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Perceived Social Stigma, Vocational Guidance and Enrolment Rates into University Technical Education Programmes: Social Cognitive Career Theory Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of perceived social stigma and vocational guidance services on enrolment rates into university technical education programmes. Anchored on Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), the research adopted a descriptive correlational survey design. A proportionate stratified random sample of 377 SS 3 students from the six education zones in Anambra State responded to the Perceived Social Stigma Questionnaire (PSSQ) and Vocational Guidance Services Questionnaire (VGSQ). Actual enrolment data for the 2025/2026 academic session were obtained from the Nnamdi Azikiwe University admission records. Results revealed a high level of perceived social stigma and only moderate vocational guidance services. Enrolment into B.Sc./B.Tech. Technical Education programmes was low at 14.05%. Pearson correlation showed a significant negative relationship between perceived social stigma and enrolment and a significant positive relationship between vocational guidance and enrolment. Moderated regression analysis further revealed that vocational guidance significantly moderated the relationship between stigma and enrolment, such that the negative effect of stigma declining at higher levels of guidance. The findings highlight the persistent stigmatization of technical education and stressed the cushioning role of effective vocational guidance. The study contributes to theory and policy on increasing enrolment in university-level technical education for national skills development. Keywords: perceived social stigma, vocational guidance, technical education, university enrolment, Social Cognitive Career Theory

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INTRODUCTION

Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) is said to be a programme design for the production of skilled manpower in engineering, applied sciences and industrial

technology. In Nigeria, successive national development plans, including the National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013) and the National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF), have consistently emphasised the strategic importance of technical education in addressing youth unemployment, promoting technological self-reliance, and supporting the nation's industrialisation agenda. However, despite these policy pronouncements and the establishment of several university-based technical education programmes across the federation, enrolment into such programmes continues to lag significantly behind in relation to other conventional academic disciplines (Abiodun-Oyebanji & Michael, 2016; Auta, Anih & Agbo, 2023). This condition is especially pronounced in the South-East geopolitical zone, and more specifically in Anambra State (Auta, Anih & Agbo, 2023; Shimu & Haolader 2025; Owusu-Agyeman, Brenya, Kwapong & Abrefa-Gyan, 2025), a region renowned for its entrepreneurial vibrancy, high literacy rate, and dense concentration of secondary schools that feed into tertiary institutions.

Anambra State hosts a major public university known as Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka which offer Bachelor of Science (B.Sc.) and Bachelor of Technology (B.Tech.) degrees in technical education with options in mechanical (Automobile and Production), electrical/electronics, building, and woodwork technology (Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, 2021). These programmes are designed to produce not only skilled industry practitioners but also technical educators capable of training the next generation of technologists (National Universities Commission (NUC), 2023). However, available data from the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) (JAMB, 2024), the National Universities Commission (NUC) (NUC, 2019) and other independent research over the past decade (Abiodun-Oyebanji & Michael, 2016; Auta, Anih & Agbo, 2023) reveal persistently low application and matriculation figures for these programmes relative to faculties of law, management sciences, and social sciences. For instance, while Medicine, Pharmacy, and Law programmes routinely record application-to-admission ratios exceeding 20:1, technical education programmes often struggle to fill even 40 % of their approved quotas (JAMB, 2024). This enrolment deficit threatens the country's capacity to meet the human resource needs of its increasing small and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs) and the broader national quest for technological advancement.

A critical but under-researched driver of this enrolment gap is perceived social stigma (PSS). In many Nigerian communities and indeed other parts of the world, technical and vocational education is still stereotyped as a "second-class" or "failure-track" pathway reserved for students who cannot cope with the rigours of "real" university education (Chijioke, 2016; Khaizer, Rauf, Ismail, Rashid, Hazwan, Puad & Zakaria, 2020; Rana, 2021; Auta, 2023). Parents, guardians, and even some secondary school teachers frequently discourage bright students from pursuing technical education programmes (Amedorme& Fiagbe, 2013; Shobola, 2022; Ali, Ali, Khan & Nabolaniwaqa, 2024; Layemo, 2024). The generational perceived notion of associating the programmes with manual labour, low social prestige, and limited economic mobility subsists (Olumese, 2021). This stigma is rooted in colonial legacies that gave more prominence to literary education over technical and vocational skills, a perception that has persisted despite evidence (Nduka, 1982; Thomas, 2021) that graduates of technical education programmes often secure gainful employment faster and command competitive remuneration in many jurisdictions including Nigeria's informal and formal industrial sectors. The resultant negative societal perception creates

psychological barriers that deter potential applicants, irrespective of their aptitude or interest.

Compounding the influence of stigma is the quality and effectiveness of vocational guidance services (VGS) provided in secondary schools (Oviawe, 2017). Vocational guidance, as conceptualised in this study, encompasses career counselling, aptitude testing, information dissemination on technical career pathways, and exposure to role models in technical education fields. In the study area and other parts of Nigeria, Adeyemi and Fadokun (2019) and Adeyemo, Olatunji and Oladipo (2022) reported that most public and private secondary schools are facing challenges in relation to vocational guidance services. These include: inadequate trained counsellors, overcrowded classrooms, and a guidance curriculum that remains heavily biased towards university education in medicine, law, engineering and the social sciences. Where guidance exists, it is often performed shabbily and rarely highlights the dignity, innovation potential, and entrepreneurial opportunities inherent in technical education (Oviawe, 2017). Consequently, many students who possess the requisite psychomotor skills and scientific inclination are either unaware of or actively discouraged from applying to university technical education programmes.

The interaction between perceived social stigma and vocational guidance in shaping enrolment decisions among secondary school leavers has received limited empirical attention in the Nigerian context, and almost none within the study area. Extant studies have largely focused on national aggregates or on polytechnic (Ogbuanya & Nnaji, 2020; Okoro, 2021) rather than university-level technical education. Moreover, throughout my literature review phases, I am unable to come across investigations that adopted an integrated framework that simultaneously examines stigma as a deterrent variable and vocational guidance as a potential mitigating or amplifying factor. This study therefore fills a critical knowledge gap by investigating how perceived social stigma and the effectiveness of vocational guidance services influence enrolment rates into university technical education programmes in Anambra State.

Despite the critical role of technical education in addressing youth unemployment and driving industrialisation in Nigeria, enrolment into university technical education programmes especially in Anambra State remains persistently low. Successive national policies, including the National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013), have emphasised the need for skilled manpower, yet programmes in mechanical (Automobile and Production), electrical/electronics, building, and woodwork technology at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka continue to struggle with severe under-subscription, often filling less than 40% of approved quotas (Auta, 2023; JAMB, 2024). This situation is particularly alarming in Anambra State, known for its high literacy rate and entrepreneurial vibrancy. The low enrolment creates a serious skills gap that threatens the state's industrial growth and national technological self-reliance.

The problem is largely attributed to perceived social stigma, which portrays university technical education as a "second-class" option for academically weak students, associated with low social prestige and manual labour (Chijioke, 2016; Rana, 2021; Auta, 2023). Parents, teachers, and peers frequently discourage bright students from these programmes (Shobola, 2022; Layemo, 2024). This stigma is worsened by inadequate vocational guidance services in secondary schools, characterised by insufficient trained counsellors, limited career information on technical education pathways, and poor exposure to role models.

Although previous studies have examined technical education enrolment challenges at national or polytechnic levels, I am unable to come across a study that investigated the combined effects of PSS and VGS on actual enrolment rates (ER) into university technical education programmes in the study area. This gap leaves important questions unanswered regarding the extent to which stigma deters enrolment and whether effective vocational guidance can mitigate its impact. The present study therefore seeks to examine the relationship among PS, VGS and ER into university technical education programmes via Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT). This is because without timely intervention, this trend will continue to hinder the production of required technical manpower and weaken Nigeria's quest for sustainable development.

METHOD

Research Design

The study adopted a prospective correlational survey research design. This design was considered most appropriate because it enables the researcher to describe the levels of perceived social stigma and vocational guidance services among secondary school students while simultaneously examining the predictive relationships and moderating effects of these variables on enrolment rates into university technical education programmes. Correlational designs are widely used in educational research when the independent variables (PSS and VGS) cannot be manipulated experimentally and when the dependent variable (ER) is archival or outcome-based (Best & Kahn, 2016; Ogbuanya & Nnaji, 2020).

The design incorporated both primary data collected through structured questionnaires and secondary data in form of enrolment statistics sourced from the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) through the university offering the programme in the study area. The anonymity of the participant was ensured by deleting their names and any other feature that will reveal their identity from the data collected. This mixed data approach allowed for robust testing of the three null hypotheses through inferential statistics. The study was conducted in two phases: (1) questionnaire administration to SS 3 students during the second term of the 2024/2025 academic session (January–March 2025), and (2) retrieval of corresponding 2025 JAMB admission data for the 2025/2026 academic session to determine actual enrolment outcomes.

Area of the Study

The study was carried out in Anambra State, South-East Nigeria. Anambra State is one of the most educationally advanced states in the federation, with a high number of secondary schools and a university offering technical education programmes- Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. This is in addition to the phenomenon of low enrollment into technical education programmes within the state. The state is divided into six education zones under the Post-Primary Schools Service Commission (PPSSC): Awka, Aguata, Nnewi, Onitsha, Otuocha, and Ihiala. These zones were used as strata to ensure adequate geographical representation.

Study Participants

The study participants comprised all SS 3 students in public and private secondary schools in Anambra State for the 2024/2025 academic session. According to the Anambra State Ministry of Education and PPSSC records, the total SS 3 population stood at 19,872 students distributed across 798 secondary schools (257 public and 541 private). Table 1 presents the distribution of the study population by the six education zones.

Table 1: *Distribution of SS 3 Students by Education Zone in Anambra State*

Education Zone	No. of Public Schools	No. of Private Schools	Total	SS 3 Population	(%)
Awka	48	92	140	3,812	19.18
Aguata	42	88	130	3,456	17.39
Nnewi	45	95	140	3,678	18.51
Onitsha	50	110	160	4,012	20.18
Otuocha	38	78	116	2,945	14.82
Ihiala	34	78	112	1,969	9.91
Total	257	541	798	19,872	100.00

Source: Anambra State PPSSC and Ministry of Education, 2024/2025 Annual School Census

Sample Procedures

The sample size was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) Table for finite populations. For a population of 19,872 at a 95 % confidence level, 5 % margin of error, and maximum variability (p = 0.5), the required sample size was 377 respondents. To ensure representativeness and proportionality across zones, a multi-stage stratified random sampling technique was employed: Stratification by the six education zones. Proportionate allocation of the sample to each zone based on the percentage of SS 3 population in Table 1. Random selection of 40 % of schools in each zone (using the PPSSC school list as sampling frame). Simple random sampling of SS 3 students within the selected schools (using class registers and random number tables). This procedure yielded the final sample distribution shown in Table 2.

Table 2: *Proportionate Sample Distribution by Education Zone*

Education Zone	SS 3 Population	Proportion (%)	Allocated Sample Size
Awka	3,812	19.18	72
Aguata	3,456	17.39	66
Nnewi	3,678	18.51	70
Onitsha	4,012	20.18	76
Otuocha	2,945	14.82	56
Ihiala	1,969	9.91	37
Total	19,872	100.00	377

Research Instruments

Three instruments were used for data collection:

Perceived Social Stigma Questionnaire (PSSQ) – A 20-item, 4-point Likert-type scale (Strongly Agree = 4 to Strongly Disagree = 1) adapted from the Stigma Scale for Vocational Education (Ogbuanya & Nnaji, 2020). Few revisions were made on the items to align with the context of the current study. The instrument measures four dimensions: societal perception, parental attitude, peer influence, and self-stigma.

Vocational Guidance Services Questionnaire (VGSQ) – A 15-item, 4-point Likert-type scale developed by the researcher after a pilot study. It assesses five dimensions: availability of counsellors, quality of career information on technical education, exposure to role models, aptitude testing, and frequency of guidance sessions.

Enrolment Data Extraction Sheet (EDES) – A researcher-designed proforma used to collect secondary data on actual enrolment into technical education programmes from JAMB

CAPS reports and university admission office for the 2025/2026 session. Enrolment was operationalised as the percentage of sampled students who successfully matriculated into B.Sc./B.Tech. Technical Education programmes in the target university using binary outcome of: enrolled = 1; not enrolled = 0 at individual level.

Validity and Reliability of Instruments

Face and content validity of the PSSQ and VGSQ were established through experts' judgement. Therefore, three experts in technical education from Nnamdi Azikiwe University and the Modibbo Adama University evaluated the instrument and their suggestions led to the deletion of two ambiguous items. Reliability was determined through a pilot test on 50 SS 3 students from two non-sampled schools in Awka zone. Cronbach's Alpha coefficients were computed using SPSS version 27.0. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: *Reliability Coefficients of Research Instruments*

Instrument	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Decision
Perceived Social Stigma Questionnaire (PSSQ)	20	0.73	Highly reliable
Vocational Guidance Services Questionnaire (VGSQ)	15	0.71	Highly reliable
Overall outcomes	35	0.72	Highly reliable

The data show that all the coefficients exceeded the 0.70 threshold recommended by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994), confirming adequacy of the internal consistency.

Procedures for Data Collection

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Faculty of Technology and vocational Education, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Research Ethics Committee. Principals of selected schools granted permission after a formal letter of introduction. Trained research assistants who were postgraduate students in technical education administered the questionnaires during school hours under strict supervision to ensure 100 % return rate. Respondents were assured of anonymity and voluntary participation. Completed instruments were collected immediately. Secondary enrolment data were obtained from JAMB through the university's admission offices.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27.0. Descriptive statistics of means, standard deviations and percentages were used to analyze data relating to purposes 1 and 2. Inferential statistics were used to test hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient for testing H_{01} and H_{02} which has to do with bivariate relationships. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis for the combined predictive power of the independent variables. Moderated Multiple Regression Analysis with interaction term for H_{03}.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Response Rate and Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

All the 377 questionnaires distributed to SS III students were successfully retrieved and screened for completeness, yielding a 100 % response rate. This high return rate was achieved through immediate on-site collection by trained research assistants and strict

supervision during administration. The demographic profile of the participants and response rate are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: *Demographic Characteristics of Respondents*

Variable	Category	Frequency	(%)
Gender	Male	208	55.17
	Female	169	44.83
School Type	Public	142	37.67
	Private	235	62.33
Education Zone	Awka	72	19.10
	Aguata	66	17.51
	Nnewi	70	18.57
	Onitsha	76	20.16
	Otuocha	56	14.85
	Ihiala	37	9.81

The data in table 4 shows that the sample was slightly male-dominated and had a higher representation of private-school students, reflecting the reality of secondary schools in the study area.

Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

1. Level of Perceived Social Stigma Associated with University Technical Education Programmes

The data relating to the level of perceived social stigma with university technical education programmes is presented in Table 5.

Table 5: *Descriptive Statistics for Perceived Social Stigma (PSSQ) by Dimension*

Dimension	No. of Items	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Societal Perception	5	3.45	0.51	Very High
Parental Attitude	5	3.22	0.47	High
Peer Influence	5	2.95	0.55	Moderate
Self-Stigma	5	3.10	0.49	High
Overall PSSQ	20	3.18	0.48	High

The overall mean score for perceived social stigma was high (M = 3.18, SD = 0.48), indicating strong negative societal perceptions of university technical education programmes. The highest stigma dimension was "Societal Perception," confirming the persistence of colonial-era stereotypes that technical education is inferior.

2. Level of Effectiveness of Vocational Guidance Services Provided in Secondary Schools with Respect to Technical Education Career Path

The data collected in relation to the level of effectiveness of vocational services provided in secondary schools with respect to technical education career path is presented in Table 6.

Table 6: *Descriptive Statistics for Vocational Guidance Services (VGSQ) by Dimension*

Dimension	No. of Items	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Availability of Counsellors	3	2.40	0.62	Low
Quality of Career Information	3	2.80	0.58	Moderate
Exposure to Role Models	3	2.50	0.60	Moderate

Aptitude Testing	3	2.70	0.54	Moderate
Frequency of Guidance Sessions	3	2.70	0.57	Moderate
Overall VGSQ	15	2.62	0.55	Moderate

The mean score for vocational guidance services was moderate (M = 2.62, SD = 0.55). The weakest aspect of vocational guidance was "Availability of Counsellors," highlighting systemic gaps in secondary-school counselling services.

3. Enrolment Rates into University Technical Education Programmes

The enrolment rates into university technical education programmes is presented in Table 7.

Table 7: *Enrolment Rates into University Technical Education Programmes*

Variable	Category	Enrolled (n)	(%)
Gender	Male	49	23.56
	Female	4	2.37
School Type	Public	14	9.86
	Private	39	16.60
Total	-	53	14.05

The data presented in Table 7show that the actual enrolment into university technical education programmes among the sampled students was low. Only 53 students (14.05 %) successfully matriculated into B.Sc./B.Tech. Technical Education programmes in Nnamdi Azikiwe University 2025/2026 session. The slightly higher enrolment was observed among male and private-school students. However, the enrolment rates remained generally low across all groups.

Test of Hypotheses

1. Extent to Which Perceived Social Stigma and Vocational Guidance Predict Enrolment Rates into University Technical Education Programmes

The data related to H_{01} and H_{02} which established the extent to which perceived social stigma and vocational guidance predict enrolment rates into university technical education programmes are presented in Tables 8 and 9:

Table 8: *Pearson Product Moment Correlation Matrix among Study Variables*

Variable	1	2	3
PSS	1.00		
VGS	−0.275**	1.00	
ER	−0.412**	0.358**	1.00

$p < 0.001$ (2-tailed)

Hypothesis 1 (H_{01}): Perceived social stigma has no significant negative relationship with enrolment rates.

The Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis revealed a statistically significant negative relationship between perceived social stigma and enrolment rates ($r = -0.412$, $p < 0.001$). Hence, the H_{01} was rejected indicating a moderate-to-strong inverse association. Based on that, it can be concluded that the higher perceived stigma is associated with likelihood of lower enrolment.

Hypothesis 2 (H_{02}): Vocational guidance services have no significant positive relationship with enrolment rates.

The data show significant positive correlation between vocational guidance and enrolment rates ($r = 0.358$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, H_{02} was rejected. This is an indication that vocational guidance acts as a facilitating factor in enrolment.

Predictive and Moderating Effects Hierarchical multiple regression was performed to determine the combined predictive power of the two independent variables on enrolment. The results are summarised in Table 9.

Table 9: *Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Enrolment Rates*

Model	Predictor(s)	B	SE	β	t	p	R	R^2	ΔR^2	F (df)	p
1	PSS	−0.284	0.032	−0.412	−8.88	0.000	0.412	0.170	0.170	78.81 (1,375)	0.000
2	PSS	−0.241	0.031	−0.350	−7.77	0.000					
	VGS	0.215	0.028	0.292	7.68	0.000	0.502	0.252	0.082	63.12 (2,374)	0.000

The data in the second model show that both predictors were significant. Though, PSS emerged as the stronger negative predictor (β = −0.350), VGS contributed positively (β = 0.292). Hence, the two variables combined explained 25.2 % of the variance in enrolment rates.

2. The Moderating Role of Vocational Guidance in the Relationship Between Perceived Social Stigma and Enrolment Rates

Hypothesis 3 (H_{03}): Vocational guidance does not significantly moderate the relationship between perceived social stigma and enrolment rates.

The data relating to H_{03} which established the moderating role of VGS in the Relationship Between PSS and ER is presented in Table 10:

Table 10: *Moderated Multiple Regression Analysis*

Step / Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	R^2	ΔR^2	ΔF	p
Step 1									
PSS	-0.284	0.032	-0.412	-8.88	<.001	0.170	0.170	78.81	<.001
Step 2						0.252	0.082	63.12[1]	<.001
PSS	-0.241	0.031	-0.350	-7.77	<.001				
VGS	0.215	0.028	0.292	7.68	<.001				
Step 3						0.271	0.019	9.12[2]	.003
PSS	-0.238	0.031	-0.345	-7.68	<.001				
VGS	0.209	0.028	0.284	7.46	<.001				
PSS × VGS	0.098	0.033	0.142	2.97	.003				

As presented in Table 10, a moderated multiple regression analysis was conducted by entering the interaction term (Stigma × Vocational Guidance) in Step 3. The interaction term was statistically significant (β = 0.142, p = 0.003), accounting for an additional 1.9 % of variance ($\Delta R^2 = 0.019$, $\Delta F = 9.12$, $p < 0.01$). Therefore, H_{03} which established the moderating role of VGS in the Relationship Between PSS and ER was rejected. It can be concluded that

VGS moderates the PSS–ER relationship. In other words, it can be said that the negative effect of PSS on ER weakens as the level of VGS increases.

Discussion

The present study provides compelling empirical evidence on the interplay between PSS, VGS, and ER into university technical education programmes. The results not only confirm the three research hypotheses but also extend Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Lent et al., 1994, 2000) by demonstrating how contextual barriers and environmental supports interact in a non-Western, communalist educational setting. The high mean score on PSS indicates that SS 3 students hold strongly negative societal perceptions of university technical education. This reflects the entrenched stereotypes that equate technical programmes with "second-class" education reserved for academically weak students. This finding aligns with Ogbuanya and Nnaji (2020), who reported similarly elevated stigma levels among polytechnic applicants in South-East Nigeria, and extends Okoro's (2021) observation that cultural valuation of white-collar professions continues to marginalise manual and vocational skills career paths.

The significant negative correlation between PSS and ER and its emergence as the strongest predictor in hierarchical regression provide clear support for H_{01}. Higher stigma directly translates into lower application and matriculation rates. This result corroborates SCCT's assertion that perceived environmental barriers undermine outcome expectations and self-efficacy (Lent et al., 2000). In the study area, where parental and peer influences are amplified by communalist family structures, stigma operates as a powerful social filter (Chijioke, 2016; Shobola, 2022; Layemo, 2024). That is, even students with strong psychomotor aptitude are steered away from technical education to preserve family prestige (Layemo, 2024). The 14.05% overall enrolment rate appears to be far below the national average for conventional programmes (JAMB, 2024). This underscores the real-world consequence of this psychological barrier.

The VGS were rated as moderately effective with the lowest score recorded on "Availability of Counsellors". This systemic weakness is consistent with national surveys indicating that most Nigerian secondary schools operate with counsellor-to-student ratios exceeding 1:2,000 (Federal Ministry of Education, 2023). The positive correlation between vocational guidance and enrolment and its significant contribution in the regression model confirm H_{02}. Effective guidance particularly as it relates to career information on technical education pathways and exposure to role models serve as a neutralizing force (Igbinedion & Ojeaga, 2012), increasing enrolment likelihood by enhancing students' knowledge of labour-market realities and entrepreneurial opportunities in technical education fields.

Notably, private-school students recorded slightly higher enrolment than their public-school counterparts, a pattern attributable to marginally better-resourced guidance units in private institutions. This disparity highlights the equity implications of uneven guidance infrastructure and confirmed the findings from similar studies in Enugu and Imo States (Eze & Okeke, 2022).

The most theoretically significant result is the confirmation of H_{03} which says vocational guidance significantly moderates the PSS and ER relationship. This finding extends SCCT by showing that environmental supports can weaken contextual barriers even in high-stigma cultural environment (Igbinedion & Ojeaga, 2012). In practical terms, robust VGS could transforms potential "drop-outs" from the technical education career pathway into

informed applicants by reframing technical education as a high-prestige, high-earning route aligned with Nigeria's industrialisation goals.

Theoretical and Empirical Contributions

The study provides the first specific empirical test of SCCT in the domain of technical education in the study area. By integrating actual enrolment data rather than relying solely on self-reported intentions, the research overcomes the common intention–behaviour gap critiqued in vocational psychology literature (Sheeran & Webb, 2016). The moderated regression model offers a distinct understanding of how guidance can function as a policy tool to degrade stigma, thereby enriching the limited Nigerian literature that has treated PSS and VGS as independent rather than interactive variables.

Practical and Policy Implications

The findings carry urgent implications for multiple stakeholders. The Ministry of Education and Post-Primary Schools Service Commission should prioritise the recruitment and training of guidance counsellors specialising in technical and vocational education. Mandatory inclusion of technical education modules in the SS 3 guidance curriculum, coupled with organised industrial visits and career talk sessions, could significantly boost enrolment. Universities must intensify de-stigmatisation campaigns by leveraging radio jingles, parent–teacher forums, and social media influencers to rebrand technical education programmes as paths to wealth creation and national development.

At the national level, the National Universities Commission (NUC) and the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board should consider quota adjustments and scholarship incentives for technical education applicants. Policymakers should also integrate stigma-reduction metrics into the performance evaluation of secondary schools.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that PSS remains a formidable obstacle to enrolment in university technical education programmes, but that strategically supported VGS can substantially mitigate its impact. By addressing these twin factors, stakeholders can transform technical education from a stigmatised "last resort" into a first-choice career path for sustainable national development. The empirical foundation laid here calls for immediate, coordinated action to harness Nigeria's youthful population for technological self-reliance and economic prosperity.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences; longitudinal studies tracking the same cohort from SS 3 to post-JAMB would strengthen causal claims. Although the sample was proportionate and representative, the study was restricted to Anambra State; comparative research across other South-East states or geopolitical zones would enhance generalisability. Self-report measures of stigma and guidance, while validated, may still be susceptible to social desirability bias despite assurances of anonymity.

Future studies could employ mixed-methods designs to explore the lived experiences of students who successfully enrolled despite high perceived barriers or investigate the efficacy of targeted interventions such as cognitive-behavioural stigma-reduction workshops for

parents and teachers. Experimental or quasi-experimental designs testing guidance enhancement programmes would also provide actionable evidence for scale-up.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Being a sole authored article, the author conceptualized the study, write the initial draft, conduct data collection and analysis, and made the final draft.

AI USAGE STATEMENT

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used Grammarly to improve grammar and clarity of thought. After using this service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest in relation to the conduct, authorship and publication of this research.

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