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Perceived Educational-Identity Stigma among Higher Vocational Students in Mainland China: A Grounded Theory Study

Sihui Yu[1,2], Xiaoqian Bian[3], Huan Hu[3,*]

[1] Mental Health Center, Shenzhen Polytechnic University, Shenzhen, 518055, China
[2] School of Education, City University of Macau, Macau, 999078, China
[3] Faculty of Health and Wellness, City University of Macau, 999078, China
[*] Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

Background: Higher vocational students in Mainland China are tertiary-level learners whose educational identity is formed through a distinctive vocational-education system, multiple admission routes, and a credential order that often compares vocational or junior-college pathways with academic bachelor-degree pathways. This position may expose students to education-based prejudice that affects psychological adaptation, learning engagement, and career development. Purpose: This study examined how higher vocational students in Mainland China perceive educational-identity stigma, where it comes from, how it is transmitted in everyday and institutional settings, what consequences it has, and how students respond. Methods: Guided by grounded theory, the study conducted one-to-one online semi-structured interviews with 15 current higher vocational students or graduates within two years of graduation from January 2025 to February 2026. Interviews lasted about 50 minutes on average and yielded approximately 190,100 Chinese characters of transcripts. NVivo 14 Plus was used to manage the data and to support open, axial, and selective coding. Findings: Open coding produced 55 initial concepts, 1,011 coding nodes, and 15 initial categories. Axial and selective coding organized these materials into five connected categories: stigma content, stigma sources, stigma origins, stigma impacts, and stigma coping. Students perceived stigma as identity devaluation, bias about ability and conduct, and restricted access to resources or opportunities. Stigma was transmitted by social groups, including employers and highly educated groups, and by relational groups, including relatives, peers, instructors, and the self. Its origins were located at individual, school, and societal levels. Its impacts showed two directions: psychological-behavioral harm and, when support was available, positive psychological-behavioral transformation. Conclusion: Perceived educational-identity stigma among higher vocational students in Mainland China is a process in which structural stigma, relational transmission, personal internalization, and differentiated coping interact. Interventions should reduce internalized credential stigma and strengthen competence evidence, peer support, teacher affirmation, and career-development resources.

KEYWORDS

Higher vocational students; Mainland China; Educational identity; Perceived stigma; Grounded theory; Psychological adaptation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Vocational education now occupies a more visible place in Mainland China's talent-development agenda. Higher vocational colleges are expected to train technically skilled workers and applied

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professionals for industrial upgrading, local development, and diversified pathways in tertiary education [1]. Yet students in this sector may still face everyday judgments that equate "higher vocational," "junior college," or dazhuan with limited ability, weak academic preparation, restricted prospects, or lower social status. For them, these labels are not only external descriptions. They may also affect self-understanding, learning engagement, family interaction, social relationships, and career expectations.

In this article, higher vocational students refers specifically to students enrolled in, or recently graduated from, higher vocational institutions in Mainland China. The term is not used as a generic label for vocational learners worldwide. In the Chinese context, higher vocational education is a tertiary form of vocational education, mainly provided by higher vocational colleges and, more recently, some vocational undergraduate institutions. It is commonly linked to junior-college diploma education, although recent reforms have expanded vocational undergraduate routes. Students enter this sector through the national college entrance examination, classified vocational admissions, or progression from secondary vocational schools. Chinese vocational-education law includes higher vocational school education in the vocational school system and allows such institutions to recruit students through assessments combining academic literacy and vocational skills [2]. National reform policies have also emphasized quality improvement in secondary and higher vocational education and the consolidation of vocational education as a distinct type within the education system [3].

The identity of higher vocational students in Mainland China is thus formed both institutionally and socially. Institutionally, it emerges from a differentiated pathway linking junior-secondary schooling, general senior secondary education, secondary vocational education, college entrance examinations, classified vocational admissions, and postsecondary vocational diploma or degree programs. Socially, it is shaped by a credential hierarchy in which academic bachelor-degree pathways often carry higher prestige than vocational or junior-college pathways. When employers, families, peers, and public discourse treat credentials as signals of ability and worth, higher vocational students may experience their educational identity as socially vulnerable.

Stigma theory helps explain this vulnerability. Stigma is not a single attitude but a process in which labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination occur within power relations [4][5][6]. When this process attaches to educational credentials, school type, or education pathway, a student's educational identity can become a symbolic basis for judging competence, character, and future potential. Social identity theory further argues that people derive self-definition and self-value from group membership; when the group is devalued, personal self-worth can be threatened [7]. Stereotype threat theory explains how concern about confirming a negative group stereotype may produce anxiety, lower efficacy, and impaired performance [8].

Research on higher vocational students has often examined learning foundations, employability, mental health, and career-development difficulties. Less is known about how students themselves perceive, interpret, and respond to prejudice attached to their educational identity. Quantitative surveys can show associations between perceived discrimination and academic or psychological outcomes, but they do not fully explain how prejudice is experienced in daily life, who transmits it, why it persists, how it is internalized, or when it can be turned into action. Grounded theory is suited to this problem because it builds concepts, categories, and process explanations from empirical materials [9][10][11].

This study therefore asks: How do higher vocational students in Mainland China perceive, explain, and respond to educational-identity stigma in educational, familial, social, and occupational contexts? Specifically, it examines the content, sources, origins, impacts, and coping mechanisms of perceived educational-identity stigma and develops an integrative model of dynamic adaptation.

2. METHODS

2.1. Study Design

This study used a qualitative design guided by grounded theory. The aim was not to test a predefined causal model but to develop an empirical explanation of how higher vocational students in Mainland China experience and respond to educational-identity stigma. The analysis moved iteratively from data to concepts, from concepts to categories, and from categories to a process model.

2.2. Participants and Recruitment

Table 1. Participant characteristics

ID	Gender	Study status	Hometown	Secondary vocational background
A1	Female	Current student	Guangdong Dongguan	Yes
A2	Female	Current student	Guangdong Shantou	No
A3	Female	Graduate	Guangdong Jieyang	No
A4	Female	Current student	Guangdong Shenzhen	No
A5	Female	Current student	Sichuan Chengdu	No
A6	Female	Current student	Sichuan Guangyuan	No
A7	Male	Graduate	Jiangsu Yancheng	Yes
A8	Male	Current student	Jiangxi Shangrao	Yes
A9	Female	Current student	Shandong Jinan	No
A10	Female	Current student	Shandong Weifang	No
A11	Female	Current student	Jiangsu Suqian	Yes
A12	Male	Graduate	Zhejiang Hangzhou	No
A13	Male	Current student	Jiangxi Jiujiang	No
A14	Male	Current student	Jiangxi Yichun	No
A15	Female	Current student	Hunan Changsha	No

Note. "Secondary vocational background" indicates progression from secondary vocational schooling to higher vocational education. Hometown refers to the participant's reported place of origin. Participant codes are anonymized.

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling, purposive sampling, and snowball sampling. Initial notices were posted in online communities for higher vocational students, on social-media platforms, and through the researcher's personal networks. As preliminary categories emerged,

additional participants were sought to increase variation in coping style, emotional experience, professional stereotypes, family-economic background, grade level, and employment pressure.

Eligibility criteria were: (a) current enrollment in higher vocational education or graduation within the past two years; (b) consciousness and ability to give coherent accounts of experience; and (c) informed consent. Exclusion criteria were severe language or hearing impairment that prevented participation and voluntary withdrawal during the study. The final sample included 15 participants: 5 men and 10 women; 12 current students and 3 graduates; and 4 participants with secondary-vocational-to-higher-vocational progression experience.

2.3. Data Collection

From January 2025 to February 2026, the researcher conducted one-to-one semi-structured interviews through online meeting platforms. All interviews were completed after informed consent was obtained and were audio-recorded with permission. Each interview lasted about 50 minutes. Recordings were transcribed within 48 hours and anonymized with participant codes A1 to A15. The full dataset contained approximately 190,100 Chinese characters of interview transcripts.

The interview guide covered five areas: participants' understanding of social evaluations of higher vocational students; experiences of differential treatment in learning, social interaction, internships, job seeking, or family communication; psychological and behavioral consequences of these experiences; participants' explanations of where such evaluations came from and why they formed; and coping strategies used when facing prejudice. Open follow-up questions were used, and the researcher avoided imposing concepts from a prior quantitative model on participants' responses.

2.4. Data Analysis

NVivo 14 Plus was used for data management and coding. During open coding, transcripts were read line by line, and concepts were developed in language close to participants' accounts. This stage produced 55 initial concepts, 1,011 coding nodes, and 15 initial categories. During axial coding, categories were compared in terms of similarity, difference, conditions, context, action or interaction strategies, and consequences; the 15 initial categories were integrated into five core categories. During selective coding, perceived discrimination among higher vocational students was treated as the core category, and relations among stigma content, sources, origins, impacts, and coping were analyzed. Coding traces available in the NVivo project file were cross-checked with coding tables exported from the original manuscript.

2.5. Trustworthiness, Reflexivity, and Ethics

Several procedures were used to improve trustworthiness. The interview guide was discussed and revised before formal interviews to keep questions open and aligned with the research purpose. Constant comparison was used throughout coding to examine similar and negative cases and to avoid premature closure. Four participants reviewed part of the analysis to confirm that the interpretations were broadly consistent with their experiences. Two non-participating postgraduate students in psychology also reviewed coding accuracy, category logic, and possible researcher bias. These procedures supported credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability [12].

Reflexively, existing theoretical and quantitative assumptions were treated as sensitizing resources rather than coding templates. During interviews and analysis, attention was given to participants' own wording and contextual explanations, especially where their experiences complicated a simple victimization narrative. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education, City University of Macau. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and identifying information was anonymized.

3. FINDINGS

The analysis generated five interconnected categories around the core process of perceived educational-identity stigma among higher vocational students in Mainland China. Stigma content describes what is stigmatized; stigma sources identify who transmits stigma; stigma origins explain why stigma forms and persists; stigma impacts describe its consequences; and stigma coping shows how students respond. Table 2 summarizes the thematic framework.

Table 2. Thematic framework of perceived educational-identity stigma among higher vocational students in Mainland China

Core category	Guiding question	Main subthemes and examples	Analytic dimension
Stigma content	What is stigmatized	Educational-identity devaluation; ability and conduct stereotypes; restrictions on resources and opportunities	Recognition vs. devaluation; competence affirmation vs. competence denial; open vs. restricted opportunity
Stigma sources	Who transmits stigma	Employers; highly educated groups; the general public; relatives; peers; service users; instructors; the self	Distant institutional transmission vs. close relational transmission; low vs. high evaluative authority
Stigma origins	Why stigma forms and persists	Self-cognition; accumulated ability resources; school resources and reputation; regional recognition; social networks; labor-market demand; credential-based recruitment rules	Individual vulnerability vs. self-affirmation; weak vs. strong school resources; weak vs. strong credential screening
Stigma impacts	What consequences occur	Self-limitation; salary difference; constrained development; guilt and anxiety; social resistance; low efficacy; learning motivation; clearer career planning; stress tolerance	Internalized harm vs. meaning reconstruction; avoidance and stagnation vs. action and development
Stigma coping	How students respond	Credential upgrading; experience accumulation; skill enhancement; role-model learning; cognitive reframing; emotion regulation; social-support seeking; collective voice	Passive endurance vs. active coping; solitary burden vs. collective support and voice

Note. The framework is based on axial and selective coding. Subthemes and examples derive from coded interview data; analytic dimensions indicate interpretive continua rather than quantitative scales.

3.1. Stigma Content: Identity Devaluation, Competence Prejudice, and Opportunity Restriction

The most direct form of stigma concerned negative social evaluations of higher vocational identity. Three dimensions were identified. Identity devaluation occurred when “higher vocational,” “junior college,” or dazhuan was treated as a sign of lower educational worth. Participants encountered this in family comparison, peer interaction, public discourse, and employment-related settings. Competence and conduct prejudice appeared when educational level was linked directly to intelligence, effort, moral conduct, or professional capacity. In this logic, a lower credential signaled

weaker ability or poorer personal quality. Opportunity restriction appeared in recruitment thresholds, internship assignments, promotion possibilities, and unequal access to educational or career resources.

These dimensions correspond to three layers of threat: who I am is not recognized, what I can do is underestimated, and what I can obtain is constrained. Perceived stigma was therefore not an abstract sense of unfairness. It was organized around concrete social judgments about credentials, competence, and future opportunities.

3.2. Stigma Sources: Social and Relational Transmission

Stigma entered participants' everyday lives through both social and relational channels. Social groups included employers, highly educated groups, the general public, and service users. Their influence was transmitted through recruitment rules, public discourse, occupational interaction, and comparison with academically oriented university students. Relational groups included relatives, peers, instructors, and the self. Their influence was transmitted through close interaction, expectation gaps, everyday comments, emotional concerns, and self-comparison.

A clear pattern was that stigma from close relationships could be more painful than stigma from distant social settings. Comments from relatives, peers, or teachers were tied to students' need for belonging, self-respect, and future recognition. Feeling looked down upon was therefore not only an external event but a relational experience that shaped self-evaluation.

3.3. Stigma Origins: A Multi-level Ecology of Educational Credentialing

Participants located the origins of stigma at individual, school, and societal levels. At the individual level, prior academic experience, self-cognition, and accumulated ability resources affected whether students interpreted prejudice as threatening or manageable. At the school level, training quality, institutional resources, school reputation, and regional recognition shaped how credible or vulnerable higher vocational identity appeared. At the societal level, stigma was sustained by credential-based educational evaluation, recruitment rules, labor-market demand, and broader beliefs about academic and vocational pathways.

These levels formed an ecology in which self-concept, school resources, and the credential order interacted. Structural prejudice could return to students through everyday relationships and then become part of personal identity. This nested account is consistent with ecological perspectives on human development [13]. It also resonates with Bourdieu's view [14] that symbolic capital can be converted into social advantage or disadvantage: here, educational credentials functioned as symbolic resources that shaped recognition and opportunity.

3.4. Stigma Impacts: Harm and Positive Transformation

The consequences of stigma followed two directions. Negative psychological impacts included inferiority, sensitivity, guilt, anxiety, low self-efficacy, social resistance, confusion, and self-denial. Negative behavioral impacts included self-limitation, avoidance of competition, acceptance of lower expectations, and premature withdrawal from job-seeking or further-study opportunities. These patterns correspond to stereotype threat and self-handicapping: when students expect to be judged through a devalued educational identity, they may protect self-esteem by procrastinating, avoiding, or reducing effort, although these responses can restrict development over time [8][15].

Participants also described positive psychological and behavioral transformation. Some students turned external prejudice into clearer reality awareness, stronger learning motivation, greater appreciation of practical training, improved stress tolerance, and more explicit career planning. This does not mean that stigma is beneficial. It indicates that, when support, role models, and actionable goals are present, negative experiences may be reconstructed as motivation for growth. This process

broadly accords with the idea that adverse experience can, under certain conditions, promote meaning reconstruction and positive change [16].

3.5. Stigma Coping: Competence Evidence, Cognitive De-stigmatization, and Resource Connection

Students used behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and social strategies. Behaviorally, they pursued credential upgrading, accumulated experience, strengthened technical skills, and learned from role models. These strategies produced visible competence evidence to counter low expectations. Cognitively and emotionally, students used reframing, self-identification, emotion regulation, and initiative to reduce internalized stigma and reinterpret a labeled identity as a starting point that could be changed through skills and career development. Socially, they sought peer support, adjusted social strategies, mobilized external resources, and sometimes used collective voice to challenge simplified group stereotypes.

Social support was a key protective condition. The stress-buffering model suggests that support from family, friends, teachers, and significant others can reduce the negative effects of stressors on psychological and behavioral outcomes [17]. In this study, students who received peer understanding, teacher affirmation, family acceptance, or career-development resources were more likely to respond actively to credential prejudice rather than internalize it as personal inadequacy.

3.6. Integrative MODEL

Based on the five core categories, this study developed a dynamic adaptation model of perceived educational-identity stigma among higher vocational students in Mainland China (Figure 1). The model shows that social prejudice first enters student experience through identity devaluation, competence or conduct stereotypes, and opportunity restriction. These contents are transmitted through distant social groups and close relational groups and are shaped by individual, school, and societal conditions. Perceived stigma then affects psychological and behavioral adaptation, producing inferiority, low efficacy, avoidance, self-limitation, and constrained development. With support, it may also be reconstructed into learning motivation, career planning, and resilience. Students ultimately cope through credential upgrading, skill accumulation, cognitive reframing, and support seeking.

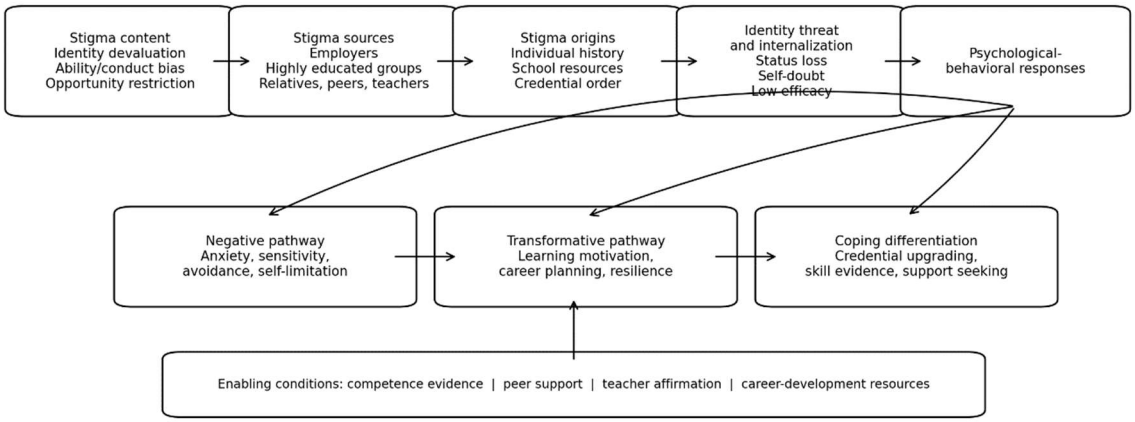


Figure 1. Dynamic adaptation model of perceived educational-identity stigma among higher vocational students in Mainland China

Note. Arrows show the main analytical sequence derived from coding. The model is interpretive and does not represent a statistical path model.

The model does not portray higher vocational students as passive victims. It shows how students negotiate structural credential prejudice and personal agency. The consequences of stigma are not determined only by external labels; they also depend on whether school support systems, peer resources, competence evidence, and students' own meaning-making can intervene.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. From Credential Labels to Educational-identity Threat

The findings show that stigma perceived by higher vocational students in Mainland China is not a general negative evaluation. It is educational-identity stigma organized around credential labels and status comparison. Identity devaluation, competence and conduct prejudice, and opportunity restriction together create educational-identity threat. Students were not only concerned about being disliked; they were concerned that their educational identity would be translated into assumptions about ability, character, and potential. This finding places the stigma process within China's vocational-education and credential hierarchy and shows that students' psychological adaptation cannot be explained only by learning habits or individual resilience.

4.2. Relational Transmission and Structural Origins

Stigma transmission was both structural and relational. Employers, public discourse, and highly educated groups conveyed a visible credential hierarchy. Relatives, peers, and teachers then translated that hierarchy into everyday comparison, concern, and expectation. The origins of stigma were not limited to individual sensitivity or isolated events. They were embedded in school-resource differences, professional reputation, recruitment thresholds, and credential culture. Interventions therefore should not simply tell students to think positively or work harder. They should also reduce stigma transmission through school resources, career-development support, teacher communication, and more balanced public narratives about vocational education.

4.3. Dual Impacts and Conditions for Positive Transformation

The dual impact of stigma is theoretically important. Educational-identity stigma may produce self-doubt, low efficacy, avoidance, and self-handicapping. At the same time, some students transformed prejudice into skills accumulation, learning engagement, and career planning. The difference appeared to depend on access to feasible action pathways, visible role models, supportive feedback, and credible evidence of competence. Positive transformation should therefore not be read as a justification of stigma. It is better understood as the result of supportive conditions that help students convert negative experience into purposeful action.

4.4. Practical Implications for Higher Vocational Colleges

The findings suggest several directions for higher vocational colleges in Mainland China. First, psychological education should identify specific stigma content, such as credential anxiety, perceived competence denial, and anticipated employment restriction, rather than relying only on general stress-management programs. Second, support should move beyond emotional reassurance toward competence evidence building. Students need visible records of growth, including practical-training outcomes, certificates, portfolios, project experience, and career-development files. Third, peer support, teacher affirmation, and school-enterprise resources should be connected into an identity-safe support system, so that students experience themselves as understood, supported, and capable of action. Finally, career services should address credential-based hiring anxiety and help students translate vocational competence into communicable evidence for internships, employment, and further study.

5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size and geographic coverage were limited. Although participants came from multiple provinces, the findings cannot represent all types of higher vocational institutions, regions, or professional fields in Mainland China. Future studies should examine the model across different regions, institutional tiers, and majors. Second, the data were collected through online interviews and self-reports, which may be affected by recall bias, social desirability, and interview context. Third, the study clarified the content structure and coping mechanisms of educational-identity stigma, but it did not use longitudinal data to verify temporal sequences among stigma perception, internalization, psychological adaptation, and academic or career outcomes. Fourth, the intervention directions proposed here require testing through quantitative follow-up studies and intervention experiments. Finally, because this manuscript was developed from an existing coded report, journal submission would be stronger if verified verbatim interview excerpts were added for each theme where required by the target journal.

6. CONCLUSION

Using grounded theory and semi-structured interviews with 15 current higher vocational students or recent graduates, this study developed a five-category framework of perceived educational-identity stigma among higher vocational students in Mainland China. Students perceived stigma through identity devaluation, competence or conduct prejudice, and restrictions on resources and opportunities. Stigma was transmitted by social and relational groups and originated from individual, school, and societal conditions. Its impacts included psychological-behavioral harm and positive transformation under supportive conditions. Students coped through credential upgrading, skill accumulation, cognitive reframing, emotion regulation, support seeking, and collective voice. Overall, perceived educational-identity stigma is a dynamic process involving social-prejudice input, identity threat, psychological-behavioral reaction, and differentiated adaptation. Higher vocational colleges should reduce internalized credential stigma by building identity safety, competence evidence, peer support networks, teacher affirmation, and career-development resources.

DECLARATIONS

Ethics approval: The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education, City University of Macau.

Informed consent: All participants provided informed consent before interview participation and audio recording.

Data availability: Interview transcripts contain sensitive personal information and are not publicly available. De-identified coding summaries may be made available by the author(s) where ethically permissible.

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