





Gender-based influences on students' choices for computing disciplines in Sri Lankan fee-levying higher education institutes

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ABSTRACT

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The global higher education (HE) sector has emerged competitive and market-driven in recent years due to the proliferation of fee-levying higher education institutes (HEIs). Consequently, researchers seek to identify the key factors influencing students' HEI choices to help education administrators develop strategies matching student expectations. However, it is insufficient to determine the important criteria because they differ depending on the degree major and student demographics like gender. Sri Lanka's HE sector is no exception, yet limited research has been conducted. Therefore, this study aimed to identify whether gender affects the major factors motivating students' decisions to enroll in an undergraduate programme in a computing discipline in Sri Lanka. The study considered the following three key factors: students' internal characteristics, institute-related characteristics, and communication channels used by HEIs to disseminate information while 16 sub-factors were also considered. A quantitative approach was used and data were collected through a questionnaire survey of 510 undergraduates across eight HEIs in the country. Data were analysed using SPSS software. The results revealed that the influence of institute-related characteristics and communication channels varied by gender whereas gender had no impact on students' internal characteristics. Only three of the 16 subfactors were found to differ by gender indicating that gender had no noticeable impact on most of the elements. Academic administrators may find these research findings useful when developing segmented marketing strategies to maximise student enrolment.

Contribution/Originality: This study is one of the few conducted in the country to examine how gender impacts the factors influencing students' HEI choices, specifically for enrolling in computing degree programmes. Therefore, the findings will assist HEI administrators in identifying critical factors for developing gender-based strategies to optimize student enrolment.

1. INTRODUCTION

The higher education (HE) sector has undergone major transformations over the past few years due to factors such as the proliferation of higher education institutes (HEIs) to meet increased student enrolment, technological advances in teaching and learning, increased student mobility among different countries and changes in teaching methods (UNESCO, 2024). It has become highly competitive and market-driven despite the HE sector becoming lucrative and thriving. Consequently, the fee-levying HEIs are investing considerable resources in initiatives such

as the development and maintenance of campus infrastructure, enhancement of academic and student services, curriculum development in in-demand industry areas, and formulating and implementing promotional and student recruitment strategies to attract students. Extensive research has recently been conducted to determine the critical factors that students consider when selecting a suitable fee-levying HEI to ensure that HEIs utilise their resources in areas that align with student expectations and thereby attract the highest number of students. However, research indicates that simply gaining knowledge of these critical factors alone is not sufficient for HEIs to effectively attract students because these influences can vary from country to country and depend on numerous factors such as the student's degree major and various demographic factors such as gender, age and income level. Therefore, researchers have also paid attention to how such factors impact the critical factors influencing students, enabling universities to address these differences and use segmented marketing strategies based on these variables thereby maximising the impact on potential students.

The higher education sector of Sri Lanka consists of a combination of state-owned and private universities as well as HEIs. One of the key features of the country's HE sector is that all state universities provide free undergraduate education. However, the country has witnessed a surge in the number of fee-levying HEIs established in the state and private sectors over the past few years because of the growing demand for HE and limited enrolment in state universities (Aturupane, 2018) creating intense competition among these institutes to enrol students. Moreover, the increasing shortage of skilled workers in the information and communication technology - business process management (ICT-BPM) sector in Sri Lanka has prompted an increasing number of students to enrol in undergraduate degrees related to computing disciplines such as computing, information systems, cyber security and network engineering. However, only a few studies such as those done by Abeygunawardena (2018); Premarathne, De Silva, and Kithsiri (2016); Ranwala, Siriwardena, Kurukulaarachchi, and Edirisinghe (2023) and Somaratna (2020) have examined the main factors influencing the students' choice of fee-levying HEIs within the country as well as how these influences vary based on variables such as degree major and demographics despite the fierce competition among these universities to attract students. Hence, HEIs have not been able to formulate enrolment strategies and use their resources based on the expectations of different student segments. The strategies that are implemented are also most often seen as failing to produce the expected result in terms of increased student enrolment. Therefore, the primary aim of this study is to answer the research question :

"Does the gender of a student impact the key factors influencing fee-levying HEI choices among students pursuing computing disciplines in Sri Lanka"?

This study considered the critical factors identified by Wickramasinghe, Mohammed, and Dhanapala (2024) that influence students' decisions when choosing a suitable fee-levying HEI when enrolling in an undergraduate programme in a computing discipline in Sri Lanka. According to Wickramasinghe et al. (2024) study, three main factors influence students. They are namely the student's internal characteristics (IC), such as their future career goals and personal preferences, institute-related factors (IRF) including the facilities offered by the HEIs, and the communication channels used by the HEIs (CM) to disseminate information to students like their websites. Accordingly, the following hypotheses were developed to determine whether gender has any impact on these identified main factors:

H₁: The influence of a student's internal characteristics differs based on the student's gender.

H₂: The influence of institute-related factors differs based on the student's gender.

H₃: The influence of communication channels used by the HEIs to disseminate information to the students differs based on the student's gender.

The study considered the three main factors IC, IRF, and CM as independent variables, the student's choice of a fee-levying HEI as the dependent variable, and the gender of the student as the moderator variable. Since IC, IRF and CM were not directly measurable, these variables were considered latent variables. Furthermore, Wickramasinghe et al. (2024) examined 35 sub-factors as the observed variables of the study, of which four sub-

factors under IC, seven sub-factors under IRF and five sub-factors under CM were identified as having the greatest influence on students when deciding on a fee-levying HEI. This study also examines whether these 16 sub-factors identified by Wickramasinghe et al. (2024) as presented in Table 1 differ by students' gender.

Table 1. Sub-factors considered in the study.

Main factors	Sub-factors
IC	Personal development and professional development (IC1)
	The economic status of the family (IC2)
	Future career goals (IC3)
	Personal interest (IC4)
IRF	The reputation of the institute (IRF1)
	Internship programs or job placement programs of the institute (IRF2)
	Quality of educational facilities such as classroom, laboratory and library facilities of the institute (IRF3)
	Availability of scholarships by the institute (IRF4)
	Links the institute has with the IT industry (IRF5)
	Availability of easy payment schemes to pay the course fee (IRF6)
	Foreign universities the institute is affiliated with (IRF7)
CM	Flyers of the institute on social media (CM1)
	Newspaper advertisements of the institute (CM2)
	Television and radio advertisements of the institute (CM3)
	School visits by the institute (CM4)
	Education fairs or exhibitions (CM5)

Accordingly, the conceptual framework developed in the study is presented in Figure 1.

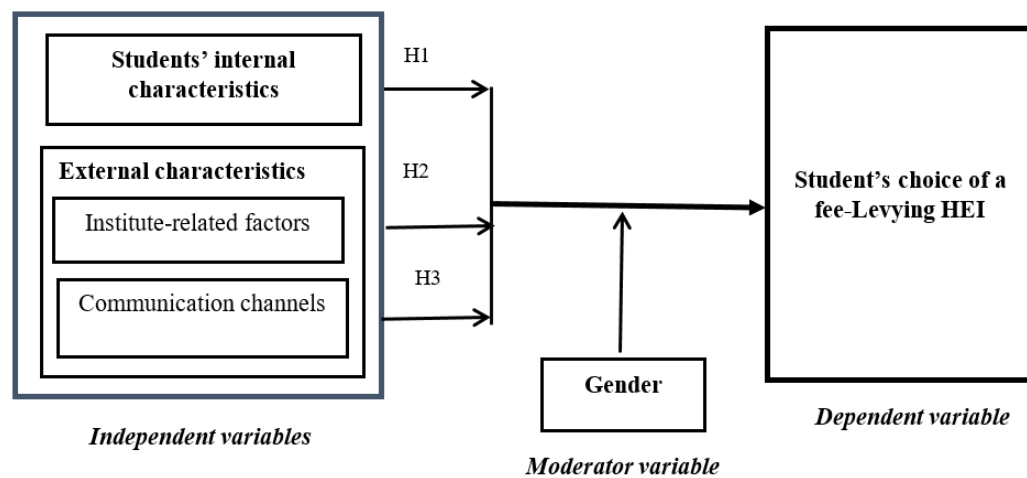


Figure 1. The proposed conceptual framework of the study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The fierce competition prevailing in the higher education sector worldwide has led to extensive research being conducted on the factors influencing students' HEI choices, thereby assisting education administrators in maximising the impact of their strategies to attract and enrol potential students. Accordingly, students' internal characteristics such as their abilities and future aspirations, institute-related characteristics such as academic quality, individuals in the environment who can influence the decision of the students such as parents and teachers as well as communication channels used by the HEIs to convey information about themselves and the degrees they offer such as newspaper advertisements have been identified as having a significant impact on students in their choice process (Chapman, 1981). Research also shows that these key factors influencing students vary based on factors such as degree specialization (Ilgan, Ataman, Uğurlu, & Yurdunkulu, 2018; Liên, Hòa, & Anh, 2015; Sabir, Ahmad, Ashraf, & Ahmad, 2013; Songan, Sam, Tonga, Rahman, & Wah, 2010) and demographic factors such as

gender (Awale, 2021; Mustafa, Sellami, Elmaghraby, & Al-Qassass, 2018; Songan et al., 2010) family income level (Aydin & Bayir, 2016; Sidin, Hussin, & Soon, 2003) and parental education (Akareem & Hossain, 2016; Eldegwy, Elsharnouby, & Kortam, 2022; Mustafa et al., 2018; Walsh & Cullinan, 2017).

When considering the demographic variable gender, research shows that male and female students tend to evaluate certain factors differently such as those related to the institute (Akareem & Hossain, 2016; Awale, 2021; Ilgan et al., 2018; Mustafa et al., 2018; Songan et al., 2010; Wiese, Van Heerden, & Jordaan, 2010) and the information they gather from different communication channels (Dao & Thorpe, 2015; Ilgan et al., 2018) when selecting a suitable institute for higher learning. Furthermore, research suggests that the influence of individuals on the environment (Anam, 2019; Dao & Thorpe, 2015; Ramalu, Abu Bakar, & Nijar, 2013; Walsh & Cullinan, 2017; Wiese et al., 2010) and the influence of students' internal characteristics (Ilgan et al., 2018) on their selection process may also vary by gender. When considering institute-related factors, it was noted that different studies have identified different factors influencing students based on their gender. However, other studies have challenged these views by stating that gender has minimal or no impact on the key institute-related factors influencing students during their selection process. For example, studies conducted by Awale (2021); Mustafa et al. (2018) and Songan et al. (2010) have observed that female students are more likely to select an HEI based on its reputation and academic quality than their male counterparts. Wiese et al. (2010) study has further observed that female students are also motivated by influences such as the availability of a wider choice of subjects, quality of teaching and the institutes' international links than male students. In contrast, Akareem and Hossain (2016) state that male students are more influenced by academic quality than female students who are only moderately influenced by this factor. According to Akareem and Hossain (2016) this may be due to families having higher educational expectations for their sons than for their daughters. Similar studies conducted by Ilgan et al. (2018) state that female students are more likely to be influenced by the facilities provided by the HEIs as compared to male students while Dao and Thorpe's (2015) study indicates that female students are more influenced by tuition fees. However, in contrast, Mustafa et al. (2018) observe that it is male students who place tuition fees as more significant when choosing an HEI. Moreover, studies conducted by Broekemier and Seshadri (2000); Kaur (2018) and Wiese et al. (2010) have also indicated that female students consider factors such as the convenient location of the HEI, availability of transport facilities, on-campus security and availability of on-campus accommodation as important when selecting a suitable HEI for higher studies. A similar study conducted by Aydin and Bayir (2016) noted that female students are more influenced by an HEI that offers student exchange programmes. Songan et al. (2010) in their study have identified that female students may place a greater emphasis on cultural values and hence would look for institutes of higher studies that would uphold these values than male students in addition to the aforementioned factors. A few studies such as those by Briggs (2006); Broekemier and Seshadri (2000); Ramalu et al. (2013) and Wiese et al. (2010) have identified that certain factors such as employment opportunities provided by the HEIs and the availability of sports and social activities in and around the campus have a greater influence on male students than on female students. Studies by Dao and Thorpe (2015) and Ilgan et al. (2018) state that female students are more influenced by the information they receive through online and offline advertisements displayed on television and radio as well as the Internet than male students when considering the channels used by HEIs to disseminate information to students. The research findings also indicate that various individuals in the environment influence the students' decisions when selecting an HEI. Research further indicates that male and female students are differently influenced by these individuals. For example, Dao and Thorpe (2015) state that female students consider the opinion of others more than male students while studies conducted by Anam (2019) and Ramalu et al. (2013) observe that female students are more influenced by the opinions expressed by their family members when choosing an institute of higher studies. On the other hand, research has demonstrated that male students are more susceptible to external influences, as demonstrated by studies such as those conducted by Walsh and Cullinan (2017) and Wiese et al. (2010). Furthermore, these studies indicate that the opinions of their peers and siblings who

are already pursuing higher education influence their decisions regarding their choice of a suitable HEI. Ilgan et al.'s (2018) study indicates that female students are more inclined to select an HEI that meets their future expectations than male students when taking into account students' internal characteristics. However, Awale (2021); Aydin and Bayir (2016); Broekemier and Seshadri (2000); Ramalu et al. (2013) and Wiese et al. (2010) are among the studies that were reviewed. They show that although several factors were found to influence students' decision-making process, the impact of only a few factors was found to differ by gender. In contrast to the aforementioned studies, studies such as those by Sidin et al. (2003) and Silwal and Baral (2021) note that the influence of gender on the key factors shaping a student's choice of an HEI is insignificant. However, a review of the literature revealed that only a few have examined demographic variables such as gender, and their impact on these factors while many studies have explored the factors impacting students' selection of a fee-levying institute. Fewer studies have examined how the student's major influences these important aspects about these demographic characteristics. A few studies have been conducted in Sri Lanka including those by Abeygunawardena (2018); Premarathne et al. (2016); Ranwala et al. (2023) and Somaratna (2020). These studies have identified factors such as the reputation of the institute, facilities of the institute, course fees, employability after graduation and the information obtained through social media as influencing the students when choosing a fee-levying HEI. However, no research has been conducted to examine the effect of demographic variables on the influential factors of students following different degree majors such as computing.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design and Setting

For this study, a quantitative approach was selected as the research methodology and data were collected through a questionnaire using the survey method. The data were gathered from undergraduates who are citizens of Sri Lanka pursuing undergraduate programmes in computing disciplines and studying in their first year in three fee-levying institutes in the state sector and five private institutes with the main campus and branch campuses situated in Western, Southern, Central and North Western Provinces in Sri Lanka.

3.2. Research Population and Sample

The population was first-year students pursuing undergraduate programmes in computing disciplines such as computing, network engineering, cybersecurity, and management information systems in fee-levying HEIs in Sri Lanka. A sample of 800 students was selected from this population to participate in the survey. A two-stage cluster sampling technique was used where during the first stage, eight fee-levying HEIs were selected based on the Sri Lankan university ranking in Webometrics. In the second stage, 50 to 150 undergraduates were selected from each of the chosen institutes using the convenience sampling technique. A total of 556 responses were received of which 510 were considered for data analysis. Data were collected by distributing a questionnaire to the students by visiting the campuses and emailing a link to a Google form.

3.3. Data Collection Instrument

The data analysed in this study were collected using a questionnaire used by Wickramasinghe et al. (2024). In the first section of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked questions regarding their demographics including their gender. This was followed by five items corresponding to the subfactors considered under IC, 14 items under IRF and eight items under CM. A further eight items were considered under a fourth main factor namely, Individuals in the Environment (IE) by Wickramasinghe et al. (2024). Wickramasinghe et al.'s (2024) study revealed that students are not influenced by this factor, it was not included in this study. The questionnaire was distributed by visiting some HEIs and sharing a link to a Google Form with students through email.

3.4. Reliability and Validity

Initially, the survey questionnaire was subject to reliability and validity testing before it was distributed to the participants. The reliability of the questionnaire was verified by calculating the Cronbach's alpha value and the values obtained for each of the individual scales of the questionnaire are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Reliability values of individual scales.

Scales	No. of items in the scales	Cronbach's alpha value	Remarks
IC	5	0.769	Acceptable
IRF	14	0.902	Excellent
CM	8	0.877	Good
IE	8	0.870	Good

It was confirmed that the individual scale items mentioned in the questionnaire have internal consistency reliability since the values obtained for all questionnaire scales were above the threshold value of 0.7. In addition, two subject experts provided opinions and recommendations on the validity of the instrument.

3.5. Data Analysis

The demographic data relating to the student's gender was analysed using descriptive statistics and the non-parametric independent- samples Mann-Whitney U test was used to test the three hypotheses formulated in the study. This test was chosen because there were only two independent groups of data for the variable gender, namely "male" and "female". Considering these results, Pearson's chi-square test was conducted to establish which of the 16 items or subfactors considered under the three main factors in the study varied by gender. Ordinal logistics regression was applied to determine the gender that exerted the greatest impact on the identified subfactors, i.e., identify whether the male students or the female students were more influenced by the subfactors considered in the study following the identification of items that varied by gender. SPSS software was used for data analysis.

4. RESULTS

The demographic data showed that out of the 510 responses analysed, 56.5% were male and 43.5% were female as shown in Table 3, indicating that there was no notable difference between the two genders.

Table 3. Gender distribution.

Category	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Male	288	56.50%	56.50%
Female	222	43.50%	100.00%
Total	510	100%	100.00%

Hypotheses H1, H2, and H3 were then tested using the independent samples Mann-Whitney U test to determine whether gender has any impact on the independent variables IC, IRF and MC and the outcomes obtained are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Hypothesis test summary.

Hypotheses	p-value	Decision
H1	0.084	Rejected
H2	0.034	Accepted
H3	0.013	Accepted

The results of hypothesis testing indicated that students' gender has an impact on two of the three main influential factors considered in the study, namely institute-related factors and communication channels since $p < .05$ whereas gender had no impact on the internal characteristics of students when selecting a fee-levying HEI for enrolment in an undergraduate computing degree. Accordingly, Pearson's chi-square test was conducted next to the seven items considered under IRF to determine whether the influence of the IRF items varied by gender and the findings are presented in Table 5. The results obtained revealed that gender has a significant influence on the IRF items IRF3 and IRF4 indicating that the influence of institute-related factors like the quality of educational facilities such as classroom, laboratory and library facilities (IRF3) and availability of scholarships by the institute (IRF4) vary by gender when students select a fee-levying HEI.

Table 5. Summary of chi-square test results between gender and items of IRF.

IRF items compared with gender	p-value	Decision
IRF1	$0.201 > 0.05$	Do not differ by gender.
IRF2	$0.084 > 0.05$	Do not differ by gender.
IRF3	$0.042 < 0.05$	Differ by gender.
IRF4	$0.041 < 0.05$	Differ by gender.
IRF5	$0.391 > 0.05$	Do not differ by gender.
IRF6	$0.279 > 0.05$	Do not differ by gender.
IRF7	$0.887 > 0.05$	Do not differ by gender.

Similarly, Pearson's chi-square test was performed on the five items under CM to determine whether the influence of the CM items varied by gender and the results obtained are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Summary of chi-square test results between gender and items of CM.

CM items compared with gender	p-value	Decision
CM1	$0.008 < 0.05$	Differ by gender.
CM2	$0.305 > 0.05$	Do not differ by gender.
CM3	$0.342 > 0.05$	Do not differ by gender.
CM4	$0.385 > 0.05$	Do not differ by gender.
CM5	$0.267 > 0.05$	Do not differ by gender.

According to the findings presented in Table 6, when comparing the CM items by gender, only the influence of CM1 varied by gender suggesting that when students choose a fee-levying institution to enrol in an undergraduate computing degree, gender influences the information shared through the Institute's flyers on social media (CM1). Consequently, it was concluded that of the 16 subfactors considered in the study, only three subfactors differ according to the gender of the student while gender has no impact on the remaining 13 subfactors. Based on this outcome, ordinal logistic regression was applied one by one to the three items IRF3, IRF4, and CM1 with gender as the predictor with male = 0 and female = 1 to determine which of the two genders is influenced more by these factors when choosing a fee-levying institute for enrolment in an undergraduate degree programme in a computing discipline. Hence, the significance values and the parameter estimates obtained are presented in Table 7 considering the model fitting information for IRF3, IRF4 and CM1 with gender.

Table 7. Model fitting information of IRF3, IRF4 and CM1 with gender.

Variables	P-value	Parameter estimates
IRF3	0.021	-0.377
IRF4	0.004	-0.464
CM1	0.000	-0.576

Since the p-values of variables IR3, IRF4 and CM1 were less than 0.05, the respective fitted models were considered significant. In addition, the parameter estimates obtained for IRF3, IRF4 and MC1 were -0.377, -0.464 and -0.576 respectively. Accordingly, it was concluded that male students are less likely to be influenced by the factors quality of educational facilities such as classroom, laboratory, library facilities of the institute (IRF3), availability of scholarships by the institute (IRF4) and the information shared through flyers of the institute on social media (CM1) in comparison to female students.

5. DISCUSSION

This study was conducted to determine whether the demographic variable gender impacts the key factors influencing students when choosing a fee-levying HEI for enrolling in an undergraduate programme in a computing discipline. Wickramasinghe et al. (2024) found three factors that influence students' selections of HEIs: communication channels, institute-related factors, and internal student characteristics. The study evaluated gender as a moderator variable. Students' choice of a fee-levying HEI was considered the dependent variable. Accordingly, three hypotheses were developed and tested and the analysed data shows that gender impacts only two of the three key factors, specifically institute-related factors and communication channels while gender does not affect students' internal characteristics. These results are also supported by numerous studies such as those conducted by Akareem and Hossain (2016); Anam (2019); Awale (2021); Dao and Thorpe (2015); Ilgan et al. (2018); Kaur (2018); Mustafa et al. (2018); Songan et al. (2010); Walsh and Cullinan (2017) and Wiese et al. (2010). Analysis of the seven subfactors considered under institute-related factors revealed that only two of them namely, the quality of educational facilities such as classroom, laboratory and library facilities of the institute and availability of scholarships by the institute, were found to differ by gender. Further analysis of these three subfactors revealed that female students are more influenced by these subfactors than male students when choosing a fee-levying institute for enrolling in an undergraduate degree in a computing discipline supporting the findings of Ilgan et al. (2018). However, the demographic variable had no impact on the other subfactors. Furthermore, the findings of Dao and Thorpe (2015) and Ilgan et al. (2018) support the notion that, of the five subfactors taken into consideration under communication channels, gender only affected one communication channel such as the information gathered through the institute's flyers on social media. Students who were female were found to be more influenced by the information gathered through this channel than their male counterparts. Gender had no impact on the other four subfactors considered under communication channels. Overall, it could be seen that among all the 16 influential subfactors considered in this study, only three subfactors were found to differ indicating that gender impacts only a very few factors while gender has no significant impact on the majority of the influential factors analysed. This is consistent with the findings of Awale (2021); Aydin and Bayir (2016); Broekemier and Seshadri (2000); Ramalu et al. (2013) and Wiese et al. (2010) who have also concluded that the influence of the majority of the factors does not vary by gender when students select a fee-levying institute.

6. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Many fee-levying HEIs offering degrees in computing disciplines in Sri Lanka compete with each other and therefore heavily invest their resources in recruitment and promotional activities to attract potential students. However, it can be observed that such activities do not always yield the expected outcomes in terms of student enrolment as they are often carried out without fully understanding student expectations. Therefore, the outcome of this study will provide insights into the factors impacting students when selecting an HEI for enrolling in an undergraduate degree programme in a computing discipline as well as how gender will impact these key factors. Hence, these findings would enable the academic administrators of these institutes to develop effective segmented marketing strategies, allowing them to fully use their resources and thereby maximise student enrolment.

7. CONCLUSION

The primary aim of this research was to determine whether the demographic variable gender impacts the key influences aiding students' selection of a fee-levying higher education institute in Sri Lanka when enrolling in an undergraduate programme in a computing discipline. Wickramasinghe et al. (2024) identified the following three key factors, specifically, the internal characteristics of students, institute-related factors, and communication channels influencing students' HEI choices. Accordingly, they were used in this study to determine whether gender has an impact on these three key factors. In addition to these three main factors, Wickramasinghe et al. (2024) identified 16 subfactors that play a significant role in choosing a fee-levying HEI and they were also considered. The survey method was used for this quantitative research and a questionnaire was distributed among eight fee-levying HEIs and their branch campuses located in four provinces in Sri Lanka. Data collected from 510 first-year students in computing disciplines were considered in the analysis. The study outcome showed that gender has an impact on the institute-related factors and communication channels whereas it has no impact on the internal characteristics of students. In addition, it was identified that of the 16 subfactors considered in the study, only the impact of the three subfactors, namely, the quality of educational facilities such as classrooms, laboratories, library facilities of the institute, the availability of scholarships by the institute and the information collected through the flyers of the institute on social media were found to differ according to gender. The remaining 13 subfactors were not affected by the moderator variable gender indicating that gender does not impact the majority of influential factors. Further analysis revealed that female students are more influenced by these three subfactors than their male counterparts. The HEI administrators will find the outcome of this research useful when formulating segmented marketing strategies to promote their institutes and undergraduate programmes and thereby maximise their efforts in attracting potential students. It would be beneficial for HEI administrators if further research is conducted on undergraduates pursuing other disciplines to obtain a better understanding of the factors that differ based on gender.

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Transparency: The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

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