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Investigating Undergraduate Students' Attitudes Towards M.A. Course Context: Gender-Based Differences

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Abstract

Undergraduate students are often introduced to syllabi that differ significantly from those of postgraduate studies, potentially influencing their perceptions of M.A. programmes. Current paper tries to investigate undergraduate students' attitudes towards M.A. course context. It aims to identify how both male and female students perceive M.A. course context. It puts following research questions: (1) Are undergraduates' attitudes towards M.A. course context positive or negative? (2) Does gender have a statistically significant effect on attitudes towards M.A. course context? To answer addressed questions, it is hypothesized that (1) there are negative attitudes concerning M.A. course context, (2) gender has no statistically significant effect on undergraduate students' attitudes. In order to prove suggested hypotheses a questionnaire of 15 items was designed, covering three key factors namely: materials, cognitive, and psychological. Results which were analyzed using Weighted Arithmetic Mean (WAM) proved that males report positive attitudes and females show negative views about M.A. course context.

استقصاء وجهات نظر الطلاب الجامعيين حول دراسة الماجستير: الاختلافات القائمة على نوع الجنس

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المستخلص

بالرغم من الدور المهم لدراسة الماجستير في تطوير المهارات البحثية للطلاب، الا انه يوجد فجوة قي دراسة وجهات نظر الطلاب الجامعيين تجاه دراسة الماجستير. بناءا على ذلك تحاول الدراسة الحالية تقصي وجهات نظر الطلاب الجامعيين تجاه دراسة الماجستير. تهدف الدراسة الى معرفة الاختلاف في وجهات النظر بين الطلبة الذكور والاناث. تضع الدراسة الأسئلة التالية: (1) هل وجهات النظر تجاه دراسة الماجستير ايجابية ام سلبية؟ (2) هل وجهات النظر تتأثر بعامل الجنس؟ من اجل ايجاد اجوبة للأسئلة المطروحة، تقترض الدراسة الحالية انه (1) هناك وجهات نظر سلبية تجاه دراسة الماجستير، (2) لا يوجد تأثير واضح لعامل الجنس على اراء الطلاب. لأثبات الفرضيات فقد تم توزيع استبيان مكون من خمس عشرة فقرة مرتبطة بثلاث عوامل هي: المواد الدراسية والمعرفة والعوامل النفسية. لقد اثبتت النتائج بأن الذكور كانوا ايجابيين والاناث سلبيين في آرائهم فيما يتعلق بدراسة الماجستير.

الكلمات المفتاحية: دراسة الماجستير، الطلبة الجامعيين الغير خريجين، وجهات النظر.

1. Introduction

The study of attitudes is of great importance due to their impact on a person's behavior. Social psychologists recognize that attitudes are related to social conduct, which is why the concept of attitude is prevalent in their research. Understanding and predicting human behaviour have long been the central focus in psychology, with great attention directed towards behavioural dispositions like social attitudes and personality traits. Attitudes are widely regarded as significant predictors of behaviour. In everyday language, “attitude” encompasses a broad spectrum of expressions, including preferences, emotions, beliefs, values, opinions, and intentions. Gordon Allport (1954) emphasized the role of attitudes in social psychology, underscoring their influence on behaviour. An individual attitude is shaped by salient behavioural beliefs like expectations about the outcomes or characteristics associated with specific behaviours, which in turn influence the intentions and actions of behaviours.

1.1 The Statement of the Problem

Despite the important role of master education in research advancement and academic skills, there exists a notable gap in understanding how undergraduate students perceive M.A. programmes. Many undergraduate students have misconceptions about the nature and structure of master studies. This limited understanding can deter students from considering M.A. courses, thereby affecting the pathway of future researchers and academics. Furthermore, undergraduate curricula frequently lack comprehensive exposure to research methodologies, leading to insufficient engagement with scholarly activities.

The above gap not only makes it harder for students to value research but also leaves them less prepared for postgraduate studies. Additionally, worries about the cost and time needed for M.A. programmes make many undergraduates hesitant to go for an M.A. Thus, fixing these issues is important for colleges and universities that want to support a strong and diverse group of future scholars. By learning how undergraduates view M.A. programmes, teachers and decision-makers can create helpful programmes to make master studies easier to understand, get students more involved in research, and show clearer steps to earning advanced degrees.

1.2 Questions of the Study

The present study addresses the following questions:

1. Are the undergraduates' attitudes towards M.A. course context positive or negative?
2. Does gender have a statistically significant effect on the attitudes towards M.A. course context?

1.3 Aims of the Study

The current study aims to:

1. Identify the attitudes of undergraduate students towards M.A. course context.
2. Identify the effect of gender on students' attitudes towards M.A. programme.

1.4 Hypotheses

This study hypothesizes that:

1. There are negative attitudes concerning M.A. course context.
2. Gender has no statistically significant effect on undergraduate students' attitudes.

1.5 Definitions of Attitude

There is no perfect definition of attitude that meets the needs of everyone who is interested in it, foremost because of its scope and the variety of theoretical viewpoints held by individuals who study it. Throughout the early half of the 20th century, three preliminary definitions of attitudes surfaced. Thurstone (1928, as cited in Mustafa and Mohammed 2022, p. 282) described attitudes as "covering an individual's general emotions, attitudes or prejudices, expectations, threats, and convictions toward a certain subject". It means that an individual's perception of a specific subject is influenced by a complex interplay of emotional responses which collectively form a comprehensive attitude that guides how one perceives and reacts to various topics. Lickert (1932) further clarified attitudes as predispositions towards attitude objects. Allport (1937) proposed a common thread among these definitions, suggesting that attitudes represent a mental and neurological state of readiness shaped by experiences, exerting a dynamic influence on an individual's behavior towards all objects and situations they encounter. Therefore, attitudes are

seen as an incipient and preliminary aspect rather than overt behavior itself. They serve as the context surrounding behavior rather than the behavior itself.

In recent times, all definitions of attitude appear to correspond to the same connotations as those used in the early definitions. In the words of Montano & Kasprzyk (2008, p. 71) an individual's attitude "is determined by their beliefs regarding the consequences of an act and is influenced by their assessments of those consequences". Students who firmly believe that applying the action will lead to highly valued outcomes will therefore have a favorable attitude toward the behavior. This point of view is likely to be unfavorable for those who strongly believe in the results that are not valued. Attitude is currently understood as a condition of readiness and propensity to act and respond to a certain stimulus. Al-Noursi (2013, P. 22) claims that attitude is "A psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor".

In other words, attitudes are the propensities to react to things and situations in particular ways. In addition, although they are resistant to it, attitudes are changeable, and because they represent people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, they cannot be directly observed (Oppenhiem, 1966).

1.6 Basic Components of Attitude

Jain (2014: 5 -6) maintains that there are three main components of attitude, they are:

- a) Affective Component (Neural) (Feeling/ Emotion)
- b) Behavioral Component (Readiness) (Response/ Action)
- c) Cognitive Component (Mental) (Belief/ Evaluation)

1.6.1 Affective (Neural) Component (Feeling/Emotion)

The emotional reaction (liking/disliking) to an attitude object is the affective component. The majority of studies emphasize the significance of affective components. Because emotion and cognition regarding an attitude object coexist, one cannot infer a person's attitude towards an object by just identifying their ideas about it. According to Agarwal & Malhotra (2005), an integrated model of attitude and choice is proposed by combining the affect (feelings and emotions) and attitude (evaluative judgment based on brand beliefs) streams of study.

1.6.2 Behavioral Component

The behavioral component is a verbal or overt (nonverbal) (Wicker,1969) behavioral propensity by an individual and it comprises of actions or perceptible reactions that come as a result of an attitude object. It involves a person's reaction (positive or negative) to an action with reference to an attitude object. More often than not, attitudes are predictable. In other words, a succession of reactions to a specific attitudinal stimulus are likely to exhibit some kind of organizational structure or predictability.

1.6.3 Cognitive Component

The cognitive component involves assessing the thing that makes up a person's opinion (believe or doubt) about the object. Cognitively speaking, it's what a person thinks and believes about an attitude object. According to Fishbein & Ajzen (1975), theta belief is knowledge a person possesses about an object; information that expressly connects an object to an attribute. The cognitive component is the part of the person's memory where they organize the information.

Summers (1977), however, asserts that the three aspects of attitude are interconnected. For instance, there might be a link between the cognitive aspect and the propensity to react to the item, resulting in a close relationship between the evaluative judgments and the direction of the response readiness. In mediating a connection between the emotional and action inclination components, the physiological relationship between an organism's emotional states and reaction readiness may also be important.

1.7 Scales of Measuring Attitudes

Attitude measurement is crucial in psychological and social research because it provides insights into individuals' evaluations of different issues, or phenomena. Among the most widely recognized tools for assessing attitudes are Thurstone and Likert scales. Each one offers unique methodologies and applications. It is very significant to understand how these scales are different to help researchers select the most appropriate tool for their studies.

Thurstone scale, developed by Louis Leon Thurstone in 1928, was the first formal technique designed to measure attitudes. This scale employs a method of equal-appearing intervals, where a panel of judges assigns numerical values to a series of items based on their perceived favourability or unfavourability. The judges' task is to rate each statement based on its content, not on their personal

agreement or disagreement with it. This process ensures that the scale captures a range of perspectives and is not biased by the judges' individual views. Respondents are presented with these items and asked to indicate which ones they agree with (Taherdoost, 2022). Each statement has an assigned numerical value, and the respondent's attitude score is calculated as the average of the values of the items they endorsed. This scoring method provides a quantifiable measure of the respondent's position on the attitude continuum.

In contrast, The Likert scale, developed by Rensis Likert in 1932, is one of the most popular tools for measuring attitudes. Instead of just asking whether someone agrees or disagrees, it allows respondents express how strongly they feel about a series of items using a five-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Once people respond, their answers are added up to create an overall attitude score.

Because of its simplicity and administration, Likert scale is widely used whether in surveys, questionnaires, or research studies. However, there is a catch: it assumes that the difference between each response option (say, between "agree" and "strongly agree") is the same. In reality, people's perceptions of these differences might not be perfectly equal, which means the scale might not always capture the subtle nuances of their feelings. Despite this, the Likert scale remains a reliable and effective way to gauge opinions and attitudes across a wide range of topics (ibid).

Both scales have been instrumental in advancing our understanding of attitudes, yet they differ in their construction, scoring methods, and underlying assumptions. Thurstone scale's emphasis on equal intervals aims for a more precise measurement, while the Likert scale's simplicity and ease of use have made it a popular choice in various research contexts. By examining these scales in detail, researchers can make informed decisions about which tool best aligns with their research objectives and the nature of the attitudes they seek to measure.

1.8 Previous Studies

Research that examines the attitudes of EFL undergraduate students towards postgraduate studies, like M.A. studies, is notably rare. Many studies have sought the attitudes of undergraduate students towards EFL learning including the motivations and the academic achievement. Among them we can find Obeidat

(2019) and Al-Muslimawi & Al-Shamarti (2023) studies. Obeidat's (2019) study concluded that there are no significant differences between male and female students as far as learning English is taken into consideration, and that the difference was based on the type of school students graduated from. On the other hand, Al-Muslimawi & Al-Shamarti (2023) study concluded that the attitudes of males and females are not the same. Male students have higher behavioural and cognitive attitudes, meanwhile female students have a higher emotional attitude concerning language learning.

Most existing studies focus on students' general attitudes or postgraduate students' attitudes of the postgraduate studies including M.A. and Ph.D. studies leaving a critical gap in understanding how undergraduate students perceive M.A. program. As a result, the present study addresses this gap by exploring both male and female undergraduate EFL students' attitudes toward master's studies. It will contribute to the understanding of how undergraduate EFL learners view their academic futures, informing targeted interventions to support their successful progression to master's education.

2. Methodology

This section outlines and explains the procedure of collecting data. It includes defining the population and sample of the study and the instrument. In addition, this section also discusses the validity and reliability of the study.

2.1 Population and the Sample of the Study

The population of this study is represented by all EFL undergraduate students meanwhile fourth year EFL undergraduate students who study at the Department of English/ College of Arts/ University of Mosul were selected to be the sample of the study. On this basis, the prepared questionnaire was given to 40 fourth year undergraduate students and it is equally distributed to 20 males and 20 females during the academic year 2023-2024.

2.2 The Instrument of the Study

To understand how EFL undergraduate students view M.A. course, a questionnaire is used in this study to achieve the above mentioned aims. Questionnaire is a research method used to collect data in both qualitative and

quantitative studies where the researcher uses either open-ended or close-ended questions/items (Dörnyei, 2007). In the unstructured questionnaire, the researcher provides open-ended questions/items where the respondents are free to answer the given questions using their own words. On the other hand, in the structured questionnaire the respondents' answers are determined by the choices that the researcher provides where the latter used close-ended questions/items. The researcher can use close-ended questions/items with two options or multiple choices.

In this study, a structured questionnaire with multiple close-ended items is followed. It is designed to contain fifteen items using Likert scale with five options (see appendix A) to gather EFL students' attitudes towards M.A. course. close-ended multiple choice items. These items were directed to undergraduate students and based on three factors. Factor (1) is related to items concerning the M.A. materials, factor (2) is related to cognitive items whereas factor (3) is related to psychological items.

2.3 Validity and Reliability of the Study Instrument

To assure that the prepared questionnaire meets the study aims, its validity and reliability are tested which are considered as the golden features of any scientific research (Lodico et al., 2006). To make sure that the questionnaire measures what it intends to measure and that its items are accurate and achieve its aim, the researcher offers the questionnaire items to a panel of experts, including five experts/ College of Arta and College of Education for Humanities/ University of Mosul, to see whether the face and content validity of the prepared items align with the study aims.

Regarding reliability, internal consistency of the questionnaire items is tested. This kind of reliability is used to check if the questionnaire items measure the same underlying construct, i.e., whether the questionnaire items measure the attitudes towards the M.A. materials, cognitive and psychological. Cronbach's Alpha is used to measure the internal consistency of the items of the questionnaire. The result indicates that the internal consistency is 0.84 which is close to 1.00 and it is an acceptable rate.

3. Data analysis and Discussion

This section deals with identifying the statistical means which are used to analyze the collected data. Two statistical methods are used, viz. Weighted Arithmetic Means (WAM) and t-test.

3.1 Descriptive Analysis and Discussion of Students' Attitudes Towards the M.A. Course Context using WAM Method

To analyze data precisely, WAM is to see how both males and females' undergraduate students express their attitudes regarding the M.A. course context. The obtained data are distributed on three tables. Table one deals with the data that are gathered from male students, table two deals the data that are gathered from female students, while table three combines both tables. Below are the analysis and discussion of each table.

Table 1:
Weighted Arithmetic Means of Females' Undergraduate Students Attitudes Concerning the M.A. Course Context

Item No.	Items	Weighted Arithmetic Mean
1	Materials that are taught in M.A. course are hard.	2.34
2	Tests of M.A. course are very difficult.	1.48
3	The syllabus of some M.A. courses is too long and accumulative only.	3.10
4	Some M.A. course contexts are not interesting to study.	3.67
5	M.A. materials are not related to bachelor materials.	2.48
6	M.A. course helps in developing my reasoning abilities.	3.00
7	M.A. course has great benefit for the development of language.	4.26
8	The different textbooks help in enriching my knowledge.	1.38
9	Joining M.A. course will help in developing one's thoughts and ideas.	1.50
10	M.A. courses allow me to enhance my cognitive abilities.	2.01
11	Lack of time is one major reason for making M.A. course so difficult.	2.23
12	Some materials are unmotivated to study.	3.16
13	I think that the educational environment does not participate in making the course easy.	1.53

14	Some professors make the course being bored.	2.79
15	I feel motivated to engage with new M.A. course materials.	2.56

Table 2:
Weighted Arithmetic Means of Males' Undergraduate Students Attitudes Concerning the M.A. Course Context

Item No.	Items	Weighted Arithmetic Mean
1	Materials that are taught in M.A. course are hard.	4.19
2	Tests of M.A. course are very difficult.	4.48
3	The syllabus of some M.A. courses is too long and accumulative only.	4.10
4	Some M.A. course contexts are not interesting to study.	2.67
5	M.A. materials are not related to bachelor materials.	4.09
6	M.A. course helps in developing my reasoning abilities.	3.07
7	M.A. course has great benefit for the development of language.	4.63
8	The different textbooks help in enriching my knowledge.	4.10
9	Joining M.A. course will help in developing one's thoughts and ideas.	3.22
10	M.A. courses allow me to enhance my cognition abilities.	3.11
11	Lack of time is one major reason for making M.A. course so difficult.	3.70
12	Some materials are unmotivated to study.	2.66
13	I think that the educational environment participated in making the course easy or hard.	3.35
14	Some professors make the course being bored.	3.10
15	I feel motivated to engage with new M.A. course materials.	3.00

Table 3:
Weighted Arithmetic Means of Males and Females' Undergraduate Students Attitudes Concerning the M.A. Course Context

Item No.	Males WAM	Average mean score	Females WAM	Average mean score
1	4.19		2.34	

2	4.48	3.90	1.48	2.61
3	4.10		3.10	
4	2.67		3.67	
5	4.09		2.48	
6	3.07		3.00	
7	4.63	3.62	4.26	2.45
8	4.10		1.38	
9	3.22		1.50	
10	3.11		2.01	
11	3.70		2.23	
12	2.66	3.16	3.16	2.43
13	3.35		1.53	
14	3.10		2.79	
15	3.00		2.56	

It is clear from the above tables that table (1 and 2) are about the WAM of the attitudes of females and male's EFL undergraduate students. While table (3) gathers both tables in terms of the WAM of each item and the average mean score of each factor.

To start with, the average mean score of the first five items is (3.90 and 2.61) for both males and females, respectively. These items are discussing the factor that is related to the context of the course. It is so clear that both males and females EFL undergraduate have different attitudes. By comparing the average scores of both males and females, a noticeable difference emerges, suggesting a divergence in their perspectives. This difference indicates that males and females hold distinct views regarding the factor under consideration. Specifically, the attitudes of male participants can be interpreted as more positive, as reflected in the relatively high WAM of the first factor. In contrast, the lower WAM recorded for female participants suggests a comparatively less favorable attitude. This contrast highlights that male students perceive M.A. course as a valuable context although they mention that the materials are difficult. Thus, their motivation and engagement are relatively high. Female students perceive the course as less difficult, but they also find it less interesting and less valuable therefore their attitudes are negative.

When examining the average mean scores for the cognitive factor, a clear distinction emerges between male and female undergraduate students. The average score across the five cognitive-related items is (3.62) for males, indicating a generally positive attitude, while females scored significantly lower at (2.45), reflecting a more negative perception. This suggests that female students may lack confidence in the effectiveness of M.A. course content when it comes to enhancing their cognitive and language-related abilities. Female respondents appear to believe that the M.A. programme does not sufficiently contribute to their intellectual growth or language development, possibly perceiving the course materials as either repetitive of prior knowledge or lacking in practical application. They might assume that language proficiency and cognitive enhancement can be better achieved through independent study, external resources, or real-world engagement rather than through the structure of the M.A. curriculum itself.

On the other hand, male students seem to hold a more optimistic and constructive view of the M.A. course. Their high mean score indicates that they see value in the academic experience, recognizing it as an opportunity for intellectual advancement and deeper analytical thinking. This suggests that males are more likely to perceive the course as aligned with their academic and personal development goals, particularly in terms of cognitive engagement and linguistic growth.

Gender-based divergence in perception underscores the importance of reviewing and potentially revising certain aspects of M.A. course design and delivery, particularly those that influence student motivation, perceived relevance, and intellectual stimulation so that the programme addresses the expectations and needs of all learners more equitably.

If we consider the third factor, the last group of items tackled the psychological factor. These items come up with the average mean score (2.43) for females. This average indicates that the beliefs towards the M.A. course of the side of psychology is negative. This means that females students find the educational environment too hard and difficult and that professors are unhelpful. Such a perception may reflect broader concerns related to emotional support, teaching styles, or the overall atmosphere within the academic setting. In contrast, by looking at the average mean score from males' side, a completely different view is found. The third factor or the last group of items gained the average (3.16) and this

is an obvious indication that males have a positive attitude about the classroom environment and how it can help them overcome the course context difficulties. Male respondents appear to believe that the classroom setting is conducive to learning and that it plays a supportive role in helping them navigate and overcome the difficulties of the M.A. course context. Their responses reflect greater confidence in the role of the professors and the academic environment in facilitating their psychological comfort and academic success. This difference in perception between males and females highlights a potential gap in how different student groups experience and interpret the psychological climate of M.A. programmes. It may also point to the need for more inclusive and responsive teaching practices to ensure that all students, regardless of gender, feel supported, motivated, and psychologically equipped to succeed.

From the above discussion, the first study questions which reads "*Are the undergraduates' attitudes towards M.A. course context positive or negative?*" is answered, and the first hypothesis "*There are negative attitudes concerning M.A. course context*" is not completely verified. This null hypothesis is verified when the results show that female students lead more negative attitudes and it is rejected when the analysis of the results prove that male students are more positive in their attitudes concerning the M.A. course context.

3.2 Inferential Analysis and Discussion of Students' Attitudes Towards the M.A. Course Context using T-test

To find out if the difference in the attitudes between male and female undergraduate students is statistically significant, paired t-test is followed. Table 4 shows the t-test result depending on the WAM result.

Table 4:
T-test Results of the Differences in the Attitudes Based on the Item-Level WAMs

Gender	N	\bar{X}	SD±	"t" Value	"p" Value	Significant Difference
Male	20	1.07	1.12	3.67	0.0025	Significant
Female	20					

*t.test is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 4 reveals that the mean difference (X) between males and females is (1.07). The mean difference comes from calculating the difference between male-female students regarding each questionnaire item. This difference indicates that male students hold more favorable attitudes toward aspects of the M.A. program, such as course materials, assessments, and structure. The above table also shows that the standard deviation (SD) is (1.12), which means that the difference in the attitudes is closely related to the difference in gender and that the attitudes are gender-based. The t-value reads (3.67), while the p-value is (0.0025) when the level of significance (0.05) indicating that the difference is significant. These results infer that difference in the attitudes between male and female undergraduate students is statistically and meaningfully significant. As explained in the previous section, male students lead more positive attitudes than female students. These results are supported by the fact that male students are psychologically and emotionally ready to engage into M.A. courses while females are not.

By analyzing and discussing the results of table 4, the second research question “*Does gender have a statistically significant effect on the attitudes towards M.A. course context?*” is answered, and the second null hypothesis “*Gender has no statistically significant effect on undergraduate students’ attitudes*” is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is accepted. It is rejected when the t-test analysis and the WAM results prove that gender has a significant effect on the undergraduate students’ attitudes.

4. Conclusions, Recommendations and Suggestions for Further Studies

The analysis of male and female undergraduate students’ attitudes toward the M.A. context shows a noticeable difference in the average mean score which, in turn, reveals a significant gender-based differences across M.A. materials, cognitive, and psychological factors. Male students tend to view the M.A. course content more positively, particularly in terms of its contribution to developing reasoning, cognition, and language abilities. In addition, they also perceive the educational environment as supportive and motivating. Opposite to this, female students offer more negative attitudes. They question the effectiveness of M.A.

courses in enhancing their knowledge and linguistic development. Psychologically, female students perceive the M.A. environment as less supportive, overly demanding, and challenging. These results suggest that while the M.A. course may meet the needs and expectations of some learners, others may encounter some barriers that hinder their engagement and academic growth, especially females.

The study recommends to hold sessions for female undergraduate students about postgraduate studies and how can they develop students' language abilities and critical thinking. These sessions can help female students overcome their difficulties and help them to view the M.A. context as a relaxing and supportive learning environment. It also recommends to revise certain M.A. curricula to ensure their content stimulates students' engagement in the M.A. course.

As for suggestions, the current study suggests to examine the attitudes of M.A. students toward the Ph.D. courses in different disciplines. It also suggests to explore the major challenges that female undergraduate students have in joining M.A. course.

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