Educational Choice and the Willingness to Apply of Higher Vocational Students in Guangdong Province, China: The Mediating Role of Career Decision-making Self-efficacy

Wan-Li Gao
Dhurakij Pundit University
Guangdong Industry Polytechnic

Hsuan-Po Wang
Dhurakij Pundit University

This study explores the influence of educational choice on the willingness to apply and career decision-making self-efficacy. A questionnaire was conducted on 1,391 freshmen from six higher vocational colleges in Guangdong Province, China, using educational choice, career decision-making self-efficacy and the willingness to apply scales. The results showed that career decision-making self-efficacy has a mediating role in the significant positive effect of educational choice on the willingness to apply. Therefore, Chinese educational institutions and policy makers should cultivate vocational students’ career decision-making self-efficacy to improve the confidence and ability in career decision-making, and better understand professional career field.

Keywords: educational choice, the willingness to apply, career decision-making self-efficacy, mediating role

INTRODUCTION

In Guangdong, China, the choice of education and the willingness to apply for higher vocational students is an issue of great concern (Xiong, 2019). With social development and economic change, vocational education plays an important role in improving the people’s high technology and high skills (Xu, 2020). However, concerns about talent training remain, especially in terms of meeting the needs of sustainable economic development. The government has adopted a series of policy measures to solve this problem, but in fact there is still a gap (Li, 2022). In this context, students’ educational choice and willingness to apply for the examination have become the focus of urgent research, especially the key role of self-efficacy of career decision-making in this process (Jiang et al., 2022; Szymkowiak et al., 2021).

Xiong (2019) stressed the importance of educational choice when Chinese vocational students are faced with career choices. The Chinese government attaches great importance to the cultivation of high-quality workers. However, from the perspective of the overall needs of the society, there are still problems that cannot meet the requirements of sustainable economic development (Li, 2022). Thanh et al. (2022) pointed out that schools and majors with high academic quality are more likely to attract students’ interest. Students’
negative academic views may lead to negative entry intentions, and students usually consider their future career prospects to decide which school or major to apply for (Avolio et al., 2020; Barone & Assirelli, 2020; Bordón et al., 2020; Jin, 2020). In addition, social events and policy changes can have an impact on students’ willingness to register (Ochilova, 2020). Therefore, the choice of student education is not only a part of individual development, but also a key part of social and economic development. In this context, the choice of education has a profound impact on students’ willingness to register. Educational choice not only involves the individual career development, but also directly related to the quality and structure of the social labor force. Studies have shown that educational selection plays a guiding role in students’ career path and development direction (Entrich, 2015). Therefore, a deep understanding of the influence of educational choice on the willingness to register will help to provide students with more sensible career planning and development direction. Therefore, this study puts forward hypothesis 1: The choice of vocational students in Guangdong, China has a significant impact on the intention to apply for the examination.

The self-efficacy of career decision-making plays a key role in the educational choice and examination willingness of higher vocational students. The concept stems from the self-efficacy theory of psychologist Bandura (1977), emphasizing that an individual’s confidence in their abilities influences their behavior and outcomes. Abdul-Rahim et al. (2021) found that career decision-making about self-efficacy was closely associated with an individual’s ability to make educational choices. Specifically, career decision-making self-efficacy is incremental predictive in predicting career decisions and school adaptation (Storme et al., 2017). Muturi and Wangeri (2022) divided career decision-making self-efficacy into two categories including high and low science ability, and pointed out that there was a positive correlation between low science self-efficacy and career decision-making, while high science self-efficacy was negatively associated with students’ ability to decide career choices. This suggests that students’ self-efficacy may show differences in different levels of scientific competence, with complex and diverse factors influencing career choice. On the other hand, Bettinger et al. (2012) found that the combination of assistance and information processing provided by schools can significantly increase students’ willingness to register, and ultimately improve the university enrollment rate. Therefore, this study proposes hypothesis 2: Educational choice has a significant impact on career decision-making self-efficacy.

Students shape their confidence in their career decision-making ability through educational choice, thus influencing the formation of their career decision-making self-efficacy. Career decision-making self-efficacy encourages students to more actively express their willingness to apply for a specific major by influencing their confidence and tendency for a specific career (Muturi & Wangeri, 2022; Nemar et al., 2020). This not only reflects executive success and career decision-making beliefs, but also plays a mediating role in both parental autonomous support and academic engagement (Jiang et al., 2022). Muturi and Wangeri (2022) shows that there is a positive correlation between career decision-making self-efficacy and career choice under the dimensions of strong and weak scientific self-efficacy. Ebner et al. (2018) suggests that intra-individual control beliefs are positively associated with occupational self-efficacy. Based on these findings, this study proposes hypothesis 3: Career decision-making self-efficacy has a mediating role in the significant impact of educational choice on the willingness to register.

Prospect theory holds that individual concerns about potential losses enable them to focus more attention on avoiding potential risks and losses rather than simply pursuing potential gains (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). The prospect theory provides a useful perspective for deeply understanding the psychological process of educational selection and examination intention of Chinese higher vocational students. In the context of higher vocational students, this means that they are more concerned about the possible negative consequences in their educational choices and career decisions, such as leading to professional inadaptation or employment difficulties. In addition, studies have shown that students’ decision-making process is influenced by sensitivity to potential losses, which affects their attitude and motivation towards educational choices and willingness to register for education (Hameleers, 2021; Falk et al., 2023). Prospect theory provides guidance for understanding and deeply dissecting students’ psychological factors in career decision-making, and also provides a theoretical basis for developing more targeted intervention strategies in the future.
Therefore, the research objective of this study is to deeply explore the influence of educational choice of vocational students in Guangdong of China on the willingness to register, and to focus on the mediating role of career decision-making self-efficacy in this process. In addition, this study uses prospect theory to gain insight into students’ concerns about potential losses in educational choices and career decisions and how such concerns affect individual attitudes and motivation. Based on the above, this study explores the following research questions:

A. Is there a significant impact on the educational choice of higher vocational students in Guangdong of China on their willingness to apply?
B. Is there a significant impact on the educational choice of higher vocational students in Guangdong of China on their self-effectiveness of career decision-making?
C. Does career decision-making self-efficacy play a mediating role in the influence of educational choice on the willingness to apply?
D. How does the prospect theory explain the concern of Chinese vocational students about potential losses in their educational choice and career decision-making, and the impact of such concern on their willingness to apply?

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research Framework

Based on the prospect theory, this study explores the relationship between educational choice and career decision-making self-efficacy of higher vocational students in Guangdong Province, China, the influence between educational choice and the willingness to register, and whether the career decision-making self-efficacy has the mediating role between educational choice and the willingness to register. The research framework is shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1
FIGURE OF EDUCATIONAL CHOICE DECISION-MAKING OF HIGHER VOCATIONAL ATUDENTS BASED ON PROSPECT THEORY

Note: The figure was built by the study.

Research Method

The study was conducted using a questionnaire survey method. Before questionnaire distribution, quality control, questionnaire setting and reward were took consideration into the questionnaire star. Second, before taking the test, the researcher communicates with the class teacher of the research object in advance, including the research aims, research purpose. After obtaining the consent of the class teacher, the class teacher is responsible for issuing the questionnaire, giving informed consent on the home page of the questionnaire, and filling in the unified questionnaire in the class. In order to ensure the objective
authenticity of the questionnaire data, the confidentiality of the study results was reiterated to the research subjects. For example, students fill in the process is voluntary, and have the right to terminate at any time. The research would have identity confidential, content confidential.

Research Participants
Higher vocational college freshmen in Guangdong Province of China are the research participants in this study, in account of the current proportion of Guangdong province in the national vocational education. The number of vocational colleges in Guangdong Province has expanded from 56 in the early days of the founding of the People’s Republic of China to 625 at present (as of 2022), accounting for 42 percent of higher vocational colleges nationwide, and the total number of students reaches 2.805 million. Guangdong Province has the largest vocational education system in China (Southern Network, 2023). Therefore, this study selected 6 higher vocational colleges in Guangdong Province, and the survey subjects covered higher vocational colleges with different disciplines such as comprehensive science and science and technology in Guangdong Province. The six higher vocational colleges are distributed in western Guangdong, eastern Guangdong and the Pearl River Delta of Guangdong Province, and the distribution is relatively uniform in Guangdong Province.

Sampling and Testing
Random convenience sampling was used (Sedgwick, 2013). Ghiselli et al. (1981) proposed that if the study involves a scale, the sample size should be changed to about 10 times the total number of questions. In this study, there are 33 items and 16 subjective open questions. The valid data recovery is about 500 questionnaires. In this study, the freshmen of 6 higher vocational education colleges in different cities in Guangdong Province, China. The study distributed 2,000 questionnaires, and collected 1,847 questionnaires. After deleted invalid questionnaires, the paper finally obtained 1,391 questionnaires. Therefore, the study questionnaires met the sampling criteria. The questionnaire was distributed on 3 May 2023 and completed on 21 May 23.

Research Tool
The questionnaire of this study used the educational choice scale, career decision making self-efficacy scale, and the willingness to apply scale, as described below.

Educational Choice Scale
Educational choice scale was used from Sojkin et al. (2012). The scale consists of 7 items, with Likert 5 points. The answer options are divided from 1 to 5 into “completely inconsistent, inconsistent, unclear, consistent, completely consistent”. All items are first added and then get the average score, the higher the score, the higher the support of students’ educational choice. The total Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient of the educational choice scale was 0.890. The items are shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JX12_01</td>
<td>Family opinions and expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JX12_02</td>
<td>Expected student life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JX12_03</td>
<td>Family financial support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JX12_04</td>
<td>The best chance to find a job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JX12_05</td>
<td>Vocational development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JX12_06</td>
<td>In line with my life ambition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JX12_07</td>
<td>Start living an independent life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note 1: JX=educational choice.

**Career Decision-making Self-efficacy Scale**

Career decision-making self-efficacy scale was developed from Career Decision Self-efficacy Scale Short Form (CDSES-SF) from Fu (2015), which is combined with Betz et al. (1996) on the basis of the scale. The scale is composed of 24 items, answer with Likert scale 5 points scoring way, into “completely inconsistent, inconsistent, unclear, consistent, completely consistent”. The Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient of the overall scale is 0.940 as seen in Table 2.

**TABLE 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ZC13_01</td>
<td>You use the Internet or other media to find the school information or professional information of interest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZC13_02</td>
<td>You choose a suitable major that you are considering or being recommended by others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZC13_03</td>
<td>You are able to make plans for learning goals for the next three or four years based on future school information and professional information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZC13_04</td>
<td>You adjust the learning methods according to the school information or major information, so as to solve the learning difficulties encountered in the selected major.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZC13_05</td>
<td>You accurately evaluate their ability according to known school information or professional information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZC13_06</td>
<td>You choose the future major from the career you have solved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZC13_07</td>
<td>You able to determine the steps to take to complete your school professionally based on known school information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZC13_08</td>
<td>You still stick to your professional or career goals when committed to setbacks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZC13_09</td>
<td>You roughly determine what your ideal job is in the future as currently situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZC13_10</td>
<td>You understand and judge through various ways according to the development trend of the major in the next 3-5 years and the development trend of the major in the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZC13_11</td>
<td>You choose a career or major that matches the desired lifestyle according to your current situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZC13_12</td>
<td>You design the current professional learning plan and future job search plan according to my current learning progress and future employment goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZC13_13</td>
<td>You understand your current professional learning focus clearly, to facilitate the future better docking of the future career requirements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZC13_14</td>
<td>You know the average annual income of a career or professional practitioner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZC13_15</td>
<td>You keep calm face in view of the current learning major and the future career of the major.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZC13_16</td>
<td>You plan to change careers immediately if you are not satisfied with your career or major after choosing it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZC13_17</td>
<td>You know the current learning content in order to achieve the future professional learning goals or the career goals of the proposed employment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZC13_18</td>
<td>You communicate with someone who are already working in a career or area of interest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZC13_19</td>
<td>You choose a career or profession in line with your interests.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZC13_20</td>
<td>You determine the enterprise information or school information related to your possible professional study before applying for the examination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZC13_21</td>
<td>You know what you want to live your life like currently.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I have known the requirements of the major and the enrollment information of the university in the future before applying for the application.

I successfully make an accurate judgment on the assessment of the professional ability of the expected school before applying for the examination.

You determine a reasonable alternative plan before applying for the examination, when you cannot get the preferred major or occupation.

Note 1: ZC=career decision-making self-efficacy.


The Willingness to Apply Scale

The willingness to apply scale was developed by the study. In combination with two research variables (educational choice and career decision-making self-efficacy), the willingness to apply scale was made into the scoring questions. The score ranges from 1 to 5. The higher the score means the more important the proportion of each dimension in the minds of higher vocational students. The Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient of the scale is 0.912, as shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3
THE WILLINGNESS TO APPLY SCALE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BK31_01</td>
<td>Educational choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BK31_02</td>
<td>Career decision-making self-efficacy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: BK=The willingness to apply scale. The table was built by the study.

Research Ethics

This study followed the requirements of National Research Council of Thailand (2015) and followed the principles of respect (2.2), compassion (2.3), and justice (2.4). The study accepted ethical review from the ethics committee of Dhurakij Pundit University in Thailand and conducted relevant studies after obtaining approval from the university. According to the principles, procedures and requirements of the National Research Council of Thailand (2015) guidelines, this study underwent ethical review by the Ethics Committee of the Dhurakij Pundit University of Thailand, who agreed to begin the collection of all study data (review number: 057/65). At the same time, the study applies for academic ethics review to the university, and obtains the review from the university (review date: 10 March, 2023). The collection date of the questionnaire survey was from 3 May to 21 May, 2023.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Research Sample

A total of 2,000 questionnaires were distributed, and 1,847 were recovered. After removing invalid questionnaires, 1,391 formal samples were recovered. Among them, 718 (51.6%) were male and 673 (48.4%) were female.

Reliability and Validity Analysis

This study conducted internal consistency testing on the measurement instruments of educational choice, career decision-making self-efficacy and willingness to apply scale, as shown in Table 4. The overall Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient of the educational choice scale is 0.891, the career decision-making self-efficacy scale is 0.932, and the willingness to apply scale is 0.929. The composite reliability (CR) value...
of the three measurement tools is 0.810, 0.970, 0.928, all greater than the standard value of 0.600. The average variance extracted (AVE) value for the potential variation of the educational choice scale is 0.382, which is less than the standard value 0.500 (the standard value shall be greater than 0.500). Chin (1998) suggested that the square root of the factor load is AVE, and the value of AVE is greater than 0.360 can be done. Fornell and Laecker (1981) recommends that if the AVE value is less than 0.500, but with the CR values greater than a standard value of 0.600 indicates that the scale still has convergent validity and is still acceptable. Educational choice, career decision-making self-efficacy, and willingness to register all showed good consistency (Cronbach’s Alpha>0.700), indicating the good reliability and validity of the three measurement instruments in this study (Nunally, 1978; Raykov & Marcoulides, 2011).

### TABLE 4
RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY TEST OF THE THREE SCALES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Item number</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha</th>
<th>CR</th>
<th>AVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational choice</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.891</td>
<td>0.810</td>
<td>0.382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career decision-making self-efficacy</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0.932</td>
<td>0.970</td>
<td>0.576</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The willingness to apply</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.929</td>
<td>0.928</td>
<td>0.723</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: CR=Composite Reliability. AVE=Average Variance Extracted. The table was built by the study.*

**Common Method Deviation Test**

In this study, the model fit between the single-factor with confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) model and the multi-factor with CFA model was used. If the multi-factor with CFA model adaptation is good, it means that the answer is no classification problem, mainly depending on the size of the adaptation index \( \chi^2 \). The smaller \( \chi^2 \) value means that the common method deviation problem is not serious, and the recovered sample has good maternal representativeness. In this study, the multi-factor with CFA model was moderately well matched, with \( \chi^2 \) value less than the single-factor with CFA. The additional \( p \)-value was significant \((p<0.001)\), indicating that there was no common CMV method bias, and the recovered samples had good maternal representation, as shown in Table 5.

### TABLE 5
COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SINGLE-FACTORIAL AND MUTI-FACTOR WITH CFA MODELS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>( \chi^2 )</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>( \Delta \chi^2 )</th>
<th>( \Delta df )</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>GFI</th>
<th>AGFI</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>RMR</th>
<th>RMAEA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single-factor with CFA</td>
<td>31556.366</td>
<td>1274</td>
<td>0.323</td>
<td>28207.354</td>
<td>785</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.268</td>
<td>0.542</td>
<td>0.091</td>
<td>0.131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-factor with CFA</td>
<td>3349.012</td>
<td>489</td>
<td>0.855</td>
<td>0.834</td>
<td>0.921</td>
<td>0.072</td>
<td>0.065</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Single-factor with CFA sets a factor structure for all items. The table was built by the study.*
Descriptive Statistical Analysis

In this study, 1,391 formal samples were tested for normal testing, and the test results are shown in Table 6. The absolute value of skewness coefficient was less than 2 and kurtosis coefficient was less than 7, all of which met the normal test standard (Curran et al., 1996), indicating the normal distribution.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Skewness</th>
<th>Kurtosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational choice</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.406</td>
<td>0.742</td>
<td>-0.552</td>
<td>0.697</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career decision-making self-efficacy</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.551</td>
<td>0.634</td>
<td>-1.018</td>
<td>2.548</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The willingness to apply</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.456</td>
<td>0.798</td>
<td>-0.712</td>
<td>0.915</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: M=mean, SD=standard deviation. The table was built by the study.

Correlation Analysis

The results of this study showed that the correlation coefficient between 0.365 and 0.590, which is less than the standard value 0.800, indicating the medium-low correlation and significance (p<0.01). Wu (2009) pointed out that the correlation analysis reflects the standard of the linear relationship between the variables, and the larger the correlation coefficient is, the stronger the linear relationship is. In this study, significant positive associations were observed between all the variables. Wu (2009) also proposed that the correlation coefficient should not exceed 0.800, indicating no serious collinearity problem. Therefore, there is no problem of collinearity in this study. The diagonal data is the square root of the AVE, used to test the discriminant validity. The AVE value is greater than the correlation coefficient, indicating sufficient discriminant validity (Hulland, 1999), as shown in Table 7.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>JX</th>
<th>ZC</th>
<th>BK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JX</td>
<td>0.618</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZC</td>
<td>0.587**</td>
<td>0.759</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BK</td>
<td>0.365**</td>
<td>0.448**</td>
<td>0.850</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note 1: JX=educational choice ; ZC=career decision-making self-efficacy ; BK=the willingness to apply.
Note 2 : **p<0.01.
Note 3 : Diagonal is the square root of AVE.
Note 4 : The table was built by the study.

Analysis of the Mediating Role of Career Decision-making Self-efficacy

In this study, the Bootstrap method adopted from Hayes (2018) was used based on the hierarchical regression analysis. The study provides case analysis to estimate parameters through Bootstrap sampling, which is particularly applicable to address the uncertainty of moderating and mediating effects, providing more reliable inference and interpretation of results for studies. The Spss Procss is mainly used to deal with the linear-based regulatory mediation hypothesis and index, which can explore different types of regulation and mediation effects. Using Process v3.5, the data were first standardized, and then the Bootstrap method was set for 5,000 repeats to calculate the 95% confidence interval (CI). In the process, the study focus on the significance of mediation and modulation effects. Specifically, neither the upper and lower CI values of the Bootstrap confidence intervals contain 0, indicating a significant product term coefficient, and
supporting the significance of the mediation effect. For moderate effects, if the 95% CI of its estimate is observed not containing 0, this indicates that the moderate effect may also be statistically significant (Hayes, 2018; MacKinnon et al., 2004; Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

The mediation effect test in this study is conducted according to the test process proposed by Wen and Ye (2014). The results show that the direct effect value of the willingness to apply in educational choice is 0.068 (p<0.05; CI=0.015-0.121). The indirect effect value among educational choice, career decision-making self-efficacy, and the willingness to apply is 0.052 (CI=0.012-0.096). No 95% CI values for career decision-making self-efficacy mediation included 0, indicating that career decision-making self-efficacy was a significant mediator. Through career decision-making self-efficacy, educational choice has a significant mediating effect on the willingness to apply. Through the analysis of mediation validation, the self-efficacy of career decision-making has a mediation role in the influence of educational choice on the willingness to apply, which also complies with the three steps of mediation validation proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986). The results are shown in Table 8.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path</th>
<th>Type of effect</th>
<th>Effect value</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JX→BK</td>
<td>Overall effect</td>
<td>.366</td>
<td>.025</td>
<td>14.622***</td>
<td>.317-.415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JX→ZC→BK</td>
<td>Direct effect</td>
<td>.068</td>
<td>.027</td>
<td>2.518*</td>
<td>.015-.121</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note 1: JX=educational choice; ZC=career decision-making self-efficacy; BK=the willingness to apply.
Note 2: SE=standard error
Note 3: *p<0.05, ***p<0.001.
Note 4: 95% CI=95% confidence interval.
Note 5: The table was built by the study.

**DISCUSSION**

Based on the prospect theory, this paper discusses the educational selection decision and examination intention of higher vocational students in Guangdong Province, China, and constructs the educational selection decision framework of higher vocational students based on the prospect theory. Through the study of freshmen in Guangdong Province, China, the educational choice of vocational students in Guangdong Province has significant influence and the self-efficacy on career decision. The self-efficacy of career decision-making has a significant impact on the willingness to register. The research model validated in this study suggests a mediating role for career decision-making self-efficacy in the significant effect of educational choice on intention to register.

**The Influence of Higher Vocational Students’ Education Choice on the Willingness to Apply**

Research has shown that schools and majors with high academic quality are more likely to attract students’ interest. This view was supported in the study of Thanh et al. (2022), where negative perception of academic aspects may lead to negative entry intentions. This correlated with the educational choice of hypothesis 1 in the study. Secondly, students usually consider their future career prospects to decide which school or major to apply for (Avolio et al., 2020; Barone & Assirelli, 2020; Bordon et al., 2020; Jin, 2020). Some studies suggest that social events and policy changes can have an impact on students’ willingness to register. For example, the Ochilova (2020) found that certain social events and policy changes may lead to increased or decreased student interest in a particular school or major. These factors are intertwined and jointly shape the decision process of students’ educational choices.
The Influence of Higher Vocational Students’ Career Decision-making Self-efficacy on the Willingness to Apply

Abdul-Rahim et al. (2021) noted that career decision-making self-efficacy is closely related with students’ career choice ability, which means that students with higher career decision-making self-efficacy are more likely to actively participate in the entry process. In addition, Bettinger et al. (2012) found that the combination of assistance and information processing provided by schools could significantly increase students’ willingness to register, and ultimately increase the university enrollment rate. This finding correlated to the impact of the timing and transmission of school information mentioned of hypothesis 2 on students’ willingness to register. The results of this study highlight the importance of schools in supporting and providing information, indicating that schools play a crucial role in providing information and support about educational choices, as well as in fostering students’ self-efficacy in career decision-making.

The Mediating Role of Career Decision-making Self-efficacy in the Influence of Educational Choice on the Willingness to Apply

Career decision-making self-efficacy plays a mediation role in the influence of educational choice on the willingness to register. Muturi and Wangeri (2022) shows that there is a positive correlation between career decision-making self-efficacy and career choice under the dimensions of strong and weak scientific self-efficacy. There is incremental predictive ability between career decision-making self-efficacy and fuzzy tolerance for career decisions (Storme et al., 2017). Through the mediation verification analysis, the self-efficacy of career decision-making has a mediation role in the influence of educational choice on the intention to register, which also complies with the three steps of mediation verification proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986). Thus, supporting the hypothesis 3 that career decision making-self-efficacy is a partial mediator in the influence of educational choice on the willingness to register. Career decision-making self-efficacy plays a mediator between parental autonomous support and academic engagement (Jiang et al., 2022). Ebner et al. (2018) showed that within-individual control beliefs are positively associated with occupational self-efficacy. This means that the educational choice ability of higher vocational students affects the self-efficiency of career decision-making, and then affects their willingness to apply for the examination. This has important reference value for the enrollment management department of higher vocational schools, to help the enrollment management department of higher vocational colleges to design more targeted enrollment strategies and improve students’ willingness to enter for the examination.

Application of Prospect Theory in the Field of Educational Choice Research

In the field of educational choice research, prospect theory provides a unique perspective for a deep understanding of students’ educational choice decisions. The prospect theory proposed by Kahneman and Tversky (1979) emphasizes people’s sensitivity to potential benefits and losses, which is particularly critical in the educational selection process. When faced with different school and major choices, students often make decisions based on the possible outcome framework, and this framework effect plays an important role in their choices (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979).

Especially for higher vocational students, academic quality and employment prospects are the primary factors for higher vocational students in their education selection. Prospect theory suggests that students may be more concerned with possible negative consequences, such as professional maladjustment or employment difficulties, and that such concerns may affect their final school and professional choices (Hameleers, 2021; Falk et al., 2023). Through the framework of prospect theory, the study can more fully understand the psychological process of students in educational choice, which provides a theoretical basis for the formulation of more targeted enrollment strategies. This is of practical significance to the enrollment management department of higher vocational schools, which helps them better understand students’ decision-making preferences and improve the enrollment effect.
CONCLUSION

The results show that the self-efficacy of career decision-making plays a key role in the choice and willingness of vocational students. This means that students’ ability and confidence in their own career decision-making self-efficacy is crucial to students’ educational choices. Vocational students should believe that they can make wise educational choices, which is not only related to their future career development, but also related to their personal career satisfaction and sense of achievement. Therefore, vocational colleges and enrollment administration departments need to take measures to cultivate, strengthen and guide students’ self-efficacy in career decision-making.

Although this study yielded some useful findings, there are still some problems to consider. This study uses a quantitative research method to collect information about the respondents’ views, opinions and experiences on the research topic or variables. Respondents provided information by selecting predefined answers or free answers. Questionnaire survey method is an effective way to obtain large amounts of quantitative data. But there may also be problems such as measurement error and methodological bias. The choice of these methods depends on the research question, data availability and investigator research objectives. Therefore, it is suggested that future studies should focus on the complexity of the research question, choose appropriate methods or use multiple methods in combination, so as to more comprehensively reveal the mechanisms behind the educational choices of higher vocational students.

FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study provide some useful implications for education policy and practice in higher vocational education. The study suggests that Chinese higher vocational education institutions and policy makers should strive to cultivate students’ self-efficacy and improve students’ confidence and ability in career decision-making. This can be done by providing career planning counseling, where vocational schools and educational institutions can provide professional career planning counseling services to help students better understand their interests, values and career goals. Vocational colleges can also provide mental health support to help students deal with the anxiety and stress that may arise in career decisions. The enrollment management department of higher vocational colleges can provide more practical registration experience activities, including major experience activities, professional volunteer activities and practical professional experience activities, to help students better understand the professional field.

REFERENCES


