

Student's Preference towards Specialization Selection: An Exploratory Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Choosing a career is one of the most difficult decisions a student ever takes. In this research study, the authors have attempted to explore the factors responsible for selecting specific career perspectives. The study is based on exploratory research design and primary data is gathered from postgraduate students of business management and computer application. For the analysis purpose, exploratory factor analysis is performed on the responses gathered from 582 postgraduate students. The findings suggest that six factors responsible for selecting a particular specialization, namely; 'market uncertainty & job security, study-related (academic) efforts required to be ready for job, exposure from social media platforms, other's recommendations, institutional resources and aligning self for future jobs'. The findings may be useful for different stakeholders to prepare themselves for attracting and guiding future professionals.

Keywords: Career planning, Choosing Specialization, Exploratory factor analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

Decisions related to career are always played a crucial part in students' lives, whether it is a selection of college/university or recognizing his/her abilities to pursue higher studies. All these decisions lay the foundation of a student's quality of future life. Similarly, selecting specialization is one of the most important decisions a student takes in his life, but students do not make such a crucial decision to select specialization in isolation. There are numerous internal (cognitive and affective) and external factors (financial condition, family background, social and cultural group) that influence a student's decision in choosing his/her specialization. Apart from these factors, students also need to consider the job market's dynamic environment, employers' requirements, and continuously updated technology. Therefore, the decision of selection of specialization could result in a stressful situation for students. A mismatch between his/her interest and abilities in choosing specialization may lead to financial as well as psychological (depression/anxiety) loss (Deb *et al.*, 2016).

Selecting a specialization just because a friend or a family member has suggested it can have a highly negative impact in the future as it can lead to a great loss of time if the student later decides to switch to some other field (Strasser *et al.*, 2002). Thus, the student

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needs to make an informed decision regarding their field of interest. To make an informed choice about the specialization the student should be aware of their future goals and expectations (Pritchard *et al.*, 2004). They should have proper knowledge about the curriculum as well so that they can find the right fit for themselves.

Previous research studies have revealed several criteria that the students use to select their choice of specialization (Schwartz *et al.*, 1990; Stratton *et al.*, 2005). Likewise, Kim *et al.* (2002) identified factors like interest in the type of work, job opportunity, self-employment, good match with student abilities, projected earnings, etc., which play a significant role in choosing specialization-related decisions. Studying how these factors have a considerable impact on the decision-making process helps various parties such as

career counselors, parents and university administrators (Davies *et al.*, 2016) Therefore, the present research study focuses on how postgraduate students select their specialization. Furthermore, we explore the factors that play a significant role in the selection of specialization.

Till now, most of the research studies pertaining to the selection of specialization is limited to western countries. Furthermore, these studies have incorporated very similar factors to measure the impact on student's decisions related to the selection of specialization. For instance, Alawad *et al.* (2015) conducted an exploratory study on medical students to know about the factors influencing the selection of particular specialization and found that factors like 'personal interest' followed by 'helpful to the community' are among the most influential ones. Likewise, Kim *et al.*, (2002) in his research on business students found that 'interest in job' being the top reason in selecting business major. So, there is scarcity of research in this area of study in Indian context and there is need to explore some new factors which could possibly play a crucial role in selection of specialization. The present research study attempts to fill this void.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A career can be defined as applying an individual's skills and knowledge that assist in taking control over his profession and developing a network with professionals (Redman and Wilkinson, 2001). Individuals are inclined towards those career options that match their expectations and improve their living standards (Cavus *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, choosing of correct career options is a matter of paramount importance. An incorrect decision pertaining to the selection of specialization may result in irrevocable loss of all individuals' resources, whether time, energy, or efforts (Ahmed *et al.*, 2017).

Many previous researchers have attempted to demystify the nexus between the choice of specialization and factors that impact specialization choice (Quinter and Edwards, 2011; Tang *et al.*, 2008; Shumba and Naong, 2012). For instance, Ozen (2011) stated that factors that influence career-related decisions could be broadly categorized into social (*relationship with friends, family, and social bonds*) and psychological factors (*ideas, beliefs & perception etc*). However, different researchers have examined this domain of research in different disciplines with different variables. Like, in the medical discipline, Wu *et al.*, (2015) have done a systematic review of 600 articles published between 2003 to 2013 in low-income

economies and concluded that intrinsic factors (age, sex & rural background) and extrinsic factors (salaries, reputation, training, government institutes) play a significant role on medical student's career choice to select a career in primary care. Likewise, in a research study on business students (MBA), Mathews (2019) stated that choice of specialization does not merely depends on the individual's choice or interest; there are factors like academic performance, the financial status of individual, family support, self-actualization and accessibility of assistance actively play a vital role. However, Abrahams *et al.* (2015) claimed that research studies pertaining to the selection of specialization in different countries with same variables resulted in conflicting relationships among variables. The possible explanation of these variances in the results could be attributed to cultural differences (Lopez *et al.*, 2005).

Exploratory research studies in the past have examined different factors that may influence decision of choosing specialization (Sarwar and Masood, 2015; Bobâlcă, *et al.*, 2014; Hiatt *et al.*, 2018). For instance, Alexander *et al.* (2011) found that 'liking of the subject' is the most significant factor in choosing a professional direction. Similarly, Cebula and Lopes (1982) reveal that the students' monetary benefits have a significant impact on their choice of business major. Furthermore, previous studies have also highlighted the importance of personality in the selection of specialization. Like, in a research study on university students in Kenya, Kemboi *et al.* (2016) found a significant relationship between the kinds of personality individual possesses and career choice. Based on the previous literature, this research study attempts to enhance understanding of different factors responsible for selecting a particular specialization among postgraduates' students.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research study has adopted an exploratory research design and factors influential in choosing specialization have been explored. Research is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected from a self-administered questionnaire after holding an informal meeting with students pursuing their postgraduate courses. The questionnaire items were selected after an in-depth discussion with eight students, four parents, and three teachers from the respective academic domain and through referring previous studies that explored choice of specialization by students. For enhancing the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, pilot testing was done with 40

students and recommended changes were made accordingly. Secondary data was collected from already published resources such as online articles, magazines, or government sites available for public access.

Data was gathered from 582 students pursuing their post-graduation from three different institutions of Delhi-NCR. The convenience sampling method was used for the collection of data due to the time and resources constraint. For the analysis of data, SPSS version 21 was used to explore factors responsible for the selection of specialization through exploratory factor analysis (EFA). Table 1 contains a demographic profile of students, in which 63% of the respondents were male and 37% of the respondents were female. Most respondents (54%) are in the age group of 21-25, while 42% of the respondents lie in the 26-30 age group, and 4% of the respondents were more than 30 years of age. Among the respondents pursuing postgraduate courses, 67% of students were from business administration, and 33% were pursuing masters in computer application. Among these respondents, mostly (77% and 21% simultaneously) were from urban and semi-urban backgrounds, and only 2% were from rural backgrounds.

DATA ANALYSIS

Exploratory Factor Analysis

The present research study has performed exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with variation matrix and principal component analysis (PCA) on 32 items explaining reason

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Respondents
Data from 582 students

<i>Base</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	63%
Female	37%
<i>Age</i>	
21-25	54%
26-30	42%
More than 30 years	4%
<i>Course Enrolled</i>	
PG in Business administration	67%
Master in Computer application	33%
<i>Living Area</i>	
Urban	77%
Semi-urban	21%
rural	2%

Source: Author's compilation

behind choosing a specific specialization. Factor loading for each item is more than 0.50 and the eigenvalue of each factor is more than 1 to extract factors.

In the analysis, 06 factors were found for explaining the reason behind the selection of specific specialization. Cronbach's alpha was further implemented to ensure the reliability of all 06 factors. The value of Cronbach's alpha between 0.6 to 0.7 is considered moderately reliable, while the value above 0.7 is considered as a good degree of reliability (Sekaran, 2003). In an analysis, all the 06 factors lie between 0.821 to 0.902 which manifests very high degree of reliability.

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test as shown in Table 2 was performed to determine the sampling adequacy of data, which was significant (0.833) while ensuring equal variances across samples. Bartlett's test was performed and found significant. The 06 factors among all the items explained 70.632% variances. Further description of exploratory factor analysis is given in Table 3.

Factor 01: Market Uncertainty and Job Security

Analysis suggests that market uncertainty and job security are the most influential reasons for selecting a specific specialization. Individuals are naturally more oriented towards future dynamics. Similarly, Students in their career planning do consider job security and the market's ongoing situation because of its uncertainties as the students believe that the specialization they choose should match the market requirement, which provides them job security in the future.

Factor 02: Study-related (Academic) Efforts Required Being Ready for Job

The second most prominent factor in choosing a specialization in our analysis is the students' academic efforts to be put in by the students to make them ready for the job. This factor expresses that while selecting a specialization, it seems students take into account that more the effort to be put in to meet job requirements, higher should be the reward of pursuing the specialization. It is like students make an effort-benefit analysis from a 'ready for job' perspective before choosing a specialization. Moreover, while choosing a

Table 2: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		0.833
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	0.921
	df	378
	Sig.	0.000

Source: Author's Own



Table 3: Extracted Factor of Job satisfaction

S. No.	Items	Factor Loading	%Variance Explained	Factor	Alpha	
1	Placement opportunities	.708	16.115		0.902	
7	Market situations	.651				
15	No. of companies visiting the campus in particular specialization	.521		Market Uncertainty & Job security		
26	Specialization have scope of almost secured jobs	.811				
27	Fear of unemployment a nature of job in a particular specialization	.780				
29	Future earnings prospects	.802				
3	Easiness of subject	0.591	14.460	Study related (Academic) Efforts required to be ready for job	0.878	
8	Relevance of specialization with previous course studied	0.688				
10	Nature of the subject	0.790				
11	Scope of scoring marks	0.703				
21	Need to be updated about the technical aspects of content in particular specialization	0.781				
22	Need to pursue any other course to get jobs in particular specialization	0.705				
17	Trends of jobs on LinkedIn	.801	13.431	Exposure from social media platforms	.852	
18	Professionals on Facebook	.710				
31	Online reviews	.601				
32	Notification for jobs on social media	.663				
4	Other students' preference	0.585	10.808	Recommendations of others	0.849	
6	Parent's guidance or recommendation	0.662				
16	Elder's advice or recommendation	0.684				
25	Recommendations from immediate past seniors	0.712				
28	Faculty member's recommendation	0.652				
30	Scope of utilizing self/ family/relative's network to get a job due to studies in a particular specialization	0.608				
2	Enrichment of faculty members	0.680	9.954	Institutional Resources	0.837	
9	Interaction with faculty	0.686				
23	Learning facilities at campus	0.570				
5	Self-interest in the subject	0.676	5.864	Aligning self for future jobs	0.821	
12	Scope of subjects in future jobs	0.724				
14	Keeping a well-planned career in mind	0.797				

Source: Author's own

specialization, students might also be mapping their capability and the extent of efforts required to be put in under a specialization to be job-ready. Another interesting insight is that some respondents believe that good grades could edge others in the competition, while some believe that good scores make them eligible for government jobs.

Factor 03: Exposure from Social Media Platforms

Exposure to social media platforms is the third most influential factor in the analysis. As students believe that although social media platforms could be the reason for distraction in their studies, it also gives them exposure to market trends and interaction with market professionals,

which guide them in selecting their specialization, especially the social media platform like LinkedIn.

Factor 04: Recommendations from Others

Recommendations from friends, relatives, and elders etc. found to be the fourth most prominent factor in explaining the reason behind specialization selection. Students believe that their closed ones could guide them in the right direction, while some believe that senior's expertise may help and be aware of the difficulties they will face in a particular domain.

Factor 05: Institutional resources

The fifth factor in analysis demystifying the reason behind choosing specialization is institutional resources. Students believe that learning opportunities in their university's ecology play an active role in selecting a specialization. For instance, individuals with a keen interest in science may divert to another domain just because of lack of infrastructure needed to perform experiments. So, students believe that institutional resources' access and extent is one important aspect they consider before choosing a specific specialization.

Factor 06: Aligning self for future jobs

The last factor that emerged as the influential factor in explaining specialization selection is aligning oneself for future jobs. As suggested earlier, students are future-oriented, their decisions are influenced by future expected job market condition, so they want to keep themselves in line with the future job opportunities. On the other hand, personal interest in the domain is another factor that influences his decision while selecting specialization because students believe that they cannot give their cent percent in the domain if they do not find interest in the subject they study.

DISCUSSION

The study's main aim was to explore the factors that influence choice of specialization in postgraduate students. Using exploratory factor analysis, six factors emerged as the most prominent ones: Market Uncertainty and Job Security, Study-related (Academic) Efforts required to be ready for job, exposure from social media platforms, and Recommendations from others, Institutional Resources and Aligning self for future jobs.

Previous studies highlighted numerous reasons for the selection of particular specialization (Dudley *et al.*, 1995; Goff, 2000; Abrahams *et al.*, 2015). This research study's findings are in line with previous research studies and further confirmed that factor 'Market

Uncertainty & Job security' is among the top-most reasons for choosing a specialization in students. Our analysis results strongly suggest that there are other reasons besides the pay-scale of job and opportunities in the market for specialization selection. As we know, every individual has its own level of risk propensity; that is why some individuals are more inclined towards risky professions like entrepreneurship, while some are more oriented towards a stable and secure profession. This is why, uncertainties in the job market and job security are the most influential one among all factors. These findings will open up a different investigation area by incorporating personality traits in choosing a specialization. The second factor, 'Study-related Efforts required to be ready for job', emerged as the second most influential factor. Students want to be prepared themselves according to the requirement of the job market. The mismatch between required and possessed skills is one of the major issues contributing to India's increasing level of unemployment. Therefore, students want to choose a specialization where they can develop their skills, making them industry-level products. Students believe that 'Exposure from social media platforms' could give an edge in a selection of specialization. They believe that social media platforms keep them updated with the latest issues and create their professional network while pursuing their studies, which is likely to be advantageous for them to get an idea about the interest field.

A fourth factor, 'Recommendations from others', whether it is an opinion from friends, parents, relatives or seniors, actively play a significant in choosing specialization (Kim *et al.*, 2002). Students believe that discussion with their peers or seniors help them to get acquainted with the specialization they consider for selection. On the other hand, they think that parents or their closed ones use their expertise to guide them properly. So, advice from their parents or relatives etc. is among the main reason behind their specialization selection. Fifth factor, 'Institutional resources', play a major role before selection of specialization because in India, although universities/colleges are ranked according to their performance but the institutional body like NIRF (National Institutional Ranking Framework), ranks college or universities in different dimensions for instance, best in medical, best in business colleges etc. So, students want to pursue their choice of specialization where they can get their all the required resources. So, access to institutional resources is one of the prominent factors in the selection of specialization. The sixth



and last factor is 'Aligning self for future jobs', which is among significant factors in deciding specialization. Even previous studies (Alawad *et al.*, 2015; Davies *et al.*, 2016) validate our findings. As suggested earlier, every individual wants to choose a specialization that matches its abilities with the domain, so the student's personal interest has a vital role.

IMPLICATION

This study offers important information for various entities such as the students, universities and colleges, and career guidance counselors. The data gathered can be used to understand how the students choose their business major and the factors that influence their decisions, which will further help the students make the decision process easier. The students can be properly assisted in making the right decision in starting the course itself so that they don't end up selecting a major that doesn't fit well with their personality. Universities and colleges can use the data to understand why some majors have higher enrollments than others and this will help the institutes design introductory programs and take initiatives that can help them promote those majors that aren't doing that well. They can assign their 'star' faculty to teach that introductory program to attract more students in such majors. The result can also help in figuring out whether certain majors are preferred by specific gender and this knowledge can be used by the institutes. The study will also help career counselors and provide them with necessary data that will further help them assist the students in making informed decisions about the major they are selecting. Career counselors can guide the students in a better way when they have access to these research findings.

LIMITATIONS

The study's findings provided us with important information regarding the factors that influence how the students choose their business majors. However, the research did have some limitations that can be addressed in future studies. First, the data for the survey was collected from Delhi-NCR and it limited the generalizability of the research. The findings may not apply to students from different geographical area and is possible that factors may vary in other countries. Future studies can use this limitation as a research gap and work on it. Second, there may be other factors that influence the decision of the students other than that which are concluded in this study. In addition to this, further studies can explore the same problem over a

period of time and a longitudinal study should be done to address the limitation of the data collected at just a single point of time.

CONCLUSION

As the selection of specialization is being considered as the most important decision for a student's life. The importance of need to explore this field of study has become prominent for researchers. This research study aimed to explore the factors behind selection of specific specialization by postgraduate students. The authors have examined various items empirically and conclude that students' choice of specialization is influenced by various factors like market uncertainty & job security, study-related efforts required to be ready for job, exposure from social media platforms, and recommendations from others, institutional resources and aligning self for future jobs.

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