Factors in the Choice of MIS as a Major:
The Role of Subjective Norms from the
Perspective of an Arab Country

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ABSTRACT

Decline of student enrollment in MIS major is still an issue. In order to reverse the trend, this study highlights the drivers toward the management information system (MIS) major in an Arab country based on the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) and the Network Externalities Theory. This is the first study that integrates the perceived number of enrolled students (PNES) with TRA in addition to other variables (reputation of the instructor, job availability, financial considerations, computer self-efficacy, easiness of the major, and IT anxiety) with intention to enroll in MIS. The model was tested with 499 undergraduate students and analyzed with LISREL. Results indicate that, unlike western culture, the subjective norms and PNES (and not attitude) are important drivers toward the major. This study is relevant for practitioners who can learn strategies to attract more students to the MIS major.

KEYWORDS
Factors Affecting MIS Major, Intention, MIS Enrollment, Perceived Number of Enrolled Students, Student Perception of MIS Programs, Subjective Norms, TRA

1. INTRODUCTION

Selecting a college major represents a strategic decision that may have an impact on the future career of a student. This decision was identified as the decision with the most life regret for students (Roese and Summerville 2005). If not appropriately approached, it is likely that many students will change their major before the completion of their education. Selecting a major is a complex, behavioral phenomenon that has received extensive consideration over the last few years (Looney and Akbulut 2007; Zhang 2007; Heinze and Hu 2009; Croasdell et al., 2011; Downey et al., 2011; Cohen and Parsotam 2012; Benamati and Rajkumar 2013; Govender et al. 2014; Burns et al., 2014).

Despite the promising outlook of the MIS field in terms of future employment growth and salary increases (Computerworld 2006; Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010), this field suffers from a decline in student enrollment in many business schools; and many studies have attempted to investigate this phenomenon in developed countries (Granger et al., 2007; Looney and Akbulut 2007; Zhang 2007; Panko 2008; Walstrom et al., 2008; Ferratt et al. 2010; Saunders and Lockridge 2011; Downey et al., 2011; Benamati and Rajkumar 2013; Govender et al. 2014; Burns et al., 2014); but few studies have been conducted in developing countries (Rouibah 2012; Govender et al. 2014). This trend continues and remains a real concern for managers and MIS departments (Saunders and Lockridge 2011) because some universities have completely dismantled their MIS programs (Aken and Michalisin 2007). The Association for Information Systems and other researchers have called the problem a crisis (Zhang 2007; Looney and Akbulut 2007; Panko 2008), which has led two researchers to publish a paper entitled “Declining MIS enrollment: The death of the MIS degree” (Saunders and Lockridge...
2011). Additionally, non-scholarly papers have been recently published that discuss students choosing irrelevant majors, including MIS (Chasalow 2014). The decline in MIS enrollment has led many researchers to call for additional studies to understand the factors that have either contributed to or mitigated the continued decline in enrollment in the field (Walstrom et al., 2008; Heinze and Hu 2009; Benamati and Rajkumar 2013). Therefore, “it is imperative that the IS community as a whole addresses this problem from several different perspectives” (Topi et al., 2010).

Decline in MIS enrollment was also observed in Kuwait, and enrollment in the MIS program decreased substantially between 2005 and 2014, with data as follows: 26.14% (2004/2005), 20.77% (2005/2006); 5.45% (2006/2007), 2.39% (2007/2008), 5.20% (2008/2009), 6.32% (2009/2010), 5.21% (2010/2011), 4.78% (2011/2012), 6.92% (2012/2013), and 7.54% (2013/2014). This decline is not justified despite the fact that the demand in Kuwait for IS graduates is expected to grow between 2012 and 2016, and the staffing supplies from business schools represents only a small percentage (20%) of the market needs (Office of the Vice President for Planning 2013). Accordingly, job availability (Saunders and Lockridge 2011; Croasdell et al., 2011) is not the main driver behind the MIS decline; however, much research is needed to shed light on the other associated issues (Riemenschneider et al., 2009, Benamati and Rajkumar 2013).

This study focuses on both the choice of major and career intentions as reflections of student interest in an MIS. Career intentions refer to the subjective probability that the student will choose to pursue a career in an MIS field. The choice of a major represents an educational aspiration and is part of the preparation for choosing a career. This study focuses on this subject for four reasons: (1) currently, most colleges of business administration have MIS departments, and enrollment remains a critical issue; (2) most studies were performed in developed countries, ignoring other contexts and cultures; (3) although previous studies highlighted a number of factors that drive the choice of an MIS major, factors such as personal interest, ability, career-related factors and social/referent sources (see Table 5 in the Appendix), fewer studies used theoretical models with strong SEM technical analysis; (4) when subjective norms and attitudes were included in Western culture, the findings showed that only attitude mediated the effect of the external factors on intentions, whereas the effect of instructors and students did not play a significant role (Heinze and Hu 2009; Downey et al., 2011; Croasdell et al., 2011; Govender et al. 2014). Because Arab culture emphasizes social influences, the unanswered questions of whether the subjective norms and its antecedents play an important role in MIS choices and whether the subjective norms mediate the effect of the external factors on intentions compared to attitudes and opposed to the vast majority of Western studies remain.

Because there is agreement among information researchers that culture affects attitude and behavior (Rouibah and Hamdy 2009), this study is oriented toward the following: (1) understanding the role played by subjective norms, a form of social influence, on the MIS choice as suggested by previous researchers (Heinze and Hu 2009) and becoming the first study that integrates two new antecedents of subjective norms (instructor reputation and the perceived number of enrolled students, noted here as PNES), and (2) collecting data about this phenomenon in an Arab country through the following two research questions:

Do subjective norms and its antecedents play a significant role in this complex process? And whether the effect of subjective norms is larger than that of attitude during choice of major and career intentions?

This study sheds light on the motives underlying enrollment in an MIS program by undergraduate students in Kuwait, in a culture that has not previously received due attention by Western scholars. The research also aims to provide insight regarding the quest to change the image of MIS and to attract more students into the field, as suggested by previous studies (Benamati and Rajkumar 2013). In achieving these objectives, the theory of reasoned action (TRA) and prior work in the MIS/IT career literature are used to examine the influence of a set of factors on the intentions of students to enroll in the MIS major.
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