Factors Encouraging The University of Cambodia’s Students to Choose a Major for Their Bachelor’s Degree

An Nimol, Khit Soaphorn, and San Channiroth
The University Of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify the factors that are the most influential to students when deciding their academic major, and to determine if there is a difference in gender when choosing a major. To achieve the objectives of this research, a quantitative approach was used, with a questionnaire as the research tool. One hundred questionnaires were administered randomly to students from The University of Cambodia. The study found that external factors were more influential than internal factors because most participants looked at the jobs after graduation, and in particular the monetary reward, job availability, and salary. Moreover, most females preferred majoring in accounting, finance, and banking while males chose other majors.

I. Introduction

1. Background of the Study
This research is aimed at identifying the factors that are the most influential to students when deciding their academic major, and the reasons why the gender gap influences their choice of major. After graduating high school, most students in Cambodia see the prospect of entering college as a new and exciting experience. It is the first time they are away from home, leaving from their parents, and it is an opportunity to meet new people and make new friends. It is leaving the comforts of high school behind for a whole new world. Students have to make decisions on their career path (Keck, 2016). For this reason, students have to think critically and deeply in order to decide whether they interested in that major or are influenced by other factors, either internal or external. Therefore, there are many things to consider. One of course, is which college to attend and which major will you study. The process of choosing a college major can be very convoluted. It is a cause of great anxiety,
because for most students, it will likely be one of the most important life decisions they make (Edmonds, 2012).

Previously, women tended to choose art majors (teaching, finance and banking, hospitality and tourism, etc.) rather than science majors (engineering, IT, mechanics, and electricity, etc.) because they mostly followed their social norms or were influenced by their culture. As a result, there is a lack of women working in the infrastructure and technology fields. By contrast, now we can see a change from the previous time. Today, more women tend to choose a major at university by themselves in the science field or STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) (Clark, 2005).

There are many factors that encourage students to choose a major at the university, both internal and external factors. Students tend to choose a major study because of their future path; some students believe that higher education can help them to reach their goal. However, there are many obstacles for students to choose a major. The first, gender gaps is the main obstacle that influenced students to decide of that major, and others in the rural areas tend to have a lack of information and encouragement from others. Last but not least, students faced pressure from their family in making a decision about their major (Edmonds, 2012). This study looks at the factors that influence college students' choice of major and aims to identify the most influential factor.

2. **Significance of the research**

This research topic is rare for researchers in Cambodia; however, this important topic will guide the next researchers or students who want to find out the impacts or the results of this research. So this topic is really important in showing students’ decisions about majors and focusing on the external and internal factors.

3. **Research Questions**

To conduct this research study, the following questions need to be addressed:

1. What factors inspire The University of Cambodia’s students to choose a major for their Bachelor’s Degree?
2. To what extent does gender influence their choice of major?
4. Research Objectives
The objectives of this research paper are:

- To explore the factors that persuade the students in choosing a major for their academic life
- To figure out the reason why gender gap influences choosing a major for students at university

5. Limitations
This research paper has been undertaken only with 100 students at The University of Cambodia due to the time availability. We are a group of three students so we had to narrow down our sample as there are many college students in every university in Cambodia. We did this in order to make sure that we could complete this project accurately on time.

II. Literature Review

1. Internal Factors
1.1 Interest in the field
Interest in the field has long been recognized as an important factor in choosing a major and working in that field following graduation (Strasser et al., 2002). Several studies have found that interest in the field is the most influential factor in the choice of a college major (Downey et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2002; Zhang, 2007). It makes intuitive sense, backed by empirical evidence, that students typically choose major fields that they find interesting (Downey, Mcgaughey, & Roach, 2011).

1.2 Aptitude in the field
Aptitude toward one’s major is another important influence. Students tend to choose majors they think they are good at or where a good “fit” exists. "For example, students with high standardized scores in math and science tend to choose more quantitative or technical majors, while those with lower scores tend to choose majors such as one in liberal arts" (Carter, 2006).

1.3 One’s personal image
Another potential influence in choosing a major is personal image. It is related to social image, which is a person’s perception of the prestige or respect associated with a major. “One’s image of oneself with respect to one’s major/career can have an influence in one’s choice of that major or career.
This may be especially significant for technology majors such as MIS; the perception that MIS majors are “geeks” or “nerds” may be demotivating to potential majors” (Zhang, 2007).

2. **External Factors**

2.1 **Influence of others**

According to Zhang (2007), “the factors that might determine the choice of undergraduate major is the influence of friends, parents, spouses, or role models on the student decision maker (as cited in Kuechler, Mcleod, & Simkin, 2009, p.466). “Although such influences can be weak, some students have explained to us that they were majoring in accounting simply because their fathers and grandfathers were accountants—and even though they hated accounting” (Kuechler, Mcleod, & Simkin, 2009).

2.2 **Job Characteristics**

Job security and job availability refer to the difficulty or ease students will have in getting their first jobs after graduation and the likely availability of jobs throughout their careers. More recent studies produced similar findings: that the future outlook for jobs is important in picking one’s major (Walstrom et al., 2008). “In light of the current global recession, job security and availability may be even more important to students today. The importance of salary and earning potential in student choice of major has been highlighted” (Walstrom et al., 2008). All of these studies suggest that students tend to choose majors and work in career fields with good present and future potential for monetary rewards (Downey, Mcgaughey, & Roach, 2011).

2.3 **The degree of difficulty and workload of major**

The possible influence on the choice of university major is the anticipated difficulty in pursuing a particular course of study. Some students who avoid major engineering or science majors because these major require use brain too much and a lot of tasks (Sabot & Wakeman-Linn, 1991). This last consideration is particularly interesting because it runs contrary to the claim that the financial costs of all major are the same (Zhang, 2007).

2.4 **Prestige of employment in the field**

Social image or prestige or status can also affect a student’s selection of a college major (Thomas & Allen, 2006). Studies report that major and careers with a higher social image are preferred (Sugahara, 2008). “One study reported a stronger link between social image and choice of major for males
than for females, suggesting a male’s desire for status inclined him to select majors like business, which was perceived to have a higher social image” (Leppel, Williams, & Waldauer, 2001). A study designed to examine why business students tend not to major in Information Technology found prestige, along with career potential and interest, was an important influence on choice of a business major (Hogan & Li, 2009).

3. Gender Gap

According to Jacobs (1995), “Gendered patterns of choosing majors have been extensively documented.” Men have traditionally concentrated in fields such as business, engineering, chemistry, and physics while women have studied education, humanities, nursing, and psychology (Goyette & Mullen, 2006). Based on the National Center for Education Statistics (1999), generally graduates in engineering, business, and math garner the highest annual salaries while education and psychology students earn significantly less. Researchers have found that earnings differential among fields play a strong role in a student’s choice (Cebula & Lopes, 1982), and that “male students differentiate between those fields offering the greatest future earnings and those with the highest entry earnings, showing a preference for the former” (Berger, 1988).

Davies and Guppy (1997) showed that men are much more likely than are women to select fields with high economic payoffs, but found to significant effects for race. Blickenstaff mentions the reasons why women leave STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) are:

1. Biological differences between men and women
2. Girls’ lack of academic preparation for a science major/career
3. Girls’ poor attitude toward science and lack of positive experiences with science in childhood
4. The absence of female scientist/engineers as role models
5. Science curricula are irrelevant to many girls
6. The pedagogy of science classes favors male students
7. A “chilly climate” exists for girls/women in science classe
8. Cultural pressure on girls/women to conform to traditional gender roles
9. An inherent masculine worldview in scientific epistemology
III. Research Methodology

1. Research design
This research study used both a quantitative and qualitative approach in order to answer the main research questions. We used a quantitative approach to generalize because we want to know about the percentages from our questionnaire. Therefore, this paper used a questionnaire as the research tool in order to explore and find out the factors encouraging students to choose a major at university. With regard to our questionnaire, there were a total of 26 questions which contain both closed-ended and open-ended questions. It is crucial to know that the first part of our questionnaire asked about the students’ background, which include their gender, colleges, year of study, majors, and hometown. The second and third part of the questionnaire served as significant indicator for our research study since we explored the various answers from their choice toward the factors influence of choosing a major study at university. In this regard, the closed-end questions aimed to focus on collecting quantitative data from the respondents, whereas the open question aimed to collect qualitative data by allowing the respondents to express their ideas and recommendations regarding the factors encouraging students to choose a major.

2. Data Collection and Sample Size
We used a non-probability sampling technique, namely convenience and systematic sampling to select our sample. The purpose of using this method was to make it easier for us to approach our subjects, and also limited time availability and resources only allowed us to contact our respondents based on our accessibility and proximity. All of our respondents were from The University of Cambodia, so our sample size was 100 for our research which is measured as a small scale research. Our questionnaires were voluntary and we handed out to everyone who was willing to complete them. They were completely anonymous and the information was kept confidential. Furthermore, our questionnaire was written in English because we study International Track and our sources are written in English. So we only selected students who have taken up the International Track to complete our questionnaires. That helped boost the speed of our research and eased up our data collection process.

3. Data analysis
To analyze our data, we used Microsoft Excel. We inputted the data that we collected from our questionnaire and analyzed it by our respondents’
characteristics such as gender, majors, hometown, and general information about our topic. As for close-ended questions, we determined the average, and counting these categories. Finally, for open question we used computer-assisted qualitative analyses. All the open document from respondents were organized in the form of text. We performed thematic analysis and divide the answers into different categories and determined the popularity of each theme.

4. **Research instrument**
There are six research tools, but we decided to choose a questionnaire to design for our research study due to it is convenience to reach out to the respondents; it takes only a short time, and does not cost much.

IV. **Findings**

Table 1 identifies that the percentage of female respondents is 61% (n=61) and males is 39% (n=39).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Frequency (Percentage)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>39% (n=39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>61% (n=61)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1 shows the basic data hometown and gender of the participating students. As illustrated in the table, the number of hometown of our participants was 45 from Phnom Penh (Female 30) and 55 from different provinces (Female 31). This result shows our female participants were split between Phnom Penh and the city, while more of our male students were from the province.
All of the participants were from different majors. The top two majors that made up most of the study population were English Literature (SFL), which accounted for 32% (n=32; Female 20 and Male 12), followed by International Relations (CoSS) which accounted for 24% (n=24; Female 12 and Male 12), so to generate the result most of respondents tend to choose art majors and there is a small gap between men and women. And the three majors also made up a significant portion of respondents are International Business 11% (n=11; Female 7 and Male 4), Finance and Banking 9% (n=9; Female 8 and Male 1), and Accounting 9% (n=9; Female 9 and no male) are in the Tony Fernandes School of Business. As a result, there is a gap between men and women. So the data shows that female students prefer to study these three majors rather than male students.

In regards to the second section of the questionnaire which seeks the factors encouraging students to choose a major at university, it shows that 37% of the total 100 participants choose their major by interest in that major, and 21% choose it for its social impact. However, 4% of respondents think that their major is easy for them to study, and 6% of them chose that major because it is a popular major. To sum up, most of the respondents chose that major because they are interested in it and also because of its social effects. Furthermore, the factor of high salary (14%) is the middle of all the factors, and being good at (9%), and the influence of others (8%) also have an impact of the respondents.
In order to determine the students’ perspective towards their major, we provided three options—Positive, Neutral, and Negative—and our respondents could tick one of them. As a result, our group can determine that most of respondents chose neutral. However, we lost 5% (n=5) of our participants that they didn’t provide the answer, so it is impossible to state that how they feel.

Table 2: Average of respondents answering statements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>The reasons for choosing major:</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>N/A</th>
<th>Ave.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I am interested in it.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>have skills to study with it</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I think it is a good major</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I follow my parents.</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Most of my friends study this major</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>I think this major has more opportunity to find good job.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>It has safety for your working.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>It is popular major.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>I can earn high salary.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>I like making myself busy.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>I like calculate major.</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>I like theory major.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Women good at study with art (psychology, teaching, education, etc.)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Men good at study with science (IT, engineer, etc.)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Men work hard than women.</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>It can lead to a high social status.</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree)
The data shows that among these sixteen statements, most of the respondents strongly disagreed with the fifth statement (Most of my friends study this major), which had 32% state strongly disagree and followed by the fourth statement (I follow my parents) which had 28% state strongly disagree. Thus, we can understand that most of our respondents were not influenced from other people (external factors). By contrast, the first statement “I am interested in it” has the highest mean, with the second statement and eighth statement following it. The scale showed that our respondents really strongly disagreed with external factors. The fourteenth statement (“Men are good at studying with science”)’s mean was 3.23, with very few strongly disagreeing or agreeing with it. Moreover, among our respondents, over half tended to choose the major for internal factors, as seen by the third statement. By contrast, the fifth statement had only five respondents who agreed with it. Thus, it shows that students don’t depend on others to choose their major. Looking at the average of the statements, “interest” and “It’s a good major” rank on the top two, while “influence of friends” has the lowest average. There are several statements which have a neutral average, including the thirteenth one.

![Hometown Pie Chart](image)

**Figure 5: I follow my parents**

This pie chart shows that the difference of our respondents of the fourth statement "I follow my parents" is irrelevant regardless of hometown. They were almost equally split between the two.
In order to collect the ideas from our respondents, we designed one open-question. As the results show, the top factor was job characteristics at 21% (male 8.86%/39 and female 12.04%/61) for our participants to choose the major study at university, which is an external factor. Secondly, their interest in the subject was ranked secondly, though males were more interested in job characteristics than interest in the subject, and females ranked interest more than job characteristics. Other answers included social image and the personal image, as well as skills. Overall, this open-question showed that there is a gap between the responses of men and women.

Comparing the two kinds of our questionnaire between the closed question (Figure 3) and open question (Figure 5), the biggest factor encouraging students to choose a major at university is interested as well as job characteristics.

As a result above of our open-question shows, among 100 respondents is 54.90% encouraged them to choose a major study at the university by external factors, and 45.10% of respondents were guided by internal factors. In general, our collecting data pop up that job characteristics of external factors is the most encouragement for students to choose a major study at the university and the lowest factor is the degree of difficulty for majors (Figure 5).
V. Discussion

After finishing collecting data from 100 UC students, respondents chose their majors from both internal and external factors. From Figure 3, Question 8 shows that the top factor is interest in the field (Internal). From Table 2, Question 11, among the sixteen statements the first statement (I am interested in the field) provides the highest average, with the participants agreeing with that statement. By contrast, from Figure 5, the most important factor is job characteristics, which is external.

Moreover, gender is a challenging in choosing a major too. As Figure 2 shows, male students chose Business Management much more than females, while they preferred Accounting and Financing by far.

Overall, our research on the topic “Factors Encouraging The University of Cambodia’s Students to Choose a Major for Their Bachelor’s Degree” shows that it is similar to our literature review with the Internal and External Factors of the previous time (Strasser et al., 2002) and (Walstrom et al., 2008). However, we had a few slightly different results from Goyette & Mullen, 2006.

VI. Conclusion and Recommendations

To conclude, we were able to identify that both factors are internal and external factor tend to be a tool in students' decision. Internal factors are about the students' interest in one major and external is about the job characteristics that allow students to work in their career field with a future potential for monetary reward. In this regard, the gender gap is significant in the major choice that females tend to choose International Business, Finance and Banking, and Accounting and females prefer working with money and communicate with people. By contrast, male students are likely to choose a major with prestige of that career such as International Relations and Business Management.

One thing to keep in mind is that, there is a limitation of this research, and we cannot generalize the whole population of undergraduate students toward the factors of choosing major choice since we only conducted a relatively small sample size. Hence, we can recommend that students should make a deep decision before decide to choose that major because choosing the right major can lead one’s future path.
The Authors
AN Nimol is an undergraduate student majoring in Accounting at the University of Cambodia. She can be contacted at An6Nimol@gmail.com.

KHIT Soaphorn is an undergraduate student of Asian Study at the University of Cambodia. He can be reached at soaphorn12345@gmail.com.

SAN Channiroth is a dual-degree student majoring in Accounting at the University of Cambodia and English for Communication at the Western University. She can be contacted at Channirothsan@gmail.com.

References
Edmonds, J. (2012). Factors influencing choice of college major: what really makes a difference?


Appendix A

Questionnaire
The Factors encouraging students to choose a major for their Bachelor’s Degree

Dear valuable participants,
We are a group of three students in afternoon shift from The University of Cambodia (UC) who are conducting a research study on “The Factors Encouraging Students to Choose a Major for their Bachelor’s Degree” among 100 UC students. Our ultimate purposes are to identify the factors, to evaluate the choice for choosing a major on UC students’ academic for their Bachelor’s Degree, and to find out the influence of gender gap in major choice.

Hence, we would like to seek for your help to spend only about 10 minutes to complete this questionnaire. Your participation is highly appreciated and is really important for our research study. Please be aware that all of the given information will be kept confidential.

I. Background Information
1. [ ] Male [ ] Female
2. Which college have you been studying in?
   Please write your answer here
3. What year are you in?
   [ ] Year 1 [ ] Year 2 [ ] Year 3 [ ] Year 4 [ ] Other
   ( )
4. What is your major? Please write your answer below
   ( )
5. Where are you from?
   [ ] Phnom Penh [ ] Province

II. The Factors encouraging Students to Choose a Major
6. Have you ever plan to choose one major when you were young?
   [ ] Yes [ ] No (if no please skip question number 7&8)
7. Have you changed your mind for that major?
   [ ] Yes [ ] No
8. What encourage you to choose the major? (You can have more than 1 answers)
   [ ] Interest [ ] Good at [ ] Popular [ ] High Salary
   [ ] Easy [ ] Social [ ] Influence of others [ ] Other
9. What is your perspective to your major you are studying?
   □ Positive  □ Neutral  □ Negative

### III. The reasons for choosing major

10. Please indicate your opinion with the statement below by placing a ✓ mark in the box provided below.
   (1= Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly agree)

   **i. Part A**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The reasons for choosing major:</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I am interested in it.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. I have skills to study with it.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. I think it is a good major.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. I follow my parents.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Most of my friends study this major.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. I think this major has more opportunity to find good job.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. It has safety for your working.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. It is popular major</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

   **ii. Part B**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The reasons for choosing major:</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9. I can earn high salary.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. I like making myself busy.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I like calculate major.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>12. I like theory major.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Women good at study with art (psychology, teaching, education, etc.)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>14. Men good at study with science (IT, engineer, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Men work hard than women.</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>16. It can lead to a high social status.</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
IV. **Open-end and close-end question**

11. What are the factors encourage you to choose a major at university? Why?

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