



# Analyzing Chinese College Students' Satisfaction with Major Choices

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**Abstract.** This paper focuses on the theme of the satisfaction level of Chinese college students with their major choices” through reviewing prior research. Firstly, the definition of satisfaction with major choices and the significance of studying students’ satisfaction with their major choices are posted in the Introduction part. Then, the “Current Situations” part indicates that Chinese college students’ level of satisfaction with major selection is not high. Also, there are some other problems but often neglected phenomena existing. Then the paper comes to the analysis of factors that influence students’ satisfaction with their major, which is divided into two streams: subjective factors and objective factors. The subjective factors include students’ willingness and the gap between students’ expectations and reality. The objective factors include employment prospects, teaching equipment and professional practice opportunities, and the quality of professional teachers. Despite that there are various drawbacks to the surveys and statistics, the paper argues that such a study is of enlightening significance for the development of China’s higher education, and the implications in three aspects (i.e. governments, colleges, and college students themselves) are suggested in the end.

**Keywords:** Chinese College Students · Major Choice · Satisfaction · Chinese Higher Education

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 The Definition of Satisfaction with Major Choices

Students’ satisfaction with their major refers to the students’ general view of emotional feelings on learning and life. It is closely related to students’ behavioral enthusiasm and mental health. Satisfaction with major choices is a kind of feeling or emotional response of students towards their majors, which represents a special attitude of students towards their professions [1].

### 1.2 Significance of Studying Students’ Satisfaction with Their Major Choices

Under the current major selection system, the freedom of college students to choose a major is strictly limited, which restricts their satisfaction with their major and affects

their learning enthusiasm. In addition, a great number of students make major choices based on their parents' arrangements rather than their own willingness or some inevitable factors, including gender and economic background, which makes some students unfit for their studies and dissatisfied with their majors. Thus, it is worthwhile to focus on college students' degrees of satisfaction with their major choices. Wang, Liang, Tan, and Zhang argue that the survey on students' satisfaction is a tool to investigate students' psychological expectations and needs [2]. On the one hand, knowing about students' satisfaction with their major selection can help observe the psychological and ideological dynamics of modern college students and implement targeting solutions effectively. On the other hand, grasping the problems existing in the current college education system and improving the quality of education can be easier. "Under the social background of comprehensively improving the quality of education and building a harmonious campus in China's higher education system, the study of students' satisfaction with their major has practical significance for China's university management" [2].

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Current Situations

For more than ten years, with the establishment of the market economic system, the implementation of the independent job selection system for college graduates, and the market value of different majors in colleges have gradually differentiated. Major selection is directly related to the academic achievements and social returns of college students.

Generally, according to prior studies, it is believed that Chinese college students' degree of satisfaction is not high [3, 4]. Since the 1990s, Chinese scholars have conducted some small-scale investigations and analyses on college students' satisfaction with their majors. In 1997, Zhao and Qian surveyed 1395 undergraduates in Xiamen University and Zhengzhou University.

The results showed that nearly 60% of the college students loved their majors only at the general level; about 21.6% of the students "showed indifference about their major," and 15.3% of the students "liked their major very much" [3]. It could be referred that most college students were not satisfied with their major. Zhao analyzed the questionnaire survey data of 5,334 graduates of Grade 2002 from 30 universities in China. It was found that 53.0% of them failed to choose their majors according to their willingness for various reasons, or were dissatisfied with their majors after years of learning [4]. In 2007, Zhao conducted a sample survey of 644 students (varying from freshmen to seniors) in 32 majors in a normal university in Guangxi. According to the survey, only 8.8% of the students were totally satisfied with their major choice, 52.6% were generally satisfied with their majors, 33.4% were generally dissatisfied with their major, and 5.3% were extremely dissatisfied with their majors [5]. In 2011, Fan conducted a questionnaire survey on 47,000 freshmen of 175 higher education institutions in 31 regions of China, which is relatively in a large scale. It was indicated that the major satisfaction of Chinese college students was not high.

According to the original data of the survey, college students' satisfaction with their major is divided into five likert scales: "very satisfied," "satisfied," "average," "dissatisfied" and "very dissatisfied." The first two levels of satisfaction evaluation as "very

satisfied” and “satisfied” were combined into “satisfied”, and the other three levels of satisfaction evaluation as “average”, “dissatisfied” and “very dissatisfied” were combined into “dissatisfied”. The results showed that among freshmen, 49.15% were “satisfied” with their major, while 50.85% were “dissatisfied” [6]. It could be seen that in China the freshmen’s satisfaction with their majors was not high. Besides, through a survey conducted on undergraduates of different grades from University of South China in 2012, Wang, Liang, et al. found that the freshmen had the highest level of satisfaction with their major; freshmen and sophomores had higher level of satisfaction than juniors and seniors, and university students of the fifth year’s degree of satisfaction rebounded [2].

However, there are some other phenomena that are opposite to the common thoughts. Some college students’ attitudes would change. In Fan’s further research, by the second semester of sophomore year, 40.26% of the same group of students were “satisfied” with their majors, which is even lower than the proportion of the freshman year (47.00%). It was noticeable that among the students who were “satisfied” with their majors in the freshman year, 44.22% were “dissatisfied” with their majors a year later, while on the other hand, among those who were “dissatisfied” with their majors before, 26.50% changed their attitudes from dissatisfaction to satisfaction after a year’s learning [6]. In addition, Fan also discovered that for some popular majors with a high proportion of voluntary admission, the degree of satisfaction was not high and even relatively lower, while for some unpopular majors with a low proportion of voluntary admission, the degree of satisfaction was not low and even relatively high [7].

## 2.2 Factors that Influence Students’ Satisfaction with Their Majors

It is believed that the varying factors that influence students’ satisfaction with their major are both subjective and objective.

### 2.2.1 Subjective Elements

Subjective factors include students’ willingness and the gap between students’ willingness or expectation and reality.

Wang et al. note that the decision-makers of major selection after the college entrance examination are mainly parents or students themselves, and that those whose majors were determined by themselves have a higher level of satisfaction with their major choices than those who follow their parents’ intentions [2]. Zhao and Qian’s research found that students who chose their own major or knew their chosen majors well had a higher level of satisfaction than those who followed others’ opinions or knew little about their chosen majors [1]. Moreover, some students have to make choices based on the considerations of force majeure rather than interests or preferences. For example, their underdeveloped economic backgrounds urge them to choose majors with high scholarship amounts to release the financial burden for the family through their own efforts. In addition, given the current enrolment system, though some students manage to fill out the college applications independently, they might fail to be admitted to their favorable majors or colleges, which also has a negative effect on their attitudes towards their major choices. Some students’ wishes cannot be achieved because there is a gap between students’ willingness and the admission of colleges and universities, which will

undoubtedly affect their satisfaction with their major [6]. As Wang suggests, “Those who had been admitted to their first choices of major showed an obvious higher level of satisfaction” [2]. Chen, Jia, and Zhang share the similar idea that students who apply for majors according to their personal interests are more satisfied with their choices [8].

Apart from students' willingness, their mistaken expectations are another factor that leads to regretful decisions on major choices. According to Fan, there was a large gap between the evaluation of many undergraduates' majors and their views when filling out applications [6]. The majors that were actively selected by students (which refers to the majors with a high proportion of volunteers) were not the majors with a high level of satisfaction; on the contrary, the majors that were passively selected by students (which refers to the majors with a low proportion of volunteers) were the ones where students felt satisfied. Namely, so-called “unexpected specialty” or “hot specialty” items are not in accordance with students' satisfaction.

A reasonable explanation for the above situation is that when candidates fill out applications, there is a typical information asymmetry between supply and demand. In this case, the choices made by students are not satisfactory to them [9]. Thereby, a large number of surveys have shown that a considerable number of college students in China lack full knowledge of their chosen majors before entering colleges and universities [10, 11]. For instance, in the survey conducted on 106 students from Nanjing Institute of Technology by Wu and Jia in 2019, before applying for the examination, 19 students did not know about their major at all, accounting for 17.9% of the total number of respondents; there were only 10 students who knew well, accounting for 9.4%; and the remaining 72.7% of the students had only some superficial knowledge of their majors [12]. Wu and Jia indicated that through further data mining, it can be found that a large number of students were still confused about their professional field, from which it can be seen that some students were blind in applying for college majors [12]. As it was found, “Their (students') indifferent attitude directly affects their interest in their majors, and then affects their four-year study at the university” [12].

### 2.2.2 Objective Elements

Objective factors include employment prospects, teaching equipment and professional practice opportunities, and the quality of professional teachers. According to Zhu, most students will consider their future employment when choosing a major: the better the employment prospects are, the higher the learning enthusiasm and level of satisfaction the students will have [13].

Some professional theoretical courses are dull and empty for students, with too few practice opportunities, and students are less satisfied; those who are well provided with learning equipment and practical opportunities have better reflections on their majors. Zhu notes that although the teaching mode of colleges and universities is dominated by students' spontaneous self-study, new knowledge and new technology are effectively guided by professional teachers [13]. If the professional teachers are equipped with abundant teaching experience, students will have a strong interest in learning and will have high satisfaction with their major even if the theoretical knowledge is dull. On the other hand, if teachers lack a sense of responsibility and students lack the guidance in their professional learning, the level of satisfaction will be lower than their expectations.

## 2.3 Implications

Improving college students' satisfaction with major choices requires efforts from varying perspectives, including governments, colleges, and college students themselves.

### 2.3.1 Suggested Actions for the Government

Just as Fan argued, "Giving students full freedom of major choice is the embodiment of respecting students' personalities and status, and it is the inevitable trend of the development of higher education" [7]. In order to achieve the objective, there is a need to gradually reform the existing management system and establish a new major selection mechanism. Based on the inevitable trend of developing students' rights to propose educational options, the government ought to endow colleges and universities with many more rights of professional setting and adjustment, and urge colleges and universities to enhance their flexibility and ability to meet the needs of students' choice of majors through reform.

### 2.3.2 Suggestions for Colleges

It is believed that colleges should take the main responsibility for this issue, as they can take actions before and after students' enrollment.

#### 2.3.2.1 Before Students' Enrolment

Zhu believed that colleges should "strengthen the guidance of students' major selection and career planning" [13]. The lack of career education and major selection guidance for students in China's basic education leads to high school graduates' blindness in filling out college applications. Inevitably, after entering colleges and universities, they found that professional learning does not meet their expectations, so they lost interest in learning. "Colleges should strengthen professional popularization and guidance on students' major choices, so that students can make the appropriate major choices on the basis of a full understanding of the majors and themselves" [6].

As for the current enrollment system, there is space for improvements. Under the current situation, colleges and universities should actively adjust the professional structure according to the needs of society and students, and reduce the scale of majors with low social demand and low student satisfaction. After that, colleges and universities should gradually revitalize educational resources through the reform of their internal management systems. Also, it is necessary to explore a new and relatively free professional selection mechanism.

In addition colleges and universities should cultivate students in large categories and establish a new mechanism for students' major selection, such as "Specialty-free Recruitment." At present, although many colleges and universities still recruit students according to certain majors, they implement large-category training on them in the lower grades and carry out professional diversion in the higher grades, so as to expand the freedom of students' professional choice. There has been a successful example of putting the system into practice. For example, at present, Yuanpei College of Peking University has made great efforts to reform students' major selection, which is regarded by Fan as "an experiment of the new major selection mechanism in small ranges" [7]. The college

does not recruit students according to their certain major choices. When students enter the school, they are divided into two streams: liberal arts and science. The lower grades accept general education mainly. After students have a further understanding of the discipline status, specialty setting, and training objectives of the college, they put forward their intention of specialty selection at the end of the second semester according to their own interests and willingness, and determine the specialty at the end of the third semester. The experiment has achieved success and accumulated experience for the implementation of a new major selection mechanism in colleges and universities in China. Zhu comments that attempts similar to this are of great significance, but around the whole country, "most colleges and universities carry out such measures only in departments" [13]. As a result, students' choices are still very limited. Further research on students' specialty selection mechanisms is needed. But just as Fan suggests, "Peking University has a strong discipline foundation and sufficient educational resources, and the students there have a good command of knowledge, which are beneficial conditions for the implementation of the Yuanpei Program experiment" [7]. Therefore, the implementation of the new specialty selection mechanism in colleges and universities in China still needs to be deeply explored in accordance with the national conditions and school operating conditions.

#### **2.3.2.2 After Students' Enrolment**

It is believed that colleges should improve the school running conditions of colleges and universities and create a good professional learning atmosphere [13].

Firstly, improving the quality of professional teachers is needed as "no matter what stage the development of China's higher education is in, the improvement of the quality of education should always be given the first priority" [14]. Secondly, colleges and universities should strengthen the professional construction, clarify the professional training objectives, improve the curriculum, raise the level of hardware facilities, and improve the practical effects of students' experimental practices. Thirdly, the construction of a campus culture should be emphasized. The research shows that in an organization with the qualities of "tolerance", "efficiency", "openness and sharing", "sensitivity" and a large number of members, the learning effort level of members is higher, the learning atmosphere is better, and a good learning atmosphere can also promote students' learning [12].

Thus, colleges and universities should provide not only a beautiful learning environment, but also a good learning atmosphere to improve students' interest in learning through campus culture. Last but not least, during the process of providing various services, colleges should learn more about the needs of students and listen to their opinions. "Only by listening to the voice of students and collecting feedback and suggestions from students can schools provide better services" [15].

#### **2.3.3 Suggestions for College Students**

Students need to further the exploration of their own major and career. Fan supposes that when selecting major, they should rationally know about both the major and themselves as much as possible, analyze the matching of the two, and avoid the behavior of blindly following the general public [6]. Additionally, students should abandon the passive

attitudes towards academic study and future development. On the contrary, students should get adapted to the current situations or find other accessible ways to solve existing problems, for example, changing their present major with full preparation and knowledge of the target major. In a word, no matter what ways they choose, they have to take the responsibility for themselves, instead of wasting their precious college time in these four years and achieving nothing in the end.

In short, higher education aims to carry out professional education and vocational education for college students, which is a social activity to train senior professionals. The affecting factors of students' satisfaction contain both subjective and objective ones, so when seeking solutions, comprehensive consideration should be given to them. Improving students' satisfaction requires the joint efforts of governments, colleges, and college students themselves. This, however, still has a long way to go.

### 3 Conclusion

Based on the general background of China's higher education enrolment system, this essay focuses on the issue of college students' satisfaction with their major choices. It presented the definition of satisfaction with major choices and their relevant current situations. Through proofreading, it is found that it is a problem for the development of China's higher education. Factors that cause this fact can be divided into subjective ones and objective ones. Subjective factors include the gap between students' willingness or expectations and the reality. The objective factors refer to employment prospects, teaching equipment and professional practice opportunities, the quality of professional teachers, etc. It is believed that studying students' feedback about their major provides an insight into the improvement of the Chinese higher education system and the cultivation of talents. Possible strategies are suggested from three perspectives: governments, colleges, and college students themselves, all hoping that the higher education system can be fully developed in the near future.

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