Exploring the Factors Influencing School Students' Involvement in TVET: A Case Study in Kuala Rompin

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Abstract

This study explores the underlying factors contributing to the limited involvement of secondary school students in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in Kuala Rompin, Pahang. Despite various national policies and reforms aimed at promoting vocational education, participation rates among rural students remain low and inconsistent. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five key informants, including TVET lecturers, institutional administrators, and a district education officer. Thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) framework, revealed five key themes: (1) social influence weakening student choices, (2) weak personal attraction toward TVET, (3) educational support gaps, (4) economic constraints and limited access to facilities, and (5) weak promotion and exposure to vocational pathways. These themes highlight how socio-cultural perceptions, institutional barriers, and economic limitations collectively shape students' disengagement from TVET. The findings offer insights into the complexity of educational inequalities in rural Malaysia and emphasize the need for policy reforms, improved institutional support, and stronger community-based promotion efforts to enhance TVET visibility and acceptance among school students. This study also contributes to theory by applying both Labeling Theory and Social Inequality Theory in the context of Malaysian vocational education. The findings underscore the need for systemic reforms that address socio-cultural stigma, strengthen institutional support, and provide equitable access to vocational opportunities. In conclusion, the study underscores the urgent need for reforms that challenge stigma, improve institutional support, and expand access to vocational education. By applying Labelling Theory and Social Inequality Theory, it provides a nuanced understanding of how social perceptions and structural barriers shape students' disengagement from TVET, offering practical insights for policymakers and educators.

1. Introduction

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) plays a critical role in fostering a skilled workforce and supporting national economic development. In Malaysia, the government has strategically positioned TVET under the

Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 and the Industry 4.0 agenda as a pathway to address youth unemployment and promote social mobility, especially in rural areas. Despite these efforts, the enrolment of secondary school students in vocational education remains alarmingly low, particularly in rural districts like Kuala Rompin, Pahang. This study is grounded in the belief that understanding localised barriers is essential to addressing this gap. The research focuses on exploring the perceptions, challenges, and systemic issues that hinder school students from engaging in TVET.

Despite Malaysia's national agenda to strengthen Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), participation among school students remains critically low, especially in rural areas such as Kuala Rompin. Institutional enrolment data between 2020 and 2024 show a declining trend, with sharp drops at key transitional stages such as from the Malaysian Vocational Certificate (SVM) to the Malaysian Vocational Diploma (DVM). This downward pattern signals persistent structural barriers that affect the sustainability of student participation in TVET programmes (KPM, 2020).

One of the most pressing issues is the strong social stigma that continues to frame TVET as a "second-class" pathway. Studies have shown that many communities perceive vocational education as less prestigious than academic routes, influencing parents and peers to discourage students from considering TVET (Nawi et al., 2024; Mitchell & Buntic, 2022). Such labelling negatively impacts students' confidence and contributes to the wider social belief that TVET graduates have fewer opportunities compared to their academic counterparts (Eze et al., 2022; Hong et al., 2022).

Financial constraints further intensify the problem, particularly among students from low-income families in rural areas. Research indicates that the high cost of education, coupled with limited access to financial aid, prevents many students from pursuing or completing TVET programmes (Marzuki et al., 2022). The Public Service Commission Report (2023) also highlighted financial hardship as a key barrier for students from B40 households, who often face competing priorities between education and basic living expenses. This reflects the broader social inequality that continues to hinder equal access to vocational opportunities (Ogur, 2023).

The inconsistent quality of TVET programmes across institutions also undermines participation. Many schools and colleges struggle with outdated training facilities, insufficient industrial linkages, and limited opportunities for practical exposure, all of which diminish students' trust in the relevance of TVET (Yang, 2024; Makinde & Bamiro, 2022). Similarly, weaknesses in teaching quality and lack of systematic curriculum alignment with industry expectations raise doubts about whether TVET graduates can truly meet market demands (Erima, 2021).

Another critical issue is the lack of early awareness and structured exposure to TVET. Many students and parents remain uninformed about the long-term benefits of vocational education, including its potential to provide sustainable careers with competitive salaries. Studies show that the absence of proper promotion, outreach, and role models contributes to the persistent lack of interest in TVET among rural youth (Razak et al., 2022; Zahari & Omar, 2021). Consequently, there exists a pronounced rural–urban gap in participation, where only 15% of rural students pursue TVET compared to 30% in urban areas (KPM, 2020).

Collectively, these interrelated issues including social stigma, financial barriers, inconsistent programme quality and lack of awareness form the background of the problem that this study seeks to address. Without adequate interventions, the low level of TVET participation will continue to limit Malaysia's ability to produce a skilled workforce for critical sectors such as engineering, construction, and information technology (Amin et al., 2023). Understanding these challenges in the specific context of Kuala Rompin is therefore essential in designing more inclusive and strategic solutions that can reposition TVET as a credible, competitive, and prestigious educational pathway for Malaysian school students.

2. Literature Review

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) has long been viewed as a strategic instrument for national development, particularly in bridging educational gaps and preparing youth for industry-ready employment (Ali et al., 2024; Rodzidah et al., 2024). In Malaysia, the government's commitment to TVET is enshrined in national policies such as the Eleventh Malaysia Plan and the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030, which emphasize inclusive education and workforce readiness. However, despite these efforts, enrolment rates into TVET pathways among secondary school students, especially those in rural districts like Kuala Rompin, remain critically low (Ridzuan & Rahman, 2022).

The first contributing factor is social influence, particularly the impact of family, peers, and community perceptions. According to Labeling Theory, when students are constantly exposed to the notion that TVET is a

second-tier option for academically "weak" individuals, they internalize these labels and self-limit their aspirations (Gyau, 2024). This is consistent with Aldossari's (2020) findings in Saudi Arabia, where stigma around vocational pathways continues to shape negative student attitudes. Ahmad (2022) further noted that in Malaysia, social prestige associated with academic routes often overshadows the value of technical careers, reinforcing the stereotype that TVET is not a desirable path. Secondly, a lack of personal attraction toward TVET has been found to affect student involvement. Many students express confusion or disinterest due to a lack of motivation, exposure, or clarity about the career prospects in TVET fields.

This aligns with findings by Ali et al. (2024), who emphasized that without strong role models or personal ambition, students fail to see the long-term benefit of vocational education. Here, Social Inequality Theory plays a role, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds often struggle with confidence and career direction due to limited cultural capital and support systems (Rodzidah et al., 2024). A third issue is the gap in educational support, particularly from schools and teachers. Research shows that many educators in mainstream schools are undertrained or unaware of TVET opportunities and therefore rarely guide students toward this path (Ridzuan & Rahman, 2022).

Moreover, school environments often overemphasize academic excellence, neglecting the importance of hands-on learning. Total Quality Management underscores that consistent institutional support, teacher involvement, and student-centered learning are critical to raising TVET's image and effectiveness (Almuntfjy et al., 2024). Economic constraints and limited access to facilities form another barrier to TVET participation.

According to Merriam and Grenier (2019), rural students often face logistical challenges such as transport, accommodation, and hidden costs associated with training. These factors disproportionately affect students from low-income families, creating systemic disadvantages, a key concern within the Social Inequality framework. Finally, weak promotion and lack of exposure to vocational pathways further discourage student involvement. Rodzidah et al. (2024) criticized existing TVET promotional strategies as fragmented and urban-centric. Students in rural areas are often unaware of the full spectrum of TVET opportunities available to them. TQM suggests that without an integrated system that prioritizes outreach, stakeholder collaboration, and sustained communication, student enrolment will continue to suffer.

In summary, the literature strongly affirms that the issues limiting TVET participation among school students in rural Malaysia are multi-layered. These include negative social labeling, internal motivation gaps, structural inequality, institutional weaknesses, and poor promotional frameworks. By synthesizing findings across both global and local contexts and anchoring them in relevant theories, this study builds a clear foundation for understanding and addressing the root causes of student disengagement in vocational education.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore the underlying factors influencing school students' participation in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in Kuala Rompin, Pahang. The case study approach was considered most suitable as it allows for rich, context-specific insights into real-life educational phenomena, aligning directly with the study's objectives (Yin, 2018).

Five key informants were selected through purposive sampling, guided by explicit inclusion criteria. Participants were chosen for their professional roles, direct involvement in TVET, and capacity to provide informed perspectives on the challenges of student participation. The sample comprised two TVET lecturers, who contributed classroom-level perspectives on student learning, motivation, and engagement; two institutional administrators, who provided insights into enrolment processes, resource allocation, and institutional strategies for promoting TVET; and one district education officer, who offered a policy-level view on planning, implementation, and oversight of vocational education. These characteristics ensured the sample represented operational, administrative, and policy dimensions, thereby providing a holistic and multi-level understanding of the issues under investigation. Although the sample size was small, the diversity of roles and perspectives provided sufficient breadth and depth of data, consistent with the principle of depth over breadth in qualitative research (Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Yin, 2018).

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary method of data collection, as this approach offers both structure and flexibility in exploring participants' experiences in depth. All interviews were conducted online via Google Meet, a choice made to overcome geographical distance and scheduling limitations while ensuring accessibility for participants. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes to one hour, guided by a carefully

developed protocol to capture detailed accounts of participants' experiences and perceptions. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Malaysia, audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. To ensure accessibility for international reporting, selected excerpts were translated into English while retaining their original meaning. Translations were cross-checked to minimise the risk of misinterpretation and preserve the authenticity of participants' voices

Data were analysed thematically using the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2021). The process involved iterative engagement with the transcripts, including familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of subthemes, construction of overarching themes, review of thematic coherence, and production of the final report. Coding was conducted manually and refined through repeated comparison until consensus was reached. This rigorous procedure ensured that the emerging themes were firmly grounded in participant narratives while maintaining analytic clarity.

Several strategies were employed to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study. Member checking was conducted by sharing interview summaries with participants to confirm accuracy, while an audit trail was maintained to document decisions made during the research process (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Ethical approval was obtained from the university's research ethics committee, and participants were assured of anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation at all stages of the study.

Despite these strengths, the study is not without limitations. The small sample size may restrict the transferability of findings to other districts or contexts. However, this was offset by the deliberate inclusion of participants from multiple roles, which ensured diversity of perspectives across operational, institutional, and policy levels. In addition, as the researcher, my prior understanding of the local educational landscape could have influenced the interpretation of data. To mitigate this, reflexive journaling was employed throughout the research process, alongside member checking and peer discussions, to enhance transparency and minimise potential bias.

Taken together, this methodological design was well-suited to capturing the nuanced, context-specific experiences of stakeholders in Kuala Rompin and provided a reliable foundation for exploring the barriers that continue to affect school students' engagement with TVET.
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4. Results and Discussion

4.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the study, derived through Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) thematic analysis framework. The analysis produced a total of 87 codes, which were categorised into five interrelated themes and eleven subthemes. Collectively, these themes capture the complex interplay of social, personal, institutional, and structural factors influencing secondary school students' participation in TVET within the rural district of Kuala Rompin. To ensure transparency, selected excerpts from participants' narratives are included to demonstrate how codes were derived. Each theme is discussed in detail, followed by interpretation through relevant theoretical frameworks and comparison with existing literature. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings, highlighting key patterns and their implications for policy and practice. An overview of the themes, subthemes, and code distribution is presented in Table 4.1.

4.1 Themes Emerging from the Data

4.1.1 Theme 1: Social Influence Weakening Student Choices

This theme emerged as the most dominant, with 32 codes across two subthemes: Family and Peer Influence (19 codes) and TVET Stigma and Negative Perceptions (13 codes). The findings indicate that students' educational decisions are strongly shaped by external expectations, particularly from parents and peers, which often reinforce the perception that TVET is a "second-class" option compared to the academic track.

As Participant 2 noted:

"Parents often tell their children to take the academic stream. They say vocational education is only for students who are weak in academics."

This statement highlights how family narratives create a social filter that discourages students from considering vocational education. According to Labelling Theory, external categorisations, such as equating TVET with academic weakness, are internalised by students, shaping their self-identity and limiting their willingness to pursue vocational pathways. These findings are consistent with past research. Nawi et al. (2024) found that Malaysian parents tend to prioritise academic achievement, while Eze et al. (2022) demonstrated how peer influence reinforced the marginalisation of vocational education in Nigeria. Together, these studies emphasise the global challenge of overcoming stigma and cultural bias surrounding TVET.

This suggests that unless negative social labelling is addressed at the community level, interventions targeting students alone will be insufficient. Family-inclusive career guidance, exposure to successful TVET graduates, and broader cultural campaigns are essential to reshape the narrative that TVET is only for "weaker" students.

4.1.2 Theme 2: Weak Personal Attraction toward TVET

The second theme, with 11 codes, was represented by the subtheme Student Interest and Motivation. Participants emphasised that many students lacked intrinsic motivation or awareness of TVET's potential benefits. Instead, students tended to equate success exclusively with pursuing academic pathways leading to university.

As Participant 3 explained:

"Most students don't really know what TVET can offer. They only think about university after SPM, so they ignore vocational options."

This reflects how the absence of role models, limited career counselling, and lack of clear information reduce TVET's personal appeal. From a psychological perspective, motivation is strongly shaped by exposure and self-belief, and without structured awareness-building, students are unlikely to consider vocational pathways. The findings align with research by Razak et al. (2022), who noted that awareness significantly influences career decisions among Malaysian youth, and Zahari and Omar (2021), who found that students' lack of confidence in vocational prospects contributed to low enrolment.

This shows that weak personal attraction is not merely an individual failing but a systemic issue rooted in insufficient career guidance and exposure. Addressing this requires stronger role-modelling initiatives, integration of TVET pathways into school counselling, and programmes that highlight long-term career progression in vocational fields.

4.1.3 Theme 3: Educational Support Gaps

This theme comprised 12 codes, with two subthemes: Role of Schools and Teachers (10 codes) and Quality of TVET Curriculum and Instruction (2 codes). The findings revealed that schools often prioritised academic performance and university entry, leaving vocational pathways largely overlooked.

As Participant 1 commented:

"In schools, teachers rarely explain about TVET. The focus is always on academic achievement and university pathways."

This observation raises questions about the adequacy of school-level guidance in preparing students for diverse educational trajectories. Within the framework of Total Quality Management (TQM), the lack of systematic advocacy, weak stakeholder engagement, and absence of continuous improvement reflect a failure to promote vocational education as a credible alternative. These findings are consistent with Yang (2024), who highlighted how weak institutional support in China contributed to declining TVET participation, and Erima (2021), who identified similar trends in Uganda.

Unless schools integrate vocational guidance into their practices, including structured career talks and collaboration with TVET institutions, students will remain unaware of TVET opportunities, thereby reinforcing systemic bias towards academic tracks.

4.1.4 Theme 4: Economic Constraints and Limited Access to Facilities

This theme accounted for 13 codes, spread across Financial Challenges and Living Costs (7 codes) and Facilities and Infrastructure (6 codes). Students from low-income households described financial hardship as a major deterrent, noting that costs related to transportation, hostel accommodation, and daily living limited their ability to consider TVET.

As Participant 4 explained:

"Some students want to join vocational school, but their families cannot afford transport or hostel fees. That is why they stop considering it."

This highlights how economic inequality functions as a structural barrier to education. According to Social Inequality Theory, students from disadvantaged households face disproportionate obstacles in accessing TVET opportunities. Poor infrastructure and limited facilities further exacerbate the divide, making TVET less attractive and less feasible for rural students. Previous studies support these findings. Marzuki et al. (2022) noted that B40 households in Malaysia often deprioritised TVET due to financial limitations, while Ogur (2023) observed similar challenges in rural Kenya.

Without targeted financial aid, subsidies, and infrastructural improvements, TVET will remain inaccessible to disadvantaged groups, perpetuating cycles of inequality and limiting the sector's ability to contribute to national workforce development.

4.1.5 Theme 5: Weak Promotion and Exposure to Vocational Pathways

The final theme consisted of 19 codes across four subthemes: TVET Promotion and Industrial Exposure (7 codes), Information and Access (5 codes), Government Policies and Support (2 codes), and Industry Networks and Entrepreneurship (5 codes). The data highlighted insufficient outreach, weak industry collaboration, and limited visibility of government initiatives.

As Participant 5 remarked:

"Students don't get enough information about vocational education. They don't know the entry routes or the kind of jobs they can get after."

This indicates that weak communication and fragmented promotion strategies hinder students' understanding of TVET. From a TQM perspective, this reflects a lack of stakeholder engagement and continuous improvement in promoting vocational pathways. The findings are supported by Zahari and Omar (2021), who argued that information gaps limit trust in TVET, and Amin et al. (2023), who stressed the importance of industry collaboration in shaping vocational pathways.

Unless systematic and sustained promotional efforts are developed, integrating schools, industries, and policymakers, students will continue to view TVET as a marginalised option. Effective campaigns must be tailored to rural contexts and highlight tangible career opportunities

Table 4.1 : Themes, Subthemes, and Code Distribution from Thematic Analysis

Theme	Subtheme	Number of Codes
Social Influence Weakening Student Choices	Family and Peer Influence	19
	TVET Stigma and Negative Perceptions	13
Weak Personal Attraction toward TVET	Student Interest and Motivation	11
Educational Support Gaps	Role of Schools and Teachers	10
	TVET Curriculum Quality	2
Economic Constraints and Limited Access	Financial Challenges and Living Costs	7
	Facilities and Infrastructure	6
Weak Promotion and Exposure to TVET	Government Policies and Support	2
	Information and Access to TVET	5
	TVET Promotion and Industrial Exposure	7
	Industry Network and Entrepreneurship	5

4.2 Summary of Findings

The analysis generated a total of 87 codes, which were organised into five themes and eleven subthemes. Among these, the most dominant barrier to TVET participation was social influence and stigma, particularly parental and peer expectations that framed TVET as a "second-class" pathway. The second most prominent barrier was weak promotion and exposure, reflecting insufficient outreach, poor industry collaboration, and limited access to accurate information about vocational opportunities. Other factors, including weak personal motivation, educational support gaps, and economic constraints, further compounded the problem. Taken together, the findings demonstrate that barriers to TVET participation are multi-layered, cutting across the individual, social, institutional, and structural levels.

Overall, while financial and infrastructural challenges remain significant, the study reveals that cultural stigma and weak institutional support are the most pervasive obstacles to TVET participation. These findings underscore the importance of comprehensive strategies that address both societal perceptions and systemic shortcomings to strengthen the role of TVET in education.

5. Conclusion

This study has provided valuable insights into the complex factors contributing to the limited engagement of secondary school students in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in the rural district of Kuala Rompin, Pahang. Through qualitative thematic analysis, five key themes were identified: social influence weakening student choices, weak personal attraction toward TVET, educational support gaps, economic constraints and limited access to facilities, and weak promotion and exposure to vocational pathways. Supported by eleven subthemes, these themes reveal how a combination of social stigma, lack of motivation, institutional neglect, economic hardship, and insufficient outreach collectively shape student attitudes toward vocational education, particularly in rural contexts.

The findings also reflect deeply rooted societal narratives and systemic shortcomings that hinder participation in TVET. Labeling Theory and Social Inequality Theory provide critical lenses to understand how negative stereotypes, unequal access, and institutional prioritisation of academic tracks continue to marginalise TVET as a "second-choice" pathway. In addition, the Total Quality Management (TQM) model underscores the importance of continuous improvement across institutional touchpoints, from career guidance and curriculum delivery to industry collaboration and promotional strategies.

Addressing these barriers requires a multifaceted response. Educational institutions must actively integrate vocational awareness into school culture, while policymakers should implement targeted strategies that elevate the status of TVET in the public eye. Equally, families and communities need to be engaged to challenge outdated perceptions and create supportive environments for alternative educational choices. In conclusion, this study highlights the urgent need for systemic reforms that reimagine vocational education as an accessible, respected, and strategic avenue for youth development in Malaysia. By embracing an inclusive and evidence-driven

approach, stakeholders can better align TVET with the aspirations and realities of rural students, ensuring no learner is left behind in the nation's pursuit of shared prosperity and skilled workforce development.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest. This study was conducted independently and without any financial, professional, or personal affiliations that could have influenced the research process, data interpretation, or reporting of findings.

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