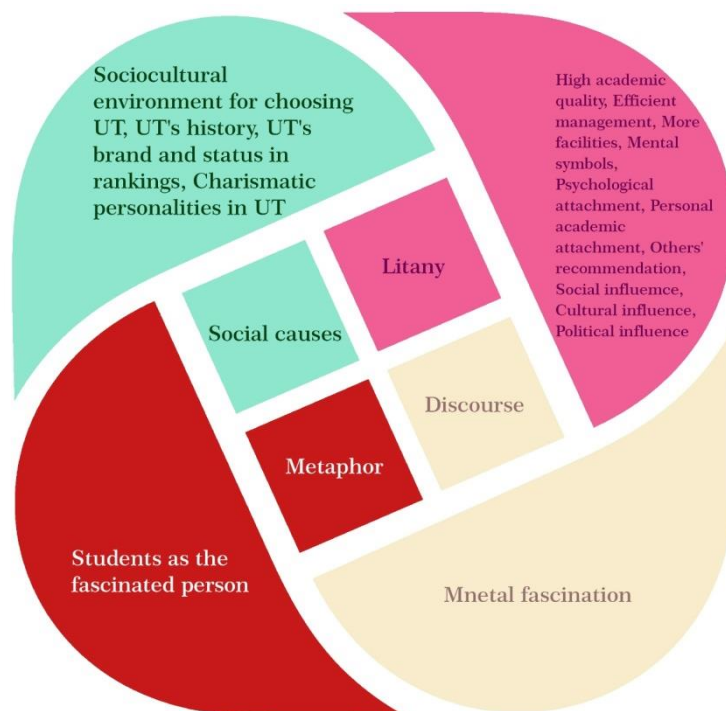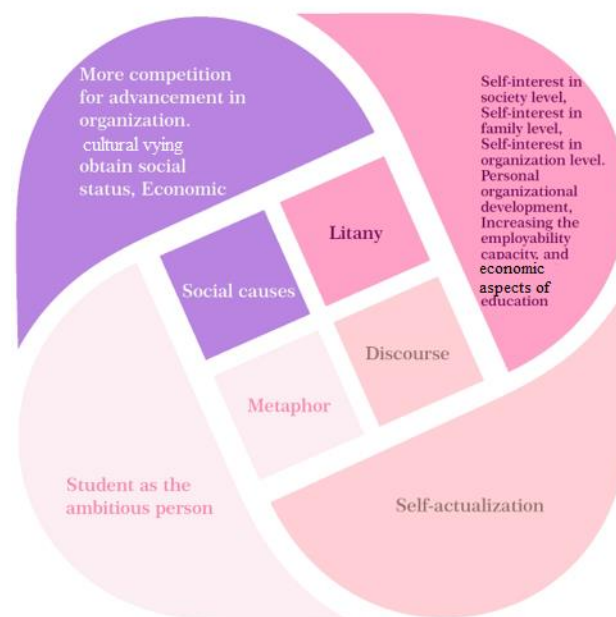

Fig. 2. Students' Causal Layer Analysis in the Category of Learner Keen on UT

In this scenario, the litany level encompasses ten subthemes. The underlying causes can mainly be attributed to an individual's mindset. Personal beliefs and mental perspectives have been the main driving forces behind the decision to pursue further education. Hence, the terminology used here includes the discourse of "mental fascination," with the metaphor of the "student as the fascinated one" aptly applied. The competition between universities and colleges is getting more severe due to the revolutions in higher instruction, so each institution needs to separate itself in advertising. To distinguish themselves, they need to strengthen their brand, increase awareness, and use digital technologies to enhance their marketing strategies (Barus, 2023). In this respect, creating a distinct brand image is one of the most effective strategies for universities to thrive in an increasingly competitive environment. The American Marketing Association defines the following: To distinguish a seller's products and services, a brand must include names, words, signs, symbols, or any

combination thereof that differentiates it from another seller's products and services (Tien et al., 2021). Such a unique brand image can significantly enhance a university's reputation. In different environments, organizational reputations have become a familiar and crucial concern. Given the rapid and broad changes in policy, culture, society, technology, or industry, organizations need to consider their reputations with a view to success (Romiani et al., 2024). The quality of education, the high level of research activity, and the university's social responsibility form a basis for its reputation. The university's reputation includes tangible assets, student and employer connections, experience, and feedback (Zyryanova et al., 2020). A positive reputation is a favorable signal for potential students and a distinguishing factor for the institution. A strong brand image increases student satisfaction and fosters brand loyalty when combined with positive word-of-mouth. In this process, the university establishes a unique selling point that bolsters its competitive edge (Panda et al., 2019).

Prospective students thoroughly assess university brands and attributes, weighing their relative importance (Curtis et al., 2009). The exchange value of a degree from reputable institutions can positively impact students' satisfaction and future benefits (Braunack-Mayer et al., 2020; Al Hassani & Wilkins, 2022). Moogan et al. (2001) argued that institutions with well-established brands have a better chance of attracting students. For example, Curtis et al. (2009) noted that esteemed higher education institutions, such as Oxford, Cambridge, MIT, and Harvard actively promote their brand and reputation to ensure that potential candidates and their families understand the values these brands represent. Students and their families, much like consumers in the goods market, have to navigate through various university brands to find the most suitable option for their needs (Stephenson et al., 2016). Figure 3 provides a causal layer analysis of the mental imagery scenario rooted in utilitarianism and practicality.
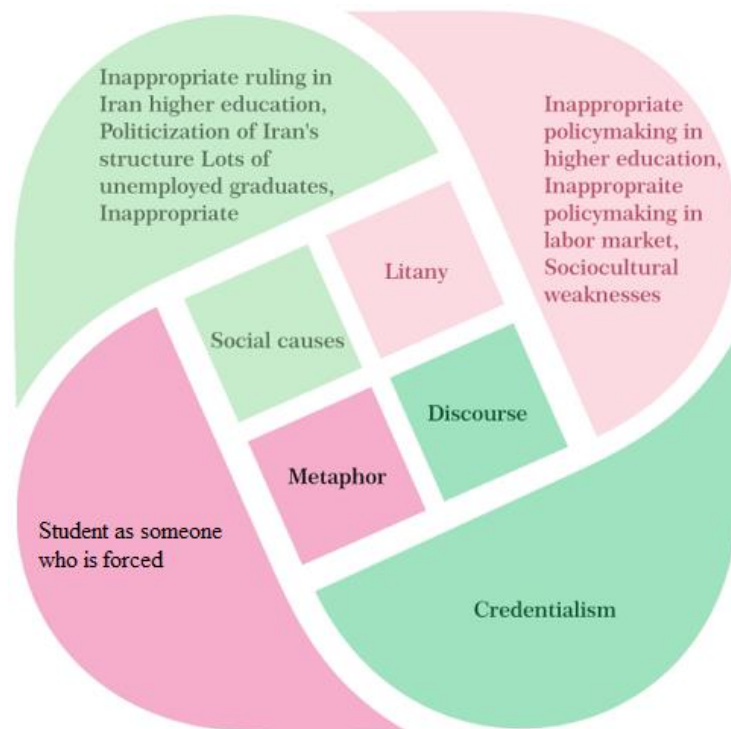

Fig. 3. Students' Causal Layer Analysis in the Category of Mental Imagery Based on Usefulness-Utilitarianism

In this scenario, students adopt an instrumentalist perspective when considering further education and doctoral degrees. Therefore, their primary motivation is self-interest, encompassing monetary and non-monetary gains, rather than a genuine passion for learning. Instead of placing value on the intrinsic aspects of education, they see education and learning as valuable, primarily because they can potentially yield greater self-interest in the future. The relationship between consumers and brands is similar to personal relationships because consumers' brand affiliations influence how they perceive and evaluate a brand. Research indicates that consumers will feel a stronger connection to brands when they sense a shared identity or connection with the brand (Eastman et al., 2020). Many of the same principles and concepts related to consumer behavior may be applicable when choosing a

university. In order to understand how prospective students make their choices about the university, concepts such as perception, attitude, motivation, and group influence can play a significant role (Novita et al., 2024). Over time, neoliberal ideas and policies have influenced our financial and political spheres, significantly impacting social strategies of various kinds. The University, where several neoliberal fundamental principles provide a valuable analytical framework for examining the evolution of students as customers, is among those institutions shaped by this change (Mintz, 2021).

The neoliberal university highlights educators' social and financial oppression, while public universities focus on professional preparation, academic work as unpaid labor, and casualization of the labor force (Biner, 2019; Coşkan et al., 2021). In the students' decision-making process, materialism serves as the prevailing discourse within this mental scenario, and the corresponding metaphor characterizes the student as an ambitious individual. The widely accepted definition of *materialism* is "a set of firmly held beliefs regarding the significance of possessions in one's life" (Richins & Dawson, 1992). According to Kasser (2002), materialism is uniquely associated with the belief that consumption and possession of goods can lead to happiness, and it can be further amplified by acquiring more possessions. Materialists heavily rely on their possessions, considering them integral to their lives (Antiniené et al., 2021). Individuals with a profit-driven and practical approach to continuing their education aim to maximize their self-interest by pursuing doctoral studies. Figure 4 provides a causal layer analysis of the mental imagery scenario rooted in disappointment and concerns regarding the decline in scientific standards.

Fig. 4. Students' Causal Layer Analysis in the Category of Mental Imagery Based on Disappointment and Scientific Decline

Within this scenario, students see continuing their education as the only way to delay their unemployment situation, considering it a distraction from their joblessness; this represents the most unfavorable scenario for pursuing doctoral studies. The emergence of this mindset in the future can be attributed to various reasons at both macro and micro levels. Consequently, the discourse of credentialism and the metaphor portraying the student as a disillusioned individual describe this perspective. In the Iranian context, credentialism encompasses numerous factors contributing to this scenario, including the proliferation of universities and higher education institutions, the growth of the student population, societal enthusiasm for academic degrees, imbalances in the supply and demand within the job market, inadequate connections between universities and industry, and a lack of

purposeful academic guidance, among others. The job search process for graduates can generally be described using three models (Pelekh et al., 2022):

1. Sequential transition from extensive to intensive search learning
2. Change in search mode due to personal experience and observation of other people's success
3. Emotional changes related to frustration and accumulation of stress from failure

6. Conclusion

The main objective of this comprehensive study was to explore the attitudes of master's students toward pursuing doctoral education at the University of Tehran. To achieve this, we employed a qualitative case study methodology and causal layer analysis to examine why students choose to further their education. The resulting scenarios were categorized into four distinct groups: mental imagery centered on self-development, mental imagery driven by a strong affinity for UT, mental imagery rooted in utilitarian considerations, and mental imagery colored by disappointment and concerns about the decline of scientific pursuits. This section builds on previous research to give background information for our findings. In a study by Bartkute (2017), titled "Lithuanian Students' University Choice: A Consumer Value Approach," it was determined that vocational preferences, rather than economic or image-related considerations, played the most significant role in influencing university choices.

However, there is evidence that prospective students are making more informed decisions when securing a spot at a university and are increasingly considering the financial implications of their choices. This consideration aligns with our study's findings, which align with the mental imagery scenario centered on usefulness-utilitarianism. These students primarily considered economic and career-related factors in their decision to pursue further education. This is consistent with the research conducted by Nuseir and El Refae (2022), titled "Factors Influencing the Choice of Studying at UAE Universities: An Empirical Research on the Adoption of Educational Marketing Strategies." Their research identified various factors influencing students' choices when choosing universities in the UAE, including academic reputation, available grants and funding, proximity to location, facilities and services, and promotional and marketing efforts.

Li et al. (2021), in their study titled "Factors Influencing Chinese Tourism Students' Choice of an Overseas PhD Program," discovered that personal motivations, the image of the country, the appeal of the city, the reputation of the institution, and the evaluation of the program influenced Chinese tourism students' decisions to pursue an overseas doctoral program. Qasim et al. (2021), in their research, titled "Student University Choice in Kurdistan-Iraq: What Factors Matter?" identified reputation, teaching quality, employability prospects, and university facilities as the most influential factors affecting students' choices in Kurdistan-Iraq. A separate study, titled "Assessing Factors Influencing Students' Choice of Malaysian Public University," concluded that students are swayed by factors such as the university's environment, available facilities, and the range of courses offered (Rudhumbu et al., 2017). These findings align with the mental imagery scenario centered on a strong affinity for UT, where the university's brand and reputation significantly influenced students' decisions. Furthermore, Munisamy et al. (2014), in their study, titled "Does Reputation Matter? Case Study of Undergraduate Choice at a Premier University," determined that, in addition to a university's reputation, a student's desire for self-development is a crucial factor in their decision-making process when selecting a university. This finding corresponds with the results of the mental imagery scenario focused on self-development. Notably, relevant research was not identified for the fourth scenario, which revolves around disappointment and concerns about scientific decline.

It is impossible to select a single scenario to analyze Iran's higher education situation according to the four scenarios set out in this research. In Iran's higher education, a combination of scenarios is feasible. In such a way, students decide to pursue their studies for growth and self-satisfaction; it is their internal motivation, needs, and personal interests that drives such a decision. In a study by Novikova et al. (2022), titled "Self-actualization Features among EU and Russian University Students," it is evident that the majority of respondents have shown a similar level of self-actualization regarding their values based on the results obtained from the comparison between two university student sample. Furthermore, they did not recognize any noteworthy contrasts concurring with the participants' gender. Hence, the investigated discoveries illustrate greater similarities than differences

within the level of self-actualization among students from the European Union and Russia. When considering the second scenario, it is essential to note that the University of Tehran is the oldest and one of the best universities in Iran. Many students aspire to study at this university due to its strong reputation, which significantly influences their academic choices. Moreover, families and community culture are more inclined to this university. These factors all play a role in forming the second scenario for students. In research by Kountouridou and Domic (2022), to investigate the impact of a positive visualisation course in brand identity on freshmen students' perceptions of university brand image, they concluded that a course on positive branding could increase students' perceptions of the university brand image. In a recent study conducted by Nayebzadeh et al. (2024) in the field of Iranian university education, titled "Causal Mapping of a Successful Brand in Iranian Higher Education (case study: Technical and Vocational University)," it was found that a successful brand in higher education comprises six essential components. These components include the university's image, costs and financial matters, school services and facilities, advertising and external communications, planning and achieving educational excellence, and campus location.

Personal interests are the basis of psychological images under the third scenario. It has prompted many students to pursue further studies because employers are interested in hiring graduates from University of Tehran. They continue their studies after searching for work, regardless of their needs and interests and the university's reputation. A study on the massing of higher education in Iran found that massing had inappropriately taken place. Despite their support for quantitative expansion, university professors were deeply concerned about the consequences of this process for the university system, its culture and values, and the social system (Hemmati, 2013). In a study critiquing the neoliberal approach to the educational system, researchers concluded that increasing competition, reducing collaboration, viewing individuals as tools, and commercializing knowledge instead of valuing it as a pursuit of truth have negative consequences. One of the challenges of this approach is ignoring public welfare and excellent and monopolistic individualism. Moreover, concrete examples of the spread of market culture and the commercialization of education, especially higher education in Iran, include the increase of nonprofit organizations with low quality and high numbers, the increase of competition for commercialization of knowledge, the proximity of universities to industry, and the lack of research ethics in recent years (Mohammadi & Zibakalam, 2015).

In the fourth scenario, an inappropriate mentality and disappointing scientific decline have led to an increase in the number of students from Iran attending higher education institutions and universities. Consequently, this has caused a decrease in the quality of education and research. Society's culture has also significantly influenced students' desire to obtain an academic degree in connection with this problem. Given Iran's rising unemployment rate, students with higher education seek to delay their unemployment to secure future job prospects. There are different reasons for the lack of educational attainment in Iran. In a study that analyzed the roots of unemployment among Iranian university graduates, Keykha (2022) divided the causes and factors into two categories: intra-organizational and extra-organizational. Higher education is a combination of scenarios that vary depending on the level and intensity of students' educational decisions.

7. Research Suggestions

Future researchers are encouraged to explore this topic further through a quantitative longitudinal study employing questionnaires. This approach would allow for an in-depth examination of students' mindsets over an extended period, encompassing both pre-enrollment and post-graduation phases. To assess the alignment of these mental images, researchers can employ advanced statistical techniques such as multilevel analysis to explore various levels of influence. Additionally, comparative studies across different countries could yield valuable insights into the factors influencing students' decisions to pursue further education. Categorizing these factors based on each society's unique conditions and context could provide a comprehensive understanding of mental imagery, considering its intricacy and mindfulness.

8. Research Limitations

Qualitative research is limited in terms of generalizability. This study's findings may only apply to specific societies or contexts. Another area for improvement is the difficulty of reaching and accessing participants due to the geographical dispersion of students after their doctoral interviews.

9. Research implications

The following outlines the key policy and executive recommendations:

- Enhancing the academic quality of life for prospective PhD candidates in the initial scenario to foster self-improvement, satisfy intellectual curiosity, and facilitate personal development.
- Elevating the standards of education and research at the university to bolster its global standing and shape students' perceptions in the second scenario.
- Attracting and hiring distinguished faculty members while also recruiting talented PhD candidates to enhance the university's rankings on both national and international levels in the second scenario.
- Overhauling organizational frameworks and implementing merit-based promotion systems within public and private sectors for selecting PhD candidates in the third scenario.
- Aligning the supply and demand of students in higher education with a particular focus on quality aspects effective in depicting PhD candidates in the fourth scenario.
- Establishing good governance frameworks in higher education to cultivate effective leadership and management in the selection of PhD candidates in the fourth scenario

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