

Differences in academic achievement and psychological well-being based on major selection status

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Article Information:

Received : June 5, 2026

Revised : June 22, 2026

Published : June 24, 2026

Keywords:

psychological well-being,
academic achievement,
major selection, interest-
major fit, Biology students

Abstract

Choosing a college major is one of the most important decisions in a student's educational journey. In reality, however, many Indonesian students enter their study programs not based on personal interest, but due to exam-score requirements, family expectations, or limited options. A mismatch between interests and major is related to students' psychological well-being. This study aims to determine whether there are differences in psychological well-being (PWB) and academic achievement (GPA) between Biology students who chose their major based on interest and those who did not, in terms of psychological well-being (PWB) and academic achievement (GPA). Using a quantitative comparative design, data were collected from 90 Biology students. PWB was measured with Ryff's Scales of Psychological Well-Being, and GPA was obtained from official university records. After confirming normality and homogeneity of variance, an independent samples t-test was applied for PWB and a Mann-Whitney U test for GPA. The independent samples t-test revealed a statistically significant difference between the two groups, $t(88) = 4.361$, $p < .001$. And the Mann-Whitney U test showed no statistically significant difference in GPA between the two groups, $U = 1003$, $z = -0.077$, $p > .001$. These findings indicate that major selection driven by personal interest is meaningfully linked to students' psychological well-being, though not to their academic grades. The implications for academic guidance and counseling practice are discussed.

Introduction

Choosing a college major is one of the most important decisions in a student's life. This choice not only influences future career direction but also shapes academic identity, learning experiences, and psychological well-being. However, within the context of higher education in Indonesia, this decision is often not entirely the student's own. Pressure from parents and limited quotas in popular study programs lead many students to ultimately pursue majors that are not aligned with their personal interests (Rohmah & Azzahrah, 2021). This study seeks to answer a fundamental question: does it matter, psychologically and academically, whether a student chooses their major based on genuine interest?

The mismatch between a student's interest and their academic environment is not a trivial concern. In Indonesia, the phenomenon is colloquially known as 'salah jurusan' literally, 'wrong major' and has attracted growing attention from educators, counselors, and the media alike. Students who feel they are in the wrong major commonly report diminished motivation to attend classes and engage with coursework. Beyond motivation, the psychological toll can be significant: feelings of being trapped, loss of academic purpose, and a general sense of dissatisfaction with one's educational path (Cahyawulan et al., 2022). These are not merely anecdotal observations; they reflect a structural problem in how higher education systems allocate students to programs. When interest and environment are misaligned, students must invest additional psychological resources simply to function — resources that would otherwise support their personal growth, well-being, and academic engagement.

Holland's Person-Environment (PE) Fit theory (1997) proposed that individuals can be described by one or more of six vocational personality types, Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional (RIASEC) and that academic and occupational environments can similarly be characterized by these types. The core proposition is simple: people thrive when their personal characteristics match the demands and culture of their environment. When this congruence is present, individuals experience greater satisfaction, persistence, and performance. When it is absent, the reverse tends to follow. Applied to higher education, this means that a student with a strong Investigative personality type curious, analytical, drawn to science would be expected to flourish in a Biology program precisely because the environment mirrors their interests. A student placed into the same program without such interest alignment may perform adequately, but is unlikely to experience the same psychological rewards (Rocconi et al., 2020).

Empirical evidence on interest-major fit and its relationship to various study outcomes continues to grow. De Vries et al. (2024) found that interest-major fit significantly predicted students' academic satisfaction, even after controlling for prior academic achievement, demonstrating that the feeling of being a "good fit" with one's major carries its own psychological weight that cannot be explained by academic ability alone. Ertl et al. (2022), in a study based on Holland's RIASEC model among first-year students, found that congruence between vocational interests and the study environment was significantly associated with persistence, performance, and academic satisfaction. Furthermore, a study of students taking introductory Biology courses found that students whose field of study aligned with the course content reported higher assignment grades and greater motivational engagement compared to students from other majors (Brownell et al., 2024). Therefore, it can be understood that when students study something they are genuinely interested in, they tend to be more engaged, more satisfied, and at least in some respects more academically successful.

Psychological well-being is one of the most theoretically rich and empirically supported constructs in positive psychology. Unlike hedonic well-being, which focuses on the presence of pleasure and absence of pain, eudaimonic well-being, as conceptualized by Ryff (1989) centers on living a life of meaning, purpose, and positive functioning. Ryff's model comprises six dimensions: self-acceptance (a positive evaluation of oneself), positive relations with others (warm and trusting interpersonal relationships), autonomy (self-determination and independence), environmental mastery (the ability to shape one's surroundings to meet personal needs), purpose in life (a sense of direction and meaning), and personal growth (the feeling of continued development and openness to new experiences). Among university students, higher PWB has been associated with better academic outcomes, greater intrinsic motivation, resilience, and overall mental health (Moreno-Montero et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2025).

Despite the theoretical clarity connecting interest-major fit to psychological well-being, empirical studies that directly examine this relationship using validated PWB instruments remain limited. Most existing research has focused on academic performance or study

satisfaction as outcomes, with psychological well-being addressed only indirectly or through proxy measures such as happiness or life satisfaction. Furthermore, the majority of available studies come from Western higher education contexts, leaving a substantial gap in understanding how interest-major alignment shapes student well-being in Southeast Asian settings, where educational decisions are more heavily influenced by social and family dynamics (Kotera et al., 2022). This study is one of the first to compare psychological well-being and GPA based on interest-based major selection status among Biology students in Indonesia. This study contributes to the literature on interest-major fit and psychological well-being among Indonesian university students, particularly those in Biology Education. Indonesia, with its centralized university entrance system and strong cultural emphasis on family-guided academic decisions, represents a particularly important context for this line of inquiry. This study addresses these gaps by directly comparing PWB as measured by Ryff's validated scale and GPA between Biology students who chose their major based on personal interest and those who did not. It is hypothesized that (1) students in the interest-based group will report significantly higher PWB than those in the non-interest group, and (2) no significant difference will be found in academic achievement between groups, given the multifactorial nature of GPA.

Methods

Design

This study used a quantitative comparative cross-sectional design to examine differences between two naturally occurring groups of students who chose their major based on personal interest, and those who did not. This design is appropriate when the goal is to detect mean differences between groups on a measured outcome, without experimental manipulation.

Participants

Participants in this study were 90 Biology Education students in their 2nd and 4th semesters, ranging in age from 18 to 20 years, consisting of 81 females and 9 males. In terms of educational background, 66 participants came from science track high schools, 17 from social science track high schools, and 7 from vocational high schools. Biology education students at Tidar University were selected because they face unique academic challenges, including lectures, laboratory experiments, and career preparation in science. Not all students have a high school education majoring in science. This makes biology students a relevant group for examining differences in PWB and academic achievement. Recruited through purposive sampling. Group membership was determined by a direct screening question: 'Did you choose to enroll in the Biology program based on your personal interest?' Students who answered affirmatively were classified as the interest-based group (coded 1), while those who did not were classified as the non-interest group (coded 2). This single-item dichotomous approach was intentionally employed to capture the fundamental presence or absence of interest-major alignment as a grouping criterion, rather than to measure the degree of interest along a continuum. Binary classification of interest-major fit as a grouping variable has been applied in prior studies examining congruence between individual interest and academic major. There were 45 students who answered yes and 45 students answered no. All participants gave informed consent before taking part.

Instruments

Psychological well-being was measured using Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scales (SPWB; Ryff, 1989). This instrument consists of 42 items that assess six dimensions of eudaimonic well-being: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. It uses a six-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree), and higher total scores indicate higher psychological well-being.

An example item on the PWB instrument is: “For me, life has been a continuous process of learning, changing and growth.” Based on statistical measurements of all items in the instrument, it is valid ($P > 0.3$) and has reliability ($\alpha = 0.865$). The instrument was administered to participants in Indonesian; the translation into Indonesian was assisted by the translation agency at Semarang State University. Academic achievement was measured by cumulative Grade Point Average (GPA).

Procedure

Data collection was conducted during the academic semester in a group setting. Students first answered the major selection screening question, then completed the SPWB questionnaire. GPA data were obtained from official academic records. After students answer the first question, they are sent a Google Form link that collects personal data, GPA, and PWB instruments. Students then fill in the data according to their own preferences. Participation was fully voluntary, and students were assured that their responses would remain confidential and would not affect their academic standing.

Data Analysis

Before conducting group comparisons, the normality of each variable was assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, and homogeneity of variance was evaluated using Levene's test. PWB scores were found to be normally distributed ($K-S = 0.069$, $p = 0.2$), while GPA scores were not ($K-S = 0.089$, $p = 0.034$). Both variables, however, met the assumption of homogeneous variance (Levene's $p > 0.05$ for both). Based on these results, an independent samples t-test was used to compare PWB between groups, while the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was applied for GPA. All analyses were conducted using SPSS.

Results

Although Ryff defines psychological well-being as comprising six dimensions, this study used a total psychological well-being score. This is because the study aimed to compare levels of psychological well-being in general based on major selection status, not to identify differences in psychological well-being based on its dimensions. Based on statistical measurements it was found that:

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of Academic Achievement and Psychological Well-Being

		Mean	Median	SD	Std. Error
Psychological Well-Being	interest-based group	201,38	200	22,15	3,30
	non-interest group	183,24	187	15,5	2,31
GPA	interest-based group	3,57	3,63	0,24	0,04
	non-interest group	3,59	3,60	0,20	0,03

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for two variables, Psychological Well-Being (PWB) and GPA, across two groups: the interest-based group and the non-interest group. In terms of Psychological Well-Being, the interest-based group obtained a mean score of 201.38 (Mdn = 200, SD = 22.15, SE = 3.30), while the non-interest group obtained a mean score of 183.24 (Mdn = 187, SD = 15.50, SE = 2.31). Regarding GPA, the interest-based group recorded a mean of 3.57 (Mdn = 3.63, SD = 0.24, SE = 0.04), while the non-interest group recorded a mean of 3.59 (Mdn = 3.60, SD = 0.20, SE = 0.03).

Table 2. Independent samples t-test results for Psychological Well-Being.

Variable		Mean	SD	t	df	p
Psychological Well-Being	interest-based group	201,38	22,15	4,361	88	0.000
	non-interest group	183,24	15,5			

Table 2 presents the comparison of psychological well-being between students who selected Biology education based on their academic interests and those who did not. The results showed that students in the interest-based group reported a higher level of psychological well-being ($M = 201.38$, $SD = 22.15$) than students in the non-interest group ($M = 183.24$, $SD = 15.50$). The independent samples t-test revealed a statistically significant difference between the two groups, $t(88) = 4.361$, $p < .001$. These findings indicate that students who chose their major based on their interests tend to experience better psychological well-being than those whose major choice was not aligned with their interests.

Table 3 presents the comparison of GPA between students in the interest-based group and the non-interest group using the Mann-Whitney U test. The median GPA of the interest-based group was 3.63, while the median GPA of the non-interest group was 3.60. The mean ranks were also very similar, with 45.29 for the interest-based group and 45.71 for the non-interest group. The Mann-Whitney U test showed no statistically significant difference in GPA between the two groups, $U = 1003$, $z = -0.077$, $p > .001$. This result suggests that choosing a major based on academic interests was not associated with differences in academic achievement, as measured by GPA, among Biology students.

Table 3. Mann-Whitney U test results for GPA (Academic Achievement).

Variable		N	Median	Mean Rank	U	Z	p
GPA (IPK)	interest-based group	45	3,63	45,29	1003	-0.077	0.939
	non-interest group	45	3,60	45,71			

Discussion

The research findings indicate that there is a significant difference in the PWB conditions of students who were initially interested in biology education as a major for continuing to higher education and students who did not choose biology education, so the findings in this study show that the alignment between academic interest in the major being studied after attending lectures has an important role in determining the psychological well-being of students ($t=4.361$, $p<0,001$). This study also found that the group that had an initial interest in biology education had higher psychological well-being scores than students who were not initially interested in choosing biology education for various reasons. This indicates that interest congruence is associated with higher PWB in students, whereas interest incongruence is associated with lower PWB in students (Caplan & Van Harrison, 1993). The differences in psychological well-being among these students may be related to the six dimensions of PWB proposed by Ryff (1989): self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth.

In the self-acceptance dimension, students who were not initially interested in biology education but had to face the challenges of college life are presumed to experience difficulties in accepting their academic conditions positively. Lecture activities that involve many abstract concepts, laboratory work, and self-development tend to become burdens rather than being seen as challenges. Thus, this condition of rejection relates to the self-concept, which

consequently inhibits students from exploring their various personal potentials and broader knowledge and skills (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

The positive relations with others dimension also contributes to the PWB of students who did not initially have an interest in biology education. An environment with differing interests makes it more difficult for students to build relationships, particularly with their classmates. Furthermore, the condition of not yet accepting the current situation worsens relationships with peers, as students remain focused on the anxiety of accepting or leaving their current circumstances. Meanwhile, lecture activities continue and demand the completion of responsibilities such as individual assignments, group tasks, exams, and laboratory work. When students are unable to accept their condition and are not fully committed to fulfilling their responsibilities as students, conflicts among group members during collaborative assignments may arise, leading to social isolation. This has an impact on the PWB of the students who experience it (Alharbi & Al-Qahtani 2025, Klotz & Damaraju 2025, Mishra et al., 2023).

The autonomy dimension relates to students' ability to direct themselves independently without relying on external pressures in determining their choice of major for continuing their studies. Choosing biology education at the last moment rather than from the outset as an intended choice is inseparable from various external factors such as parental pressure, lack of knowledge about the chosen major, or admission opportunities. Unmet autonomy needs result in reduced internal motivation, as students feel the chosen major was not based on a strong internal desire. Consequently, the PWB of students who were not interested in biology education becomes low (Johansen, 2024).

The environmental mastery dimension describes students' ability to manage and utilize their environment effectively. Students who did not initially choose biology education are likely to experience greater difficulty adapting to academic demands that involve many abstract concepts, laboratory activities, and self-development. In contrast to students who chose biology from the beginning, their readiness to face the academic environment in biology education is naturally greater than that of students who did not prepare themselves from the start. Students who were initially interested in biology can seek various literatures related to the material to be studied, the academic demands to be faced, and the academic environment in biology education, which will greatly impact their readiness for college life in biology education (van Rooij et al., 2018).

The purpose in life dimension is related to an individual's interests. A person who has a clear sense of interest has a strong foundation for determining their life goals. When the activities they engage in are not aligned with those interests, they are likely to struggle in finding meaning in their learning process. The mismatch of interest from the outset, compounded by the inability to accept the major being pursued, is closely related to academic meaninglessness (Yusuf, M., et al., 2026). Lectures perceived as meaningless give rise to irresponsible behaviors such as skipping classes, neglecting assignments (both individual and group), conducting laboratory work without seriousness, and inadequately preparing for exams. This condition has implications not only the individual but also their social environment. In fact, a strong sense of life purpose is closely linked to high internal motivation.

The personal growth dimension describes students' perception of their own continuous development, and students who did not initially choose biology education are prone to perceiving academic activities as stagnation rather than as opportunities for growth. Zhang et al. (2025) state that students who perceive their academic activities as a burden are vulnerable to experiencing burnout and stress, which consequently hinders their self-development. Yet the conditions of higher education demand self-awareness for growth, as students are regarded as mature individuals capable of determining their own developmental needs to support their personal, social-academic, and career lives. When students stagnate and withdraw from their environment, this is not easily noticed by those around them. If left unaddressed, this will have

an impact on students' PWB. Therefore, the alignment of students' interests in choosing their major will be closely related to their psychological well-being.

The findings of this study are also inseparable from the role of academic identity and sense of meaning held by students in biology education. Academic identity, defined as the way students define themselves in an academic context, conveys that students who chose biology education from the beginning possess an academic identity that is aligned with their interests, thereby strengthening their PWB. Suarez and Sawatsky (2025) state that, conversely, students who are not interested in biology education may experience identity dissonance, which ultimately lowers their PWB. Without alignment of academic identity, the meaning of the lectures being undertaken may be lost.

Although there is a significant difference in PWB, this study reveals that there is no significant difference in the GPA of students who chose biology education from the beginning compared to those who did not. This can be understood through the role of various extrinsic factors that are capable of maintaining academic performance even when internal conditions are less than optimal (Huang et al., 2025). Factors that possibly serve as controls over the academic performance stability of students who did not initially choose biology include family pressure. Family serves as a major reason for a person to achieve success. Therefore, demands from family to succeed at every stage of life become a strong motivation to continue attending biology education lectures, even without having a strong initial interest. Next is scholarship demands, where the possibility of a scholarship factor serves as an increasingly significant control over academic performance. This is because if students fail to achieve the minimum GPA required by the scholarship provider, they will receive a warning or face the consequence of having their scholarship revoked.

Beyond extrinsic factors that serve as controls on academic performance, GPA stability among students can also be explained through academic adaptation mechanisms that develop over the course of their studies. Students facing conflicts between their interests and their current reality will develop coping strategies by building learning approaches to compensate for their low interest. Furthermore, as knowledge and understanding of biology education increase over time, students may also begin to find meaning and value in it.

Therefore, this study shows that GPA and PWB operate on separate tracks. Both belong to different functional constructs PWB to subjective psychological experience, and GPA to academic behavioral output. Thus, even though the psychological well-being of students who did not initially choose biology education has a lower average and shows a significant difference, the academic performance reflected through GPA remains comparable to that of students who chose biology education from the start.

Implications

The findings of this study have significant practical implications for counselors and educators in Indonesian higher education. The fact that PWB differs significantly between groups while GPA does not carries an important message: students who are enrolled in a major that was not their choice may be experiencing genuine psychological distress, yet this is entirely invisible in their academic transcripts. A student who passes courses with adequate grades but is internally struggling with a low sense of life purpose and self-acceptance is not a student who is flourishing in a holistic sense. Counselors need to be sensitive to these invisible dimensions of well-being.

In practical terms, this means that psychological well-being screening should be routinely integrated into the academic advising process, particularly for students known to have entered through non-preference pathways or under external pressure. Counseling interventions targeting the most likely implicated dimensions namely purpose in life, personal growth, and self-acceptance such as values clarification exercises, strengths-based counseling, and career identity exploration, can meaningfully contribute to student well-being even when

they remain in a major that does not align with their interests. At the institutional level, these findings make a strong case for placing vocational interest assessment at the heart of the pre-enrollment guidance process, rather than treating it as an optional service that can be overlooked.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations worth acknowledging. First, major selection status was captured by a single yes/no screening question, which cannot fully represent the complexity and nuance of students' enrollment motivations. Future research should use validated interest-major fit instruments that capture the degree of fit on a continuous scale. Second, this study was conducted with Biology students at one institution, limiting how broadly the findings can be generalized. Third, the cross-sectional design means that causal claims cannot be made: it is possible, for example, that students with higher baseline well-being are simply more likely to act on their interests when choosing a major, rather than the other way around. Longitudinal designs that track students from enrollment through graduation would provide much stronger evidence. Future studies should also explore potential mediating variables such as academic motivation, sense of belonging, and social support that might explain why interest-based enrollment produces higher well-being.

Conclusion

Among Biology students in Indonesian higher education, whether a student chose their major based on personal interest turns out to matter but not in the way many might assume. Interest-based enrollment was significantly associated with higher psychological well-being, lending support to Holland's Person-Environment Fit theory and the eudaimonic model of well-being developed by Ryff. However, it was not associated with higher academic performance as measured by GPA, suggesting that grades are maintained by a range of motivational forces beyond intrinsic interest. The core message for practitioners is this: a student who is performing academically may still be struggling psychologically, and that struggle is closely connected to whether they feel they belong in the major they are studying. Embedding interest-driven guidance into the university enrollment process, and proactively supporting students in non-preferred majors through targeted counseling, are concrete steps that institutions can take to ensure that academic success and psychological well-being go hand in hand.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by Universitas Tidar.

Author Contribution Statement

WA conceptualized the study, developed the research design, collected and analyzed the data, and drafted the manuscript. DH conducted the reliability and validity testing of the instruments and reviewed the manuscript. AS contributed to the translation and back-translation of the research instruments and assisted in the validation process. IH assisted in data collection, including the development and administration of the Google Form survey, and contributed to manuscript revision. FK supervised the overall research process, provided critical review of the manuscript, and approved the final version for submission.

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