

Switching Majors and its Relationship to Decision Making Styles Among Arab Students in Israeli Universities

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ABSTRACT: Previous studies have shed light on career choice and higher education challenges. However, this study is unique since it is the first to focus on the relationship between switching university majors and decision-making styles among Arab university students changing their majors during their academic life. A cross-sectional and descriptive design study was carried out consisting of 228 university students. Two scales administered were: The General Decision-making Styles Questionnaire (GDMSQ) and Influences on Choice of Major Questionnaire (ICMQ). Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficient tests were used to analyse the data. The research findings showed that rational decision-making style is very prominent, and that personal interests and abilities are the most significant factor for major switching among Arab university students. The findings revealed positive correlation between personal interests and abilities on the one hand and rational style on the other hand. The main contribution of the present study is its approach in examining the relationship between switching university majors and decision-making styles among students, specifically within the context of Arab society in Israel.

KEYWORDS: Switching majors, Decision making styles, Israeli universities, Arab students

INTRODUCTION

The university stage is considered one of the most important stages of academic life for many students, as it contributes significantly to refining and shaping their personalities and developing their values, skills and abilities [1]. Higher education is regarded as an important stage of career exploration and identity formation. It plays a significant role in determining students' future careers. Many students face academic and personal challenges, particularly during the transition into university life loaded with anxiety, stress and psychological pressure, especially when it comes to choosing their university majors [2].

In many societies, choosing a university major is considered a critical decision in a student's life since it affects the individual's personal, social, and professional future. Economic factors, among others such as personal interests and academic fit, often influence the selection of university majors. Academic factors related to the nature of the subjects, the type of specialization, and the admission conditions, as well as social and family factors and the social status of the future profession. Personal factors are also linked to a student's achievements and mental abilities. Finally, motivation, desires, tendencies, interests, personal values, and decision-making styles are all affected by psychological factors [3]. It has been demonstrated that personality traits influence academic major choice at the university level [4].

The proportion of Arab students enrolling in Israeli universities has seen a significant increase over the past decade. Between 2009 and 2021, the number of Arab students pursuing a bachelor's degree increased by 106%, those pursuing a master's degree by 228%, and those pursuing a doctorate by 133%. This increase represents a substantial improvement in the academic representation of Arab students in Israel, with the number of Arab students in higher education institutions exceeding 50,000 for the first time during the 2018-2019 period. Despite these increases, significant challenges remain for Arab students, including social and economic gaps that affect their educational and professional opportunities. Additionally, statistics indicate ongoing disparities between Arab and Jewish students in terms of wages and academic achievement, highlighting a continued need for improvements in these areas. However, Arab students in Israel face significant challenges in higher education, including language barriers due to Hebrew-dominated instruction, discrimination, limited financial resources, and social and cultural isolation. Additionally, they experience underrepresentation in academic and administrative structures, misaligned curricula, and political and administrative hurdles. These issues collectively hinder their educational experience and progress, necessitating sustained efforts from universities and the government to improve their conditions and support their academic success [5].

Higher education is of great interest to Arab society in Israel, as evidenced by the growing number of Arab students enrolled in higher education institutions both inside and outside of Israel, as well as the diversity of subjects taught. The career of an Arab academic student in Israeli universities differs from that of other students from other cultures and communities due to the unique

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characteristics of political reality and the transformation of Palestinian society within Israel from a majority to a national minority, with both the resulting psychological, social, political, and educational changes and projections on the reality of individuals' lives in society. According to a Center for Higher Institutes of Academic Studies report, Arab students drop out more than Jewish students during their academic careers, and Arab students are 13% less likely to receive their first university title than Jewish students. Arab university students encounter psychological difficulties as a result of social, material, family, cultural, and linguistic misunderstandings. During their academic and professional careers, they face challenges as a result of political and national conflict. by Arab students [6].

Decision-making styles

Decision-making stands as a pivotal cognitive function within the realm of educational psychology, representing a key construct linked to human behavior, thereby warranting scientific examination in psychology. This process is acknowledged as being both systematic and rational, permeating every level of organization, society, and family life [7]. Historically, research on decision-making concentrated on the process itself; however, recent studies have shifted focus towards understanding the variability in individuals' performances across various decision-making tasks and roles, including the perception of preferences as inherent risks [8]. The style with which a student makes decisions significantly influences their approach to choosing an academic major. This choice is not merely academic; it is a reflection of the student's identity, aspirations, and perceived career trajectory. Students with different decision-making styles experience and manage the stress and uncertainty of this choice in varied ways, which in turn impacts their satisfaction and success in their chosen fields of study.

It is observed that an individual's approach to decision-making often reflects a learned behavior pattern, consistently applied across situations requiring a choice. These approaches are intricate, encompassing numerous cognitive processes such as information gathering, self-evaluation, and organizational skills [9]. Decision-making methods are defined "as learned, habitual responses that an individual exhibits in the face of decisions". Importantly, these are not considered personality traits but rather habit-formed tendencies to respond in specific manners within certain decision contexts [10].

Five primary decision-making styles are identified: dependent, avoidant, spontaneous, rational, and intuitive. Individuals tend to exhibit varying degrees of these styles, though typically one style prevails [10]. The rational style is characterized by a thorough exploration of all options, analysis of potential outcomes from diverse angles, followed by the selection of the most effective solution. This style emphasizes extensive research, fact verification, and a logical assessment of alternatives. Conversely, the dependent style is marked by a reliance on others for support and advice in decision-making scenarios, indicating a preference for external guidance before making significant choices [11]. The intuitive style, on the other hand, leans towards an emphasis on details within information flows, favoring intuition and personal feelings over systematic data processing [12]. In contrast, the avoidant style is noted for deferring or dodging decisions whenever feasible, showing a tendency to procrastinate [13]. Lastly, the spontaneous style is identified by a pressing sense of urgency and a swift decision-making process [9]. This approach is characterized by impulsiveness, a lack of patience, and a predisposition towards satisfying others rather than engaging in logical deliberation [14].

Major Change

Numerous studies have identified a variety of internal factors that are pivotal in guiding students towards selecting their future academic disciplines, including but not limited to their personal interests, inherent talents, and scholastic accomplishments [15]. These personal attributes, encompassing interests, talents, and personality traits, have been linked to influencing students' decisions in choosing their majors specifically, in cultures that value individualism, personal interests have been underscored as a critical determinant in career choices, with younger individuals showing greater autonomy in their career-related decisions [16], [17]. Additionally, the allure of financial rewards alongside personal interests plays a substantial role in shaping students' career decisions. Earlier research also supports the notion that students' career pathways are significantly influenced by their personal interests and academic performances [18]. Interest is described as a pivotal inclination that motivates students towards a particular major, driven by their enthusiasm and engagement with the subject matter [19]. Moreover, this body of research confirms that academic achievements are also a crucial factor in the major selection process. Conversely, external elements affecting students' choices include familial relationships, specifically between parents and their offspring. The impact of interpersonal dynamics, such as those within families and among peers, is also deemed vital [20]. Furthermore, it was found that parents' financial capabilities to support their children's education play a crucial role in the selection of careers, granting parents considerable influence over their children's educational and career trajectories [21].

The literature suggested that changing a major is associated with certain variables such as instructors, advisors, friends and family, good salary, job security and career advancement, personal interests and course preferences that affect students' decisions to change majors [22],[23], [24], [25], [26], [27],[28]. More than a half of students participated expressed their desire to study another major than they are enrolled in. The differences were statistically significant in favor of females [22]. Three primary factors influencing students' choices to switch their academic majors. Firstly, personal and course preferences; students might opt for a different major that resonates more with their personal interests, stimulates their motivation, leverages their strengths, and brings them joy through engaging coursework. Secondly, influential issues, according to existing studies, decisions to change majors are often influenced by

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specific individuals and variables that provide crucial information and guidance. These influencers can include teachers, advisors, peers, and family members, with the latter two, particularly friends and family, playing a significant role in advising students on their major choices. Thirdly, job issues, the decision to stick with or switch majors can also be driven by factors related to future employment prospects, such as the potential for a good salary, job security, opportunities for career progression, and availability of career opportunities [23].

It was found out that students often switch majors due to a reevaluation of their skills and self-confidence. Some students gain confidence in their abilities, which leads them to pursue more challenging majors they previously thought were beyond their reach. Others experience self-doubt and realize they may not have the necessary skills for their initial major, prompting them to switch to fields they feel more suited for. Moreover, some students feel that their initial major does not meet their needs or adequately support their success, which leads them to seek out other majors that seem to offer better structure and support. Finally, before fully committing to a new major, students often engage in a tentative exploration of potential new fields. This includes researching program requirements and taking introductory courses in the new field to assess their interest and fit [27]. High-achieving students are more likely to switch majors, particularly across disciplines and later in their studies, contrary to expectations that higher performers are more stable in their choices. Furthermore, a mismatch in occupational interests primarily impacts switches across broad subject groups, suggesting that students seek majors that better align with their interests when they decide to switch. What is more, parental and peer disapproval of a student's initial subject choice significantly affects the likelihood of switching, particularly during the first two semesters [25]. Furthermore, the majority of Arab students indicated that the reason for choosing the university subject they are studying is due to their love for the subject they are studying (53.2%), while 29.4% of students indicated that the reason for choosing their subject is mainly due to their acceptance of this subject, not love for it. 12.5% chose their subjects based on the recommendation of friends and family, 56.3% of students indicated that they liked to study another major; only 4.9% initially considered the possibility of job opportunities for the subject and accordingly, chose the subject. The results show that about a third of students choose the abstract subject without examining their personal inclinations or their ability to progress in it, and give through it [29].

Research on the relationship between switching university majors and decision-making styles among Arab students switching majors during their academic life involves understanding the factors that influence such decisions and the patterns of thought that lead to major changes. Several key considerations could be taken. Firstly, decision-making styles can impact a student's probability of switching majors. For instance, avoidant decision-makers might delay choosing a major due to fear of making a wrong choice, thus it may lead to a switch later on. Secondly, cultural Influences can significantly influence decision-making. Arab students in Israel might experience unique cultural pressures, such as societal norms or family expectations, which could influence their choice of major and openness to changing it if their initial choice does match their career goals or personal interests. Thirdly, the structure of university programs in Israel, availability of career guidance, and informational resources might also play crucial roles. Moreover, limited exposure to different fields prior to or during the early stages of university could lead to changes in major as students gain more insight into what different fields entail. Next, personal growth, self-discovery, and changing interests are common in university students and can lead to a switch in majors. Social adaptability and psychological resilience might also correlate with the probability of making such a change. Then, economic considerations could also drive decisions to switch majors, for example, changes in the job market or economic downturns may prompt students to switch to majors perceived as more lucrative or stable. Finally, the implications of switching majors can be significant in terms of time to graduation, financial costs, and mental health. Based on these points, the current study is the first of its kind to reveal the relationship between decision-making styles and switching university majors among Arab students during their undergraduate studies in Israeli universities.

RESEARCH METHOD

Sample

The study involved 228 Arab university students who changed their academic major at least once during their academic life. They were selected through convenience sampling, with 73% being female. The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 32 years, with an average age of 26.15 years ($SD = 5.16$). They were drawn from eight different faculties. Among them, 26.1% were enrolled in medical fields, 19.9% in computer science or engineering, 16.4% in social sciences, and 15% in humanities, with the remaining students studying law, business, science, and education sciences. A total of 22.8% of the students began their academic studies immediately after high school, while 51.3% started after a one-year delay. Additionally, 13.6% of the students had changed their major more than once, and 64% had changed their major within the first year of their studies.

Instrument

Three tools were used to test the study variables :

Demographic variables questionnaire: This instrument was created by the researcher and included self-reported questions for gender ,age, academic major, how many times they change their academic major, and finally the timing of switching the major.

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General Decision-making Styles Questionnaire (GDMSQ): The questionnaire consists of 25 statements, with responses from 1-5 on a Likert scale (totally disagree = 1 to totally agree = 5). The questionnaire measures five subscales-five statements in each subscale: rational; intuitive; dependent; avoidant; and spontaneous. The Arabic version was translated from English by professional expert English translators. For the current study, Cronbach Alpha coefficients were calculated for the questionnaire and the reliability values were as follows: rational $\alpha = 0.79$, intuitive $\alpha = 0.78$, dependent $\alpha = 0.84$, avoidant $\alpha = 0.81$, spontaneous $\alpha = 0.89$.

Influences on Choice of Major Questionnaire (ICMQ). The Influences on Choice of Major Questionnaire (ICMQ) (Malgwi et. al., 2005) has been modified by the researcher. The developer presented the questionnaire to five experts who confirmed it and reported internal reliability of $\alpha = .72$ on the Cronbach Index. The new questionnaire consists of 17 statements on a 5-point Likert-type scale: (1= no influence to 5= major influence. The questionnaire consists of main sections: a) the section on positive influences includes three dimensions: personal interests and abilities, influential issues, and job issues; b) Negative influences for major change, this section includes only one dimension: prior academic challenges.

Research Process: The study included Arab university students who have studied in Israeli universities. Data was collected through filling an anonymous online questionnaire. All participants were aware of the purpose of the study, the quality of data collected and gave prior informed consent. Participation in this study was voluntary and no incentive was given to the participants.

Statistical Analysis: Means, standard deviations, and maximum and minimum values for decision making styles and the influences on choice of major were calculated first. Then, independent samples t-test, and Pearson correlations were calculated to test the hypothesis. Lastly, Alpha of Cronbach calculated for the research tools. Statistical analyses were performed by SPSS version 26.

FINDINGS

In order to examine the levels of the study variables, means and standard deviations were calculated first, along with minimum and maximum values for General Decision-Making styles and Influences on Choice of Major as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum values for the study variables

	Dimensions	M	SD	Min	Max
General Decision-Making styles	rational	4.07	.85	1.00	5.00
	intuitive	3.53	.71	1.40	5.00
	dependent	3.25	.88	1.00	5.00
	avoidant	2.66	1.08	1.00	5.00
	spontaneous	2.54	.86	1.00	5.00
Influences on Choice of Major	Personal interest & abilities	4.08	1.01	1.00	5.00
	Job issues	3.19	1.22	1.00	5.00
	Prior academic challenges	2.70	1.02	1.00	5.00
	Influential issues	1.94	.79	1.00	5.00

Table 1 shows that the rational decision-making style is relatively high whereas the spontaneous style attained the lowest score. It is also shown that personal interests and abilities are the most prominent reason for major switching among Arab university students.

Table 2. Pearson correlations between Influences on Choice of Major and Decision-making styles (N = 228)

	rational	spontaneous	avoidant	dependent
Prior academic challenges	-.15*	.31**	.34**	.22**
Personal interest & abilities	.24**	-.14*	-.23**	
Influential issues	-.22**	.15*		

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; $n = 228$

Table 2 shows statistical correlations between influences on choice of major and decision-making styles among Arab students in Israel. There is a statistically significant positive correlation between personal interest & abilities and rational style ($r = .24$, $p < .01$), and a negative correlation with avoidant and spontaneous styles respectively ($r = -.23$, $p < .01$; $r = -.14$, $p < .05$). There is a statistically significant positive correlation between prior academic challenges and avoidant style, spontaneous style, and dependent style respectively ($r = .34$, $r = .31$, $r = .22$, $p < .01$), and a negative correlation with rational style ($r = -.15$, $p < .05$). Furthermore, there is a statistically significant negative correlation between rational style and influential issues ($r = -.22$, $p < .01$); and a statistically significant positive correlation between spontaneous style and influential issues ($r = .15$, $p < .05$). Finally, no gender differences were found related to influences on choice of major and decision-making styles as well.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the current study was to examine relationship between switching university majors and decision-making styles among Arab university students. The research findings show that rational decision-making style is very prominent Arab university students. The high score for the rational decision-making style indicates that Arab university students tend to prefer a systematic and analytical approach to making decisions. They likely engage in thorough research, consider various options, and evaluate the potential outcomes before arriving at a conclusion. These findings are aligned with a study examining the relation between decision making styles and big five personality traits among Arab university students in Israel shows that the rational decision-making style is relatively high whereas the spontaneous style attained the lowest score [30]. The low score for the spontaneous decision-making style, however, suggests that these students are less likely to make impulsive or quick decisions without careful consideration. These findings reflect a student population that values careful, informed decision-making and seeks alignment between their academic pursuits and personal strengths. This indicates a mature and thoughtful approach to education and career planning, which can lead to higher satisfaction and success rates if adequately supported by the university.

What is more, the fact that personal interests and abilities are the most prominent reasons for major switching in this research indicates that students prioritize aligning their studies with their passions and strengths. This suggests a strong desire for personal fulfillment and success in areas where they feel competent. These findings are aligned with a study identifying the factors that high school students have used in examining career choices among Palestinian high school in Israel showed that future progress and advancement opportunities and job security comes first. Student's interests, personality and tendencies attained high score. It is notable that identifying and understanding individual's interests, values and personality is considered as a foundation for career decision making [31]; the current research findings are similar to those suggesting that switching majors is a complex decision influenced by both individual preferences and external social factors [25]. In addition, the current findings are aligned with results of the study showing that students who decided to change majors were positively influenced by their interest in the new majors, parents advise to change their current majors to better ones, discussing with other students about the new majors, their instructors and the availability of job opportunities related to the new majors [23],

The research findings show positive correlation between personal Interests and abilities on the one hand and rational style on the other hand. This indicates that students who score high on rational decision-making tend to choose their majors based on personal interests and abilities. These students likely employ a logical and structured approach to align their academic paths with their strengths and passions. Furthermore, students who avoid decisions or make spontaneous choices are less likely to base their major selection on personal interests and abilities. This suggests a potential mismatch between their decision-making styles and optimal major selection strategies. The findings also show that students who have faced academic challenges tend to exhibit avoidant, spontaneous, or dependent decision-making styles. These styles may stem from previous difficulties in academic performance, leading to less proactive and more reactive decision-making behaviors. Students with rational decision-making styles are less likely to have experienced significant academic challenges, possibly due to their systematic approach to problem-solving and decision-making. Rational decision-makers are less influenced by external issues, indicating their decisions are more internally driven and based on personal criteria. Finally, students with spontaneous decision-making styles are more likely to be influenced by external factors when choosing their majors, reflecting a less structured decision-making process. To sum up, Personal interests and abilities are the most prominent reasons for major switching among these students, indicating that their decisions to switch majors are primarily driven by a desire to align their studies with their intrinsic motivations and perceived strengths.

For Arab students in Israeli universities, these findings highlight the importance of aligning academic pursuits with personal interests and abilities. The preference for a rational decision-making style suggests that these students value thorough analysis and logical reasoning in their academic decisions. The influence of past academic challenges on decision-making styles reflects the impact of prior experiences on current behaviors. Understanding these dynamics can help educators and counselors support students in making informed decisions that align with their personal and academic goals.

CONCLUSIONS

Efforts should be made to empower students with rational decision-making skills, this may boost independence from external pressures, and schools should provide comprehensive resources to help students understand their interests and abilities. This can be enhanced by structured guidance and targeted academic support, assisting students in overcoming past challenges and decreasing future ones. Early development of these skills is crucial. Academic and career counseling should be designed to align with students' preferences, emphasizing critical thinking, problem-solving, and analytical skills in the curriculum. Personalized education through flexible curricula and interdisciplinary programs are recommended. School services should focus on early identification of interests and abilities through tests and exposure to various fields. Enhanced advising, career development programs, and flexible curriculum design that allows for easy switching of majors without penalties are essential. Mental health services and supportive resources such as stress management should address both rational and emotional decision-making aspects, creating a supportive environment for students to achieve their academic and career goals aligned with their personal interests and abilities .

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However, the research on the relationship between switching university majors and decision-making styles among Arab university students in Israel has several limitations. Firstly, the use of convenience sampling limits the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, the study relied on self-reported data through questionnaires, which can be subject to biases such as social desirability bias or inaccurate self-assessment. Next, the study is specific to Arab students in Israeli universities, which means the findings may not be applicable to other cultural or national context. Then, there may be other unmeasured variables that influence both decision-making styles and the likelihood of switching majors, such as prior academic performance, family expectations, or personal experiences that were not accounted for in the study. Finally, broader political, social, and economic factors unique to the Palestinian minority in Israel were mentioned but not deeply examined, which could play a significant role in educational and career decision-making processes. Future research could address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs, larger and more diverse samples, and mixed-method approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing major switching and decision-making among university students.

Conflict of interest: The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

Availability of data: All data generated or analyzed during this study are not publicly available to maintain the privacy of the individuals' identities. The dataset supporting the conclusions are available upon request to the corresponding author.

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