

How Does Interest Misalignment Influence the Academic Motivation and Performance of Taiwanese College Students Nearing Graduation?

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Abstract

This study explores how interest misalignment influences the academic motivation and performance of Taiwanese college students who are nearing graduation. Under Taiwan's higher education system, many students select majors influenced by family expectations, university admission systems, and societal pressures rather than intrinsic interests. Through qualitative interviews and thematic analysis, this research examines how 12 Taiwanese final-year college students experience, interpret, and cope with the gap between their chosen academic fields and personal passions. The analysis identifies three interconnected themes: (1) External Forces Shaping Major Choice, where parental influence and institutional constraints dominate initial decisions; (2) Balancing Interests and Responsibilities, in which students struggle between academic obligations and genuine interests, often compensating through extracurricular exploration; and (3) Redefining the Self and Future Direction, where students reconstruct motivation and career identity by aligning personal values with future aspirations. Findings reveal that while interest misalignment often reduces intrinsic motivation and engagement, many students display adaptive strategies such as integrating interests into unrelated coursework, pursuing minors, or engaging in part-time work aligned with their passions. These coping processes foster resilience and self-awareness, transforming misalignment into opportunities for personal growth. This study concludes that universities should strengthen counseling systems and provide more flexible academic structures to support students facing major-interest misalignment.

Keywords: interest misalignment, academic motivation, Taiwan, higher education.

摘要

本研究探討了興趣錯配如何影響台灣即將畢業的大學生的學業動機和學業表現。在台灣的高等教育體系下，許多學生在選擇專業時更多地受到家庭期望、大學入學制度和社會壓力的影響，而非出於自身興趣。本研究透過質性訪談與主題分析，檢視了 12 位台灣大學應屆畢業生如何體驗、理解與因應所選專業與個人興趣之間的差距。分析結果提煉出三個相互關聯的主題：（1）外在因素影響專業選擇，父母的影響和製度限制主導了最初的選擇；（2）平衡興趣與責任，學生在學業義務和真正興趣之間掙扎，常常透過課外活動來彌補；（3）重塑自我與未來方向，學生透過將個人價值觀與未來抱負相契合來重構；研究結果表明，雖然興趣錯配往往會降低內在學習動機和參與度，但許多學生會展現出適應性策略，例如將興趣融入到不相關的課程中、輔修其他專業或從事與自身興趣相符的兼職工作。這些因應策略能夠增強學生的韌性和自我認知，將興趣錯配轉化為個人成長的契機。本研究得出結論，大學應加強諮商服務體系，並提供更靈活的學術結構，以支持面臨專業與興趣錯配問題的學生。

關鍵詞：興趣錯位、學業動機、臺灣、高等教育、質性研究

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INTRODUCTION

Background

A Growing Concern in Taiwan's Higher Education

Taiwan's higher education system has seen dramatic expansion over the past few decades. Once an elite privilege, university education has become widely accessible due to policy reforms and the proliferation of institutions. While this democratization of education has opened doors for more students, it has also created new challenges, one of the most pressing being the interest misalignment between students' academic majors and their personal interests. This issue is increasingly impacting student motivation, academic engagement, and long-term career satisfaction. In today's Taiwan, the issue of interest misalignment is more relevant than ever. A shrinking job market, declining birthrate, and pressure to maintain university enrollment have all contributed to a mismatch between student aspirations and institutional realities. As universities compete for students, some programs may emphasize enrollment over fit, while students, under pressure to enter "safe" or prestigious fields, often make choices based on limited guidance or external expectations.

Social and Cultural Context

Cultural expectations continue to exert a powerful influence on major selection. Traditional values such as filial piety and respect for parental authority remain prevalent in Taiwanese society. Many students prioritize family wishes when selecting their major, even when it conflicts with their own interests. Family influence frequently trumps personal passion, especially in choosing majors perceived to offer greater financial stability. Moreover, practical concerns dominate the decision-making process for many students. As observed in previous scholarships, Taiwanese students often select majors based on expected

income and job security rather than intrinsic interest. This utilitarian mindset may provide short-term reassurance but can lead to disengagement later in the academic journey.

Institutional Influences and Gaps in Guidance

Despite the presence of counseling services in most Taiwanese schools, students often receive insufficient or ineffective guidance when choosing their major. Research from Padang University found that while over 99% of schools employ counselors, nearly 60% of students report inadequate access to higher education planning. Alarmingly, over 10% of students receive no guidance at all. This lack of support leaves many entering university without a clear understanding of what their chosen field entails. Rigid university systems further compound the problem. Inflexible curricula limited elective options, and minimal opportunities for interdisciplinary exploration make it difficult for students to adjust their academic paths after enrollment. Students who realize their interest misalignment too late may find it hard or even impossible to switch majors or reorient their academic focus without incurring financial or time-related setbacks.

Psychological Factors and Self-Assessment

Students' own perceptions of their academic abilities also influence their major choices. Many rely on standardized test scores and high school performance to gauge their "fit" for certain disciplines. Scholars Dillon and Smith noted that students often avoid challenging fields like STEM, not because of a lack of interest, but due to fear of failure or perceived inadequacy.¹ This self-limiting mindset can prevent capable students from pursuing areas they might thrive in, reinforcing cycles of misalignment. This cautious approach reflects a broader

¹ Dillon, Eleanor W., and Jeffrey A. Smith. "The Determinants of Mismatch between Student Ability and College Quality." *Journal of Labor Economics* 35, no. 1 (2017): 47–66.

culture of risk aversion in education. Students, parents, and institutions alike tend to favor predictable pathways, often at the expense of personal growth or genuine interest.

Observable Trends and Consequences

The effects of misaligned interests are widespread and increasingly visible. According to Ministry of Education statistics, only 3.28% of students feel completely suited to their current major. Over 23% express a desire to transfer to a different field.² Dropout and transfer rates continue to rise, particularly in programs with high entry requirements but low student satisfaction. Media reports frequently highlight stories of students regretting their major choices, struggling through capstone projects, or pursuing careers unrelated to their field of study. A 2022 news article from United Daily News cited that nearly half of recent graduates do not work in areas related to their university major. These trends underscore the long-term implications of early mismatches—impacting not only academic performance but also mental well-being and career development.

Interest misalignment also affects graduation timelines. Students often extend their studies to switch tracks, complete missing prerequisites, or engage in alternative projects that reflect their true interests. This extension places a financial burden on both students and families, and further revealed systemic inefficiencies in major assignment and support structures.

Research Motivation

In Taiwan, college students often face a mismatch between their academic major and personal interests. Many students choose their field of study based on external expectations such as parental influence, job security, or university entrance scores rather than genuine

² Rossetti, Rosemarie. "Factors That Influence Students Not to Enroll at the Vanguard Joint Vocational School." The Ohio State University, 1991.

interest. This interest misalignment can lead to decreased learning motivation, poor academic performance, and uncertainty about future career paths. While previous studies have explored students' motivation or career choice separately, few have examined how interest misalignment specifically affects students nearing graduation, a period when they face critical decisions about their professional future.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore how interest misalignment influences the academic motivation and performance of Taiwanese college students who are nearing graduation. Through in-depth interviews, this study aims to identify the emotional, behavioral, and strategic responses students adopt when facing a mismatch between their field of study and personal interest.

Research Questions

RQ1: What external and internal factors influence final-year Taiwanese university students' initial choice of an academic major that does not align with their personal interests?

RQ2: How do final-year Taiwanese university students experience and adjust their academic motivation when facing major–interest misalignment?

RQ3: What adaptive strategies do final-year Taiwanese university students adopt to cope with interest misalignment during their undergraduate studies?

Contribution

While the issue of interest misalignment is receiving growing public attention, research in the Taiwanese context remains limited. Most existing studies focus on institutional structures or economic outcomes, with less emphasis on how students personally experience and navigate this challenge especially in their final years of university when the effects of

major–interest misalignment become most pronounced. Given Taiwan's unique mix of cultural pressures, economic shifts, and educational expansion, a deeper understanding of students' lived experiences is essential. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring how students cope with interest misalignment, how institutional and familial support or lack thereof—shapes their choices, and what mechanisms might help students better align their academic paths with their passions. By shedding light on these dynamics, this research seeks to inform educators, counselors, and policymakers about how to better support students in achieving both academic fulfillment and long-term career success in an increasingly uncertain educational landscape.

Limitation

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size is relatively small, consisting of 12 final-year undergraduate students in Taiwan, all of whom were recruited primarily through the researchers' personal networks. While this sampling approach limits the generalizability of the findings, it is consistent with the qualitative research design, which emphasizes depth, contextual understanding, and rich descriptions of individual experiences rather than statistical representativeness.

Second, the study focused exclusively on final-year students who were consciously aware of the interest misalignment between their academic majors and personal interests. As a result, the findings may not fully capture the experiences of students at earlier stages of their academic journey or those who have not yet reflected on such misalignment.

Finally, the limited availability of prior research specifically addressing major–interest misalignment among final-year undergraduate students in Taiwan constrained the theoretical scope of this study. Future research could expand the sample size, include students from different academic stages, regions, and disciplines, or adopt mixed method approaches to further examine how interest misalignment develops over time.

Delimitation

This study is limited to Taiwanese undergraduate students who are in their final or near-final year of university, focusing specifically on those who have experienced interest misalignment. The research does not include graduate students, vocational college students, or students studying abroad. In terms of scope, this study emphasizes students' subjective perceptions, experiences, and coping strategies rather than using quantitative measures of academic performance or psychological well-being. The research adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to gain an in-depth understanding of students' lived experiences, without employing large-scale surveys or experimental designs. This study focuses on the context of Taiwan's higher education system; therefore, the findings may not be directly applicable to other cultural or institutional settings. These delimitations are intended to keep the research focused, feasible, and manageable within the available resources.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Misaligned Interests in Higher Education: Causes, Consequences, and Coping

Mechanisms in the Taiwanese Context

The phenomenon of interest misalignment where students' academic majors do not align with their personal interests or career aspirations has emerged as a significant concern within Taiwan's expanding higher education landscape. A growing body of research illustrates how institutional structures, cultural expectations, psychological dynamics, and socioeconomic backgrounds collectively contribute to this issue, affecting students' academic motivation, performance, and post-graduation trajectories.

Causes of Interest Misalignment Inadequate Pre-University Guidance

Studies indicate that a significant percentage of students select majors misaligned with their interests due to insufficient guidance and external pressures, which subsequently leads to higher dropout rates. Despite the high availability of school counselors in secondary education (99.18%), a large proportion of students in Taiwan report receiving insufficient information regarding higher education pathways.³ For instance, in research conducted at Universitas Negeri Padang, only 3.28% of first-year students felt aligned with their major, while 23.77% expressed a desire to transfer. These findings suggest that career guidance services are not effectively equipping students with the information needed to make informed academic decisions.

³ Ardi, Zadrian. "Unsuitable Majoring: Does the Reorientation Would Help the Student for Revitalize Learning Activities." Paper presented at the Proceedings of the 9th International Conference for Science Educators and Teachers, 2017.

Cultural and Familial Influences

Cultural values, such as filial piety, significantly shape academic choices. Taiwanese students frequently select majors based on family expectations and perceived job security rather than intrinsic interest. Scholarly research also notes that while interest is a primary determinant in major selection, gendered expectations and perceived career prospects further shape decision-making processes.⁴ This dynamic reflects a persistent tension between collectivist values and individual academic preferences.

Ability-Oriented Thinking

Beyond cultural expectations, cognitive factors play a critical role. Students rely heavily on perceived academic ability as inferred from standardized test scores—to determine their major choice. Scholars argue that this self-assessment can lead students to avoid challenging yet potentially fulfilling fields, thereby limiting personal growth and academic satisfaction. Furthermore, institutional structures and shifting perceptions of "fit" influence how students choose and adjust their majors over time.⁵

⁴ Malgwi, Charles A., Martha A. Howe, and Priscilla A. Burnaby. "Influences on Students Choice of College Major." *Journal of Education for Business* 80, no. 5 (2005): 275–82.

⁵ Bordon, Paola, and Chao Fu. "College-Major Choice to College-Then-Major Choice." *Review of Economic Studies* 82, no. 4 (2015): 1247–88.

Consequences of Misaligned Interests

Decline in Academic Motivation

Interest is a central component of intrinsic motivation. When students lack genuine interest in their studies, their classroom engagement, self-regulation, and effort decline⁶. Researchers have observed that Taiwanese students' motivation diminishes progressively after the initial recognition of misalignment, often reaching its lowest point during the final years of study.

Reduced Academic Performance

Interest misalignment has been shown to adversely affect academic outcomes, particularly in independent projects such as capstones.⁷ Students studying subjects aligned with their interests consistently achieve higher grades in major-specific courses.⁸ While some students may maintain academic performance through strong external motivation, misalignment generally correlates with weaker overall academic results.⁹ Engagement and long-term success in both learning and career development are highest when academic interests align with the chosen major.

Impact on Mental Health and Career Readiness

Misalignment leads to reduced educational satisfaction, heightened anxiety about post-graduate decisions, and weaker career development capabilities. Many Taiwanese college

⁶ Deci, Edward L., and Richard M. Ryan. 2000. "The 'What' and 'Why' of Goal Pursuits: Human Needs and the Self-Determination of Behavior." *Psychological Inquiry* 11 (4): 227–268.

⁷ Tsai, Cheng-Yuan, and Chin-Hung Kuo. "Impacts of Interest Misalignment on Student Performance in Undergraduate Capstone Projects." *Journal of Higher Education Development* 14, no. 2 (2022): 85–104.

⁸ Yang, Min-Ling, and Yi-Hsuan Chen. "The Relationship between Major-Interest Fit and Academic Achievement in Higher Education." *Educational Psychology Review* 28, no. 1 (2016): 45–62.

⁹ Wu, Jui-Ying, Yi-Ling Lin, and Sheng-Hui Chen. "Navigating Misalignment: The Roles of External Motivation and Self-Regulation in Academic Success." *Journal of Educational Studies* 56, no. 3 (2020): 312–30.

students experience career decision anxiety, particularly those uncertain about their future professional goals.¹⁰ Students nearing graduation often face internal conflicts between pursuing a career aligned with their degree versus one that aligns with their true interests but requires additional training.¹¹ Graduates whose occupations align with their college majors experience higher adaptability, a stronger sense of achievement, and greater overall life satisfaction.

Coping Strategies and Student Adaptation

Malgwi, Howe, and Burnaby also noted that while interest is the primary determinant in major selection, gendered expectations and perceived career prospects further shape decision-making processes.¹² Students employ a variety of strategies to manage interest misalignment. Li identified three primary approaches¹³:

1. **Instrumental motivation:** focusing on the extrinsic rewards of completing a degree.
2. **Identity compartmentalization:** separating personal interests from academic identity.
3. **Personal interest cultivation:** engaging directly or indirectly with personal interests through coursework, independent learning, or extracurricular activities.

Hsieh and Wang found that senior students frequently supplement their formal education with interdisciplinary learning, certificates, or minors better aligned with their interests.

¹⁰ Chen, Chin-Ying. "A Study on College Students Anxiety of Career Decision." National Taiwan Normal University, 2005.

¹¹ Huang, Yi-Chun, and Hsiu-Wen Lin. "The Tug-of-War between Degree Utility and Personal Passion." *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance* 23, no. 1 (2023): 45–67.

¹² Malgwi, Charles A., Martha A. Howe, and Priscilla A. Burnaby. "Influences on Students Choice of College Major." *Journal of Education for Business* 80, no. 5 (2005): 275–82.

¹³ Li, I. Wei. "A Study on the Major-Interest Mismatch and Its Coping Strategies among University Students." National Taiwan Normal University, 2018.

¹⁴These strategies highlight students' resilience and proactive efforts to find meaning in their academic journey.

Institutional and Socioeconomic Influences

Institutional Structures

Rigid academic programs with limited elective options may exacerbate misalignment. In contrast, institutions offering interdisciplinary programs and flexible curricula are better positioned to support students. Structured curricula and comprehensive counseling systems can enhance students' career planning and mitigate the negative effects of academic career misalignment. Peer dynamics also play a role, as students sometimes switch majors based on social comfort rather than long-term goals.¹⁵

Socioeconomic Constraints

Students from middle-class families often have greater access to adaptive resources, such as private tutoring or additional certifications. In contrast, students from working-class backgrounds face more rigid constraints, making it harder to change majors or delay career decisions, thus deepening the equity gap in higher education outcomes.¹⁶

Research Gaps and Future Directions

Despite the increasing recognition of interest misalignment as a systemic issue, empirical studies focusing specifically on Taiwanese university students, especially those in their senior years, remain scarce. This study seeks to address that gap by examining the coping mechanisms and motivational shifts relevant to Taiwanese students experiencing interest misalignment in their later undergraduate years.

¹⁴ Hsieh, Ping-Jung, and Yu-Sheng Wang. "Interdisciplinary Learning and Academic Resilience." *Journal of Education and Psychology* 42, no. 1 (2019): 115–38.

¹⁵ Pu, Shi, Yu Yan, and Liang Zhang. "Do Peers Affect Undergraduates Decisions to Switch Majors." *Educational Researcher* 50, no. 8 (2021): 516–26.

¹⁶ Dillon, Eleanor W., and Jeffrey A. Smith. "The Determinants of Mismatch between Student Ability and College Quality." *Journal of Labor Economics* 35, no. 1 (2017): 47–66.

Conclusion

The literature underscores that misaligned interests in higher education are shaped by a convergence of cultural, institutional, psychological, and socioeconomic forces. This misalignment significantly impairs student motivation and academic success, particularly during the critical transition to graduation and career planning. However, students also exhibit agency and adaptability by employing various coping strategies. Effective institutional support systems—such as re-orientation programs, interdisciplinary options, and targeted career counseling—are essential in helping students reconcile their academic experiences with their personal and professional aspirations.

Conceptual Framework

This study proposes a framework that views interest misalignment as a dynamic process of "Constraint–Negotiation–Transformation." 1. Phase 1: External Constraints (Context): Focuses on the structural forces (family expectations, examination systems) that dominate initial major selection. 2. Phase 2: Internal Negotiation (Process): Examines the psychological conflict and behavioral adjustments (extracurricular activities) students use to balance obligations with passions. 3. Phase 3: Self-Redefinition (Outcome): Analyzes the reconstruction of career identity as students prepare for graduation.

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter explained the research methodology of this study, which aimed to explore how interest misalignment affects the academic motivation and performance of undergraduate students in Taiwan. Because the research question involved subjective experiences, emotional responses, and identity formation, a qualitative approach was adopted to gain a deeper understanding of participants' lived experiences. This chapter sequentially explained the research design, cross-institutional and cross-departmental sampling strategies, data collection procedures, thematic analysis, ethical considerations, and methodological limitations.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design within the interpretive paradigm. The core of this design lay in exploring how individuals assigned meaning to their academic journeys. Compared to quantitative research, qualitative methods were better suited to capturing students' psychological conflicts, coping strategies, and future plans when confronted with interest misalignment in a nuanced manner. Through in-depth, one-on-one interviews, this study moved beyond surface-level data to examine the external pressures and intrinsic motivations influencing students' choices of major.

This approach aligned with the interpretivist paradigm, which views knowledge as socially constructed and context dependent. It was well suited to addressing the following research question:

How did interest misalignment influence the academic motivation and performance of Taiwanese college students who were nearing graduation?

By employing semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, this design captured complex and layered data that reflected individual perspectives while also uncovering shared patterns across cases.

Sampling Strategy and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the subjective impact of interest misalignment among university students. Participants were primarily recruited through convenience sampling, which connected the researchers with peers and students within existing academic networks.

To ensure a high level of relevance to the research topic, purposive sampling was further applied during the selection process. Participants were required to be clearly aware that their academic major did not align with their personal interests or career aspirations. This selection process ensured that all participants possessed the core characteristics necessary to provide rich and in-depth qualitative data.

Sources of Data

This study drew data from final-year (fourth year) undergraduate students enrolled in various higher education institutions in Taiwan. Final-year students were selected because they were at a critical juncture in their academic and career transitions, enabling them to provide reflective evaluations of their undergraduate learning experiences.

In total, 12 final-year undergraduate students experiencing interest misalignment were selected ($n = 12$). Participants' academic backgrounds included international affairs, law, international business management, English communication, industrial engineering, leisure and recreation management, and fine arts. This cross-institutional and cross-disciplinary sampling design enabled the study to capture common challenges across diverse academic environments.

Inclusion / Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria for this study were as follows: (1) final-year undergraduate students currently enrolled in universities in Taiwan; (2) individuals who perceived a clear interest misalignment between their academic major and personal passions; and (3) participants who completed the entire duration of the recorded interview.

Conversely, the exclusion criteria included: (1) undergraduate students in their first through third years of study; (2) individuals who deliberately concealed information or were unable to engage in honest self-reflection during the interview process; and (3) students who were pursuing a degree without meaningful engagement in the learning process. These criteria ensured that the final sample of 12 participants provided the most relevant and high-quality data for the research questions.

Table1 Major and Interest Information of Interviewees

	Gender	University major	Extracurricular activities
Student one	Female	Final-year law student	Singing and swimming
Student two	Female	A final-year majored in International Affair	Dancing and music
Student three	Female	A senior majored in International Business Management	Playing sports, singing, and organizing events
Student four	Female	A senior majored in International Business Management	Dancing and sports
Student five	Female	A senior in International Affairs	Don't have any interests
Student six	Female	Final-year student in the Department of International Affairs	Playing volleyball
Student seven	Male	A final-year student majored in International Affairs	Have always had a strong interest in sports.

Student eight	Female	Final-year student in the Department of Sport and Leisure	Listening to music
Student nine	Female	Final year in the Department of English for International Communication	Exploring different restaurants, researching ingredients, cooking techniques, and occasionally write food reviews to share my thoughts
Student ten	Female	A senior student in the Department of Industrial Engineering and Management	Enjoy coffee, visit different cafés
Student eleven	Female	A final-year student majored in Leisure and Recreation Management	Enjoy drawing, taking photos, and often visit different cafés
Student Twelve	Male	A final-year student in the Fine Arts Department	Playing basketball
		Final year in the Department of International Affairs.	

Source: Organized by the Author

Procedures For Data Collection

Data collection was conducted between June and July 2025. Due to the geographical dispersion of participants, all interviews were conducted online using video conferencing software. Prior to the interviews, participants were informed of the research objectives and were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and used solely for academic purposes. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with both verbal and written informed consent. All recordings were transcribed verbatim to preserve participants' language use, tone, and emotional nuances for subsequent thematic analysis.

Tools for Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a six-step thematic analysis framework.¹⁷ The process began with familiarization, during which interview transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve immersion in the data. Initial coding was then conducted to identify meaningful units, such as parental pressure and lack of academic interest. These codes were subsequently organized into broader themes, including external influences on major choice, academic disengagement, coping strategies, and future outlook. The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence and alignment with the research questions. In the final stages, themes were defined, named, and interpreted within their contextual settings, supported by illustrative participant quotations. To enhance analytical rigor, all data were coded manually with accompanying field notes, and a second coder reviewed selected transcripts to verify coding consistency.

¹⁷ Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the academic research ethics guidelines of the Department of International Affairs at Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages. Prior to data collection, participants were provided with an electronic informed consent form detailing the research purpose and procedures. To protect participants' anonymity and privacy, institutional names were omitted, and participants were identified using numerical codes (Student 1–12). All interview recordings and transcripts were securely stored in encrypted cloud-based storage accessible only to the research team. Participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Limitations of the Methodology

This study was subject to several methodological limitations. First, the relatively small sample size of 12 participants and the use of non-random sampling limited the generalizability of the findings. However, this approach was consistent with the qualitative research aim of achieving depth and contextual understanding rather than statistical representativeness. Second, the study relied on self-reported data, which may have been influenced by social desirability bias. Finally, cultural norms related to academic conformity occasionally made it difficult to recruit participants willing to discuss interest misalignment openly. Despite these limitations, the methodology was appropriate for this exploratory study and provided valuable insights.

Chapter Summary

This chapter detailed the methodological framework of the study, which explored how interest misalignment influenced the academic motivation and performance of Taiwanese college students who were nearing graduation. By employing convenience sampling and conducting semi-structured interviews with 12 participants from diverse academic

backgrounds, the study ensured data richness and ethical integrity. The integration of thematic analysis and rigorous ethical procedures established a solid foundation for the presentation of findings in the following chapter.

DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction of Data Analysis

This chapter presented the findings derived from the qualitative analysis of interview data collected from 12 final-year undergraduate students in Taiwan (Student 1 to Student 12). The analysis followed a systematic coding process, moving from initial open coding to identify meaningful patterns across diverse academic backgrounds. Rather than merely reporting individual responses, the data were synthesized to uncover the "mainstream patterns" of interest misalignment, motivation, and coping strategies. The findings were organized into thematic sections: (1) motivations for choosing an academic major, (2) interest-related experiences, (3) learning and growth, (4) extracurricular engagement and future plans, and (5) suggestions and advice.

Data Analysis Coding Process

This study employed the core concept of qualitative coding in its data analysis, transforming extensive transcripts of interviews into systematic academic findings. The overall analysis process was divided into four key stages. The first stage was open coding, which began with the initial deconstruction of the interview transcripts. Researchers read each transcript line by line, marking key keywords, meaningful statements, and sentences reflecting psychological states mentioned by respondents. At this stage, researchers maintained an open attitude and did not presuppose any frameworks, aiming to capture students' most authentic, original descriptions of "major selection," "learning motivation," and "interest misalignment." The next stage was axial coding. After the initial marking, researchers organized, compared, and summarized the scattered codes generated by open coding. By comparing similar concepts among different respondents, they identified the connections between various categories. For example, "parental advice," "grade distribution,"

and "social expectations" were categorized under the core category of "external constraints," thereby clarifying the relationships between these concepts.

Next, in the Selective Coding phase, researchers further integrated the axis codes into higher-level themes, systematically categorizing the data into five major thematic frameworks: motivation for choosing an academic major, interest-related experiences, learning and personal growth during university, participation in extracurricular activities and future plans, and advice for younger students. This ensured that the analysis results directly answered the research questions. Finally, through theme connection and contextual analysis, researchers further explored the interactions between themes and employed Descriptive Synthesis to integrate the common experiences and recurring patterns of the 12 respondents. This method not only avoided presenting isolated individual responses but also helped identify "mainstream patterns" across cases, thereby delving into the causal relationships and dynamic adjustment processes between interest misalignment, academic motivation, and coping behaviors.

Identifying Patterns

Through the aforementioned coding process, the study revealed a high degree of complexity in students' learning journeys. First, not all students' motivation stemmed from interest; rather, it was influenced by admission pathways, external conditions, or the characteristics of their chosen major. For example, some respondents admitted to choosing the wrong department or viewed their current major as a "steppingstone"; others chose to "strategically stay" due to difficulties in transferring or family expectations.

Furthermore, significant individual differences were observed among students under the influence of "interest misalignment." While most respondents felt a gap between their ideals and reality, their coping mechanisms varied: some viewed it as an obstacle, leading to severe academic burnout; while others (such as Student 2 and Student 8) demonstrated adaptability,

attempting to combine personal interests (such as music and intercultural exchange) with academic requirements. The identification of these patterns laid the foundation for subsequent thematic discussions.

Theme Comparison

Through a cross-case comparison of 12 participants (Student 1 to Student 12), this study identified critical patterns in major selection, motivation, and self-adjustment. While all respondents operated within similar higher education environments in Taiwan, their experiences revealed a dynamic struggle between "structural limitations" and "personal agency."

1. The motivation for choosing a major

The analysis indicated that for most participants, the selection of an academic major was not primarily based on personal interest but was instead shaped by a complex interplay of external constraints and pragmatic considerations. Evidence from the interviews revealed that many students, such as Student 5 and Student 9, made their choices based on admission outcomes and the structural limitations of the university entrance examination system. Several participants explained that because they failed to gain admission to their preferred majors, they selected their current fields as a secondary or fallback option. For others, such as Student 2, the major was viewed as a strategic "steppingstone" or a transitional pathway aimed at securing future career stability rather than fulfilling a genuine passion. Furthermore, Student 9 explicitly highlighted the role of parental influence as a deciding factor, noting that family members pushed for specific majors perceived to offer broader career prospects or more "flexible" professional development.

These findings suggested that major selection is rarely the result of pure personal preference; rather, it reflected the interaction between individual circumstances and

institutional constraints.¹⁸ In the Taiwanese educational context, the "smooth completion of a degree" often took precedence over self-actualization during the initial enrollment phase. This prioritization created a foundation of extrinsic motivation that inherently complicated later academic engagement, as students found themselves pursuing a curriculum that did not align with their intrinsic values or interests.

2. Academic motivation and persistence

While most students chose to continue their studies until graduation, the underlying "power source" for their persistence varied significantly between external pressure and internal transformation. Evidence from the interviews suggested that for many, such as Student 9, the decision to stay was rooted in pragmatic barriers like the "difficulty in transferring" and the weight of "family expectations," a sentiment echoed by the majority of the 12 interviewees. In stark contrast, Student 12 represented a case of low engagement, continuing only because the course was a mandatory graduation requirement, despite there being no personal meaning in the curriculum. However, a distinct pattern of "Internal Transformation" was observed in Student 2 and Student 4; for instance, Student 2 gradually cultivated an interest in economics and gained confidence through interactions with international students, while Student 4 found her motivation strengthened as she recognized her own personal growth in the later semesters of her degree.

This highlighted that "persistence" was not a monolithic concept but rather a spectrum of motivational states. Applying the framework of Self-Determination Theory, students like Student 12 exhibited a motivation or pure external regulation, where their actions were dictated by outside requirements. Conversely, Students 2 and 4 successfully internalized their

¹⁸ Yang, Min-Ling, and Yi-Hsuan Chen. "The Relationship between Major-Interest Fit and Academic Achievement in Higher Education." *Educational Psychology Review* 28, no. 1 (2016): 45–62..

academic environment, shifting their focus from external demands to an internal rhythm. This transition was a critical factor in determining whether a student merely "survived" the academic process through passive compliance or actually "thrived" by finding a renewed sense of purpose within a misaligned major.

3. Interest matching

In evaluating the link between their professional studies and personal interests, the respondents generally reported a state of interest misalignment, yet their responses to this gap were remarkably diverse. Evidence and analysis from the interviews revealed that while Student 10 described the mismatch as "completely inconsistent," leading to a total lack of motivation, other students utilized creative strategies to mitigate this disconnect. For instance, Student 8, who studied English for International Communication despite a primary passion for music, managed to bridge the gap by connecting language acquisition with her interest in global song culture. Similarly, Student 2 demonstrated that interest misalignment was not a fixed or terminal state but rather an opportunity for adjustment, eventually finding "new fun" through proactive exploration. In contrast, Student 7 enjoyed a rare "strong alignment," as his Sports and Leisure major naturally fit his long-term passion, resulting in significantly higher satisfaction and a clearer professional identity.

These findings indicated that "interest misalignment" was a highly subjective experience rather than an objective academic hurdle. While a perfect match, as seen with Student 7, remained the ideal scenario for student engagement, the "Self-Adjustment Ability" of the individual served as a critical moderator in the learning process. As demonstrated by Student 8, when structural alignment was absent, students had to actively construct personal meaning within their curriculum to prevent academic burnout and psychological distance from their field of study.

4. Extracurricular activities and interests

Extracurricular engagement among the participants emerged as two typical models: "Extensive Exploration" and "Goal-Oriented Focus," both serving as essential platforms to supplement or revise their professional learning experiences. Evidence from the interviews showed that Student 3 engaged in diverse activities, such as sports and singing, to gain new perspectives and develop interpersonal communication skills. In contrast, Student 11 adopted a more pragmatic approach, using her time working in cafés to directly link her extracurricular experience with her specific future career goals. Furthermore, Student 1 and Student 6 emphasized the development of independence and responsibility through the rigors of teamwork in swimming and volleyball, while Student 8 described these activities as a vital "release valve" for the mounting pressure of an uninteresting academic curriculum.

The discussion of these findings suggested that extracurricular engagement functioned as a form of "Identity Compensation." For students navigating interest misalignment, these activities provided the sense of achievement and the affirmation of "Self" that was often missing from their formal classroom environments. This supported the conclusion that students were not merely passive victims of their assigned majors; rather, they were active agents who strategically utilized external spaces to maintain their self-identity and explore viable career alternatives.

5. Future plan and facing the unknown

The emotional states of students regarding their post-graduation future ranging from a sense of excitement to profound anxiety largely depended on their ability to link their current learning to long-term goals. Evidence from the interviews highlighted a significant contrast in these emotional trajectories: for instance, Student 11 exhibited strong motivation because she identified a concrete interest in opening a café and believed her college experience indirectly

contributed to this dream. Similarly, Student 4 expressed a productive mix of excitement and nervousness while remaining optimistic about the transition. In contrast, students like Student 5 and Student 12 remained stuck in a state of confusion and passivity, with Student 12 adopting a pragmatic but passive stance focused solely on "just finish college." These findings suggested that having a "Clear Direction" served as an effective buffer that reduced post-graduation anxiety. When students could not find a meaningful link between their four-year academic journey and their future self, they experienced higher psychological stress. The divergence between Student 11's goal-oriented clarity and Student 5's uncertain direction illustrated how interest misalignment could lead to a "holding pattern" in career development, where the lack of a clear professional identity hindered the transition from university to the workforce.

6. Suggestions and advice

The advice provided by the 12 participants reflected a hard-earned wisdom regarding autonomy and the courage to change. Evidence from the interviews suggested that students viewed "Self-Imitativeness" as the primary tool for navigating interest misalignment. For instance, Student 11 emphasized that choosing the wrong major was not an irreparable failure, provided one remained proactive in exploring other possibilities, while Student 3 even encouraged the courage to change majors if necessary. This spirit of exploration was balanced by Student 6's focus on independence and self-discipline, noting that university life required a higher level of personal responsibility than many imagine. Furthermore, Student 1 highlighted the delicate psychological labor involved in balancing family expectations with one's "inner voice" and personal happiness.

Collectively, these suggestions represented a critical reflection on the traditional score-based and prestige-driven decision-making processes prevalent in the Taiwanese education

system. The findings illustrated that the college experience was rarely a linear path; instead, it was a dynamic process of continuous adjustment between misalignment, exploration, and compromise. Ultimately, the patterns observed in this study emerged from the interaction between external structures and internal agency. While systemic constraints and family expectations dominated the early stages of a student's trajectory, it was the individual's willingness to explore through courses, extracurricular, or self-reflection that determined whether they could transform "interest misalignment" into a catalyst for personal growth and self-awareness.

Connecting Themes

After identifying the six core patterns, this section synthesized them into three overarching themes that portrayed a developmental trajectory. These themes represented a dynamic journey from the initial surrender of agency to external forces, through a period of active negotiation, to the eventual reconstruction of the self.

Theme A: External Forces Shaping Major Choice

The initial stage of the students' academic lives was characterized by a reliance on external markers rather than internal desires, as their initial academic choices were largely influenced by factors beyond personal passion. Analysis of the 12 participants revealed that most students selected their majors based on family expectations, the admissions system, or career stability. For example, Student 9 explicitly noted that his parents believed a major in industrial engineering offered broader career prospects, making his selection an extension of parental authority rather than personal affinity. Similarly, Students 1, 2, and 4 prioritized institutional prestige, such as Wenzao University's reputation or its all-English teaching environment, over the specific academic content of their programs. Student 5 represented the

most passive extreme, admitting to having "no clear interests" and simply complying with the arrangements assigned by the school.

These findings suggested that in this early stage, students exhibited a predominantly External Locus of Control, where their academic identity was essentially "borrowed" from their parents or the educational system. This pattern highlighted the powerful presence of Structural Constraints—the institutional frameworks, parental expectations, and social norms that prioritized degree completion and stability over self-exploration. However, even within these externally imposed contexts, subtle differences in personal agency began to emerge; while Student 9 initially accepted his situation passively, Students 2 and 4 eventually utilized their environment to find internal meaning. Ultimately, Theme A captured a starting point defined by compliance rather than passion, creating a foundational conflict between interest and obligation that necessitated the negotiation processes explored in the following theme.

Visual Summary – Theme A

Family Expectations → Admission System → Passive Major Selection → Foundation of interest Misalignment (Theme B)

Theme B: Balancing Interests and Responsibilities

As students encountered the reality of their chosen curriculum, they frequently entered a phase of "Academic Dissonance," where the gap between their passions and academic obligations became unavoidable. This theme focused on how students navigated this conflict by constructing adaptive spaces to balance personal interests with institutional responsibilities. Analysis of the respondents revealed that when interest misalignment became undeniable, it often led to a crisis of motivation, as seen in Student 10, who realized his true passion for coffee only after enrolling in Leisure and Recreation Management.

However, the data revealed a significant pattern of "Identity Compensation" rather than passive acceptance. For instance, Student 8 creatively integrated her love for music into her English studies to enhance her pronunciation and cultural understanding, effectively bridging the emotional gap. Similarly, Student 3 and Student 6 utilized sports and volleyball to regain the sense of discipline and achievement that the formal classroom failed to provide.

The discussion of these experiences suggested that this stage represented the critical re-emergence of the Individual Agency. By actively constructing alternative spaces for engagement such as clubs, part-time jobs, or specialized hobbies students protected their psychological well-being and maintained a coherent sense of self. Student 11's work at a café served as a prime example of this, as she transformed her leisure time into a "career laboratory" that directly linked her current activities to her future goals. Ultimately, Theme B represented a negotiation phase where students transformed external compliance into self-driven adaptation. This active adjustment demonstrated that even within the confines of a misaligned major, students could redefine what counted as meaningful learning, laying the essential groundwork for the self-reflection and identity reconstruction explored in Theme C.

Visual Summary – Theme B

Awareness of interest misalignment → Identity Dissonance → Coping & Exploration → Re-acquisition of Agency (Theme C)

Theme C: Redefined the Self and Future Direction

The final theme illustrated how the experience of interest misalignment served as a catalyst for identity reconstruction and post-graduation planning. After navigating the stages of external control and internal conflict, students gradually entered a phase of self-reinvention characterized by the development of personal goals and life philosophies. Analysis of the

participants, such as Student 11 and Student 9, revealed that their academic struggle often produced a "clarified effect"; they emerged with concrete plans (such as opening a café or pursuing food culture) precisely because the interest misalignment taught them what they did not want. This transformation allowed Student 4 to view her future with a productive mixture of "excitement and nervousness," treating uncertainty as a motivational force rather than a barrier. In contrast, the stagnant experiences of Student 5 and Student 12, who remained focused solely on the pragmatic goal of "just finishing," highlighted that without the agency developed in the negotiation phase, unresolved dissonance could lead to prolonged career confusion and passivity.

The discussion of these findings indicated that university was not merely a venue for gaining degree-specific skills; it was a critical site of Identity Reconstruction. While Theme A presented initial constraints and Theme B focused on behavioral adjustments, Theme C represented a psychological Resolution. At this stage, students began to align their personal values with their future professional goals. The advice shared by the participants reflected this heightened self-awareness: Student 6 emphasized independence and self-discipline, while Student 11 encouraged peers to value active exploration over hasty decisions. Student 1 further highlighted the importance of balancing family expectations with one's "inner voice." Ultimately, this redefinition suggested that "choosing the wrong major" could transform from a source of stress into a site of profound personal growth, provided students learned to prioritize autonomy and self-awareness over social pressure.

Visual Summary – Theme C

*Self-Redefinition → Identification of Core Values → Identity Reconstruction
→ Future Directions*

Table 2 Code Category and The Most Appropriate Citation

Academic Choice and Motivation	Code Category	Academic Definition	The most appropriate citation
	Motivation for Choosing a Major	The initial driving forces that influence students' admission to a particular department encompass personal factors, family expectations, and institutional allocation.	Students 2: "I've always liked English since junior and senior high school, and the fact that the program is taught entirely in English also caught my attention." This narrative reflects extrinsic motivation, as the participant's initial decision was driven by external goals such as university admission rather than intrinsic interest in the major itself. At the same time, the emphasis on English instruction suggests a partial alignment with personal interests, indicating a transitional stage between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation.
	Academic Motivation	External pressure or obligation for students to continue their studies in each department is usually related to graduation requirements.	Students 9: "Mainly the difficulty of switched majors. My family also preferred that I graduate smoothly. The relatively low graduation requirements were a practical consideration too."

		<p>The participant's decision was primarily shaped by external pressures and practical constraints, including family expectations and institutional graduation requirements, rather than intrinsic academic interest.</p>
Persistence Motivation	<p>The intrinsic or transformed source of motivation that supports students in overcome difficulties, maintained their learning pace, and completed their studies.</p>	<p>Students 2:</p> <p>“Yeah, I found my rhythm. I also realized I really like economics, so I started focusing more on that. It made things easier than in freshman year. Now in final- year, there are more specialized courses, and I chose a lot of economics ones. I feel like I've really learned something now. And outside of class, I've also gotten to know some international students, so I've become more used to different English accents. I'm not perfect, but better than in freshman year.”</p>
Parental Influence	<p>The structural influence of core family members on students' academic</p>	<p>Students 9:</p> <p>“I chose Industrial Engineering and Management because my family</p>

		decisions and career perceptions.	thought it had broader career prospects and more flexibility.”
Interest-related	Academic Interest Alignment	The degree to which a student's personal passions and interests align with the content of their current major academic courses.	Students 10: “Hmm... honestly, probably not. I think I'd go for a program that's more focused on food and beverage or specifically on coffee. If I had known my interest earlier, I would've headed straight in that direction.”
	Importance of Interest	Students' subjective perception of the value of "interest" in personal efficacy, well-being, and long-term career development.	Students 10: “It's super important. If you're not interested in something, it's really hard to keep going. But if you're passionate, it's easier to push through challenges.”
Learning and Growth Experience	Learning Experience and Growth	Within the academic system, students gain unexpected skill development, mental maturity, and enhanced self-efficacy.	Students 4: “I feel a mix of excitement and nervousness, but I'm motivated because I've found something I truly love and I'm working toward it.” The participant's engagement is driven by genuine interest and

		personal enjoyment rather than external rewards.
Expectations and Perceptions of Campus Life	The interaction between students' subjective expectations of the university environment and their actual social and academic experiences.	<p>Students 3:</p> <p>“I think the most rewarding thing has been meeting all kinds of friends, whether we share the same interests or not. Seeing their different life paths gave me inspiration and new perspectives. So, I’d say the people I’ve met are my biggest takeaway.”</p> <p>This account reflects the influence of social learning within the campus environment, as interactions with diverse peers exposed the participant to multiple life trajectories and value systems.</p>
Classroom Response	Students' psychological engagement, concentration, and attitude towards required courses in the classroom environment.	<p>Person 12:</p> <p>“I had no idea what the point of the class was, and it felt like a waste of time. But since it was a required course, I had to tough it out.”</p> <p>Being required to complete the course despite this lack of interest resulted in</p>

			a passive coping strategy, characterized by minimal engagement and emotional detachment rather than active learning.
	Time Management and Stress	The psychological pressure students experience when allocated resources between academic requirements, financial support (such as part-time jobs), and personal interests.	Students 11: “I often feel like there’s not enough time. I go to classes during the day and work in the evenings, so it’s exhausting. There’s pressure to keep up with grades, but deep down, I’d rather focus on café-related things.”
Extracurricular and Future	Extracurricular Activities and Interests	Students' self-exploration paths outside of class are used to compensate for the lack of academic satisfaction.	Students 3: “In my free time, I enjoy playing sports, singing, and organizing events—my interests are pretty diverse.”
	Future Planning	Students develop an initial vision and plan for their career path after graduation based on their current learning experience.	Students 11: “Yes. Even if the courses aren’t directly related to opening a café, I’ve learned about aesthetics, visual coordination, and how to deal with

			<p>pressure. Those things are definitely helpful.”</p> <p>It suggested a shift toward a more integrative learning perspective, where students reinterpret academic experiences as resources for future career paths rather than isolated requirements.</p>
	<p>Facing an Uncertain Future</p>	<p>The emotional state of anxiety and anticipation that arises when facing a career transition depends on the clarity of one's goals.</p>	<p>Students 9:</p> <p>“I feel a mix of excitement and nervousness, but I’m motivated because I’ve found something I truly love and I’m working toward it.”</p>
<p>Suggestions and Advice</p>	<p>Advice for Other Students</p>	<p>Reminders or suggestions given to peers based on one’s own experiences.</p>	<p>Students 11:</p> <p>“I’d tell them not to rush their decision. It’s okay to choose the wrong major—but be proactive about exploring and finding your path, or you might get lost.”</p>
	<p>Advice</p>	<p>Beyond the academic realm, this sharing of life philosophies concerning personal autonomy,</p>	<p>Students 6:</p> <p>“University is not as easy as you think. You have to rely on yourself to do</p>

	psychological resilience, and self-management.	things and not rely on others. You must learn to be independent."
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Source: Organized by the Author

Connecting the Themes

Across the three themes identified in this study, the experiences of the 12 participants revealed a profound paradigm shift moving from a state of externally dictated decisions toward a reconstructed sense of self-defined goals. This journey was not linear but represented a complex negotiation between systemic constraints and individual agency.

Relation to the Literature Review

The findings of this study both validated and extended the conceptual frameworks established in the literature review, offering a more nuanced understanding of interest misalignment within the Taiwanese context. Consistent with prior research regarding the dominance of parental influence and the disconnect between interest and enrollment.¹⁹ The results of Theme A confirmed that Taiwanese college students' early academic paths were heavily regulated by external factors rather than intrinsic passion. However, this study deepened the existing discussion by revealing that these structural constraints did not merely "limit" choice; they served as a critical psychological starting point. For students such as Student 9, external pressure acted as a "structural anchor" that necessitated the development of survival strategies. This suggested that in a prestige-driven hierarchy, these constraints served a developmental function, setting the stage for a more intentional self-adjustment later

¹⁹ Yang, Min-Ling, and Yi-Hsuan Chen. "The Relationship between Major-Interest Fit and Academic Achievement in Higher Education." *Educational Psychology Review* 28, no. 1 (2016): 45–62.

in the academic journey.

Furthermore, in alignment with the principles of Self-Determination Theory (SDT).²⁰ The negotiation processes observed in Theme B illustrated the delicate balance between extrinsic and intrinsic motivations. While prior research often framed coping mechanisms as temporary fixes for low motivation or academic burnout, this study's findings suggested that these adaptations such as Student 11's café work or Student 6's volleyball discipline were transformative mechanisms. These adaptive spaces allowed students to reconstruct their "agency" even within a restricted institutional environment. Unlike much of the literature that viewed interest misalignment as a static problem of "mismatch," our data showed that such gaps could trigger a proactive search for alternative meaning, effectively transforming external compliance into self-driven adaptation.

Finally, the findings in Theme C corresponded with established literature on academic identity and career exploration,²¹ echoing the idea that interest misalignment can foster personal growth and deep reflection. Nevertheless, this study diverged from earlier research that often assumed "finding one's path" was a universal or guaranteed outcome of the college experience. Instead, it revealed significant variation among the participants: while some achieved high levels of self-clarity, others remained in a state of "strategic passivity" or unresolved dissonance. This highlighted that self-redefinition was an uneven, ongoing process rather than a linear result. Together, these connections demonstrated that interest misalignment was not merely a source of stress but a cyclical process of constraint, adaptation, and self-reconstruction that required active individual agency to reach a successful resolution.

²⁰Vallerand, Robert J., Luc G. Pelletier, Marc R. Blais, Nathalie M. Briere, Caroline Senecal, and Evelyne F. Vallières. "The Academic Motivation Scale: A Measure of Intrinsic, Extrinsic, and Amotivation in Education." *Educational and Psychological Measurement* 52, no. 4 (1992): 1003–17.

²¹ Wu, Jui-Ying, Yi-Ling Lin, and Sheng-Hui Chen. "Navigating Misalignment: The Roles of External Motivation and Self-Regulation in Academic Success." *Journal of Educational Studies* 56, no. 3 (2020): 312–30.

CONCLUSION

Discussion Of Key Findings

This study explored the transformation of motivation, stress, and growth among Taiwanese university students when their majors did not align with their personal interests. The overall results revealed three main findings: the influence of external constraints, the negotiation between interest and responsibility, and the process of self-reconstruction. First, family and institutional factors played a crucial role in students' initial decision-making. Most respondents' major choices were influenced by parental advice, the examination system, and societal expectations of "stability," confirming existing literature's observation of limited student autonomy within Taiwan's educational structure. However, this study further indicated that while these external constraints suppressed the development of early interests, they simultaneously became the starting point for self-awareness and adjustment. Students began to explore new meanings of learning within the framework of decisions made by others.

Second, students exhibited multi-layered adaptation strategies during the interest misalignment of their majors. Many students compensated for the motivational gap through extracurricular activities, club participation, or part-time work experience. This aligned with self-determination theory,²² demonstrating that even with limited external motivation, individuals could maintain intrinsic satisfaction through autonomous choices and self-directed activities. The students in this study not only coped with the interest misalignment through "compensation" but also created new meaning through action, transforming the learning process into a growth opportunity.

²² Deci, Edward L., and Richard M. Ryan. *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior*. New York: Plenum Press, 1985.

Finally, the students exhibited varying degrees of self-reconstruction and future orientation in the later stages. Some students were able to integrate their interests into their future plans, redefining "success" and "meaning"; others remained uncertain and confused, indicating that the development of self-awareness varied from person to person. Overall, this study found that "interest misalignment" was not only a limitation but also an opportunity to prompt students to reflect, adjust, and grow.

Addressed the Research Question

The results showed that interest misalignment had a dual effect on students' inhibition and transformation. In the initial stage, interest misalignment weakened students' intrinsic motivation and academic engagement. Some students experienced burnout and stress due to a lack of interest in learning, which affected their academic performance. However, as time progressed, students gradually developed the ability to self-adjust and reinterpret. Through extracurricular experiences, social relationships, and reflective actions, they gradually transformed "interest misalignment" into an opportunity for "exploration." This transformation showed that the impact of interest misalignment was not unidirectionally negative, but a dynamic psychological and behavioral process from being constrained by external forces to rebuilding autonomy and meaning.

Therefore, this study answered the research question by stating that while interest misalignment initially reduced students' academic motivation and participation, it also initiated a process of self-growth, prompting students to develop new learning strategies and self-identity. This result expanded the existing theoretical understanding of motivation and learning autonomy, showing that students could still demonstrate agency under structural constraints and achieve meaning reconstruction and direction redefinition through adaptive behavior.

Implications and Constructive Solutions

Based on the findings regarding the structural constraints of the current education system, this study suggested that universities must prioritize institutional flexibility to mitigate the negative effects of interest misalignment. According to the interview results, many students felt "trapped" in their majors due to high credit requirements and rigid transfer barriers. Therefore, it was recommended that academic departments lower the threshold for internal transfers and streamline the process for obtaining interdisciplinary minors. Furthermore, the implementation of an "Exploration Track" or "Undecided Major" for freshman students would provide a crucial buffer period, allowing them to explore various fields before making a final commitment, thereby reducing the risk of chronic academic disengagement.

As the analysis of student motivation suggested, there was a critical need for an integrated support system that addressed both career guidance and psychological well-being. According to the data collected from 12 participants nearing graduation, many suffered from "interest burnout" but lacked professional outlets to discuss their dilemma. Universities should establish a collaborative network between academic advisors and career counselors to identify students showing early signs of low motivation. These interventions should focus on "career re-orientation" programs, helping students find creative ways to bridge the skills learned in their current major with their true personal passions, ensuring they did not feel their four years of study had been wasted.

As revealed by the participants' experiences with external pressure, the influence of parental expectations and social prestige remained a primary cause of interest misalignment in Taiwan. To address this root cause, this study proposed that educational institutions take a more proactive role in parental education. It was recommended that universities host seminars and workshops specifically for parents to highlight the long-term psychological and

professional risks of forcing students into high-prestige but low-interest majors. By fostering a social environment that values personal aptitude over traditional templates of success, students could be granted the autonomy to pursue academic paths that offer both professional viability and personal fulfillment.

In light of the practical challenges faced by students nearing graduation, this research suggested that students adopt a more proactive mindset toward their academic mismatch. According to the successful adaptation strategies observed in some participants, students should be encouraged to build a "shadow curriculum" through micro-internships, specialized clubs, and project-based learning that aligned with their true interests. Rather than adopting a passive attitude toward their primary major, students could use these external experiences to develop a unique interdisciplinary profile. This proactive approach not only served as a psychological buffer against academic dissatisfaction but also provided tangible competitive advantages for career transitions post-graduation.

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