

Employing Mean-End-Chains theory to explore students' values from school's image characteristics - A case study of a business school in Ho Chi Minh City

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ABSTRACT

The literature shows that there are studies on students' choices when enrolling in an institution. The findings from these studies help High Educational Institutions (HEIs) to improve their enrollment. However, not much literature explains how students (as consumers) explain the values they can get from HEIs' image attributes. The present study employs Mean-End Chain (MEC) theory to explore students' values by identifying attributes of HEIs images attributes from their perceptions with the following objectives: (1) to explore attributes of the selected school's image from students' perspectives, (2) to explore the connections between these attributes and values of individual students through consequences from these attributes. The soft-laddering interview is the method to collect data, and participants are first-year students who have just enrolled in the selected school in the last national enrollment in 2020. The research findings show that there are 12 attributes, which drive to eight values through 23 consequences (13 functional consequences and 10 psychosocial consequences), making students enroll in the selected school. The result from HVM states that there are five significant A-C-V linkages to explain which attributes have the most influence on students' choice, and how these attributes affect their perceived values. Finally, the study also proposes suggestions for institutions to promote their enrollment practices and increase the quality of their enrolments.

1. Introduction

High Education Institutions (HEIs) in Vietnam have been facing more competitive pressure not only from local institutions but also from foreign ones. This fact is similar to many other HEIs in the globe, such as the Portuguese higher education industry (1983, as cited in Duarte, Alves, & Raposo, 2010) or institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Manov, Mujkić, & Husić-Mehmedović, 2020), or universities in Philippines (Bringula & Basa, 2011). Therefore, in order to create a competitive advantage, HEIs need to develop a distinct image to attract students to apply for enrollment (Ivy, 2001). A positive image of an institution can be considered as a valuable intangible asset. This is also the reason why many universities and institutions around the globe have spent much effort and money on communication and marketing campaigns. The

literature shows that many studies confirm the positive effect of university's image on many aspects such as student satisfaction, student loyalty, students' willingness to apply for enrolment, etc. (Manov et al., 2020).

Most studies on HEIs brand image have focused on explaining factors influencing students' decision-making process when enrolling. These studies have been based on the justification that, to HEIs, the more understanding of the influences and outcomes of the students' decision-making process, the better adapting their recruitment message (Pampaloni, 2010). Nevertheless, not much literature found can explain what students (as consumers) perceive the values they can have from studying in a particular institution, especially from the institution's brand image. In fact, when a consumer makes a purchasing decision, they automatically link from what they buy to the value they may get (Chahal & Kumari, 2012).

Mean-End Chain theory is a tool to address the issues of understanding consumers' decision-making. This theory provides a conceptual framework to describe consumer decision-making and understand it clearly (Reynolds & Olson, 2000). In this framework, product attributes, their functional consequences are the means to an end - personal values. In another saying, product attributes are not what consumers are really seeking, but values that can be satisfied when consuming/using product attributes (Reynolds, Whitlack, & Wirthlin, 2000). With MEC, characteristics of an institutions' brand image, as well as values that students (as consumers) can get when enrolling in that institution, can be comprehensively analyzed and understood.

In 2020, the law of high education in Vietnam has been updated. From that, universities are allowed to be self-controlled. Universities have to be operating with their own recruiting plans as well as financial plans. Therefore, creating and developing a good brand image is critical to universities, especially to state-owned ones, to attract students. These will help HEIs to attract appropriate students and increase the quality of enrollment as well. Moreover, HEIs need to clearly understand how students perceive their brand image and what values they think they may get if enrolling. However, there is a lack of literature on this issue and not much practical information from the market for HEIs in Vietnam.

From these motives, the present study employs MEC theory with the soft-laddering interview as the method to collect data and aims (1) to explore attributes of the selected school's image from students' perspectives, (2) to explore the connections between these attributes and values of individual students through consequences from these attributes.

2. Theoretical basis

2.1. Results and discussion

The image of an organization is created by the organization to convince stakeholders of characteristics that it wants to show to the public and perceived by non-members (Pampaloni, 2010). Therefore, in his study in 1965, Reynolds (as cited in Alwi & Kitchen, 2014) explained that organizational (brand) image is about stakeholders' attitude to a brand. In a review of Reynolds and Gutman (2000), brand image can be interpreted as: (a) general characteristics, feelings or impression; (b) perceptions of products; (c) belief and attitudes; (d) brand personality, and (e) linkages between characteristics and feeling/emotions. Creating an image is to make signals or send messages by the organization itself, and those signals/messages are perceived and translated by its stakeholders over time (Arpan, Raney, & Zivnuska, 2003). In addition, these signals and messages are already translated and then transferred by media and other stakeholders (such as parents, friends, etc.). This perceived image has direct effects on contact, communication, or any further cooperation with that organization. This issue can also be applied

to university image as students (consumers) will perceive an HEI, which will affect their further actions towards institutions.

Studying *university image* shares some characteristics with that of *organizational image*. Alwi and Kitchen (2014) define school brand image as students' overall attitude and impressions from their experiences. However, when employing the concept of the organizational image to study *university image*, one issue that needs to be noted is that businesses of universities are much different as compared with business of a corporation (Pampaloni, 2010). According to scholars such as Pampaloni (2010), Ivy (2001), the image of an institution is relative to those of other ones, and it is formed from word-of-mouth, past experience, and marketing activities of the institution. Obviously, people can generate an image of an institution on limited and inaccurate information. However, the generated image can have effects on enrollment, recommendation, supports, etc. (Ivy, 2001). Therefore, what HEIs need to do is to make sure that the image is reflected accurately.

Many studies on university image focus on determining factors that influence university image. In their study, Duarte et al. (2010) have reviewed several studies and summarized factors affecting university image into 04 categories according to their features, including institutional (11 factors), academic (13 factors), social (05 factors), and personal (02 factors). The institutional category includes characters that can describe visible aspects of an institution, such as geographic location, facilities, institutional communication, or sport program. Academic categories are about invisible factors, such as academic prestige, teaching quality, university atmosphere, or difficulty level. The social category covers connections with businesses, friends, family, or social atmosphere in institutions. The last, personal category, is about professional aspirations and personal aspirations.

Another direction in studying university brand image is based on cognitive and affective brand attributes (Alwi & Kitchen, 2014). These attributes refer to stakeholders' attitudes toward an institution. An institution's cognitive brand attributes are based on service quality, while affective attributes are based on intangible and emotional criteria. Importantly, both attributes are stakeholders' perceptions which are based on their experience with a specific institution (Alwi & Kitchen, 2014). Nevertheless, Alwi and Kitchen (2014) also continue their study by evaluating how these two brand attributes affect school brand images.

The literature review on university brand image shows that scholars have focused on how factors or attributes of brand image influence brand image. There have not been any studies that explain or explore what students (as consumers) can benefit from these attributes of university brand image. The more HEIs know how students make decisions, the better marketing activities they can prepare to attract prospective students. Therefore, it is important to figure out what attributes of university brand image that students perceive, and what values they think they can benefit from these attributes.

2.2. Means-End Chain theory as the framework for the present study

Mean-End Chain theory was first developed by Gutman (1982). Gutman (1982) explained that MEC could help link values, which are important to consumers, to specific attributes of products. From this explanation, it is obvious that firms can study consumers' perceptions at any level of the MEC model, from attributes, to consequences and values. Employing MEC to study consumers' perceptions will help firms/organizations much in promoting products/services. Gutman stated that knowing which product attributes are used by consumers would help firms in product development. However, not only that, but firms can also change approach(es) to promote products/services to communicate any attributes that

consumers have not been aware of yet.

From the theory proposed by Gutman (1982), researchers and practitioners have employed the MEC model to develop effective marketing plans, such as advertising and promotion, for firms (Boga & Weiermair, 2011; Jeng & Yeh, 2016; Kuisma, Laukkanen, & Hiltunen, 2007; Reynolds, Whitlack et al., 2000). MEC is applied to understand why consumers believe some attributes and consequences are more important to them than others when these become the means to an end (value) that they really expect from the product.

In the most common MEC model, consumers have three levels of a product/service, forming a hierarchical chain of Attributes-Consequences-Values. The end (Value) involves consumer satisfaction of product/service (Reynolds & Olson, 2000). In the MEC model developed by Olson and Reynolds (1983, as cited in Reynolds & Olson, 2000), there are six levels, including 02 levels of attributes (concrete and abstract attributes), 02 levels of consequences (functional and psychosocial consequences), and 02 levels of values (instrumental and terminal values). The *concrete attributes* are defined as properties or characteristics of the product, service, or performance that may be desired or pursued by consumers, while *abstract attributes* are those that cannot be tested before consumption of the product and must, therefore, be elicited from internal or external information sources. In terms of the consequences, *functional consequences* are the benefits related to the product attributes that consumers directly and immediately experience from having products or services, normally during or soon right after the consumption; and *psychosocial consequences* are the results of a more personal, social and less tangible nature. The *instrumental values* are intangible goals associated with the behavioral means used to achieve the end purposes, and finally, *terminal values* refer to desired end states (Walker & Olson, 1991). However, Reynolds and Olson (2000) also stated that the six-level MEC model is too complex and not necessary, and they suggested that a four-level MEC model can be considered as the “standard” means-end chain. This four-level model includes Attributes - Functional consequences - Psychosocial consequences - Values. Therefore, this study will employ the four-level MEC model as the research framework (Figure 1).

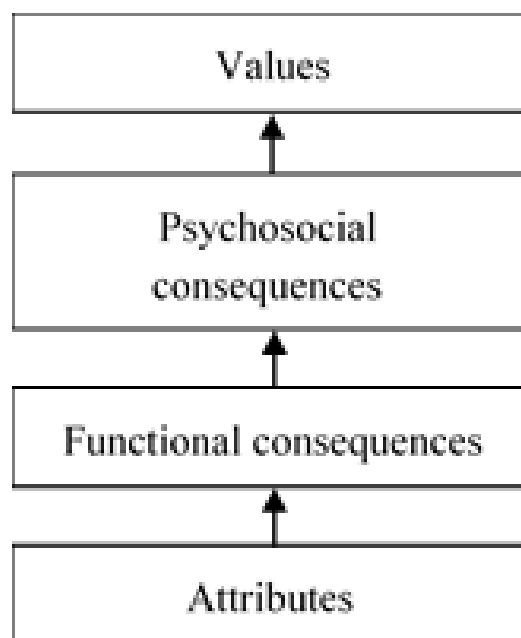


Figure 1. The four-level means-end model (Reynolds & Olson, 2000)

MEC model is an appropriate method to study the brand image (Reynolds & Gutman,

2000) for the following reasons. First, the analysis level in MEC is at an individual level. Second, MEC models use consumers' language. Third, there are versions of analysis so that the content of the image can be grouped meaningfully. And, fourth, the structure of the image can be explained clearly via linkages between levels of attributes, consequences, and values. In the MEC model, the linkage 'attributes-consequences-values' (from individual-level analysis) are the foundational unit of analysis in understanding image. In another saying, the linkage A-C-V provides a means to understand consumers' orientation towards the image, then a framework for developing image positionings (Reynolds & Gutman, 2000).

Based on the review of MEC, the present study will employ the MEC model as the framework to explore students' perceptions of the selected school, including the school's attributes of brand image, consequences of these attributes, and finally, their individual values.

2.3. Laddering interview

Laddering is the most widely employed technique to reveal means-end structures (ter Hofstede, Audenaert, Steenkamp, & Wedel, 1998). As developed by Reynolds and Gutman (1988), laddering is a technique to collect data following MEC theory by interviewing the one-by-one and helping to understand how consumers interpret attributes of product/service concerning their personal values. The question "Why is that important to you?" is typified and used during interviews to figure out the linkages between attributes - consequences - values to represent the perceptual orientation of consumers. One issue that needs to be noted is that even though using one-by-one interviews, laddering interview is different from typical qualitative research. The results from laddering interview are profound and focused because it uncovers personal motivation behind a brand choice, while other qualitative are broad and shallow (Reynolds, Dethloff, & Westberg, 2000).

Laddering interviews include 02 types: soft-laddering and hard-laddering (K. G. Grunert & Grunert, 1995; S. C. Grunert, Beckmann, & Sorensen, 2000). Soft-laddering is carried out by in-depth one-on-one interviews applying an open question approach that allows respondents to give unlimited answers and using free elicitation methods to get information. Soft-laddering analysis requires a sample size of at least 20 (Reynolds, Dethloff, et al., 2000), and it is not suitable for collecting a large sample (ter Hofstede et al., 1998). Hard-laddering can be implemented via telephone, e-mail, or self-administered questionnaires in order to obtain information on the hierarchical order of attributes, consequences, and values through respondents' answers. In hard-laddering, interviewees are forced to produce ladders one-by-one. This method requires a large sample size, usually more than fifty (ter Hofstede et al., 1998).

In the present study, the purpose is to explore all brand images' attributes of the selected school; therefore, the soft-laddering interview is employed to collect respondents' viewpoints.

3. Research method

The present study is to explore students' values from a school image's characteristics through consequences. Therefore, the study employs the qualitative approach to explore the features of selected school's brand image, which attracts high school students to enroll. Based on MEC theory, this study employs the soft-laddering interview as the method to collect the data.

The flow of an interview begins with the questions "*From your perspective, what are the attributes of the school's brand image leading your decision to enroll in this school?*" or "*Why did you choose to study at this school?*" Then, many "Why" questions continue this process in order to explore the consequences of every mentioned attribute. This practice finishes when

interviewees come to their individual values, which are the end of chains.

The purposive and convenience sampling method are used to collect data from first-year students at the selected school who have just had the experience of choosing where to study management in the last enrollment in 2020. The sample size is not predetermined; instead, the interview ends when the information is saturated, this means that no new A, C, and V are detected. And, the sample size needs to meet the requirement suggested by Reynolds, Dethloff et al. (2000) for soft-laddering interviews with at least 20 respondents. Eventually, the study interviews 20 first-year students.

The data is analyzed by the Association Pattern Technique (APT) proposed by ter Hofstede et al. (1998). There are three implication matrices analyzed separately, A-C matrix, C-C matrix, and C-V matrix. Based on these matrices, a Hierarchical Value Map (HVM) is gradually developed by connecting all the linkages formed among elements A, C, and V. (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988).

The studied school is a business school in a large and reputed university in the South of Vietnam. This school was founded in 1990 and offers academic programs for undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral degrees. It has offered English programs for bachelor's degree and master degree in 2014 and 2020, respectively.

4. Research results

In total, there are 20 first-year students interviewed, including 13 students from the Vietnamese program and 07 students from the English program, at 65% and 35%, respectively. All of the interviewees are first-year students in the studied business school. Among these 20 respondents, there are 17 females, which accounts for 85% of the interviewed student.

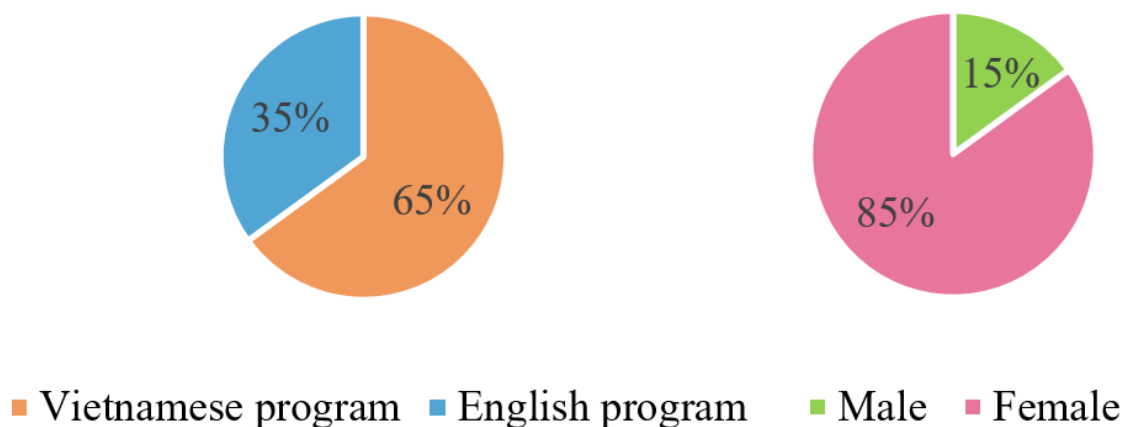


Figure 2. The description of the respondents categorized by gender and study program

4.1. Attributes (A), Consequences (C), and Values (V) from Soft-laddering interviews

Interviews with soft-laddering technique lasted 45 up to 60 minutes. Through 20 interviews, many characteristics of the selected business school which attract high school students to enroll are mentioned by students. After analyzing, attributes, consequences, values are coded and summarized in Table 1. In total, there are 12 attributes (A), 23 consequences (C) with 13 functional and 10 psychosocial consequences, and 09 values mentioned by interviewees.

Table 1

The list of attributes, consequences, and values explored from the interviews

CODE	LIST OF ATTRIBUTES	
A1	A business school in an engineering university	
A2	Reputation	
A3	High quality lecturers	
A4	Good learning environment	
A5	Having a practical and comprehensive curriculum	
A6	Having cooperative connections with businesses	
A7	Comfortable facilities	
A8	Reasonable tuition fees	
A9	Diversified communication channels	
A10	Reliable consultants	
A11	Diversified and valuable scholarships	
A12	Convenient location	
C1	Easily working with colleagues	
C2	Easy finding a job	X
C3	Effective studying	X
C4	Reduced financial pressure	X
C5	More understanding of school and major	
C6	Understanding more about career opportunities after graduation	X
C7	Increase the chances of becoming a manager or working at a high position in the organization	X
C8	Logical thinking	
C9	Making parents proud	X
C10	Demonstrate competency	
C11	English in business improvement	
C12	Having the opportunity to work at the desired business	X
C13	Reduce learning pressure	
C14	Not much physical effort required	
C15	Well-completed tasks	X
C16	Avoiding social evils	
C17	New knowledge and experiences improvement	X

CODE	LIST OF ATTRIBUTES	
C18	Helping others	X
C19	Get a scholarship easily	
C20	Fully equipped with knowledge and skills	
C21	Saving time and effort	
C22	Coming/visit home regularly	
C23	Suitable for students' capacity and talent	
V1	Respect	
V2	Freedom	
V3	Meaningful life	
V4	Safety	
V5	Mental comfort	
V6	Trust	
V7	Happiness	
V8	Responsibility	
V9	Confidence	

Source: The researcher's data analysis

4.2. Constructing the HVM

As justified in Literature Review, this study employs the four-level HVM model. The HVM consists of 04 levels, with A being the bottom level, V being the highest level at the top of the map. According to the APT technique (ter Hofstede et al., 1998), it is necessary to build implication matrices in order to construct the HVM, including A-C matrix, C-C matrix, and C-V matrix. Numbers in these matrices indicate the frequency of a pair (A-C), (C-C), or (C-V), all column elements lead to all row elements. This means that the higher the number appears, the stronger the link and vice versa.

In the matrices, the numbers before the symbol (;) show the frequency of direct chain relations between the elements, while the numbers after the symbol (;) exhibit the frequency of indirect chain relations (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). For instance, in the cell (A11; C2), the number 02 before the symbol (;) means that the direct link from A11 to C2 was mentioned two times, while the frequency of indirect links between them was only one (the number after semicolon). Similarly, it can be seen in the cell (C6, V6) (Table 4) that 09 respondents agreed on the direct links between C6-V6; however, there is no indirect link between C6 and V6 created from the result of interviews. Moreover, some blank cells such as (A2; C1), (C2; C1), and so on mean that neither direct links nor indirect links are created between the elements.

The A-C matrix (Table 2) shows the relations between attributes and consequences, while the C-V matrix (Table 4) indicates the linkages between consequences and values. In addition, there are relationships between different consequences, namely functional and psychosocial consequences, as shown in the C-C matrix (Table 3).

Table 2

A-C implication matrix

	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6	A7	A8	A9	A10	A11	A12
C1	2;0			1;0								
C2	13;0	14;0	2;0	6;0	3;0	2;0	0;1				2;1	
C3		0;1	1;0	1;0			2;0	0;1			1;0	
C4	0;2	0;2						8;0			2;0	
C5									7;0	6;0		
C6									1;1	5;2		
C7	4;1	0;1		0;1	0;1				0;1			
C8	1;0				1;0							
C9		4;1										
C10		3;0										
C11					3;0							
C12		0;1			0;3				1;0		1;0	
C13	2;0		1;0		1;0				1;0			
C14	1;0											
C15	1;1	1;0	2;1	2;0								
C16												1;0
C17	0;1	0;1									2;0	
C18	0;7	0;3	0;1	0;2							0;3	
C19		1;0										
C20											1;0	
C21												1;0
C22												2;0
C23					1;0							

Source: The researcher's data analysis

Table 3

C-C implication matrix

[illegible]

	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	C9	C10	C11	C12	C13	C14	C15	C16	C17	C18	C19	C20	C21	C22	C23
C7			1;0					1;0				1;0			1;0								
C8																							
C9		1;0																					
C10																							
C11																							
C12											3;0								1;0				
C13																							
C14																							
C15		1;0	1;0																				
C16																							
C17		1;0																					
C18		7;0					1;0					1;0			1;0								
C19																							
C20																							
C21																							
C22																							
C23																							

Source: The researcher's data analysis

Table 4

C-V implication matrix

	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	C9	C10	C11	C12	C13	C14	C15	C16	C17	C18	C19	C20	C21	C22	C23
V1	3;0	4;0	0;1	1;0			5;0	0;1	3;0	4;0	0;1	1;1			0;1								
V2		12;0	0;2				2;0				0;1	1;0			3;1								
V3		2;1	1;0									1;1			1;1			1;0	0;1				
V4		2;0	3;1	0;2										1;0		1;0							
V5				4;0									5;0	1;0			1;0				1;0	2;0	1;0
V6					9;2	9;0																	
V7		2;7	4;0	2;0			0;1		2;0								2;0	4;0		0;1			
V8		1;6		2;0			0;1		1;0									3;0					
V9		0;1									0;1	1;0			1;0								

Source: The researcher's data analysis

The HMV (Figure 3) shows that some links are pointed out by many respondents, such as (A1; C2), (A2; C2), and (A9; C5) with the frequency of 13, 14, and 07, respectively. Concerning the C-C relationship, the link of C2 - C18 is strongest with 07 times mentioned by interviewees. About the relationship between the consequences and values, (C2; V2) is the link having the highest frequency with 12 times mentioned by respondents. (C5; V6) and (C6; V6) both rank second at the frequency of 09 while the third place belongs to the link (C7; V1), mentioned by 05 interviewees.

4.3. Discussion

From the matrices and the constructed HVM (Figure 3), there are some significant findings as follows:

4.3.1. The most mentioned attributes - The important image characteristics of the school

In terms of the school's image characteristics, there are 04 attributes mentioned most by interviewees, including A1, A2, A4, A10, with the frequency of 19, 18, 10, and 11, respectively. Moreover, even though having 08 times mentioned only, A9 is also an important attribute because it is part of one of the strongest links discussed in detail in the next parts. Totally, 05 attributes that got the most interest of interviewees are A1, A2, A4, A9, A10.

Firstly, with attribute **A1** (A business school in an engineering university), the studied school is mentioned as a faculty of economics and management in a university specializing and being well-known in engineering in the South of Vietnam. In many respondents' opinions, this characteristic is a very special point because the knowledge gained from the studied school will have a combination of economic and technical knowledge, helping learners get a comprehensive understanding and easily adapt to various working fields. Some interviewees said that this can help them feel more confident when attending a job interview as they can have a competitive advantage over those who only study business. That makes a significant difference and brings many opportunities for them. This is an interesting feature, as respondents think that the school can give them confidence in the knowledge as well as creating strengths that help them easily find suitable jobs in the future.

Secondly, attribute **A2** (Reputation) refers to reputation, particularly that of the university. The university is well-known because of its engineering teaching, research, and technology transfer. Since the school is a unit of this university, it also inherits that reputation from the university. Interviewees feel reassured learning in a reputable place because they believe there is a good quality of training there. For example, a student thinks that what attracts her to choose to study here is reputation. This attribute makes her believe that the studied school offers a high quality of training because it has high-quality lecturers, a good learning environment, etc., which helps her acquire comprehensive knowledge and skills. A student (H. T. P. Thao) shared that successful enrollment in a prestigious school (in a well-known university) helps her prove her abilities and make her parents feel proud. Similarly, many students think that the school's good reputation will bring much support in the matter of finding a job after graduation. It can be seen that both A1 and A2 are rooted in the reputation of the university.

Next, attribute **A4** (Good learning environment) is a characteristic related to the learning environment aspect. This feature refers to a place of active learning that has students who study hard and proactive. The respondents shared that they found the learning environment in this faculty is very dynamic, where everyone enthusiastically discusses, which makes the learning more effective. N. K. Trang said that a good study environment is a crucial issue to enroll in because studying with hard-working people motivates her to try harder, too. Another student, B. T. H. Lam, also agreed with the above opinion; besides, she added learning in a dynamic environment helps students learn from each other and understand lessons more deeply and comprehensively. This helps students gain lots of useful knowledge and skills, creating many advantages in studying and future work.

Finally, attribute **A10** (Reliable consultants) indicates that the factor that attracts students is the reliable counselors, who are teachers (from high schools or universities), previous course

students or relatives, friends. Through interviewees' answers, many counselors said that studying at the studied school is an appropriate choice with good quality, competitive tuition fees, and many job opportunities. There are many concrete shreds of evidence about its students being appreciated when working at different organizations, making the advice more plausible. Based on the advice, the students who intend to choose the school have more useful information about the curriculum as well as the career path in the future. Similarly, **A9** (Diversified communication channels) is an attribute relating to effective communication channels that the school has used to approach students; and these channels also contribute much useful enrollment information for high school students. Many interviewees shared that they followed the studied school's fan page on Facebook and website, which help them to find a lot of useful information for their enrollment. As a result, they are more confident in making decisions of choosing the studied school to enroll.

4.3.2. The most significant values

The present study aims to explore students' values from the studied school's image attributes by constructing ladders from attributes to consequences, then to perceived students' values. The findings show that there are 05 strongest ladders from students' perceptions when choosing an institution to enroll, including A1 - C2 - V2, A2 - C2 - V2, A9 - C5 - V6, A10 - C5 - V6 and A10 - C6 - V6 (Figure 3).

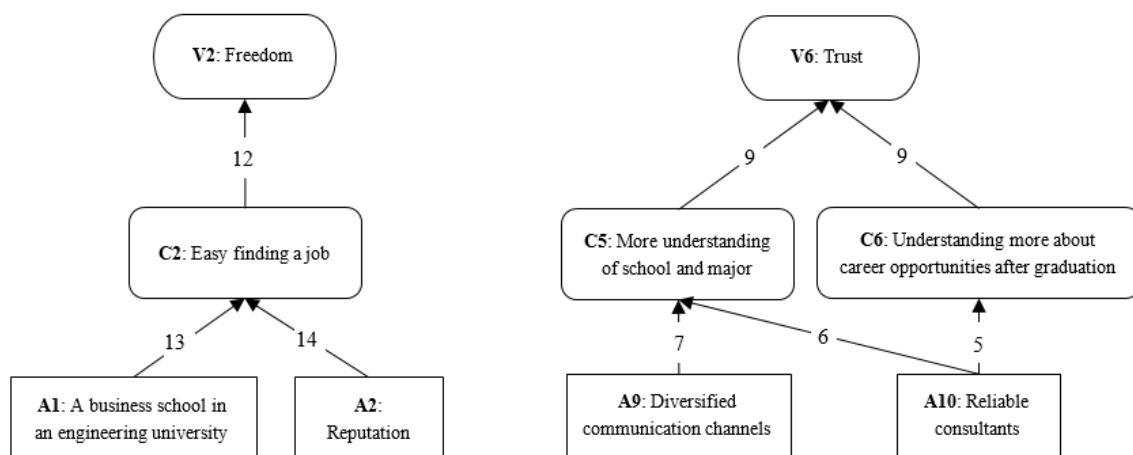


Figure 3. The five strongest ladders in the HVM

These strongest ladders drive to 02 significant values perceived by interviewees, namely V2 (Freedom) and V6 (Trust).

V2 - Freedom

A2 - C2- V2 and A1 - C2 - V2 are the two strongest chains leading to V2. Both of these direct chains indicate that some features, such as reputation or the faculty of management in the engineering school, can help students find a job easily after graduation. Through this consequence, the graduates will gain freedom because they can earn their lives. Moreover, they also feel less pressured because they can do whatever they like without depending on their parents financially. Overall, it can be said that having the freedom to decide many different aspects of their own life is the value that many students aim for.

V6 - Trust

In this study, V6 can be seen in three main ladders, including A9 - C5 - V6, A10 - C5 - V6, and A10 - C6 - V6. Through diverse communication channels (A9) and reliable counselors

(A10), high-school students can easily get lots of information about the studied school such as curriculum, learning environment, extra activities. In addition, they also know more about career opportunities after graduation, which helps them define a career orientation more suitable for them. Through information gathered from the faculty's website, fan page, and counselors, high school students feel more confident about what it brings to them. On the whole, with the information collected from sources, students have a value of "Trust" and this significantly affects students' decision to enroll in the studied school.

5. Contributions and managerial implications

The key purpose of this study is to explore students' values from their perceptions when choosing an institution to enroll in from its attributes. MEC theory with the soft-laddering interview as the methods to collect data is employed. The research findings show that there are 12 attributes, 23 consequences (13 functional consequences and 10 psychosocial consequences), and 09 personal values explored. The final step of data analysis is to construct the HVM. From the constructed HVM, there are 04 most concerning attributes (A1, A2, A9, A10), through the consequences leading to two important values: V2 - Freedom and V6-Trust. Additionally, 05 strongest links are also defined, including A1 - C2 - V2, A2 - C2 - V2, A9 - C5 - V6, A10 - C5 - V6, and A10 - C6 - V6.

Based on the research findings, the values that students concern about most are Freedom and Trust. As discussed above, both attributes A1 and A2 are rooted from the reputation of the university. Hence, the value "Freedom" mainly results from the university's reputation to which the studied school belongs. It can be said that, students believe that well-known institutions can bring them many positive benefits, and this becomes one of the significant factors attracting students to enroll. In order to attract more and higher quality students, schools or institutions need to pay attention to make their reputations by improving the quality of lecturers, learning environment, facilities, research publications, etc. These are crucial pathways for students to approach their freedom.

The value "Trust" is led by attributes "Diversified communication channels" and "Reliable consultants". Both of these attributes can be considered as the way that institutions should use to disseminate their information which is concerned by students (such as curriculum, tuition fees, job opportunities, successful alumni, etc.) to reliable sources, such as its fan page on Facebook, websites, high school teachers. In addition, making a reputation, in turn, will create word-of-mouth from the community in general; and this can also be a source of information. Moreover, in recent years, especially in the context of Covid-19, Enrollment Fairs, organized by many organizations (e.g., Tuoi Tre Newspaper, Thanh Nien Newspaper) or institutions, have to change to online channels, rather than physical ones. Students have started searching for information online rather than offline. This found value "Trust" also reflects the practical context now.

As mentioned above, previous studies in HEIs have not explained or explored (perceived) values of students (as consumers) from the institution's brand image. The research findings of the present study have theoretically contributed to the literature some crucial issues. Firstly, being different from previous studies that focused on determining factors influencing university image, the present study has explored values which students (as consumers) are most concerned about when enrolling. These values are important because they help properly understand students' logical thinking in choosing an institution to enroll. Secondly, from laddering interviews and analysis, the study has identified consequences resulting from attributes of the institution's brand image. These found consequences that have not been discussed before in HEI studies help explain comprehensively and logically students' (perceived) values.

Limitations and future research directions

The study has addressed the proposed key objective of exploring students' values from the studied schools' image characteristics. However, there are some limitations as follow:

Firstly, the employed sampling is purposive and convenient. More students in Vietnamese program were interviewed as compared to those in the English program. This issue may influence the research findings. Therefore, further research should approach more students in programs, such as English programs, foreign programs, joint-programs to explore students' perceived values that institutions can bring them.

Secondly, the present study is conducted in the context of one business school in an engineering university. Obviously, the research finding cannot be generalized for other business schools in an economic or marketing university. Hence, future studies should approach students from different institutions to explore more comprehensive perceptions from students.

Finally, the present study can only employ soft-laddering interviews to collect data with few respondents interviewed. Therefore, the linkages between attributes - consequences - values developed in the present study cannot be generalized to understand students' values as a whole. Future studies can employ attributes, consequences, and values explored from this study and employ hard-laddering interviews to approach a larger number of respondents.

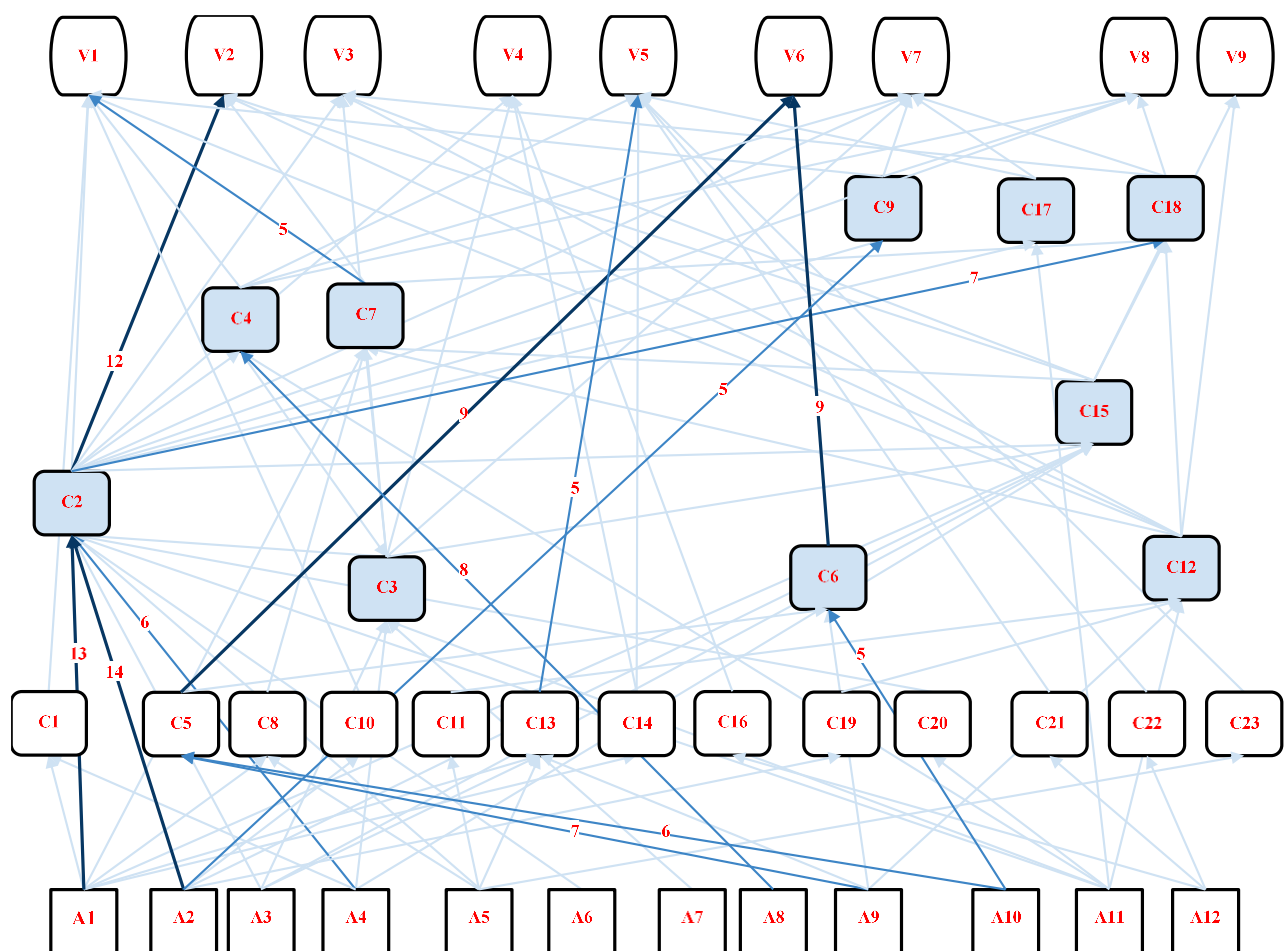


Figure 4. The hierarchical value map for students' enrollment

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