

## **Mass Communication Minor Selection Gap. Why are Students Choosing Public Relations over Advertising or Journalism?**

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### **Abstract**

One of the main problems Mass Communication colleges are facing in United Arab Emirates (UAE) is the fact that students are selecting Public Relations over other minors such Journalism and Advertising. In this paper, we explore the several factors that affect student decision in selecting a minor. The paper tries to answer the following question: Do variables such as age, citizenship, culture, religion, future prospects (such as readiness for employability after graduation) and influence of external factors (such as family or university staff) affect minor selection? We find that gender and citizen play a role in determining the minor selection. We also find that the lack of external effect from university staff can be used to better balance the numbers between the three minors.

The research offers several suggestions on what both Universities as well as the government of UAE can take to better divert students towards mass communication minors (Journalism and Advertising) including placing a cap on number of students enrolled in Public Relations minor, holding workshops and introducing students to benefits and advantages of other minors (Mainly journalism and Advertising).

**Keywords:** Mass Communication, minor selection, public relations, journalism.

### **Introduction**

Selecting a college major is a career-related decision for many students (Germeijs, Luyckx, Notelaers, Goossens & Verschueren, 2012). Super's (1980) theory considered major selection as a minicycle in a larger cycle of career development. The literature is filled with research examining factors that can affect the decision to select a major (see, for example, Brenner-Shuman & Waren, 2013; Freeman & Hirsch, 2007; Madison, Hopp, Santana, & Stansberry, 2017; Zafar, 2013; Nores, 2010).

Madison et al. (2017) explored students' motivation for choosing mass communication as their major field of study by using self-determination theory. Self-determination theory proposes two types of motivation that inspire people: intrinsic motivation comes from within and extrinsic motivation comes from external influences. The Madison et al. study focused on career security, performance in academics, and general life satisfaction as the basic outcomes related to major satisfaction. The authors found that intrinsic motivation rather than extrinsic motivation influenced students' major life satisfaction. In addition, major life satisfaction positively aligned with career surety, academic performance, and life satisfaction.

Brenner-Shuman and Waren (2013) examined the relationship between age at menarche and the choice of a science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM) major. Surveying 150 female students, Brenner-Shuman and Waren found that that women who entered puberty earlier in life were more likely to select college majors that focused on verbal skills. Their findings also revealed that students taking STEM majors were a little younger than non-STEM majors.

Freeman and Hirsch (2007) examined the relationship between students' choice of degree course and knowledge content of jobs. To measure knowledge content of jobs, Freeman and Hirsch took a person's earnings and employment statistics found in the Current Population Survey and combined them with ratings on 27 knowledge-content areas from the Occupational Information Network. The researchers then linked the data retrieved from the Digest of Education Statistics for 1976 to 1977 through 2001 to 2002 with the 27 knowledge-content areas. The researchers discovered that the choice of college major responded to modifications in the knowledge-content of jobs. The researchers observed that women respond better to knowledge content than men, but their response to wages was weaker than men's. Additionally, women responded to nationwide information rather than gender-specific information on labor market knowledge content when making degree decisions, thereby pursuing careers

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that are similar to those of men. Findings also revealed that the choice of undergraduate major is receptive to concurrent changes in earnings in knowledge areas.

Zafar (2013) examined college-major choices focused on explaining the prevailing gender gap. Zafar surveyed 161 sophomore students (92 women and 69 men) from Northwestern University on their choice of major selection among 41 possible majors. Gender differences in beliefs about ability and future earnings were insignificant in explaining the gender gap; merely raising women's expectations may not be enough to eradicate the gap, and hypotheses claiming the gap could be explained by women having low self-esteem or less confidence than men can be rejected by my data. Rather, as this paper shows, the gender gap is due to gender differences in beliefs about enjoying coursework and different preferences for various outcomes. Zafar (2013) observed that replacing women's beliefs about enjoying coursework with those of men decreases the gender gap in engineering by almost half.

Nores (2010) examined the relationship between major selection and citizenship. Using administrative data obtained from two universities in Texas—Texas Tech University and the University of Texas at Austin, Nores found that those who were not citizens had a higher tendency to select majors in science, engineering, and mathematics and a lower tendency to select majors in the social sciences. Additionally, domestic students differed in their tendency to choose science, mathematics, and engineering and other majors depending on their race. Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians who were citizens had a higher tendency to select science, mathematics, and engineering as fields of study. In contrast, among students who were not citizens, Blacks had the lowest tendency to select science, mathematics, and engineering at Texas Tech University and Hispanics recorded a lower rate in selecting these fields at the University of Texas at Austin.

Finally, Nores observed that after the introduction of a Texas bill, choices for college major changed for domestic noncitizens. Noncitizens could now afford to choose the fields of study that domestic citizens chose, thereby narrowing the gap between fields of study for domestic citizens and noncitizens.

### **The Problem**

The problem analyzed here is that most Mass Communication students in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) prefer to select the Public Relations minor over other minors such as Journalism or Advertising. As noted later, many universities in the UAE face this issue and it is not a single event happening at Al Ain University of Science and Technology (AAU), where this study was conducted. As of the date this research study was conducted, more than 8,000 students were enrolled in the Public Relations minor at AAU, whereas the total number of Mass Communication students was 374, of whom 343 or 91.7% were enrolled with a Public Relations minor; the rest were distributed among the other two minors, Advertising (3.7%) and Journalism (4.6%). To try to understand this problem, we surveyed students on factors that played a role in their decision to select a minor. We extracted the factors for selecting a field of study from literature as can be seen in table 1.

Table 1 *Factors Affecting the Field of Study*

Factor	Literature
Age	Brenner-Shuman & Waren, 2013
Citizenship	Nores, 2010
Gender	Anelli & Peri, 2015; Golombisky, 2001; Zafar, 2013; Zhang, 2007
Job Prospect.	Eide & Waehrer, 1998; Freeman & Hirsch, 2007; Monaghan & Jang, 2017
Role Model	Akbulut, 2016
Culture and religion	Villalpando & Solorzano, 2005

### **Research Methodology**

The Mass Communication department offers three programs for choice of minor:

- Public Relations
- Advertising
- Journalism

Since the inception of the program 2 years ago, the department started facing a common issue in the UAE, in that students preferred to select a Public Relations minor, rejecting the other two options of minors. To determine the variables that affected the selection of a minor, we conducted a literature review and created and disseminated a

questionnaire, based on information gleaned from the literature. The questionnaire measured the role of the following factors in deciding to select a particular minor program:

- Culture
- Religion
- Future outlook
- Society

The goal behind this research was to answer the following three questions: Is there a difference in characteristics between students in the three minors? What factors affect the selection of a minor program? What can be done to properly balance students among the three minors? To answer these questions, we formulated the following hypotheses:

*H1A*: A significant relationship will emerge between gender and minor selection.

*H1A<sub>0</sub>*: No significant relationship will emerge between gender and minor selection.

*H2A*: A significant relationship will emerge between citizenship and minor selection.

*H2A<sub>0</sub>*: No significant relationship will emerge between citizenship and minor selection.

*H3A*: A significant relationship will emerge between minor selection and the prospects of finding a job.

*H3A<sub>0</sub>*: No significant relationship will emerge between minor selection and the prospects of finding a job.

*H4A*: A significant relationship will emerge between minor selection and student preference.

*H4A<sub>0</sub>*: No significant relationship will emerge between minor selection and student preference.

*H5A*: A significant relationship will emerge between minor selection and culture, religious beliefs, society acceptance, or future outlook.

*H5A<sub>0</sub>*: No significant relationship will emerge between minor selection and culture, religious beliefs, society acceptance, or future outlook.

*H6A*: A significant relationship will emerge between minor selection and the influence of external factors (family, university registration, or friends).

*H6A<sub>0</sub>*: No significant relationship will emerge between minor selection and the influence of external factors (family, university registration, or friends).

### **Data Collection**

The 20-item questionnaire on selecting a minor included reasons associated with culture, religion, the future, the environment, and four general questions. Students responded to items on a 5-item scale as follows: Strongly agree, Agree, Somewhat agree, Do not agree, and Strongly disagree. In addition to the 20 questionnaire items, students also responded to 8 demographic items.

Of the 176 students, six did not respond to the 20-item questionnaire and were dropped from the analysis. Several missing responses were scattered throughout the questionnaire, replaced with the medians of those students who did respond to the items. This left an *N* of 170 students on which the analysis was conducted. The description of demographic characteristics is provided first (see Table 2) followed by tables addressing different analyses associated with selecting a minor.

Because the study's framework was based on learning about the selection of a minor, the demographics were partitioned by minor. The numbers in Advertising and Journalism minors were small and almost equal; thus, we combined them into one group (*N* = 27) with the remainder of students having selected Public Relations as their minor (*N* = 143). Table 2 shows the partition by minor on the demographic characteristics collected. Students responded to general and specific questions about why they chose their minor and these results appear in Table 3. Finally, Table 4 provides further analysis of specific reasons.

### **Results and Analysis**

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Table 2 *Demographic Characteristics for Mass Communication Majors by Minor (N = 170)*

Characteristic	Public Relations (143)		Advertising and Journalism (27)		$\chi^2$
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
Age					a
18–20	17	12	8	30	
21–25	60	42	13	48	
26–30	25	18	3	11	
31–35	21	15	1	3	
36–40	10	7			
Did not answer	10	7	2	7	
Gender					5.02*
Male	76	53	8	30	
Female	67	<u>47</u>	19	<u>70</u>	
Nationality					8.29**
UAE	112	78	14	52	
Other	31	<u>22</u>	13	<u>48</u>	
Reason for study at U					a
Find a job	62	43	19	70	
Get a promotion	65	46	5	19	
Improve salary	11	8			
Other	5	3	3	11	
Largest role in selecting minor					22.72***
Friends	16	11	4	15	
No one helped	93	65	8	29	
Parent	26	18	6	22	
University personnel	8	<u>6</u>	9	<u>33</u>	
Highest degree (father)					a
Graduate degree	2	1	2	7	
Undergraduate degree	41	29	10	37	
High school	45	32	7	26	
Pre-high school	69	48	9	33	
Highest degree (mother)					a
Graduate degree			2	7	
Undergraduate degree	29	20	9	33	
High school	45	32	7	26	
Pre-high school	69	48	9	33	

*Note.* Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. <sup>a</sup>Indicates insufficient cell numbers for chi-square, \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Table 3  
*General and Specific Reasons for Selecting Minor*

Reason	Public Relations (143)		Advertising and Journalism (27)		$\chi^2$
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
General					0.37
High chance for growth	78	55	16	59	
High chance of finding a job	51	36	8	30	
Minor subject is easy and simple	14	10	3	11	
Specific					
Society	82	57	14	52	1.43
Religion	36	25	9	33	0.07
Future	45	33	7	26	0.83
Environment	58	41	12	44	0.02

*Note.* The Ns and percentages for Specific do not sum to 143, 27, or 100 because the students could choose multiple reasons among the four.

Table 4 *Specific Reasons for Choosing Major Associated with Society, Religion, the Future, and Environment.*

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Specific reason	Public Relations (143)		Advertising and Journalism (27)		$\chi^2$
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
<b>Society</b>					
I feel I can accomplish more in a liberated society	124	87	22	82	0.30
I don't like to interfere in people's business	127	89	22	82	0.10
I abide by tradition	126	<u>88</u>	16	<u>59</u>	0.36
<b>Religion</b>					
I consider myself very religious	36	25	7	26	0.01
I consider religion in every move I make	89	<u>62</u>	22	<u>82</u>	1.95
I ask my parents a lot about religious stuff	81	<u>57</u>	15	<u>5</u>	0.32
<b>Future</b>					
I think a lot about my future	124	87	24	89	0.22
Future doesn't look clear to me	52	36	11	41	0.02
I consider the effect of my decisions on my future	78	55	20	74	1.58
<b>Environment</b>					
The minor I selected will benefit my society	117	81	21	78	0.01
The surrounding environment accepts my minor	77	54	15	56	0.02
In a different environment I would have selected a different minor	38	27	3	11	3.85*

*Note.* The *N*s and percentages do not sum to 143, 27, or 100 because the students could choose multiple reasons, \* $p < .05$ .

Because of the differences in the number of students in Public Relations and Advertising/Journalism, the percentages are most informative. When considering differences in percentages, the small number of students in the Advertising/Journalism group should be considered. Accompanying the percentages, we performed chi-square analyses to determine if statistically significant differences emerged between minors associated with the demographics. Largely, the distributions in minors were similar. However, for several characteristics, the differences were comparatively large and these are underlined.

### The Effect of Age on Minor Selection

The age distribution in minors was similar, except the Advertising/Journalism group had a higher percentage at a younger age (18–20) and none in oldest age category (36–40). The Advertising/Journalism group also had a higher percentage of women than men (70 versus 47%) as well as non-UAE students (48 to 22%). Thus, the Advertising/Journalism minors were somewhat characterized as younger, women, and non-UAE students. It is important to reiterate that the number of students in Advertising/Journalism minors was relatively small. Chi-square between genders was statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 5.02, p < .05$ ); hence we accepted H1A which stated, “A significant relationship will emerge between gender and minor selection” and rejected Null Hypothesis H1A<sub>0</sub> which stated: “No significant relationship will emerge between gender and minor selection.”

### **The Effect of Citizenship on Minor Selection**

In considering the citizenship factor, a statistically significant difference ( $\chi^2 = 8.29, p < .01$ ) emerged between citizenship and minors where noncitizen students tended to select the Advertising/Journalism minor than the Public Relations minor. Therefore, we accepted H2A which stated: “A significant relationship will emerge between citizenship and minor selection” and rejected Null Hypothesis H2A<sub>0</sub> which stated: “No significant relationship will emerge between citizenship and minor selection.”

### **The Effect of Employability on Minor Selection**

When considering the reason for selecting a minor, 70% of those with a minor in Advertising/Journalism believed attending the university would help them find a job more than those minoring in Public Relations (43%). This could be due to the notion that the majority of students in Advertising/Journalism reported not being citizens of the UAE and will have to seek employment after graduation, whereas citizens are usually allocated job positions by the government after graduation or are already working as they complete their education. To support this notion, data revealed that 46% of students minoring in Public Relations indicated they were enrolled at the university to get a promotion. Nevertheless, students in the two minors were quite similar in that the majority agreed that their fields of study had a high chance for growth (55 and 59% respectively). They agreed that their chance of finding a job was not a strong reason for selecting their minor, in that the percentages were in the 30s. Hence, we rejected H3A which stated: “A significant relationship will emerge between minor selection and the prospects of finding a job” and accepted Null Hypothesis H3A<sub>0</sub> which stated: “No significant relationship will emerge between minor selection and the prospects of finding a job.”

### **The Effect of Minor Preference on Minor Selection**

In students’ preference or favoring the choice of minor over other minors, those with Public Relations and the Advertising/Journalism minors tended to prefer the minor picked (77 and 82% respectively), were similar in their agreement about job expectations (59 and 67%), and about society’s acceptance of the job field the minor represented (83 and 70%). Chi-square analysis comparing the differences showed no statistical significance between the minors with respect to students’ opinions about which minor they favored. Therefore, we rejected H4A which stated: “A significant relationship will emerge between minor selection and student preference” and accepted Null Hypothesis H4A<sub>0</sub> which stated: “No significant relationship will emerge between minor selection and student preference.”

### **The Effect of Religious Tendencies on Minor Selection**

When exploring students’ religious tendencies, surrounding culture, and view of society or the future, we asked students specific questions about whether these variables were a factor in deciding a minor. Society and environment had the highest percentages of agreement for both groups. However, none of the four specific reasons was strong (environment was close, but due to small percentages on both sides (27 to 11%), as shown in Table 3, it was considered of no effect). No statistically significant chi-square differences emerged in agreement across the four specific reasons between the minors. Therefore, we rejected H5A which stated: “A significant relationship will emerge between minor selection and culture, religious beliefs, society acceptance, or future outlook” and accepted null Hypothesis H5A<sub>0</sub> which stated: “No significant relationship will emerge between minor selection and culture, religious beliefs, or society acceptance.”

### **The Effect of External Influence (Family, friends, university staff, etc.) on Minor Selection**

Who had the largest role (most influence) in selecting the minor was statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 22.72, p < .001$ ). Observation of who had the largest role in selecting the minor was quite informative in that the majority (65%) of those with Public Relations minors reported that no one helped in selecting a minor whereas only eight (6%) students of the 140 Public Relations students indicated university personnel assisted them with the selection. In contrast, 33% of those with Advertising/Journalism minors indicated they received help from the university. This can be attributed to many factors: first, nonnationals seek more help and guidance from the university, due to entering a new environment. Another reason is that nationals have a clearer idea of why they are enrolled and thus do not seek help when enrolling; rather, they complete the process themselves without consulting university staff. Therefore, we rejected H6A which stated: “A significant relationship will emerge between minor selection and the influence of external factors (family, university registration, or friends)” and accepted null Hypothesis H6A<sub>0</sub> which stated: “No significant relationship will emerge between minor selection and the influence of external factors (family, university registration, or friends).”

### **Discussion**

No distinctive reasons emerged in how or why students picked their minor that would distinguish those who selected Public Relations from those who selected Advertising or Journalism. That is, students in each minor were similar in their agreements about the influence of society, religion, the future, and the environment. In addition,

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each group of students was similar in agreement about their minor being influential in finding a job. Removing such variables can help the university focus its effort on other factors that might balance student distribution among minors.

One finding that is central in distinguishing how students choose their minor is the university's influence—or lack of influence. Only 6% of the 140 Public Relations students reported the university had a role in assisting them with their selection whereas 65% reported they had help from no one. The role of the university in directing students toward different minors is important and is a factor that can be controlled by university staff. Some suggestions we can offer universities include the following:

- Better advertisement for the two minors (Advertising and Journalism)
- Introduce the benefits of Advertising and Journalism in classes to encourage students to switch from Public Relations to one of the other two minors
- Introduce a financial incentive system to persuade students to select Advertising or Journalism
- Introduce students to well-known people who minored in Advertising or explain to students the benefits and advantages of such minors and try to clarify any disadvantages perceived by students relating Journalism and Advertising.

On a larger scale, the issue of selecting a Public Relations minor exists not just in Al Ain University of Science and Technology. The number of registered students minoring in Public Relations in UAE exceeded 8,000 students compared to only a few hundred students in the other two minors, forcing the Ministry of Education to limit the maximum number of students accepted under the Public Relations minor to not exceed 90 per year.

### Conclusion

Selecting a minor can be as important as selecting a major for many students. It's a step that determines the type of work they will do for most of their lives. Although no distinctive reasons emerged in how or why students picked their minor that would distinguish those who selected Public Relations from those who selected Advertising or Journalism, we found that gender and citizenship are two factors that do affect the choice of minor in our sample. With younger students going for Journalism and Advertising compared to older students selecting Public Relations. We also noticed that UAE citizens were more likely to pick Public Relations over the other two minors because Public Relations students can work in many different sectors in UAE while non-citizens prefer Journalism and Advertising due to the fact their stay in the country is limited; after they graduate they have to search for jobs in their own countries, Journalism or Advertising gives them a better chance at that. We also found that the university can play an important role in directing students towards the other minors by properly guiding them at registration time, or holding workshops or providing students with more information on the benefits of such minors. Our sample indicated that 65% of the students picked Public Relations without any guidance or help from anyone, which means with some guidance that percentage can be reduced.

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