

# **Applying the Stimulus-Organism-Response framework (S-O-R) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to Moroccan Students' Grandes Écoles Choice: A Theoretical Framework**

## **Application du modèle Stimulus-Organisme-Réponse (SOR) et de la Théorie du Comportement Planifié (TCP) aux choix des Grandes Ecoles par les étudiants marocains : Cadre théorique**

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### Abstract

This article suggests a theoretical framework combining the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) with the Stimulus-Organism-Response framework (S-O-R) to explore the decision-making process of students deciding to pursue education at regulated access Higher Education Institution (HEI), specifically, the Grandes Ecoles. Our aim is to build a thorough conceptual model including the social external and individual cognitive elements influencing the choice of a HEI by aggregating these two well-known theories.

**Keywords:** Student Choice Behavior, Brand Image, Stimulus-Organism-Response Model, Theory of Planned Behavior, Decision-Making in Higher Education.

### Résumé

Cet article propose un cadre théorique intégrateur combinant la Théorie du Comportement Planifié (TCP) et le modèle Stimulus–Organisme–Réponse (S-O-R), dans l'optique d'analyser le processus de prise de décision des étudiants lors du choix d'un établissement d'enseignement supérieur à accès régulé, en particulier les Grandes Écoles. Notre objectif est de développer un modèle conceptuel approfondi qui tient compte à la fois des facteurs externes sociaux et des facteurs cognitifs individuels, et ce, en mobilisant ces deux approches théoriques majeures.

**Mots clés :** Comportement de choix des étudiants, image de marque, modèle Stimulus-Organisme-Réponse, Théorie du Comportement Planifié, Prise de décision dans l'enseignement supérieur.

## Introduction

It is undeniable that the Grande Écoles system embodies a remarkably unique and prestigious segment in the Higher Education landscape both in France and Morocco, in contrast to open access institutions and universities (Bourdieu, 1989; Vermeren, 2000). Thus, students are often confronted to a pivotal choice as to whether seek an education in a Grande École which would require spending years of preparation and striving against an extremely competitive selection process or to pursue studies in a university (Albouy and Wanecq, 2003). It's crucial to understand the decision-making process behind this choice, as it has lasting consequences on students' future opportunities and career paths. Although the prestige of the Grandes Écoles is widely recognized, the complex psychological and behavioral mechanisms that drive a student to undertake this challenging choice are not fully understood. This gap in the literature leads to our main research question: **To what extent does the brand image of a Grande École, as an external stimulus, interact with students' internal psychological factors to shape their final decision to enroll in a regulated-access Higher Education Institution?**

The study proposes a theoretical framework combining two well-established models: the Stimulus-Organism-Response model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), in order to examine this decision-making process. Integrating these models allows the construction of a comprehensive conceptual framework that takes into consideration both environmental stimuli affecting students' perceptions and internal processes guiding their intentions and choices.

Methodologically, this article adopts a theoretical and conceptual research design. In fact, it doesn't involve empirical data collection but rather focuses on a synthesis of existing literature and theoretical constructs to build a novel model tailored to the Moroccan context that can serve as a foundation for future quantitative or qualitative studies.

To this end, the paper is organized into five main sections. The first section will outline the Moroccan Higher Education landscape by examining its public, private, and public-private partnership dimensions. The second section will focus on regulated access institutions, notably the Grandes Écoles system and will contrast the French and Moroccan models. The third and fourth sections will be dedicated to presenting our core theoretical foundations: the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Model and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), respectively. Finally, the fifth section will synthesize these elements into our proposed integrated theoretical framework and discuss its implications and potential for future empirical research.

## Theoretical background

### 1. The Moroccan Higher Education Landscape

Initially, the Moroccan Higher Education landscape was organized around two main segments: Public Higher Education and Private Higher Education, as defined in law no. 01-00 on the organization of Higher Education.

Nevertheless, since 2010, the Higher Education sector, considered as one of the pillars of development in Morocco, has been transformed and broadened towards a new status of Public-Private Partnership (PPP) Higher Education. According to the report Higher education reform: strategic perspectives n°15/2019, a number of universities have been created in this new format, benefiting from both state support and student contributions to finance their studies.

Hence, the current Moroccan Higher Education system can be categorized into 3 main segments: Public Higher Education, Public-Private Partnership Higher Education and Private Higher Education, all of which can be represented as follows:

**Table 1. Categories of Higher Education in Morocco**

Public Higher Education		Private Higher Education	Public-Private Partnership (PPP) in Higher Education
<i>Public universities</i>	<i>Higher Education establishments not affiliated to universities</i>		

Source: authors

#### 1.1. Public Higher Education

*Public universities:*

These are public establishments under the authority of the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation (MESRSI). There are 12 public universities spread across different regions of the Kingdom of Morocco, with a total of 160 faculties and establishments belonging to these universities. There is also Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, an autonomous public university with a derogatory status.

**Table 2. List of Moroccan public universities**

List of Moroccan public universities	
1	University Mohammed V – Rabat
2	University Hassan II of Casablanca
3	University Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah – Fès
4	University Mohammed Premier – Oujda
5	University Cadi Ayyad – Marrakech
6	University Moulay Smail – Meknès
7	University Abdelmalek Essaadi – Tétouan
8	University Chouaib Doukkali – El jadida
9	University Ibn Tofail – Kénitra

10	University Ibn Zohr – Agadir
11	University Hassan I – Settat
12	University Sultan Moulay Slimane – Béni Mellal

Source: authors

*Higher Education establishments not affiliated to universities:*

According to the Enssup website, these are the 39 specialized establishments with regulated access, as specified in article 25 of law 01-00, placed under the authority of several ministerial departments and divided into 9 education fields:

- Architecture, urban planning, development and environment
- Art, culture and sport
- Administrative, legal and management studies
- Agricultural, forestry and marine sciences
- Education
- Life and earth sciences
- Engineering science and technology
- Information and communication science and technology
- Social and Health Sciences

### **1.2. Private Higher Education**

These are establishments created by private initiatives and placed under the pedagogical authority of the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation. These institutions are divided into private universities gathering various faculties organized by the field of training, and private schools of higher education.

On the report *Higher education in figures 2023-2024*, there are 6 private universities (University Mundiapolis Casablanca, International University of Casablanca, Private University of Fez, Private University of Marrakech, International University of Agadir, Private University of Health and Science of Agadir) with 34 establishments affiliated to these universities, and 125 private establishments not affiliated to universities.

### **1.3. Public-Private Partnership (PPP) in Higher Education**

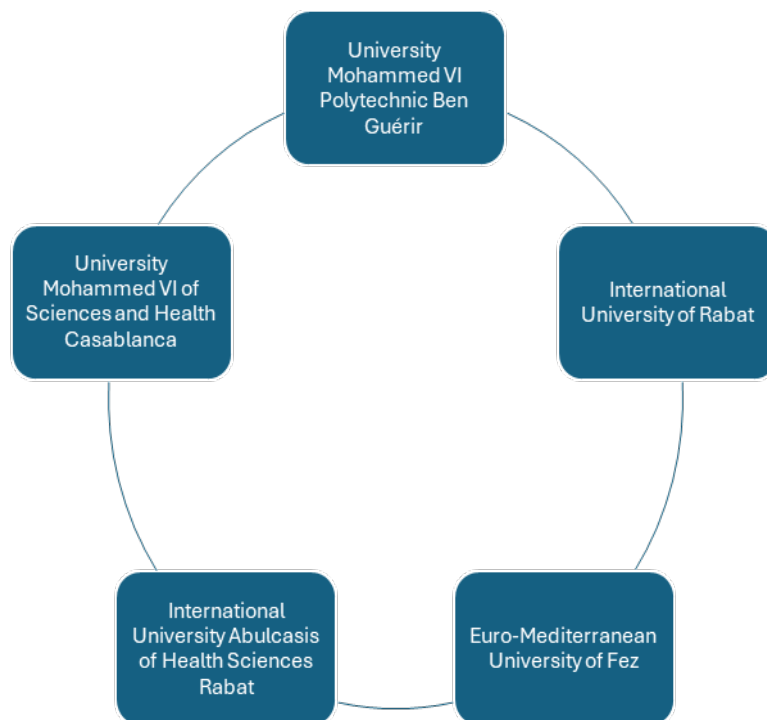
These are non-profit foundations created as part of the dynamic drive to strengthen ties between the professional and academic worlds of Moroccan higher education. These establishments are founded in partnership between the State and private-sector companies, then placed under the educational authority of the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation (MESRSI). According to the MESRSI report “L’Enseignement supérieur en chiffres 2023-2024”, Morocco currently counts 48 private higher education establishments created within the

framework of partnerships, including 5 universities (University Mohammed VI Polytechnic Ben Guérir, University Mohammed VI of Sciences and Health Casablanca, International University of Rabat, International University Abulcasis of Health Sciences Rabat, Euro-Mediterranean University of Fez). (see figure 1, p.7)

## 2. Regulated access institutions in Higher Education

Moroccan public Higher Education is structured around two modes of access to institutions, an open access system welcoming the vast majority of students with a rate of 88% in 2014-2025, and a regulated, more selective access system welcoming 12% of students as specified in the Report N°5/2019 Higher Education Reform Strategic Perspectives. A second study in 2017 corroborates these findings and shows that the ratio of student numbers per institution is 12.227 in open access versus 1423 in regulated access. Open access establishments are easy to get into, and require no prerequisites other than a baccalaureate diploma, which is why the overwhelming majority enroll there by default of not passing the competitive entrance exams of regulated access establishments. This disparity is all the more perceptible upon completion of studies and entry into the job market. Côme and Yassine (2015) were able to demonstrate through a field study that the motivation and involvement of students from regulated-access institutions was higher than that of open-access students, where amotivation was observed, and possibly explains why the mode of entry very likely has an impact on the chances of success.

**Figure 1. Public-Private Partnership Moroccan universities**



Source: authors

## 2.1. The “Grandes Ecoles” system

Inspired by the French education system, where there were two types of institutions, the universities and the Grandes Ecoles, two structures with diametrically opposed roles. Until the 1970s, the universities were dedicated to research and the transmission of abstract knowledge, while the Grandes Ecoles, a French specificity, were dedicated to training engineers and top executives for the private and public sectors. While access to university was open to all, the Grandes Ecoles were highly selective, with highly demanding entrance examinations (Albouy & Wanecq, 2003). The adoption of the “Grandes Ecoles” in Morocco is modelled on the pre-existing system in France.

However, we can't address the Grandes Ecoles without going back to the “Classes Préparatoires aux Grandes Ecoles” (Preparatory classes for the Grandes Ecoles), originally created in the 18th century in the military context, where various corps were recruited through an entrance examination. The leitmotif of this new creation was “merit alone and people's ability attract them jobs”, as preached by Vauban (1685), who instituted the first competitive recruitment examination for the army, necessitating the adoption of preparatory classes for this examination. These preparatory classes were exclusively scientific, before paving the way, decades later, for the creation of literary (khâgnes) and then commercial preparatory classes (Dauvergne and Vignolles, 2010).

This two-year education system is intended as a tool to train the national elite capable of leading and developing the country. Undoubtedly, this is the golden ticket to a Grande École. (*Classes Préparatoires aux Grandes Écoles - CPGE - Rapport Rentrée scolaire de septembre 2022 & Bilan de l'année scolaire 2021/2022*)

For Le Pape and Van Zante (2009), access to higher education does not guarantee social distinction; it's the choice of post-baccalaureate studies that makes the distinction and shapes the unequally profitable and valued educational pathways. The choice of the Grandes Ecoles is as highly valued in France as it is in Morocco, as a distinctive path of excellence chosen by the most assiduous and hardworking students.

According to the report on the insertion of higher education graduates (National Survey 2018) conducted by the Higher Council for Education, Training and Scientific Research, this disparity is well illustrated in terms of employment rates, where holders of engineering and business school diplomas account for 87.9% and 84.9% respectively, compared with university masters degrees with 72.2%.

## 2.2. The French and Moroccan Grandes Écoles Systems

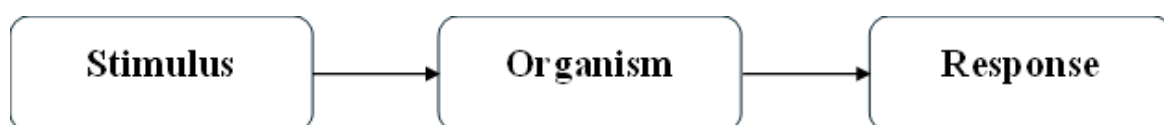
The Grandes Écoles system in France is characterized by its selectivity, prestige, and strong links to elite professional networks (Brezis & Crouzet, 2006), these institutions are compared to the Ivy Leagues universities in the US. Similarly, the Moroccan Grandes Écoles, largely modeled on the French system, have become key institutions in the training of Morocco's elite. In both countries, admission to Grandes Écoles typically requires completion of preparatory classes (Classes Préparatoires aux Grandes Écoles, or CPGE) and success in highly competitive entrance examinations (“concours”) (Darmon, 2013, Brezis & Crouzet, 2006). The choice to pursue a Grande École education in France as well as Morocco is influenced by various factors, including, among other factors, the academic excellence and career prospects (Darchy-Koechlin & Draelants, 2010), the institutional prestige and rankings (Draelants & Darchy-Koechlin, 2011) and the family background and expectations (de Saint Martin, 2008).

## 3. Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Model

Presented by Mehrabian and Russell back in 1974, the SOR, or Stimulus-Organism-Response model is widely recognized as one of the most valuable frameworks for understanding consumer behavior and explaining how the organism, being the middle link between stimuli and responses, can modulate individuals' cognitive and affective states, which in their turn trigger the corresponding behavioral actions (Islam & Rahman, 2017).

In S-O-R framework, “stimuli” are antecedent characteristics of environment recognized to influence cognitive/affective response at individual level (Eroglu et al., 2001), while “organisms” reflect internal perceptual, physiological, feeling and thinking activities that interpose between stimuli and the final action, reaction or response observed (Bagozzi, 1986). Last is the “response” which signifies consumers' decision of approach or avoidance behavior also known as the consumers' last word (Ridgway et al., 1990). Approach behaviors are good behaviors that may be taken in reference to a given environment. These intermediaries convert environmental stimuli into behavioral responses that are the output of the consumers' behavior in the form of buying or not buying. While in the context of HEI's choice, this framework can help explain how external factors related to the brand image of the HEIs influence the students' internal processes and ultimate decisions of choosing a HEI over another HEI. (see figure 2)

Figure 2. Stimulus-Organism-Response model



Source: Mehrabian & Russell, 1974

### 3.1. Origins and Key Concepts

The SOR framework assumes that an individual experiences external environmental stimulation (S) that influences the thoughts and feeling (O) which finally determines the behavior exhibited (R) (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). As such, this model serves to be useful as a guideline which will help in the depiction of how outside stimuli influence inside mechanisms to create visible conduct. The key components of the SOR framework include:

- Stimulus (S): All the events that are out of the control of the learning individual and faced in the process of learning. These could be in the context of institutional reputation, promotional materials, personal campus visits, recruitment trips or sources of information on specific academic programs.
- Organism (O): The activities of the mind and feelings of an entity or a person. This basically refers to cognitions that are perceptions, attitudes and emotions that intervene between the stimuli and the response. For prospective students, this can encompass how they perceive the rankings of universities, the affective reactions they have to campus environments or the thought processes involved in the consideration of careers.
- Response (R): The final decision that a student makes. In our context this would be the choice of a particular Higher Education Institution.

### 3.2. Application in Consumer Behavior and Decision-Making

Even though the SOR model has been initially proposed in the paradigm of environmental psychology, there has been increasing interest toward using this framework in consumer research (Vieira, 2013). Sometimes the model has been used to explain the way in which these marketing cues affect the internal consumer responses and eventual purchase behaviors.

In the context of consumer, stimuli may include product variables, persuading tactics price, place, promotion, and product itself. The organism element refers to the reaction of the consumer in terms of thinking and feeling, value appreciation, emotional functionalities, and attitudinal change. The response generally refers to the consumers' buying decision, concrete consumption, or other behavioral outcomes such as the word-of-mouth communication (Chang et al., 2011).

The SOR framework has been particularly useful in studying online consumer behavior. Kim and Lennon (2013) used the model to look at how the quality of a website, which is the stimulus, affects the organism, which is the emotional state of consumers, as well as the response which is their intention to make a purchase especially while shopping online.

### 3.3. Relevance to Higher Education Choice

In particular, the use of the SOR framework in the context of the choice of a higher education institution is an effective way of analyzing the decision-making process of students. Several researchers have adapted the concepts of this model to the educational context:

**Stimuli in Education:** a stimulus in the higher education context can be absolutely anything, in its 2012 study, Obermeit revealed that stimuli which include reputation of the institution, the programs of study, facilities, and location were key attraction triggers. In fact, these several factors are what allow the potential students to make their HEI's choice among the various offered alternatives of universities (Obermeit, 2012). About other motivational factors, in the context of Grandes Écoles that are our focus, we could talk about perceived prestige of these institutions, competitiveness in preparatory classes, and further career opportunities.

**Organism in Education:** prospective student internal processes are therefore critical regulators which join institutional stimuli and choices. Khanna et al. (2014) observed the role played by organism, particularly students' perception of institutional image and quality of education during different phases of the admission process and their impact on the enrollment's intentions.

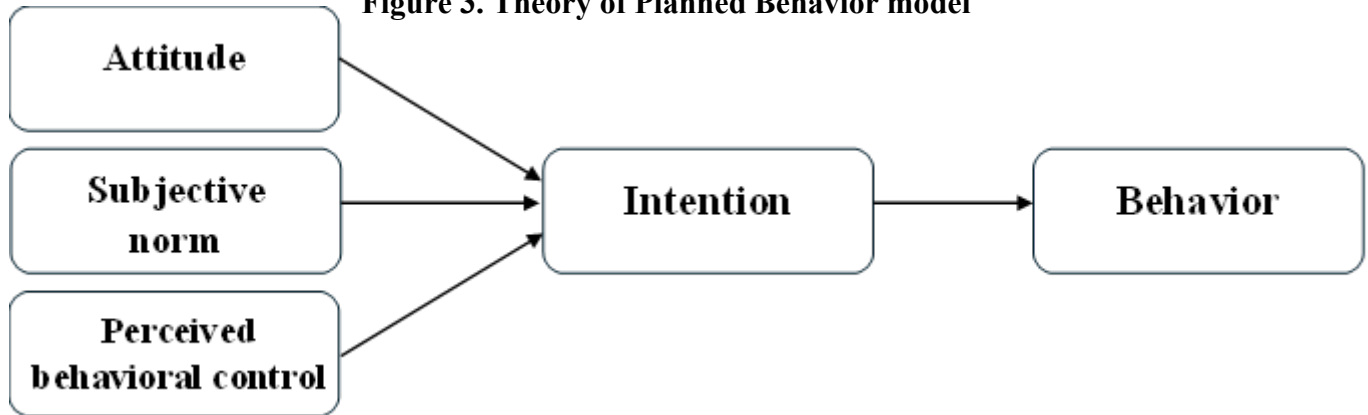
**Response in Education:** crucially in the context of higher education the main choice which is most often under consideration is the institution. Nevertheless, there can be other pertinent responses which would include submission of applications, attending a campus tour, or even interacting with institutions' social media pages. Again, and considering Portuguese students' decisions on their choice of HEIS, for Simões and Soares (2010), the concept of institutional image through their website served as the stimulus, while the choice intentions could be taken as the response for the students' organism.

### 4. Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), developed by Icek Ajzen (1991) is one of the most recognized models of predicting and explaining human behavior in different spheres. This section then explores the fundamentals of TPB, its origin from the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) and its use in the education systems with a focus on decision to pursue higher education institutions such as the Grandes Écoles. The Theory of Planned Behavior is an expansion of the earlier Theory of Reasoned Action invented by Fishbein and Ajzen in 1975. The major distinction between the two is the variable perceived behavioral control in TPB. This addition was introduced to account for situations in which individuals do not have complete volitional control over their behavior (Ajzen, 1991). In the context of the choice of destination for higher education particularly in the case of Grandes Écoles this extension is pertinent. In support of

TRA, results show that students can have positive attitudes toward attending a Grande École and even feel the social pressure to attend one; however, their perceived control over such decisions can specify how those intentions can be enacted as shown in figure 3.

**Figure 3. Theory of Planned Behavior model**



Source: Ajzen, 1991

#### **4.1. Core Components of Theory of Planned Behavior TPB**

According to the Theory of Planned Behavior, behavioral intentions are considered the nearest predictors of the actual behavior. These intentions are influenced by three main factors resulting in the behavioral intentions and are thought about as the antecedents for actual behavior (Ajzen, 1991).

- **Attitudes:** The individual's attitude towards performing a behavior, that is how the person feels about engaging in the behavior. These could be a student's attitudes toward the decision to attend a Grande École, such as, the opinion that attending a famous school is useful or the attitudes to rivalry that characterizes these institutions. Thus, students' attitudes toward Grandes Écoles can be associated with their beliefs concerning the reputation, opportunities and quality of education.
- **Subjective Norms:** The perceived pressure from society to either do or not to do an action. For prospective Grandes Écoles' students this could entail expectations from the family, peers or society to attend the elite institution. Due to the cultural expectations and the associations with success in relation to Grandes Écoles, there are clear perceptions of what is considered normal and appropriate, hence established subjective norms. Esteem from family members, friends and other people in society will very likely play major roles in this regard.
- **Perceived Behavioral Control:** It refers to a person's confidence in the ability to do the behavior which might be the student's self-assertiveness regarding their academic accomplishments in preparatory classes. This factor may be even more significant in

consideration of the fact that most Grandes Écoles are highly selective institutions. The self-efficacy beliefs concerning students' abilities to excel in preparatory classes, in competitive exams or in the challenging academic environment of these institutions are therefore relevant issues.

## 5. Integrated Theoretical Framework

After establishing the theoretical underpinnings of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR), this study offers an integrated conceptual model that uses the complementary advantages of both frameworks to investigate students' choice of a Moroccan regulated HEI (Grande École). The suggested conceptual model illustrates the complex decision-making processes where the university brand image factors, which are rational and emotional dimensions, serve as influences or stimuli toward the student's perceptual process (organism). Within this perceptual process, the three main factors of the TPB (attitudes toward the university, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control) act as mediators between stimuli and response. The final response is expressed as the Grande Ecole choice of students. The stimulus actually consists of the university's brand image, which incorporates both emotional and rational components. According to Goi, Kalidas, and Yunus (2018), students' affective and cognitive processes are triggered by these image dimensions. According to Ajzen (1991), the TPB's core constructs : attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control represent how these stimuli feed into the organism.

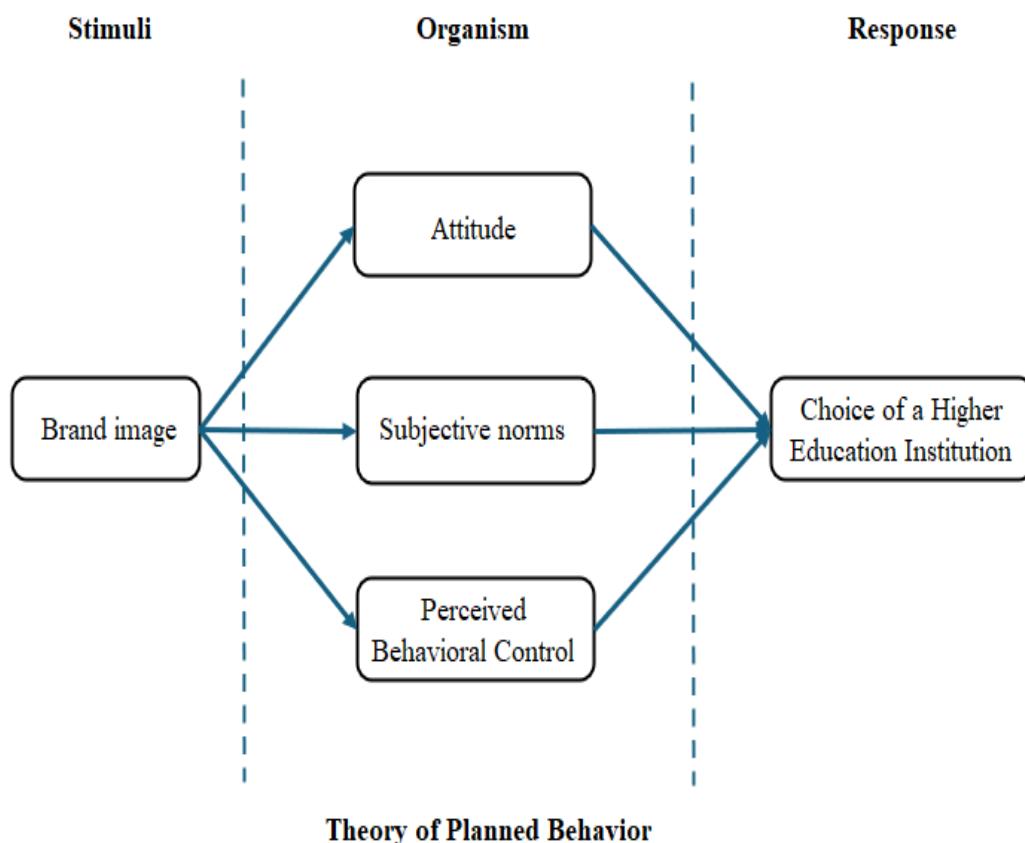
Combining branding and TPB constructs is supported by empirical evidence, in fact, in a meta-analysis that integrated TPB and Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE), for instance, Wu et al. (2020) discovered that behavioral intention is driven by brand attitudes, which are significantly preceded by brand image, brand personality, and subjective norms. This emphasizes how branding stimuli have the theoretical capacity of affecting internal states and ensuing choices.

Other domains, for instance tourism, where environmental stimuli and internal cognitive-affective processes combine to better explain consumer choices, have found success with the SOR model (Baber & Baber, 2023). Similar dynamics exist in higher education, where potential students respond to institutional branding in both rational and subjective ways, notably, through evaluations influenced by family and peers. Additional validation is provided by Zhong (2023) who demonstrated how brand image affected consumer intention through mediators like perceived value and control using a combined SOR–TPB model. The effectiveness of this integrated model is also supported by comparable research in health behavior (Zhan et al.,

2023). Recent investigations support the value of combining SOR and TPB in higher education, for instance, Pahrudin et al. (2023) adopted this integrated model to explore how the entrepreneurship ecosystem stimuli (curriculum, university support, and lecturer competence) function as external triggers that influence students' internal perceptions through TPB constructs (attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control) . Their results validated the efficacy of combining the psychological mechanisms of TPB with the environmental focus of SOR by confirming that these mediators significantly predict entrepreneurial intention. The approach used here is similar to the one we use in Grandes Écoles, where brand image elements serve as stimuli that students internalize through TPB factors and ultimately influence their decision-making.

Using this reasoning, our study addresses the choice decision and selection of a specific Grande École to enroll in. According to the model, a more complex and empirically verifiable understanding of how branding influences important educational decisions can be obtained by coordinating external brand stimuli with internal psychological mediators as shown in figure 4.

**Figure 4. The constructed theoretical framework**



Source: authors

## Conclusion

The present research adds to the body of literature in two important ways. First, it investigates the way the emotional and logical aspects of an institution's brand image operate as external stimuli on students' internal assessments and enrollment choices. Students' attitudes and enrollment intentions are greatly influenced by elements such as emotional experience and institutional reputation, according to prior research using the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework in higher education settings (Goi & Yunus, 2018). Little is known, nevertheless, about the precise ways in which these brand-related cues influence students' selection in extremely selective settings such as Grandes Écoles.

Secondly, in order to gain a better understanding of the way internal psychological factors affect the relationship between enrollment choice and brand perception, this study combines the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) with the SOR model. The TPB framework highlights how attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control shape behavioral intention, as demonstrated by studies of program participation intentions (Yusoff et al., 2022) and higher education enrollment decisions (Allam et al., 2018). This study is going to make a contribution to advancing theory through providing practical implications for branding in the higher education sector by integrating these two theoretical frameworks to provide a more nuanced understanding of the cognitive and affective processes that influence students' behavior of choosing a Higher Education institution.

Additional empirical investigation can test and guarantee the validity and reliability of this model in various higher education contexts. This research will provide a robust foundation to support factors impacting the students' choice decision of enrollment in highly regulated and competitive academic environments such as Grandes Écoles. The integral study and its empirical results will be presented in a forthcoming publication, which will offer detailed insights into students' decision-making processes and their implications for higher education branding.

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