

Rhetoric, Risk, and Reputation: The Impact of Destabilizing Policy Rhetoric on International Students' Intentions to Study in the U.S.

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Abstract

The United States has long been a leading destination for international students due to its prestigious universities and high educational standards. However, recent declines in international student enrollment suggest that additional factors beyond economic conditions, visa policies, and global competition may be at play. This study examines the role of destabilizing policy rhetoric surrounding immigration and international education in shaping international students' perceptions and enrollment intentions. Grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory, the research conceptualizes students as active media users who seek information to reduce uncertainty and meet emotional and social needs related to studying abroad.

Using a cross-sectional survey design, data is collected from prospective and current international students aged 18 and older. The instrument includes Likert-scale measures assessing media consumption frequency, perceived exposure to destabilizing political rhetoric, and motivations for media use, including informational, emotional, and social gratifications. Additional measures assess perceived risk, trust in U.S. institutions, and enrollment intentions, while open-ended responses provide contextual insight into students' perceptions.

It is hypothesized that greater exposure to destabilizing political rhetoric, particularly through digital and social media, is associated with increased perceived risk and decreased intention to enroll in U.S. institutions. Furthermore, uses-and-gratifications motivations are expected to mediate this relationship. Findings contribute to research on media effects, global mobility, and perceptions of democracy, with implications for higher education institutions and policymakers seeking to maintain U.S. competitiveness in international education.