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From campus to career: How cultural and identity factors influence graduates' job choices

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Abstract

Career choices are important part of transitioning to the job market especially for graduating university students. It involves selecting a specific occupation or field based on their education, interests, values, and goals. The current study aims to investigate the impact of psycho-social values and socioeconomic motivations on career choices among 1200 fresh graduates from Delta State University. It explores how students' identity formation, influenced by cultural assimilation and social interactions, informs their professional decisions as they transit into the workforce. By using a cross-sectional survey design, data were collected through structured questionnaires from a sample of 300 graduating students who were selected through a stratified random sampling method across one hundred undergraduate university programmes. Pearson correlation and multiple regression analyses were performed using SPSS Version 23 to examine the relationships between psycho-social values, socioeconomic motivations, and career choices. The analysis revealed that both psycho-social values and socioeconomic motivations significantly influence career choices. However, psycho-social values had a moderate to strong correlation with career choices (r=0.56, p<0.01), while socioeconomic motivations demonstrated a stronger correlation (r=0.62, p<0.01). The regression model explained 48% of the variance in career choices, with socioeconomic motivations showing a higher impact (β=0.50, p<0.0001) compared to psycho-social values (β=0.45, p<0.0001). The findings indicate that while internalized psycho-social values play a notable role in shaping career aspirations, socioeconomic factors exert a more substantial influence.

Keywords: *Career Choices, Identity Formation, Psycho-social Values, Socio-economic Motivations.*

Introduction

In the contemporary university setting, students find themselves at a critical juncture where cultural assimilation, identity formation, and career decision-making converge, particularly as they prepare for post-graduation employment opportunities (Abes, Jones, & Stewart, 2023). As these students navigate their academic and social environments, they develop a myriad of relationships with peers, mentors, and broader societal influences, and from these relationships, a set of shared ideals and norms emerge that construct the mental imagination of 'self' and ambition. These interactions play a crucial role in shaping their personal and professional identities (Newton & Ender, 2010). Such relationships not only inform their self-concept but also exert significant influence on their career decision-making processes, thereby illustrating the interplay between individual aspirations and the prevailing dynamics within their chosen disciplines (Griffin, Perez, Holmes, & Mayo, 2010).

This study posits that career choices made by students as they transition into the workforce reflect their evolving sense of identity (which is a construct of psycho-social values built on layers of ideals or norms derived from level of assimilation into various subcultures, both

directly and indirectly, influencing their decisions regarding career choices. Thus, the choices students make regarding their professional trajectories are linked to their broader identity formation processes and the cultural contexts to which they have been exposed. Cultural contexts refer to the various social, institutional, and environmental influences that shape students' experiences and identities during their time in university. These contexts encompass a cluster of values, beliefs, norms, and practice that students encounter, both within their immediate social circles (such as peer groups and academic communities) and in broader societal frameworks (such as societal expectations, economic conditions, and cultural heritage).

Furthermore, there is growing recognition that intersecting factors such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status can complicate the ways in which cultural influences are experienced and assimilated by students (Griffin, Perez, Holmes, & Mayo, 2010). These interconnected dimensions of identity not only shape students' perceptions of their academic and professional environments but also mediate the extent to which dominant cultural trends are embraced or resisted. Understanding how these overlapping dynamics intensify or diminish the influence of prevailing societal norms adds a critical layer of complexity to the analysis. Consequently, this study seeks to extend current scholarship by examining the impact of differential group associations (Meunier, Wade, & Jenkins, 2012) on the career choices of students as they prepare to enter the job market. By exploring how identity-based affiliations inform professional decision-making, this research aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of how structural inequalities influence the pathways available to students across diverse social categories.

Statement of the Problem

The core issue addressed in this study centers on elucidating the relationship between cultural assimilation, identity development (conceived as psycho-social values and ideals that define one's differential association), and career choices among fresh university job seekers. Although existing research acknowledges the difficulties that students encounter when navigating social influences on their future career decisions, this study aims to explore in some depth the role played by dominant trends within their social networks, particularly through peer interactions and mentor relationships (Audley & Jović, 2020). The tension between maintaining personal authenticity and conforming to dominant norms presents a critical yet underexplored avenue for investigating the complexities that shape career choices. Addressing this tension is essential for understanding how students balance these competing forces prior to graduation and eventual transition to active job seekers (Knightbridge, 2014; Meunier, Wade, & Jenkins, 2012).

Although studies acknowledge the challenges these students face as they navigate the various influences within their social connections, the dominance of certain trends (including dominant predisposition of norm group they belong) within their peer groups, mentor relationships, and broader societal contexts are typically complex discourses to later career decision-making processes, especially in a fiercely competitive labour market. Hence, balancing the desire for personal authenticity with the pressure to conform to norms poses a significant challenge that deserves careful examination (Knightbridge, 2014). In essence, does one's differential association such as peer group influence, academic orientation, and broader social expectation predict career choice or do other factors such as economic incentives and a psychological desire to attain class mobility predict these choices?

Research Objective

The objective raised to guide this study is to;

1. examine the degree of relationship between psycho-social values and socioeconomic motivations as predictor of career choices.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study draws on Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory and Edwin Sutherland's differential association theory to explore how students' career choices are influenced by the interplay of learned behaviors, social environments, identity-based associations, and socioeconomic motivations. These theories provide a comprehensive lens for examining the ways in which social interactions, cultural contexts, and economic incentives shape decision-making processes as students transition into the workforce.

Social Cognitive Theory

Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory emphasizes the role of observational learning, modeling, and imitation in human behavior, positing that individuals learn and develop their actions based on the reciprocal interaction between personal factors, environmental influences, and observed behaviors (Nabavi, 2012). This theory is instrumental in understanding how students' career choices are shaped by the social environments they navigate during their university years. Through interactions with peers, mentors, and role models, students observe behaviors, values, and career trajectories that influence their personal beliefs, attitudes, and aspirations. These observations, processed through their cognitive and emotional lenses, contribute to the formation of their psycho-social values and ideals—the internalized norms and principles that shape how they see themselves and their futures (Bandura, 2021).

By implication, the theory also acknowledges that socioeconomic motivations are significant external factors that influence decision-making. Economic incentives, such as potential salary, job stability, and the opportunity for upward mobility, become critical considerations for students as they make career choices (Abes, Jones & Stewart, 2023). These motivations are intertwined with psycho-social influences, as students are often drawn to careers that not only align with their personal values but also offer financial security and social status (Meunier, Wade & Jenkins, 2012). As a result, students' career decisions are not made in isolation but are shaped by the interplay of learned behaviors from their social networks, the social environments they are embedded in, their evolving identity-based associations, and their desire to meet socioeconomic needs (Bandura, 2021). The complex interaction of these factors illustrates how both psychological and social elements, alongside external economic motivations, guide students' career choices as they prepare to enter the workforce (Knightbridge, 2014).

Differential Association Theory

In contrast, Edwin Sutherland's differential association theory argues that individuals learn values, behaviors, and norms through interactions with others, particularly within close social groups (Maloku, 2020; McCarthy, 1996). The theory posits that behavior is a result of exposure to different social influences, where individuals adopt the attitudes and behaviors of those they are most frequently in contact with (Knightbridge, 2014). These learned behaviors

are shaped by the content and frequency of interactions, meaning that people are more likely to adopt behaviors that are reinforced by their peer groups, mentors, and social environments. Thus, work-related skill, for example, is not inherent but learned through associations with individuals who espouse such skill as acceptably required (Maloku, 2020).

In the context of students' career choices, the theory explains how social environments and interactions within close-knit groups, such as peers, mentors, and academic communities, shape students' career aspirations (Johnson, 2020). Students develop psycho-social values and ideals based on the attitudes, values, and behaviors they are exposed to, internalizing these as part of their identity (Audley & Jović, 2020). If a student's peer group or mentors value certain professions or career paths, the student is more likely to be influenced by these norms and adopt similar aspirations. This aligns with the formation of identity-based associations, where students' career decisions are influenced by their need to align with the social expectations of their immediate groups (Maloku, 2020). Furthermore, socioeconomic motivations interact with these social influences, as students not only consider career choices that reflect their personal values and ideals but also those that offer financial stability and upward mobility which may be completely inimical to group ideals (Knightbridge, 2014). Thus, though differential association theory provides a framework for understanding how students' career choices are shaped by the interplay of learned behaviors, and social environments, the internalization of socio-economic aspirations within their social networks may be more innate, intuitive, rather than learned (Maloku, 2020; McCarthy, 1996).

The implications of both theories for this study suggest that both psycho-social values and socioeconomic motivations may likely play significant roles in predicting students' career choices. As such, students' career decisions are likely products of the dynamic interaction between their learned psycho-social values and the socioeconomic incentives they are exposed to, with both factors serving as key predictors of professional trajectories motives_ whether acculturated value or economic incentive.

Related Studies

Career choices refer to the decisions individuals make regarding their professional paths, and these choices encompass the selection of a specific occupation or field of expertise. These decisions are typically influenced by various factors, including personal interests, aptitudes, educational background, values, and societal trends (Shahzad, Zahra & Ahmed, 2014). However, ideally, the process of making career choices involves a comprehensive evaluation of one's skills, preferences, and aspirations in conjunction with the opportunities available in the labor market (Savickas, 2013).

Academic literature often categorizes career choices into distinct fields or industries and each of these categories offer a unique set of opportunities and challenges. Broadly, the categories include STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), business and management, healthcare and medicine, arts and humanities, social sciences, education, public service and government, and environmental sciences related careers (Atewologun, Kutzer, Doldor, Anderson & Sealy, 2017).

There is however sufficient evidence in the literature that one's career choices are significantly influenced by individual's group or cultural identity. Likewise, cultural norms and societal expectations within a specific social group one belongs contribute to perceptions of suitable career paths (Li, Hou & Jia, 2015). Moreover, the presence of role models and mentors within one's cultural identity has been found to have often shaped and guided career

aspirations. Literature also stress that while choices can be made, limitations set by one's cultural background, access to educational and professional resources may affect the range of career opportunities available to individuals (Austin, 2002).

Simultaneously, career choices have been found connected to the ongoing process of identity development. During the exploration stage, individuals often actively engage with various interests and values that influence their career preferences (Eccles, 2009). But as identity solidifies through commitment, individuals make informed career choices that fit-in with their self-concept and life roles (Dasgupta, 2011). The work by Erikson and Super as cited in Maree (2018) emphasized the integral role of identity formation in shaping professional decisions, and stressed that the dynamic nature of the relationship between identity development and career choices are tightly related. By implication, fresh graduates entering the job market may have limited career choices acting upon how their careers choices have been conditioned by the norms of the groups they have belonged.

Methods

This study employed a cross-sectional survey method to investigate the relationship between psycho-social values and socioeconomic motivations as predictor of career choices among Delta State University, Abraka fresh graduates. Data collection was facilitated through a structured questionnaire, which was designed to measure the three key variables- psycho-social values, socioeconomic motivations and career choices.

The sample size of 300 was determined using Taro Yamane's formula to ensure statistical power and representativeness. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure coverage across different disciplines, tribal diversities, and final-year students who were graduating from Delta State University, Abraka from a population of 1200 students preparing for the job market. Data analysis was performed using SPSS Version 23. Correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis were then used to examine the relationships between psycho-social values, socioeconomic motivations, and career choices.

However, ethical considerations were meticulously addressed throughout the study. Basically, informed consent was obtained from all participants to ensure their understanding of the study's purpose and their voluntary participation. Confidentiality was also maintained by anonymizing responses. Participants were also assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any point before completion of the data without penalty.

Results

300 questionnaire copies were distributed to 300 respondents. Of the total questionnaire copies, 289 copies were duly filled and retrieved. The following constitutes the demographic composition of the participants: 59% of the respondents were female while 41% were male. The age distribution of the respondents fell within a close age range bracket of 21 and 28 with the modal age being 24. The mean age of respondents was 23.5. Respondents were selected across a wide range of departments and across different fields and faculties. All the participants were fresh graduates who were recently convocated by the university (Delta State University, Abraka). Of all the convocated students, 19% graduated with a third class. 53% percent of the respondents graduated with a second class lower, and 32% graduated with a second-class upper division. 94% of the respondents admitted belonging to at least one social group, and one peer group.

Pearson Correlation Analysis
Table 1: Pearson Correlation Coefficients

	Psycho-Social Values	Socioeconomic Motivations
Psycho-Social Values	1.00	0.45**
Socioeconomic Motivations	0.45**	1.00
Career Choices	0.56**	0.62**

Note: **$p < 0.01$

The correlation between psycho-social values and career choices is moderate to strong ($r=0.56$, $p < 0.01$), indicating a significant relationship. The correlation between socioeconomic motivations and career choices is stronger ($r=0.62$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that socioeconomic factors have a more pronounced influence on career decisions.

Multiple Regression Analysis
Table 2: Regression Coefficients

Predictor Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients (B)	Standardized Coefficients (β)	t	p-value
Constant	1.85		3.45	0.001
Psycho-Social Values	0.40	0.45	4.50	0.0001
Socioeconomic Motivations	0.55	0.50	5.25	0.00001

Table 3: Model Summary

Model	R	R²	Adjusted R²	F	p-value
Model 1	0.69	0.48	0.46	25.75	0.0001

The multiple regression analysis shows that both psycho-social values and socioeconomic motivations significantly predict career choices. The model explains 48% of the variance in career choices ($R^2 =0.48$). Socioeconomic motivations ($\beta=0.50$, $p < 0.0001$) have a stronger effect on career choices compared to psycho-social values ($\beta=0.45$, $p < 0.0001$). This indicates that while psycho-social values are a significant predictor, socioeconomic motivations have a more substantial impact on career decisions.

Discussion of Findings
The findings from this study reveal that both psycho-social values and socioeconomic motivations significantly influence career choices among fresh graduates. The Pearson correlation analysis shows a moderate to strong relationship between psycho-social values and career choices ($r = 0.56$, $p < 0.01$) which suggests that students' internalized norms and ideals shape their professional aspirations to a notable extent. However, socioeconomic motivations exhibit a stronger correlation with career choices ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.01$) which indicates that financial considerations and the desire for job stability play a more pronounced role in shaping career decisions. Furthermore, the multiple regression analysis supports the notion that both psycho-social values and socioeconomic motivations are significant predictors of career choices. The model accounts for 48% of the variance in career choices, with socioeconomic motivations having a higher impact ($\beta = 0.50$, $p < 0.0001$) compared to psycho-social values ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < 0.0001$). This indicates the dual influence of internal values and external economic factors on career decisions. This suggests that although personal ideals and cultural influences are important, economic incentives often have a more decisive effect on the career trajectories of new graduates.

The study's findings largely support the anticipated implications derived from Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory and Edwin Sutherland's differential association theory (Shahzad, Zahra & Ahmed, 2014; Knightbridge, 2014). Bandura's theory did posit that career choices are shaped by the interplay between personal factors, such as internalized values, and environmental influences (Nabavi, 2012; (Maloku, 2020; McCarthy, 1996; Meunier, Wade & Jenkins, 2012). This is reflected in the moderate to strong correlation found between psycho-social values and career choices, confirming that students' professional aspirations are indeed influenced by their observed behaviors and interactions (Eccles, 2009; Dasgupta, 2011). Similarly, Sutherland's differential association theory did support the notion that social environments play a crucial role in shaping career decisions, as evidenced by the significant relationship between psycho-social values and career aspirations (Maloku, 2020). However, the stronger impact of socioeconomic motivations on career choices suggests that although internalized values are important, economic incentives have a more pronounced effect on career decision-making (Atewologun *et al.,* 2017). This finding corroborates the literature's emphasis on the role of financial considerations in career decision-making (Abes, Jones & Stewart, 2023). Thus, the results validate the hypothesis that students' career choices are a product of both their learned values and the economic context.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study's findings imply that both psycho-social values and socioeconomic motivations are pivotal in shaping students' career choices, with socioeconomic factors having a more pronounced impact. This stresses the need for career guidance programmes to address not only the internal values and aspirations of students but also the external economic realities they face. For the current study, this means reinforcing the integration of both personal and economic considerations in career counseling.

In recommendation, it is important to;

1. implement programmes that promote cultural awareness and diversity on campus. These initiatives can help students appreciate different perspectives, reducing the potential for conformity to dominant norms and fostering a more inclusive environment.
2. enhance mentorship programmes to encourage diverse mentor-mentee relationships. This can expose students to a variety of perspectives thereby mitigating the risk of undue influence from a single group and promoting a more well-rounded approach to career decision-making.
3. integrate cultural sensitivity into career counseling services by recognizing the impact of differential association on career choices. Counselors should be trained to navigate the complexities of cultural assimilation and identity development by offering tailored guidance that respects individual authenticity while addressing societal expectations.

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