

A major choice: exploring the factors influencing undergraduate choices of Communication major

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Abstract

This study explores the reasons behind the popularity of majoring in Public Relations as opposed to Journalism or Digital Media among mass communications undergraduates in Oman. It attempts to gain insight into the factors influencing students' decision-making process in selecting their major. It explores factors such as choice of major and sources of information that shape students' knowledge and perception of the majors, using variables such as knowledge of job market, knowledge of curriculum, information sources and personal influences shaping major choice and selection. The study confirms that perception of the job market is a crucial factor in the selection of the majors. It also reveals that family plays a crucial role in influencing students' decision-making process while choosing a major. The study concludes that strengthening the role of the academic advisor and educating students on course content and learning outcomes can increase the acceptance of less popular majors among communication undergraduates. The study is relevant in the context that the falling numbers of student enrolments in some areas of media studies could lead to a decline in teaching and research activities in those areas, in addition to a possible shortfall of specific skilled professionals in the national labour market pool.

Introduction

Choosing a college major is akin to choosing a path while at a crossroads. A chosen major, often a one-off decision, decides several aspects of a student's career, leading them to a specialization in the areas of their professional interests. For a student, a chosen major, as Al-Rfou (2013) points out, can influence a range of educational and post-educational goals, leading to academic success, hardships or availability of job opportunities, as well as affecting study continuity, defining academic satisfaction or dissatisfaction and determining appropriate financial return and social status. But what factors influence students' choice of majors and why some majors remain more popular than others among students are often challenging and rather elusive questions in higher education that academics across various streams have been grappling with for decades (Al-Rfou, 2013; Bowers, 1976; George-Jackson, 2012; Gibson, 1987; Richardson, 2009; Wiltse, 2006; Zhang 2007).

While students are fully entrusted with deciding on their majors, the choices they make may be based on influences and preconceived notions of the challenges and opportunities associated with each major. An insight into their attitudes and perceptions towards different majors and the factors that might influence their decisions could be crucial to an institution's intelligence database, which could feed into education policy formulation and building an effective academic guidance system in promoting and popularizing the less recognized majors. Against this background, this study aims to contribute to an

ongoing discussion in devising a mechanism that can help promote the underrepresented majors offered at Sur College of Applied Sciences – hereafter referred to as SUR CAS – by identifying and rectifying the problem areas, including possible major-related misconceptions, misplaced influences, false premises and similar obstacles.

This paper, in essence, brings together an analysis of SUR CAS students' perceptions of the three communication majors, Journalism, Public Relations, and Digital Media, and an overview of the student decision-making process, with a focus on the possible areas of intervention relevant to developing a mechanism for preparing SUR CAS students to make an informed choice of a college degree programme. The study explores existing factors according to which students choose their major and the degree to which these factors influence students' decision-making process.

The data obtained from the college registry shows that between 2012 and 2015 the overwhelming majority of students opted for the Public Relations programme, under-representing Journalism and Digital Media. Even a cursory glance at the numbers indicates a noteworthy trend. According to the figures available, in 2012–2013, 66.37% students opted for the Public Relations major, while 19.4% selected Digital Media, and only 14.15% chose Journalism. Students enrolled in the years 2014, 2015 and 2016 are yet to decide on their majors; as per staff expectations, a similar trend is likely to emerge.

Over time, this situation has proved to be both intriguing and, to a certain extent, challenging to both teachers and college administration, with attempts being made to understand the underlying causes and factors of this trend. Again, a thorough understanding of the processes by which students choose their majors could feed into the growing campaign to develop a scenario for addressing the root cause of the lack of popularity of Journalism and Digital Media majors among the SUR CAS students, strengthening the efforts to create an effective mechanism of educating and informing undergraduates about various majors.

Context

Located in the city of Sur, in the north-eastern region of the Sultanate of Oman, SUR CAS is one of six Colleges of Applied Sciences (CAS) operating out of six different regions under the flagship of the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE). The college was started with the aim of catering to the needs of the Omani employment market. SUR CAS presently offers three programmes: Information Technology, Communication Studies, and Applied Biotechnology. Admission of students into these programmes is centralized and administered by the government bodies concerned. Students seek admission to the college based on their high school grades as well as the subjects and college of their choice. They are required to successfully complete a Foundation Programme (FP) if they fail to meet the requirements for direct entry into the aforesaid programmes. On successful completion of the General Education Diploma with a minimum grade of 'C' in English language, students are admitted to their preferred programme of study.

The Communications department at SUR CAS offers three comprehensive majors: Journalism, Public Relations, and Digital Media. Students are expected to opt for one major upon completion of the second year of the study programme. The official data from the year 2012 show that of all the students enrolled in the aforesaid three majors, 42 opted for Public Relations as opposed to 6 who signed up for Journalism and 12 for Digital Media. In 2013, the numbers stood at 33, 10 and 10, respectively. A lack of evidence with respect to factors that influence students' choices and perceptions has resulted in no solution or action in this regard. Some argue that majors offered by an institution simply cannot all be equally popular because some will always remain more attractive to students than others. While this

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argument holds water, the current imbalance in how the student population is distributed across various majors may, on the one hand, lead to the shortage of skilled professionals in the national labour market and, on the other hand, contribute to a decrease in teaching and research in the fields affected by low student interest. The steady yet continual growth of the media industry in Oman would require a constant demand of professionals in a range of areas, including – in addition to public relations, which is already very popular among students – journalism and digital media. But skewed student enrolment in less popular majors highlights an impending shortage of locally trained and available talent to meet the needs of the industry. In order to address this, therefore, it is imperative to probe the educational process across the region and to ascertain the general trends that shape students' choices, so as to strike a balance between industry needs and the availability of local talent.

For example, in his study of student perceptions of the tourism and hospitality industry in Australia, Richardson (2009) identifies a direct link between negative perceptions of the industry among students, falling enrolment figures in the hospitality majors, and the industry's growing struggle with finding and retaining skilled professionals. Similarly, as Zhang (2007) observes, falling enrolment numbers in information systems-related majors in the US resulted in a shortage of qualified professionals, an inability of the industry to hire a well-qualified workforce and concerns expressed about future recruitment to replace retiring workers. A similar problem was described much earlier by Weigle (1957), who directly attributed the shortage of trained professionals in journalism to the low number of student enrolments in journalism schools in the US.

On the surface, there is a general belief dominating the students' choice of the Public Relations major at CAS that Public Relations will lead to better employment opportunities. There is no concrete evidence that ascertains the validity of this belief. It clearly points towards the likelihood of misplaced premises and assumptions that influence student perceptions of the value of each major and, thus, highlights the need for a thorough investigation into the information being provided.

A similar misconception among students was reported in the study by Weigle (1957), discussing graduates' perception of the industry that led to low enrolments in journalism schools; as a consequence, the journalism industry struggled to find trained graduates for editorial positions in the US.

There are two additional factors that are central to understanding the importance of this study. First, there is a bilingual format in higher education in Oman, with Arabic being the mother tongue and English being used mainly as the medium of instruction. This gap is offset by the dedicated English language training programme that provides a language training for undergraduates in their Foundation Year with the aim of enabling them to pursue a higher degree in English as a medium of instruction. Nonetheless, a possible implication of this factor might be the perceived difficulty for students of comprehending, processing and producing information in classes being offered in English. This, perhaps, is one of the key factors that influence students' choice of majors. Second, there is a lack of localized academic research (Gallacher et al., 2010) with an emphasis on student attitudes and perceptions towards subject choices across various streams, resulting in missed opportunities in identifying the areas of strengths and challenges. The implication of this factor is the absence of a critical academic knowledge base that is capable of explaining the nuances of education strategies with respect to the delivery and learning of the curriculum material while keeping the needs of the industry and preferences of the students in view. As this study proposes an examination of students' attitudes and perceptions as a key indicator in informing college-based campaigns and generating micro-policies for educators to

maximize the effectiveness of the delivery and reception of the course modules, it could set a tone for any further research identifying and tackling the issues head-on.

This study attempts to investigate several issues, namely, why Public Relations is the most preferred major among the respondents, and what factors influence a student's decision to select the Public Relations, Journalism or Digital Media programme. The results of this study could help to focus on those factors while strategizing and planning for the future. It is important to examine what sources of information students use to obtain knowledge of the majors. The answers could help further probe into the popularity of the major subjects offered, and provide important clues about possible areas of intervention in effective targeting and informing SUR CAS students about the major courses. The perception of the senior students who have chosen their majors, identified as Group 2 students in this study, is another area of inquiry, which entails exploring their satisfaction with their chosen major as well as considerations to change the field, if any. This enables it to be established whether the perceived benefits of the course and the seniors' choice of major correlate given the benefit of their hindsight. The seniors' rate of satisfaction with the chosen major can be indicative of how well the factors this study explores work out in subsequent semesters, and how informed their foresight was while choosing the major.

Literature review

Research on Public Relations and Journalism majors more often focuses on industry practices, and less frequently on academic practices. On the academic front, only a handful of studies have researched student attitudes towards Journalism versus Public Relations (McCoy et al., 2011). Studies have tended to focus on attitudes towards either Journalism as a major (Bowers, 1976) or Public Relations as a major (Gibson, 1987); other aspects discussed in this field are journalism curriculum (Brock, 1996), student attitudes towards writing rather than towards the major (Ceperley, 1999; Wiltse, 2006), and the differences and similarities between the practice of the two professions in the industry (DeLorme & Fedler, 2003; DeLung, 2008; Falconi, 2007; Kopenhaver et al., 1984; Monck, 2007).

The question of the choice of major and the confusion it can cause is observed as a concern in some studies without being discussed in detail. Wiltse (2006), for example, notes that

the proliferation of communication programs in higher education could confuse students trying to select a major from the many available choices. (p. 179)

Wiltse (2006) considers writing skills the main factor in understanding student attitudes towards communication majors. He argues that writing apprehension – a construct that attempts to differentiate people who find writing enjoyable and those who experience high levels of anxiety when writing is required – is the “most powerful predictor” (p. 189) of whether students will choose communication, journalism, or other majors.

A study that discusses an issue similar to the subject of this paper was conducted by Griffiths (1996). He investigates the tension that exists between the number of students studying the Public Relations major and the number studying Journalism, noting that the popularity of the Public Relations major among students surpasses that of Journalism studies and other majors:

At any given time in the semester, a sizable minority of 260 students say they want to go into Public Relations. For one thing, they know that Public Relations often pays more than newspapers or broadcast stations. And many want nothing to do with asking difficult questions of strangers and writing about crime, school boards, and sewer rates. (p. 82)

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Griffiths, however, discusses the role of course delivery in getting Public Relations students equally interested in Journalism. He maintains that by identifying for students the common elements in Journalism and Public Relations, such as the aspect of the 'gathering and dissemination of accurate information', the importance of Journalism can be emphasized. In a similar study, Guiniven (1998) observes that Public Relations is the fastest-growing field of all the communication-related disciplines as more freshmen 'express interest' in studying Public Relations rather than Print or Broadcast Journalism (p. 48).

Previous studies in other subject areas report various factors that influence a student's choice of major. According to George-Jackson (2012), students' choices of majors are "influenced by others, their own interests, and their own motivations" (p. 1). In business studies, Malgwi et al. (2005) identify 'interest in the subject', 'pay in the profession' and 'career and job opportunities' as key factors that influence a student's choice of majors.

Furthermore, former studies indicate that since the 1950's, the journey of the Journalism major in terms of its acceptance among students has been fraught with uncertainties and ups and downs. One of the earliest studies on factors influencing students' choice of journalism as a career was conducted by Weigle (1957), who carried out his research against the backdrop of a shortage of trained professionals for editorial positions in the United States and the falling number of student enrolments in journalism schools. He noted that

journalism school undergraduate enrollment has declined at the same time that schools report from five to ten calls from prospective employers for every graduate available. (p. 39)

His survey among high school students in California showed journalism was ranked "definitely less desirable in certain respects than engineering, law, teaching or government work" (p. 45), owing to the belief that "it is difficult for a journalism school graduate to find a job in journalism" (ibid).

According to Weigle (1957), fewer students enrolled in journalism courses because of "negative views of journalism as a career" due to "low starting pay, pressure and limited job opportunities" while other professions offer "more glamour, money and security" (as cited in Bowers 1976, p. 265). However, the falling enrolment in journalism was considered less of an issue in the later decades. Bowers (1976), for example, highlights the growing popularity of the journalism major among students in the US as something of a "national phenomenon" (p. 265). He shows that between 1962 and 1972, national journalism enrolment increased 85% (p. 265). Saalberg (1973) states that the rising number of enrolments in journalism had become more of an "enrolment problem", "causing pains" in many journalism schools and departments, and calls for studies into the "motivations behind students' decisions to major in journalism" (Saalberg 1973, cited in Bowers 1976, p. 266).

A comprehensive study investigating student attitudes towards journalism against the backdrop of similar studies was conducted by Dodd (1990), who notes that the research carried out on journalism students from the 1980's onwards switched from falling student enrolments to examining the

shift in most journalism and mass communication colleges from a majority of students being news editorial majors to a majority of students majoring in advertising or Public Relations. (p. 5)

A similar concern is briefly mentioned in Weigle (1957), who claims that the

expansion of industrial journalism and Public Relations has taken men [sic] who might otherwise be in newspaper work. (p. 39)

Post-1980's research, it seems, focused on shifts in the embattled state of journalism courses due to falling enrolments of students, who were showing more interest in media majors other than Journalism.

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The research carried out in the past two decades has investigated the reasons behind Public Relations being the foremost student choice in comparison to other communication majors. Little has come out in terms of what could be done to design a framework to make other majors – including journalism and advertising – equally attractive to students, at least at the undergraduate level.

Factors influencing major selection

Previous studies explored the following factors that may affect the student's degree choice: family, graduates, instructor's/advisor's guidance, reputation of the institution, perceived difficulty of the course/curriculum, and job availability. A study conducted by Geiger and Ogilby (2000) found a strong correlation between the role that individual instructors play and perception change among students as well as their decision in selecting the major. That the role of a subject instructor is an important factor in deciding on a major is revealed by another study on how business students choose their Accounting major (Quezada & Chi, 2013). The researchers concluded that the Accounting Principles instructor was one of the influencing factors in students' decision-making process; students acknowledged that the instructor encouraged and persuaded them to major in accounting.

Rababah (2016) in a study conducted at an Emirati University, found that personal interests, personality, job prospect, reputation of the university and media did not have a significant influence on the students' choice of accounting as a major whereas family members and peers, significantly related to the students' choice of accounting as a major. Hodges and Corley (2016) support some of the findings of Zhang's (2007) study on the perception of female undergraduate students of the Information Systems major (IS) regarding such factors as job availability, job security, and difficulty of curriculum affecting their choice of the major. Zhang (2007) found that students perceive Information Systems to be promising in terms of high pay and job security. Difficulty of curriculum in addition to job availability, in Zhang's study, are reported to be the other two significant factors influencing female students' selection of IS as a major.

While the study by Hodges and Corley (2016) confirms Zhang's findings, it reveals remarkable differences in students' major perceptions in terms of "genuine interest" (Zhang, 2007), as opposed to the roles played by "subjective norms" (ibid.) such as family, fellow students, professors, and advisors' roles. According to Zhang (2007), "genuine interest", along with the factors of family and professors' influences are significant factors in selecting the IS major. Hodges and Corley argue that the influence of "subjective norms [is] less of a factor among women [and has] changed over time" (p. 6). According to another study conducted by Odia and Ogedu (2013) in a Nigerian university, personal and job-related factors such as student interest, performance in secondary school and prospects of high pay had a strong influence on undergraduate students opting for accounting majors in Nigerian universities. Probing further into the family factor, Pimpa (2007) finds a high correlation between Thai students' decision to study abroad and five influencing family factors: finance, information, expectation, competition and persuasion. Student personality, characteristics and perception of the profession can also be among the influencing factors determining the selection of majors, according to Worthington and Higgs (2004). They claim that the choice of an Economics major is a function of student personality, interest in the economics profession, non-economics secondary studies, and gender. In addition to the level of students' interest in the profession, as Worthington and Higgs (2004) explain, their "personality and perception of the profession" (p. 609) also contributed to the choice of major.

It must be noted that the studies cited here differ in terms of their sample formation and sizes. This difference, in addition to the different regions – Western and non-Western – where these studies were conducted, may well result in different influencing indicators and the overall conclusions of the studies.

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For example, family influences and job market factors may have different influences on decision making depending on the culture, social practices and the state of the job market. Nonetheless, most studies that deal with the challenges of the decision-making process among students regarding career choices and subject majors appear to be grappling with similar issues and questions, regardless of the region in which they were conducted or the variables chosen to analyse the problem.

Research questions and hypotheses

The objectives of this study are: to establish the factors that influence students' choice of major in the Communications Programme; to identify the sources through which students obtain their knowledge of the majors; and to measure the perceptions of students who have already chosen their major.

To achieve this, the following research questions were employed to guide the study:

RQ1: What is the most preferred/ frequently chosen major among the respondents?

RQ2: What factors influence a student's decision to choose between Journalism, Public Relations, and Digital Media?

RQ3: What sources of information do students use to obtain information about the majors?

RQ4: To what extent are senior students satisfied with the choice of their major; given the chance, would they change their major and why?

The following null hypotheses were also tested to obtain deeper insight into the student perceptions of the majors.

H_01 There is no significant relationship between the preference for a major and the student's knowledge of majors' curriculum/content.

H_02 : There is no significant relationship between preferences for a major and the student's positive perception of the industry.

H_03 There is no significant relationship between the preference for the major and the perception of job prospects in the chosen major.

H_04 There is no correlation between the sources of information about the majors and the factors influencing the students' decisions of which major to choose.

Methodology

This study uses quantitative analysis to investigate the factors that influence student decisions when selecting a major.

Sample

The sample consisted of 72 respondents (39.8%) from the total 181 undergraduates enrolled in the Communications Department programmes. Of the 72 respondents, 7 (9.7%) were male students and 65 (90.3%) were female. The higher number of female students in the sample was due to the higher female population in all the programmes in the college compared to the male population. The ratio is roughly 9:1 – a seemingly emerging trend and the reasons for which are yet to be established.

The entire sample was divided into two parts, grouped according to whether the respondent had already chosen a major or not. The respondents who indicated they had chosen/registered for a major are referred to as 'Group 2' for the purpose of this study, and the others are identified as 'Group 1'. Foundation (Year 1) and Year 2 students were labelled as 'Group 1' and were yet to choose their major, while Year 3 and Year 4 students were tagged as 'Group 2' and had already chosen their major. This classification was not aimed at carrying out a comparison between the groups, but designed to single out the perceptions of those students who had already chosen their majors.

Survey

The study used a questionnaire to measure the factors seen as influencing the students' major choices. The survey instrument contained primarily closed-ended questions, quantitative in nature. A total of 125 survey questionnaires were distributed among students enrolled in the Communications Department. Of the total 125 survey questionnaires, 76 were returned, demonstrating a response rate of 60.8%. The completed questionnaires were carefully reviewed, and removed from the sample if found to be incomplete and/or duplicate. Four questionnaires were found erroneous/ incomplete. This brought the response rate down to 57.6%. The remaining results were tabulated using SPSS. A pretest of the survey questionnaire was conducted among a small group of students to establish its efficacy.

The questionnaire (see Appendix) contained 16 questions in two sections. The first section, with seven questions, aimed at measuring the demographics details such as age, gender, year of study, chosen major. The second section contained nine questions aimed at evaluating the factors impacting students' decisions. More specifically, the second section of the questionnaire examined the following areas:

- a) Factors affecting students' choice of major, wherein respondents were asked to indicate the most appropriate and primary factor/reason for choosing their major (see Q10).
- b) Sources for obtaining information about the majors, wherein respondents were asked to indicate the most important source of information that they used to obtain information about the available majors (see Q8).
- c) Perception of the employment opportunities in the job market and industry growth; this area probed their perception of the availability of job opportunities and growth of the industry of interest, a significant area that could have a bearing on the choice of major (see Q9, Q11).
- d) Knowledge of the course content/curriculum: all respondents were asked whether they have/had prior knowledge about the content before choosing the major. (see Q12)
- e) The level of satisfaction that the seniors enjoy in their chosen major was another key area investigated, which included probing those respondents who had already chosen their majors, who are identified as Group 2 in this paper. This section asked questions regarding their satisfaction with the chosen major, willingness to switch majors, if given the chance, and satisfaction with the information received from advisors/teachers when they were to choose their majors.

The respondents from both the groups were asked to answer all questions unless otherwise specified clearly in the questionnaire. For example, 'Group 1' was asked to answer all questions except the ones that dealt with the satisfaction with the chosen major (See Q13, 14, 15, 16). While 'Group 2' was asked to skip the question that probed major preference (See Q6). All other questions were carefully worded to solicit responses from all students who indicated to have chosen or not chosen their majors (See Q8, 10). Much attention was paid in keeping the questionnaire and the

questions short and precise in order to ensure maximum participation and responses from the respondents, as long and complex questionnaires have been found to deter student participation, in our previous attempts.

Data analysis

For data analysis, descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation test and multiple regression analysis were used. The output from these analyses was tested and checked for reliability and consistency. To measure internal consistency of the instrument, Cronbach's alpha was employed. Cronbach's alpha is an

index of reliability associated with the variation accounted for by the true score of the underlying construct – the hypothetical variable that is being measured. (Hatcher, 1994, cited in Santos 1999)

Santos (1999) specifies that the value of 0.7 is considered to be an acceptable reliability coefficient although lower thresholds are sometimes used in the literature. Multiple regression analysis was used to measure the relationship between the dependent variable (preference/registered major) and the independent variables (factors that affect the preference for the major, information sources for the majors, perception of the job market, perception of the industry and prior knowledge of course content). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the demographic details of the respondents. Perceptions of the Group 2 students in terms of their satisfaction with the chosen major were assessed on a 4-point Likert scale.

A key limitation of this study is with respect to the methodology, as it uses only the quantitative method of analysis, which may be limited in asserting the strength of the findings; using several other methods addressing the same problem, we believe, could enhance the quality and reliability of the findings reported in this paper. While this study initiates a key discussion on a previously unexplored problem using the quantitative method approach, further studies exploring the same problem coupled with qualitative methods could add to the much-needed knowledge base on student choices and decision making.

Findings

Descriptive statistics

Among the participants surveyed, 14 (19.4%) were freshmen, 30 (41.7%) were sophomore, 22 (30.6%) were juniors, and 6 (8.3%) were senior students. Of the 72 respondents, 28 (38.9%) had made their choice of major (Group 2) while 44 (61.1%) were yet to opt for one (Group 1). Among the Group 1 participants, 26 (59.1%) indicated Public Relations as their main preference as opposed to 15 (34.1%) interested in Digital Media, and 3 (6.8%) in Journalism. Among the Group 2 participants, a similar trend emerged. Of the 28 students, 16 (57.1%) indicated Public Relations, 5 (17.8%) Digital Media, and 7 (25%) indicated Journalism. This further confirmed the initial observation that Public Relations is the most preferred major among both Group 1 and Group 2 students, while Journalism and Digital Media remain less popular.

This study was particularly interested in finding the major factors that influence students' decision-making process when choosing a major. To examine this, the respondents were asked to pick the most important factor that influenced their decision while choosing their major. The reason for asking for the most important factor was to establish the ranking of factors as per their responses, which could not have been achieved if the students chose multiple factors. When asked to identify the most important

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factor, 21 (29.2%) respondents indicated family advice, 20 (27.8%) chose better job opportunities, and 11 (15.3%) specified the difficulty level of the major as the key factor. The remaining variables were represented as follows: 3 (4.2%) indicated classmates, 3 (4.2%) chose high pay packages, 4 (5.6%) a lack of information about other majors, and 4 (5.6%) indicated graduate students' advice.

The respondents were further asked what sources of information about the majors they used; the answers demonstrate that the key sources are family (26.4%) senior/graduate students (20.8%), classmates¹ (19.4%), media (18.1%), and advisors/teachers (13.9%) as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Sources of information for major choice.

Factors	Frequency	Per cent
Family	19	26.4
Classmates	14	19.4
Seniors/Grads	15	20.8
Media	13	18.1
Advisor/Teachers	10	13.9
Other reasons	1	1.4
Total	72	100.0

The survey attempted to measure the awareness of the course curriculum of the three majors the respondents possessed, and the growth perception of the industry associated with the major. This section of the survey was aimed at finding a relation between the students' choices and their understanding of what the chosen majors offer with respect to curriculum and future involvement in the industry. The results are believed to be helpful in prioritizing this factor in prospective awareness programmes. First, all respondents were asked to indicate their awareness of the job availability in the respective major areas, and then whether they were aware of the course contents of the majors. For this purpose, a 4-point² Likert scale was used, where 1 indicated 'strongly agree'; 2, 'agree'; 3, 'disagree'; and 4, 'strongly disagree'. A mean of 2.33 was found for the first component of the question (whether respondents were aware of the type of jobs available in Oman) and 2.06, for the second part of it (whether respondents possessed the knowledge of the curriculum in each of the majors). While this suggests that students possess knowledge of the curriculum and of industry prospects, there should be further studies carried out to find out the extent to which they *understand* these two components.

In another section of the survey, the same Likert scale was used to measure the Group 2 students' satisfaction with their chosen major. The inquiry as to whether students were satisfied with their major returned a mean of 2.00. An additional question that read 'If given the chance, would the respondent change the major?' delivered a mean of 3.00. Finally, when asked 'Would you choose a different major if you received proper/more information?', the responses delivered a mean of 2.56.

Reliability of instruments

The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for reliability was calculated for the instrument used in the study. A value of 0.7 or more was taken as indicating satisfactory reliability. The internal consistency of the instrument was found to be reliable as it delivered a Cronbach's alpha of 0.88. The reliability of the student satisfaction subscale for Group 2 students in the study was .969. For Group 1, however, this was 0.65, slightly below the satisfactory level. The perceptual subscale consisted of five items that delivered a reliability score of 0.84.

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Hypothesis testing

All hypotheses except for H4 were analysed using regression analysis to see how strong is the relationship between the dependent variable (the student's preferred/chosen major) and the independent variable (knowledge of the course content, perception of the industry, and job prospects) as shown in Table 2. The H4 hypothesis was analysed using the Pearson correlation coefficient for two independent variables (the sources of information on majors against the factors affecting the students' choice of the major).

Table 2: Regression analysis of student perception vis-à-vis preferred/registered major.

	Beta	t	Sig.
Knowledge of the course content	.191	1.542	.128
Perception of the industry	.147	1.191	.238
Job prospects	.688	.404	.049
Dependent Variable: Major preference			

H1: The regression analysis indicates a statistically insignificant relationship between **preference for a major and the student's knowledge of its course content**, Beta = 0.191, t= 1.542 and p = .128 which is more than .05 (level of significance), therefore there is no evidence to reject the null hypothesis.

H2: The regression analysis indicates a statistically insignificant relationship between a student's major preference and their positive perception of the relative industry, Beta = 0.147, t = 1.191, and p=0.238, which is more than .05 (level of significance), therefore there is no evidence to reject the null hypothesis.

H3: The regression analysis indicates a statistically significant relationship between the preference for the major and the perception of the job prospects, Beta= 0.688, t=.404, and p=0.049 which is less than .05 (level of significance), therefore there is evidence to reject the null hypothesis.

H4: A Pearson correlation coefficient analysis revealed a weak linear relationship between sources of information on the majors and the factors that affect students' decisions in choosing one, $r(72) = .192$, $p = .106$. Therefore, there is a weak yet positive relationship between information sources and major preferences, thus the null hypothesis is rejected. This indicates that, some sources such as family and classmates who act as information providers may have influence on students' decision making while other such as media and seniors may not.

Discussion

This study attempted to explore the reasons behind the popularity of Public Relations vis-à-vis Journalism and Digital Media as well as student perceptions of the majors, with an aim of gaining an insight into students' decision-making process while choosing a major. In doing so, the paper discussed the factors that influence students' decisions: sources of information; perception of job market; awareness of the curriculum of the preferred/chosen course. The research was driven by the intention to identify the fault lines in the trends that make one major more popular than the rest, and to point out interventions where necessary. Students' perception and decision-making process were measured using certain variables, such as the knowledge of the job market, knowledge of the course curriculum, satisfaction with the chosen major among the Group 2, sources of information on the majors, and other factors that influence their choice of major. This study feeds into a wider context of the college

campaign that is meant to strategically target the future intakes of students in educating them in various majors before they make a decision about choosing one.

The findings of this research confirm that Public Relations is the most preferred/chosen major in comparison to Journalism and Digital Media. The trend indicates the challenge that the less popular majors face, and leads to a low number of trained graduates to take up work in the journalism and digital media industries in Oman. In measuring the students' perception, the findings indicate that the respondents do possess knowledge and understanding of each of the majors or their job prospects in the industry, which underscores that the job market is a crucial factor in choosing a major. This implies that students believe that Public Relations has better job prospects compared to other majors. However, there is no evidence or research to back up this belief. Therefore, this particular perception should be investigated further to explore the extent to which students understand the curriculum and industry prospects associated with each of the majors. In exploring the factors that influence the student decision-making process while choosing a major, the findings indicate that family advice and job opportunities/prospects are the most significant factors.

These findings are consistent with several previous studies (Mazzarol & Soutar 2002; Odia & Ogiedu 2013; Pimpa 2007; Rababah 2016; Weigle 1957). Rababah (2016), for example, found a significant relationship between the family/peers factor and a student's choice of major; however, the author reported no relationship between job prospects and choice of major. However, other studies such as Malgwi et al. (2005) have found that the influence of the parents/guardian is less significant in comparison to other factors, such as job opportunities and college reputation. This finding is significant in the light of the fact that family advice is a key factor that influences the decision-making process. While family advice and guidance should play an important role in the development of a student, whether a student should depend heavily on family advice when choosing a major or not is a questionable and an interesting area of investigation, and raises a range of questions, such as to what extent does the family know about the student's strengths and weaknesses and the position of the industry vis-à-vis the subject major. Job perception was found to be another key factor that indicates that students opt for the Public Relations major because of a perception of the industry having more jobs to offer in Public Relations than Digital Media and Journalism. However, as noted earlier, there is no concrete evidence to back this belief. Thus, family advice and job market perception should be seen as the key areas of interventions when educating students about the majors. Other factors that were found to be significantly important in this study are the influence of peers/classmates followed by graduates and the media. Some previous studies have also found these factors to be significant (Odia & Ogiedu, 2013; Weigle, 1957).

The influence of the academic advisor was reported in this study to be the least significant factor, which is consistent with a few studies such as Al-Rfou (2013) and Malgwi et al. (2005), who found that advisors, teachers and career guidance counsellors have a lower degree of influence on student choice and decision making. Several studies have stressed the importance of advisors in shaping the career choices of students (Bahr, 2008; Damen & Sulaiman, 2004; Young-Jones, Burt, Dixon, & Hawthorne, 2013), but their low degree of influence on college major decisions in our context indicates a fault line that must be taken into consideration.

Another area that this study wished to explore with regard to influencing factors was the information sources that students use to obtain knowledge about their preferred/chosen major. The students reported family to be the most significant source of information, followed by graduates/classmates and the media. Advisors received the lowest rank as the source of information on the majors. These findings

confirmed a greater role of the family as opposed to that of advisors, showing that the family remains a significant source of information.

Furthermore, data analysis showed no significant correlation between students' major decisions and their knowledge of the course content. This indicates the need to educate students on course content and learning outcomes to enable them to make an informed choice. The data show, however, that there is a significant correlation between students' preferred major and their perception of future growth in the respective industry. Among the Group 2 participants, the findings presented no evidence of dissatisfaction with the chosen major; therefore, no intention to change the chosen major was detected. Importantly, the findings reveal that more information could have led to some different decisions regarding the choice of major. The fact that the respondents indicate a lack of information about other majors when making a choice highlights the need for a comprehensive information campaign to equip juniors with the knowledge of the three majors before they take a decision.

A careful consideration of the problem and a redressal mechanism developed in response to these findings, we believe, could help place Journalism and Digital Media among the preferred majors while alleviating the skewed enrolment numbers that these majors have seen in the recent past. The information campaign designed to educate students about the majors could prove more effective if developed in line with the findings presented in this study.

Conclusion

This study offers a modest idea of the opportunities and challenges that can be addressed in making less popular majors more attractive and acceptable among students and adds to a largely unaddressed area of research in the Gulf context. While the study does offer some insight into the nature of the problem, more exhaustive research may be needed to analyse this area in further detail. Its findings could prove helpful both to educational institutions in thinking about synchronizing their graduate numbers in tune with the industry needs, and future researchers in addressing this problem and its nuances with unique insights and innovative approaches. This said, the paper also emphasizes that the industry, too, from time to time, in their interactions with the educational bodies and concerned stakeholders, could communicate the disparities that they encounter in terms of availability of the national talent pool. Given the limited time and scope, this study could not venture into other intriguing areas, such as the role of the English language in choosing a major, graduate experiences of the majors, their acceptance in the job market and alumni testimonials. Though limited in scope, this study offers a fresh insight into an area that has remained beyond the purview of research and methodical investigation in the local context, as it feeds into one of the most generic yet quintessential objectives of offering a profound and engaging educational experience for students – an objective with which most educational establishments are concerned.

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Appendix

Survey

1. Gender
(a) Male { } (b) Female { }
2. Year of study
(a) I { } (b) II { }
(c) III { } (d) IV { }
3. Place you are hailing from
(a) Urban { } (b) Suburban { } (c) Rural { }
4. Are you a foundation student?
(a) Yes { } (b) No { }
5. Have you chosen/registered for your major?
(a) Yes { } [If yes, Go to question 7]
(b) No { } [If no, Go to question 6]

Part B

6. **Rank** the preferences of your specialization. Rank 1 gets highest preference while Rank 3 gets least preference. (*Answer **if you have not** chosen your major.*)

Sl. No	Major	Rank (from 1 to 3)
1	Digital Media	
2	Journalism	
3	Public Relations	

5	Lack of information about other majors	
6	The preferred/chosen major is more reputed than others	
7	senior friends/graduate friends advise/d me	
8	Other majors are difficult than my chosen/preferred major.	
9	Any other (Specify.....)	

[For each of the following variables, please suggest your opinion by marking (put 'x') in the appropriate column]

	Variable	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
11	I know what types of jobs are available in Oman for each of the specializations.				
12	I am/was aware of the course content for each of the majors.				

Answer the questions only if you have chosen your major.

	Variable	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
13	I am satisfied with my preference of my major.				
14	Given a chance, I will change my major.				
15	I could have chosen a different major, if I were informed well about other majors in the first year.				

16. I have changed my major

Yes ()

No ()

If yes, please mention the reason.....

¹ Classmates- It has been observed that students often prefer to opt for courses that their friends in the same year/semester are opting for. Friends, therefore, are considered as an influence in the selection of a major and referred to as 'classmates' in this paper.

² Due consideration was given to the academic debate around 4- point vis-à-vis 5-point and 6-point Likert scales (see Chang 1994).