

# Social Dynamics in Academic Pathways: A Comprehensive Study of Social Influences on University Program Selection in Kenya

<sup>1</sup>Robert Wafula Wekesa., <sup>\*2</sup>Patrick Oduor Owoche

<sup>1</sup>Department of Educational Psychology, Kibabii University

<sup>2</sup>Department of Information Technology, Kibabii University

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## ABSTRACT

In the dynamic context of Kenyan higher education plus the everchanging career landscape, the career selection decision-making process regarding university program or course is not only critical but also complex. Failure to make an informed career choice hampers the student's proper formation of self-esteem into adult life. Hence the need for this study that addresses the gap in understanding the social dynamics influencing Kenyan students' educational choices, set against an evolving educational landscape. The study is anchored on Ginzberg's Developmental Theory, Bandura's Social Learning Theory, and Super's Self-Concept Theory. The research provides a multifaceted perspective on how students navigate their academic pathways. Surveying 200 undergraduate students at Kibabii University, Kenya, the study employed a descriptive correlational design, integrating both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses to explore the influence of peers, family, teachers, and media. The results indicated that a higher percentage of female students (22%) than male students (12%) make this decision at primary school age. The decision-making is fairly distributed across different stages of secondary education, with the most decisive phase being after secondary school, where 34% of males and 26% of females make their choice. Interestingly, an equal percentage (15%) of both genders report that their decision emerged slowly over time. Further findings indicate a significant impact of peers on program selection, signifying a peer-oriented approach in students' decision-making. In contrast, parental influence is identified as a major determinant in the timing of these decisions, highlighting the critical role of family in the Kenyan educational setting. These results not only contribute to a nuanced understanding of academic decision-making in Kenya but also underscore the importance of considering these social factors in educational counseling and policy formulation. The study bridges a crucial research gap and provides insights pivotal for educators, counselors, and policymakers, emphasizing the need for comprehensive guidance strategies that accommodate these social influences.

**Keywords:** Higher Education, Social Influences, University Program Selection, Kenya, Peer Influence, Parental Influence, Educational Decision-Making, Developmental Theory, Social Learning Theory, Self-Concept Theory, career guidance in Kenya.

## INTRODUCTION

In the dynamic and evolving landscape of Kenyan higher education, the process of selecting a university program is both critical and complex, shaping students' immediate academic journeys and future professional trajectories. Despite its importance, there is a notable gap in the literature concerning the social dynamics that influence these crucial educational decisions, especially within Kenya's unique educational context.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining the various social factors influencing Kenyan students' decisions regarding university program selection. It situates its analysis within the frameworks of Ginzberg's Developmental Theory, Bandura's Social Learning Theory, and Super's Self-Concept Theory. These theories offer a comprehensive perspective on the decision-making processes of students, encompassing the evolution of career preferences (Ginzberg), the impact of observational learning (Bandura), and the influence of self-

perception in career choices (Super).

Employing a descriptive correlational design, this research surveys 200 undergraduate students at Kibabii University in Kenya. The methodology integrates both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses, aiming to explore the influences of peers, family, teachers, and media on students' choices of university programs.

This paper is organized to provide a clear and logical presentation of the research. Following this introduction, the paper proceeds with a Literature Review, which lays the groundwork for understanding the current state of research and the theoretical foundations underpinning the study. The Methodology section then details the research design, data collection, and analytical techniques employed, the results section and discussion. Through this structure, the paper aims to bridge a critical research gap and offer valuable insights for educators, counselors, and policymakers. By comprehensively understanding the social factors influencing Kenyan students' academic decisions, this study emphasizes the need for targeted guidance strategies that reflect these diverse influences.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational research has significantly focused on the influence of social factors and agents on students' educational choices and experiences. Studies emphasize the substantial role of family background in shaping educational attainment. Research done by Rodríguez-Hernández, Cascallar, and Kyndt, (2020) shows that parental education levels and socioeconomic status are strong predictors of a student's academic success and choices, a finding echoed by Adelabu (2008), who notes that in African contexts, family expectations and cultural norms often guide students toward certain fields of study.

Peer influence is another critical factor, as Ryan's (2001) research highlights how peer groups significantly sway students' academic aspirations and attitudes toward certain subjects. Boudon's (1974) work also demonstrates the role of peer pressure and social conformity in influencing students' field of study choices.

Teachers play a pivotal role in guiding students' career aspirations. The work of Wong, Yuen and Chen (2021) illustrates that teacher expectations and guidance can profoundly influence students' academic pursuits, a phenomenon particularly notable in Kenya. As shown by Wanyama (2021), who found a significant correlation between teacher encouragement and students' choices of science and technology-related courses.

The literature on career decision-making reveals a complex interplay of factors. John Holland's Theory of Career Choice suggests that career choices are an extension of one's personality (Reardon & Lenz, 1999). The Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) emphasizes the role of self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals in career decision-making (Lent, Brown & Hackett 2002). Environmental and socio-economic factors also play a substantial role, as studies highlight the impact of socio-economic status, access to resources, and cultural backgrounds on career decisions. Parental influence and expectations are pivotal, as research by Whiston and Keller (2004) shows how parental involvement shapes a student's career development and decision-making.

Various decision-making models in career choice, such as Gelatt's (1989) Decision-Making Model, and emotional and psychological factors like anxiety and self-esteem, are found to influence career choices, as discussed by Krieshok, Black, and McKay (2009). The role of educational institutions and career counseling services is critical in facilitating career decision-making.

The literature on academic choices in university settings offers insights into the multifaceted processes guiding students. Gardner et al., (2021) emphasizes the balance between intrinsic motivations and extrinsic factors. Marsh and O'Mara's (2006) research sheds light on the influence of academic self-concept on students' choices. Tight's (2020) research on university retention highlights the importance of institutional offerings aligning with students' interests and goals. Cultural and socioeconomic influences affect educational aspirations and choices (Paulsen, & John, 2002). The relationship between academic choices and career planning is explored by Robbins et al., (1990) who discuss how students' career aspirations guide their selection of majors and courses.

The landscape of Kenyan higher education is dynamic and evolving. Otieno (2009) provides an overview of how Kenyan universities adapt their curricula to global job market demands, with Macharia, and Pelsler (2014)

discussing the integration of technology in Kenyan higher education. Mulongo (2013) delves into the challenges of access and equity, highlighting the systemic barriers faced by disadvantaged groups. Itegi, (2016) examines the impact of government funding cuts on education quality, and Akosah-Twumasi, et al. (2018) explore how societal expectations and cultural values shape students' career choices.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY**

In constructing the theoretical framework for this study, which explores the role of social influences on students' academic choices, three key theories have been identified as particularly relevant: Ginzberg's Developmental Theory, Bandura's Social Learning Theory, and Super's Self-Concept Theory. These theories provide a multifaceted lens to examine the complexities of academic decision-making among students.

Ginzberg's Developmental Theory offers a foundational perspective, positing that career and academic choices evolve through various life stages. This theory highlights that students' preferences and decisions are not static but develop over time, influenced by a myriad of personal and environmental factors (Patton & Creed, 2001). It sets the stage for understanding the dynamic nature of students' academic choices.

Bandura's Social Learning Theory brings into focus the impact of observational learning in educational settings. It suggests that students' academic choices are influenced by observing and imitating the behaviors and attitudes of role models such as parents, teachers, and peers (Grusec, 1994). This theory is crucial for understanding how social interactions and exposures shape students' educational paths.

Super's Self-Concept Theory complements the other theories by emphasizing the role of individual self-perception in career and academic choices. It posits that students select academic paths that align with their evolving self-concept, shaped by personal experiences and feedback from their social environment. Self-Concept and the theory of self (Betz, 1994). This theory underscores the importance of personal identity and aspirations in the decision-making process.

In synthesizing these theories, the framework addresses the study's objective of exploring social influences on academic choices. Ginzberg's theory provides a developmental perspective, Bandura's theory offers insights into social learning mechanisms, and Super's theory emphasizes the role of self-concept. Together, they form a comprehensive backdrop for analyzing how developmental stages, social learning, and self-concept influence students' academic decisions.

Critically, while these theories provide robust tools for understanding academic choice, they also have limitations. For instance, they may not fully account for the immediate contextual factors or cultural variances specific to the Kenyan educational setting. Acknowledging these gaps, the study aims to apply these theories while being mindful of the unique cultural and educational contexts in Kenya.

In applying these theories, the study will utilize methodologies and analyses that capture the dynamic interplay between social influences and individual student development. This theoretical framework not only guides the study's research design and analysis but also contributes to the broader field of educational psychology by offering a nuanced understanding of academic decision-making processes in diverse cultural settings.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study aims to explore the role of social influences on students' academic choices and evaluate the timing and determinants of career decision-making among university students. The methodology adopted is designed to provide comprehensive insights into these objectives, utilizing a combination of descriptive and inferential statistical analyses to interpret the data gathered.

The research employed a descriptive correlational design, conducted at Kibabii University. This approach was chosen for its effectiveness in understanding relationships between variables and patterns within the data. The study involved a large participant base of 200 undergraduate students, ensuring a diverse and representative sample.

Data was collected through a structured questionnaire, carefully designed to capture various aspects of students' academic choices and career decision-making processes. The questionnaire included closed-ended questions, allowing for quantitative analysis. The distribution and collection of these questionnaires were systematically managed to ensure a high response rate and reliability of the data.

The data analysis procedure in this study involved a thorough examination of questionnaire responses using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The descriptive analysis provided insights into when students decided on their degree program, with gender comparisons showing an earlier decision-making trend among female students. The inferential analysis utilized regression techniques to assess the influence of social factors on the selection of university programs. The reliability of the questionnaire was verified by Cronbach's alpha, ensuring the consistency of the survey items. This robust analytical approach underpinned the study's findings on the significant roles of peer and parental influences on students' educational decisions.

Ethical considerations were a priority in this study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they were aware of the study's purpose and their rights. Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the research process. The study also received ethical approval from the relevant institutional review board at Kibabii University.

While the methodology is robust, certain limitations are acknowledged. The reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases, and the findings may not be generalizable beyond the context of Kibabii University. These limitations were considered in the interpretation of the results.

## RESULTS

In this study, the data collected from questionnaires were subjected to comprehensive statistical analysis, encompassing both descriptive and inferential approaches. The results indicated that a higher percentage of female students (22%) than male students (12%) make this decision at primary school age. The decision-making was fairly distributed across different stages of secondary education, with the most decisive phase being after secondary school, where 34% of males and 26% of females make their choice. Interestingly, an equal percentage (15%) of both genders report that their decision emerged slowly over time. A notable insight from the descriptive statistics is that a substantial proportion of students, approximately 69%, had already made definitive career choices by the time they concluded their high school education. This early decision-making underscores the significant influence of various factors on students' career choices during their secondary education phase.

Delving into the inferential statistical analysis, particularly through regression analysis, the study explored the relationships between several social factors and the students' selection of university programs, with a specific focus on "Degree Choice 1" as the dependent variable. The analysis revealed that the influence of friends and romantic partners, with a coefficient of 6.835, is significantly associated with "Degree Choice 1." This positive coefficient, backed by a p-value of 0.028, which is below the standard threshold of 0.05, indicates a statistically significant impact of peers and romantic partners on this particular academic choice. This finding highlights the critical role of peer relationships in the academic decision-making process among students.

Moreover, the study examined how various social influences relate to the timing of students' decisions on their field of study. The regression analysis presented a significant constant intercept coefficient of 9.282, suggesting that in the absence of all other variables, the baseline timing for decision-making on the field of study is set at this value. The t-value of 8.103 and a p-value of less than 0.001 for this intercept further reinforce its statistical significance.

Interestingly, among all the social factors examined, it was observed that only the influence of parents or step-parents holds a statistically significant impact in determining when students decide on their field of study. This outcome underscores the substantial role parental influence plays in hastening the decision-making processes concerning students' academic paths. Contrasting with this, the influences of other social agents like teachers, peers, siblings, and other acquaintances do not exhibit a statistically significant effect on the timing of these crucial educational decisions. These results collectively underscore the unique and dominant role of parental input in shaping students' choices of field of study, differentiating it from the influences exerted by other social factors.

## DISCUSSION OF KEY FINDINGS

The research findings suggested significant gender differences in the timing of degree program decisions, with a greater proportion of female students making this decision at a younger age compared to male students. The majority of students make their degree choice after high school, but a noteworthy percentage begin considering their options much earlier, during their primary school years. The study also revealed the powerful influence of social factors, particularly peers and romantic partners, on students' degree choices. Parental influence is highlighted as a critical factor, particularly in accelerating the timing of students' decisions regarding their field of study, marking a distinct contrast from the less impactful influences of other social factors such as teachers and siblings. These insights underscore the complexity of educational decision-making and the need for supportive environments that recognize these social influences.

When compared with existing literature, this finding aligns with the notions of peer influence highlighted in adolescent and educational psychology. Previous studies have emphasized the role of peer groups in shaping attitudes and behaviors during the formative university years. However, it is interesting to note that other social factors such as the influence of teachers, parents, siblings, and acquaintances do not significantly predict "Degree Choice 1." This could suggest a relative independence of students from traditional authority figures in making decisions about their education, reflecting a transition towards peer-oriented decision-making.

Conversely, the timing of students' decisions regarding their field of study appears to be significantly influenced by parents or step-parents. This result is indicative of the substantial role parental input plays in hastening decision-making processes related to education. It implies that parental opinions, expectations, or guidance can act as catalysts in students' decision-making timelines.

This finding contributes to the broader discourse on parental involvement in higher education. While previous research often emphasizes the financial and motivational aspects of parental support, our study highlights a more direct influence on the timing of academic decisions. The unique role of parents, as opposed to other social agents like teachers or peers, in influencing the timing of these decisions underscores the enduring impact of familial relationships on educational trajectories.

### Implications and Future Research

The implications of this study are multifaceted, suggesting that educational stakeholders should consider gender-specific approaches when addressing early career decision-making. As female students tend to make decisions earlier, interventions to support career exploration could be introduced at the primary education level, particularly targeting young girls. The significant influence of peers and romantic partners on degree choices indicates the potential effectiveness of peer-led initiatives and counseling that leverage these relationships to guide academic paths.

For future research, there is a need to investigate the underlying reasons for the gender differences observed and to explore the long-term outcomes of early career decision-making. Additionally, understanding the mechanisms through which parental influence operates could inform the development of family-oriented educational programs. Expanding the scope to include more diverse educational contexts would also help to generalize the findings. Further studies could also examine the role of digital media and its increasing impact on the educational decision-making process.

## CONCLUSION

The study conclusively highlighted the early career decision-making trends among students, with distinct gender differences and the profound influence of social factors. The significant role of peers and romantic partners in shaping academic choices, and the unique impact of parental influence on the timing of these decisions, point to the necessity for tailored educational guidance. These findings underscore the importance of integrating social dynamics into career counseling frameworks and suggest a direction for future research to further explore these influences across diverse educational contexts and cultural settings.

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