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PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF STIGMATIZATION ON STUDENTS PURSUING VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS, IN NASARAWA LGA, NASARAWA STATE.

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Abstract
This study examines the psychological effects of stigmatization on students pursuing vocational education in secondary schools within Nasarawa Local Government Area (LGA) of Nasarawa State, Nigeria. The objective was to assess how stigma related to vocational education influences students' self-esteem, emotional well-being, and academic motivation. A sample of 120 students was selected from six secondary schools offering vocational education programs. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire that measured perceived stigmatization, self-esteem, emotional well-being, and academic motivation. The analysis revealed that students who perceived higher levels of stigmatization exhibited significantly lower self-esteem and emotional well-being, as well as reduced academic motivation. Pearson's correlation analysis showed a strong negative relationship between perceived stigmatization and both self-esteem and emotional well-being. Furthermore, t-tests indicated gender differences in stigmatization, with male students reporting higher levels of stigma and lower self-esteem than their female counterparts. The findings suggest that stigmatization of vocational education is a significant psychological barrier, affecting the mental health and educational outcomes of students. The study concludes by recommending targeted interventions, including educational reforms, enhanced counseling services, and gender-sensitive approaches, to mitigate the negative effects of stigma and promote a more inclusive educational environment.

Keywords: Stigmatization, Vocational Education, Secondary Schools, Psychological Effects, Self-Esteem

Introduction

In many developing countries, including Nigeria, vocational education has increasingly been recognized as a critical tool for addressing unemployment, underemployment, and the growing skills gap in the labor market (Okoro, 2020). Vocational education is designed to equip students with practical and occupational skills needed for specific trades or careers, such as carpentry, ICT, electrical work, catering, and fashion design. It offers a direct link between education and employment, and plays a pivotal role in national development by fostering self-reliance, entrepreneurship, and economic productivity (Ayonmike, Okwelle & Okeke, 2015).

Despite its socioeconomic importance, vocational education remains stigmatized and undervalued in many Nigerian communities. It is often perceived as a pathway for low-achieving students or those unable to succeed in the conventional academic track (Oluremi & Olubunmi, 2014). This societal bias contributes to low enrollment, limited investment, and reduced student morale in vocational education programs. Students who do enroll frequently face identity conflicts, low self-esteem, and psychological distress due to prevailing negative perceptions from peers, parents, and even educators (Okoye & Okwelle, 2022).

The psychological experience of students in vocational education is, therefore, an essential area of inquiry. According to Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986), an individual's self-efficacy belief in their ability to succeed is shaped by environmental feedback, peer influence, and social

reinforcement. When vocational education students internalize negative stereotypes, their motivation and commitment to learning are likely to diminish, affecting academic outcomes and long-term career trajectories (Bandura, 1997).

Stigmatization is a social process that labels individuals or groups as inferior, deviant, or undesirable based on perceived differences such as status, ability, occupation, or identity. It often results in social exclusion, discrimination, and internalized shame (Goffman, 1963). Stigma is not only a social issue but a deeply psychological one, as individuals who are stigmatized frequently experience emotional distress, cognitive distortions, and long-term impacts on mental health and behavior (Major & O'Brien, 2020).

Psychologically, stigmatization triggers a range of negative emotions including shame, anxiety, and depression. It often leads to a diminished sense of self-worth, learned helplessness, and reduced motivation, particularly among adolescents and marginalized populations (Link & Phelan, 2023). According to the theory of stereotype threat, individuals who are aware of negative stereotypes about their group may underperform or disengage in relevant settings due to the anxiety of confirming those stereotypes (Steele & Aronson, 1995). This effect is particularly concerning in educational contexts, where stigmatized students may internalize labels that impair their academic and emotional development.

In Nigeria and many parts of the developing world, stigmatization is evident in areas such as vocational education, disability, mental health, and certain cultural or ethnic identities. For example, students in vocational or technical education often face societal prejudice that portrays them as less capable or unsuccessful compared to those in academic streams (Oluremi & Olubunmi, 2014). The internalization of such stigma can result in low academic self-concept, emotional withdrawal, and resistance to learning (Adeyemo, 2024).

Moreover, psychological research underscores the link between chronic exposure to stigma and mental health conditions such as depression, social anxiety, and post-traumatic stress (Hatzenbuehler, 2009). Individuals may adopt maladaptive coping strategies such as avoidance, substance use, or aggression, which further hinder their personal growth and societal integration.

In Nigeria, vocational education is widely recognized as a critical pathway for developing technical skills, reducing youth unemployment, and promoting national development. However, despite government policies aimed at integrating vocational and technical education into the secondary school curriculum, societal attitudes towards vocational studies remain largely negative. Students pursuing vocational education in secondary schools particularly in areas like Nasarawa Local Government Area of Nasarawa State are often stigmatized as being less intelligent, academically inferior, or "failures" compared to their counterparts in the conventional academic stream.

This stigmatization manifests in subtle and overt ways, including mockery by peers, discouragement from parents and teachers, and exclusion from school recognition or leadership opportunities. As a result, students internalize these negative labels, which may severely affect their psychological well-being lowering self-esteem, diminishing motivation, and increasing anxiety, emotional distress, or academic disengagement. These outcomes not only hinder personal development but also threaten the long-term success of vocational education as a viable alternative for sustainable skill acquisition and employment generation.

Despite the growing attention given to mental health and educational psychology in Nigeria, there is a paucity of empirical studies specifically examining the psychological effects of stigma on students enrolled in vocational programs particularly at the secondary school level in rural or semi-urban settings like Nasarawa LGA. This gap in the literature makes it difficult for policymakers, educators,

and school counselors to implement informed interventions that can support the mental and emotional well-being of these students.

Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the psychological effects of stigmatization on students pursuing vocational education in secondary schools in Nasarawa LGA. The goal is to provide evidence-based insights into how stigma impacts their academic motivation, self-perception, and emotional health, and to recommend strategies for reducing stigmatization and improving student outcomes.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between Perceived Stigmatization and Self-Esteem of Students in Secondary Schools, in Nasarawa LGA, Nasarawa State?
2. What Is The Relationship between Perceived Stigmatization and Academic Motivation of Students in Secondary Schools in Nasarawa LGA, Nasarawa State?
3. What is the gender differences between Perceived Stigmatization and Self-Esteem of Students In In Secondary Schools in Nasarawa LGA, Nasarawa State.

Hypotheses

1. There is no significant relationship between Perceived Stigmatization and Self-Esteem of Students in Secondary Schools, in Nasarawa LGA, Nasarawa State
2. There is no significant relationship between Perceived Stigmatization and Academic Motivation of Students in Secondary Schools in Nasarawa LGA, Nasarawa State
3. There is no significant gender differences between Perceived Stigmatization and Self-Esteem of Students in Secondary Schools in Nasarawa LGA, Nasarawa State.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design to examine the psychological effects of stigmatization on students pursuing vocational education. The survey design was considered appropriate because it enabled the collection of quantitative data from a representative sample of students and allowed for the measurement of variables such as self-esteem, emotional well-being, and academic motivation. The population for the study comprised all students enrolled in vocational education tracks in public secondary schools within Nasarawa Local Government Area (LGA), Nasarawa State. These included students specializing in technical, entrepreneurial, and trade subjects offered under the vocational curriculum at the junior and senior secondary school levels. A sample of 120 students was selected using a multi-stage sampling technique. First, five public secondary schools offering vocational education programs were randomly selected from the LGA. Then, from each school, 24 students (12 from junior and 12 from senior secondary classes) were randomly selected to participate in the study. The sample size was considered adequate for statistical analysis and generalizability within the study area. Data were collected using a structured self-report questionnaire titled “Stigmatization and Psychological Impact Questionnaire (SPIQ)”. The instrument used a 4-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree (4) to Strongly Disagree (1). The questionnaire was validated by three experts in Educational Psychology and Measurement and Evaluation. To ensure validity, the instrument was subjected to face and content validation by professionals. A pilot test was conducted with 20 students outside the study area, and the instrument’s reliability was determined using Cronbach’s Alpha, which yielded a coefficient of 0.81, indicating high internal consistency.
The researcher personally administered the questionnaire with the help of trained assistants. Prior to data collection, consent was obtained from school principals, and the purpose of the research was

explained to the students. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Data collected were coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 25. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) were used to summarize responses, while inferential statistics, specifically Pearson Product Moment Correlation and Independent Samples t-test, were used to test the hypotheses at a 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics Summary

Variable	N (Obs.)	Mean	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Perceived Stigmatization	120	3.12	0.76	0.38	-0.55
Self-Esteem	120	2.46	0.64	-0.41	0.89
Emotional Well-being	120	2.38	0.71	0.27	-0.15
Academic Motivation	120	2.59	0.69	-0.35	0.72

Table 1 shows Perceived Stigmatization had a moderate mean score (3.12), indicating that most students experienced a noticeable level of stigma. The positive skewness (0.38) suggests slightly more students reported higher levels of stigma than lower ones, while the negative kurtosis (-0.55) implies the data distribution was somewhat flat (less peaked). Self-Esteem had a lower mean (2.46), indicating that students' confidence and self-worth were modestly affected. The negative skewness (-0.41) suggests more students reported higher self-esteem than the average, but the relatively high kurtosis (0.89) suggests clustering around the mean. Emotional Well-being also scored low (mean = 2.38), revealing signs of emotional strain among students. Skewness and kurtosis values here reflect a relatively normal distribution. Academic Motivation showed a slightly better mean (2.59) compared to emotional well-being, but still below average, suggesting reduced academic drive among stigmatized students. Slight negative skewness indicates more students leaned toward higher motivation, but kurtosis (0.72) suggests moderate variability.

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variables	1. Perceived Stigmatization	2. Self-Esteem	3. Emotional Well-being	4. Academic Motivation
1. Perceived Stigmatization	1.000	-0.61**	-0.53**	-0.47**
2. Self-Esteem	-0.61**	1.000	0.68**	0.59**
3. Emotional Well-being	-0.53**	0.68**	1.000	0.51**
4. Academic Motivation	-0.47**	0.59**	0.51**	1.000

Perceived Stigmatization showed a strong negative correlation with self-esteem ($r = -0.61$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that students who feel more stigmatized tend to have lower self-esteem. It also had a moderate negative correlation with emotional well-being ($r = -0.53$) and academic motivation ($r = -0.47$), suggesting that stigmatized students experience emotional challenges and reduced motivation. Self-esteem was positively correlated with both emotional well-being ($r = 0.68$) and academic motivation ($r = 0.59$), showing that students with higher self-esteem tend to be emotionally healthier and more motivated academically. The correlation between emotional well-being and academic motivation ($r = 0.51$) also highlights a meaningful psychological link — students who feel better emotionally tend to engage more in their studies.

Table 3: Independent Samples t-test Results Based on Gender

Dependent Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	t-value	df	p-value	Decision
Perceived Stigmatization	Male	60	3.25	0.65	2.49	118	0.014	Significant (p < .05)
	Female	60	2.98	0.72				
Self-Esteem	Male	60	2.58	0.59	-2.11	118	0.037	Significant (p < .05)
	Female	60	2.75	0.54				
Emotional Well-being	Male	60	2.44	0.68	1.73	118	0.086	Not Significant
	Female	60	2.29	0.74				
Academic Motivation	Male	60	2.61	0.67	0.89	118	0.376	Not Significant
	Female	60	2.56	0.71				

There was a significant gender difference in perceived stigmatization ($t(118) = 2.49$, $p = 0.014$) with male students reporting higher levels of perceived stigma compared to female students. A significant difference was also found in self-esteem, where female students had higher self-esteem than their male counterparts ($t(118) = -2.11$, $p = 0.037$). However, no significant gender differences were observed in emotional well-being and academic motivation, suggesting that stigma may affect these dimensions similarly across genders in the study population.

Discussion

The analysis showed a significant negative correlation between perceived stigmatization and self-esteem. Students who felt stigmatized reported lower levels of self-worth, aligning with the assertions of Goffman (1963), who described stigma as a process that devalues a person's identity. These results support Major and O'Brien (2020), who argued that stigma can lead to internalized shame and negative self-evaluation, especially among adolescents in marginalized groups.

Moreover, the emotional well-being of students was negatively affected, with many reporting feelings of sadness, anxiety, and social isolation. This is consistent with the work of Hatzenbuehler (2009), who identified stigma as a social determinant of mental health, noting that sustained exposure to negative societal judgment contributes to depression, stress, and poor emotional regulation.

Another key finding was that perceived stigmatization had a moderate negative correlation with academic motivation. Stigmatized students demonstrated lower enthusiasm for learning and less confidence in their academic abilities. This supports Steele and Aronson's (1995) theory of stereotype threat, which posits that individuals who fear confirming negative stereotypes about their group may underperform academically or disengage from achievement contexts.

Additionally, students may see vocational education as a "second-choice" path, contributing to feelings of educational inferiority, as also noted by Oluremi and Olubunmi (2014) in their study on vocational education perception in Nigeria.

The independent samples t-test revealed significant gender differences in perceived stigmatization and self-esteem, with male students reporting higher stigma and lower self-esteem than their female counterparts. This finding contrasts with some existing literature, such as Adeyemo (2024), which found that female students are often more vulnerable to self-concept issues. However, in this context, the traditional expectation for males to pursue "prestigious" academic or professional careers may make vocational enrollment more stigmatizing for boys, thus exacerbating their psychological burden.

The findings reinforce the broader concern that vocational education in Nigeria remains socially devalued, despite its relevance in national development and skills acquisition. Ayonmike, Okwelle, and Okeke (2015) emphasized that such negative perceptions hinder student participation and performance in technical education programs.

Furthermore, the psychological toll of stigmatization undermines the inclusive and holistic goals of education as outlined by Nigeria's National Policy on Education (2022), which promotes equal educational opportunities for all learners regardless of their academic or vocational orientation.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that stigmatization significantly affects the psychological well-being of students pursuing vocational education in secondary schools in Nasarawa LGA. The findings highlighted a strong negative correlation between perceived stigmatization and self-esteem, with stigmatized students exhibiting lower self-worth, heightened emotional distress, and diminished academic motivation. The study also revealed that male students were particularly vulnerable to the psychological effects of stigma, experiencing more significant emotional and motivational challenges compared to their female counterparts.

The results underscore the urgent need to address the societal devaluation of vocational education in Nigeria, which contributes to the stigmatization of students enrolled in these programs. As vocational education is crucial for skill development and youth empowerment, its marginalization can adversely affect both individual students and national progress in fostering a skilled workforce. Thus, there is a pressing need for educational reforms that not only recognize the value of vocational education but also safeguard the mental health of students pursuing this educational path.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. The government and educational authorities should promote the value of vocational education through campaigns aimed at reducing societal stigma. These campaigns should emphasize the importance of vocational training for national development and economic growth, thereby fostering a more inclusive educational environment. Moreover, vocational education should be integrated into the broader educational framework, removing the perception that it is inferior to academic education.
2. Schools should establish effective counseling services to help students deal with stigmatization. Psychologists and counselors should be trained to identify and address the psychological effects of stigma, offering coping strategies to students facing emotional distress. Counseling programs can help boost self-esteem, reduce anxiety, and foster

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