

Moderating Role of Peers and Social Media in Ghanaian Students' Career Choices and Aspirations

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ABSTRACT

Ghanaian students usually face a dilemma in selecting the right course to study due to their inability to identify their strengths, and thus, follow the views of their colleagues, parents and social media on the career path to choose. This sometimes leads to course and programme changes along the way, which may ultimately affect their career choices and aspirations. Therefore, this study was conducted to explore the extent to which peers and social media influence the career choice and aspirations of students in senior high schools in Ghana. The study adopted a survey design and a simple random sampling technique was used to select the sample from the population. The sample consisted of Form 3 students from the selected senior high schools in the Kumasi Metropolis of the Ashanti Region of Ghana. The instrument for data collection was a 24-item questionnaire, which was divided into 3 sections. The questionnaire was developed by the researchers. The data was analysed using moderation analysis. The results of the study revealed that both peers and social media had a significant influence on the career choices and aspirations of senior high school students. The study recommended that senior high school students be engaged with highly relevant career choice content which would help them make better career related decisions. It was also recommended that heads of senior high schools should help work to intensify access to Guidance and Counselling services in their various schools to help make readily available, accurate, current and relevant information on career choices to students. Some implications of this study for Career Counsellors include incorporating group counselling sessions or peer mentoring programmes, guiding students towards reputable social media platforms for career development and networking and helping students identify professionals in their desired career fields who are willing to offer advice and support.

Keywords: career choice, career aspirations, senior high schools, peers, social media.

INTRODUCTION

In today's rapidly changing world, the process of career choice has become increasingly complex and challenging, particularly for senior high school students (Schneider, Broda, Judy, & Burkander, 2013). With numerous career options available, students often find themselves confronted with the daunting task of selecting a path that aligns with their interests, abilities, and aspirations (Jansen, Scherer, & Schroeders, 2015; Guthrie, & Davis, 2003). Amidst this decision-making process, peers and social media have emerged as influential factors that significantly affect the career choices made by students (White, & Green, 2011). This study explored the moderating roles of peers and social media in the career decision-making process of senior high school students in Ghana.

Peers play a crucial role in shaping the career choices of senior high school students. As adolescents navigate their way through the maze of career options, they often seek guidance, advice, and inspiration from their peers. The support or encouragement received from peers can significantly affect students' confidence levels and the decisions they make regarding their future careers (Eccles et al., 1993). Moreover, peer pressure, both explicit and implicit, can steer students towards certain career choices, either aligning with or deviating from their own preferences (Mtemeri, 2020).

According to Amoah, Kwofie and Kwofie (2015), high school is the most important time for teenagers to prepare for the transition from school to employment or college. According to Maluwa-Banda (1998) and Watts and Kidd (2000), secondary school years represent a shift from the cooperatively protected existence of elementary school to the freedom and responsibility of either university education or work. Peer influence is important since it has been shown to affect professional decisions. Studies in Nigeria, South Africa and Kenya (Edwards & Quinter, 2011; Faiter & Faiter, 2013; Kimiti & Mwova, 2012; Shumba & Naong, 2012) have shown that peers have a range of influences on pupils, including peer connections, peer counselling, peer contact, and peer guidance.

According to Epstein and Karweit (2014), the basis for peer counselling is the idea that people with comparable traits and ages have a tendency to influence one another. Similar to this, Chireshe (2013) in Zimbabwe emphasized the value of peer counselling in schools by stating that peer counselling made it simple to spread knowledge. The social cognitive theory, which underlies this study and contends that social factors like peers may have an impact on workers' career decisions, is congruent with peer counselling. Peer relationships have an impact on peers' job decisions. Peer interactions have been shown to affect students' job decisions in Kenya (Walaba & Kiboss, 2013) and Uganda (Okiror & Otabong, 2015).

Students converse while exchanging career-related information and the social learning theory of Krumboltz, which emphasizes the value of students interacting with one another in their surroundings, is in accord with this. The way that students view themselves is greatly influenced by their relationships with their classmates (Yi-Hui, 2006). Yi-Hui found in his research in China that student interactions with peers from other interests, races, and origins have the ability to encourage thought, knowledge, and beliefs, which may result in new ways of thinking about the world, other peers, and ultimately oneself. Peers' interactions allow them to explore vocations they had never considered in order to better understand the working world. Additionally, Kiuru (2008) highlighted the significance of peer connection in Finland when he claimed that teenage individuals' vocational careers could be affected in the long run by the academic orientation characteristic of their peer group.

In recent years, social media has emerged as a powerful force shaping the career aspirations and choices of senior high school students. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter provide students with a wealth of information and exposure to a wide range of careers. Social media platforms offer a space where students can connect with professionals, access career-related resources, and gain insights into different industries (Chen, & Xiao, 2022).

Social media activities include networking, connecting, and socializing online using text, images, and video. Social media has numerous advantages, one of which is that it allows individuals who live in faraway locations to communicate with one another more easily. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) described social media as a collection of web-based programmes that capitalize on the conceptual and technical underpinnings of the web and permit the production and sharing of user-generated content. It also describes the actions, customs, and conduct of online groups of individuals who come together to exchange data, knowledge, and viewpoints through interactive media.

According to Adeboye (2012), social media is a social structure made up of young people, people, or groups called nodes that are linked by one or more particular types of interdependency. These include relationships based on work, friendship, kinship, common interests, financial exchange, dislike, sexual relations, or relationships based on beliefs, knowledge, or prestige. People seek out and enjoy the company of others online through social media. It encourages teens and organizations with shared interests to exchange information and services Cotterell, J. (2013)

However, social media is not merely for entertainment. It provides a wide range of information for making decisions, especially career related choices. By connecting and gathering the necessary digital information for the user, social media platforms may be useful for information searching, sharing, and retrieval as well as for giving fast and rapid information to the information community (Sherwin, 2013). As a result, the usage of social media broadens the range of geographical contexts where formal learning opportunities are available, and a variety of social media are being accessible. Social media use is on the increase, particularly by

adolescents in senior high schools with more and more students accessing Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other social sites (Kamaku, & Mberia, 2014).

According to Mitchell, Jones, and Krumboltz's (1971) social learning theory, people make job decisions because of learning events that have a good or bad impact on them. Adolescents are inspired by admiration to acquire equal power and prestige. Students are favourably influenced by this to strive for the same rank and power. Bandura (1977) indicated that viewing a show where a character has a fulfilling career and is successful might inspire a young person to seek that particular profession. In contrast, a negative representation that highlights enormous struggle and meagre success may have the exact opposite impact. Due to this exposure, it makes it easier for adolescents to choose role models, have a fair knowledge of various career options and opportunities in order to help them make informed career decisions.

In considering career decisions, senior high school students especially are confronted with doubts, stresses and uncertainties. In light of this, students may require assistance to be able to make the right career choices. Various factors may control student's career decisions, making the decision-making procedure arduous. Some of these variables link to peer influences, advices from friends, teachers, naivety and parents or the ascendancy associated with specific occupations.

In Ghana, some studies have shown that students in senior high schools' face numerous issues relating to their career aspirations. For instance, Lawer (2007) criticized the adaptability of career guidance in Cape Coast Municipal Senior Secondary Schools and ascertained that the majority of students were clueless of important occupations in Ghana. The students also lacked understanding of their career goals, aptitudes and abilities, as well as ideas of the skills needed for particular occupations. Another challenge faced by students, which is very typical in the Ghanaian society, is that adolescents are not allowed to make their own decisions when it comes to career, rather parents make the decisions for them (Ukil, 2016). These bring up various queries as to whether students are provided with the needed guidance concerning accessible jobs related to their academic disciplines. What are the sources of career decisions to students? What roles, if any, do their peers or social media play in their career decision-making, and how do those factors influence them?

Research has shown that pupils in Ghana usually face a dilemma in selecting the right course to study due to their inability to identify their strengths, and thus, follow the views of their colleagues and parents on the career path to choose (Acheampong, 2014; Boateng & Gaulee, 2019). This may also lead to their changing of courses of study to follow that of a friend known to them. By implication, it is possible that these students were not well informed about what influences their career decisions. In the face of these, there has not been any empirical study to find out how peers and the social media influenced the career decisions of students in second cycle schools in the Kumasi Metropolis. As a result, this study sought to explore the extent to which peers and the social media influences the career decisions of senior high school students in Kumasi Metropolis of the Ashanti Region of Ghana.

Understanding the complex dynamics between peers, social media, and career choice among senior high school students is vital for educators, policymakers, and career counsellors. By recognizing the moderating roles of peers and social media, interventions and guidance programs designed to provide students with accurate information, enhance their decision-making skills, and mitigate potential negative influences. This study aimed to contribute to the existing literature by shedding light on the intricate relationship between peers, social media, and career choices and career aspirations.

Research Hypotheses

1. Peer influence does not moderate the career choices and aspirations of senior high school students in Ghana.
2. Social media does not moderate the career choices and aspirations of senior high school students in Ghana.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research used the quantitative approach of data collection. Specifically, the descriptive research design was used for the study. This design is found suitable because it gives an in-depth description of the phenomena in their existing setting and also economical in collecting data from a large sample with high data turn over (Kothari, 2004).

Sample and Sampling Procedures

The target population of this study were senior high school students in Ghana. Among the 1,200 Senior High Schools in Ghana, the population of students was approximately 404,856 (Sasu, 2023). Three senior high schools in the Kumasi Metropolis were selected out of a total of 13 senior high schools for the study. Specifically Form 3 students formed the accessible population. The total number of Form 3 students from the selected schools was 1400. The Krejcie and Morgan Sampling table was used to arrive at a sample of 302 respondents based on the accessible population. Simple random sampling (specifically the lottery method) was used to arrive at the sample for the study.

Research Instrument

The instrument used for the collection of data in this study was a questionnaire developed by the researchers and titled, "Peers, Social Media and Career Choice and Aspiration. It was made up of 24 items in total, which were divided into three (3) sections. Section A was on the demographic characteristics of respondents such as Gender, Age and Course of Study. Section B was on 'Peers and Career Choice/Aspiration' (it had 10 items, and a reliability coefficient of .730). Section C focused on 'Social Media and Career Choice/Aspiration (10 items, .830). The items in Sections B and C were based on a 5-point Likert type scale. The instrument was pilot tested and tested for reliability using the Cronbach's Alpha test for reliability which showed that each set of test items were reliable. The validity of the instrument was ascertained by experts in the field of Guidance and Counselling at the University of Cape Coast.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Hypothesis One

Peer influence does not moderate the career choices and aspirations of senior high school students in Ghana.

To test the hypothesis, items on the Section B of the questionnaire were used to provide the results. Table 1 presents the results of a regression analysis.

Table 1: Regression analysis

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	28.02	.734		38.20	.000
Peer Influence	.040	.001	1.56	34.83	.000
Career Choice	-1.10	.073	-.672	-15.0	.000
a. Dependent Variable: Career aspirations					

A multiple regression model was tested to investigate whether the association between career choice and career aspirations of senior high school students depends on peer influence. Results indicated that career choice ($B = -1.10$, $SE = .073$, $\beta = -.672$, $p < .001$) was associated with career aspiration. The interaction between peer

influence (moderator) and career aspiration was significant ($B = .040$, $SE = .001$, $\beta = 1.56$, $p < .001$) suggesting that the effect of career aspiration depended on the peer influence. Together, the variables accounted for approximately 92% of the variance in career aspiration, $R^2 = .92$, $F(2,299) = 1802.68$, $p < .001$. from the above results, we reject the null hypothesis.

The results of the study shows that career choice and career aspirations of students are influenced by the peers they surround themselves with. This is in line with a study by Shumba and Naong (2012) who found that adolescents are easily influenced by their peers because they rely on their friends to provide validation of the choices that they make including career decisions. Hellmann (2014) suggested that peer relationship is a critical factor in career aspiration and decision-making, which supports the findings of this study that peer influence affects the career choice and career aspirations of senior high school students. Furthermore, in line with our findings, a Nigerian study by Bankole and Ogunsakin (2015), indicated that peer relationships were revealed as a significant factor in helping students choose careers.

Committing to a career path may create a fear of changing course, even if new and more ambitious aspirations arise. Students might resist pursuing higher aspirations because they fear the effort, time, or uncertainty associated with changing their career trajectory. The moderating effect of peer influence emphasizes that the relationship between career aspirations and career choices is not fixed; it can vary depending on the influence of peers. Peers can positively influence students to pursue higher career aspirations. For instance, if a student's friends are ambitious and encourage them to set higher goals, it can counteract the negative association between career choice and aspirations. Conversely, if a student's peers have lower aspirations or discourage them from aiming higher; this can further suppress career aspirations for those who have already made career choices. The highly significant model indicates that a substantial portion of the variance in career aspirations among students is accounted for by career choice, peer influence, and their interaction.

Hypothesis Two

Social media does not moderate the career choices and career aspirations of senior high school students in Ghana.

The purpose of this analysis was to examine how social media moderates the career choices and career aspirations. Table 2 offers a breakdown of the results based on regression analysis.

Table 2: Regression analysis

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
	(Constant)	30.431	.863		35.27	.000
	Social media	.042	.002	1.697	22.07	.000
	Career Choice	-1.274	.119	-.823	-10.71	.000
a. Dependent Variable: Career aspiration						

A multiple regression model was tested to investigate whether the association between career choice and career aspirations depends on social media. Results indicated that career choice ($B = -1.127$, $SE = .0119$, $\beta = -.823$, $p < .001$) was associated with career aspiration. The interaction between social media (moderator) and career aspiration was significant ($B = .042$, $SE = .002$, $\beta = 1.697$, $p < .001$) suggesting that the effect of career aspiration depended on social media. Together, the variables accounted for approximately 87% of the variance in career aspiration, $R^2 = .87$, $F(2,299) = 990.20$, $p < .001$. From the results, we reject the null hypothesis.

The negative association between career choice and career aspirations underscores the idea that making early career commitments can sometimes restrict students' willingness to explore a broader range of career options. When students make early decisions about their careers, they might become less open to considering

alternative paths or reassessing their aspirations. This decision could be as a result of some factors. In a study done by Ferry (2006), which looked at the factors that influenced the career choices of adolescents in rural Pennsylvania. Through the use of twelve focus groups, Ferry (2006) was able to identify the groups' perceptions of the importance of family factors when choosing a career. Ferry (2006) reported that, "Parents, followed by other family members, provided valuable learning experiences through their own role models and supporting activities that assisted in exploring career interests" (Findings section, 3). Thus when an adolescent's career choice is in line with that of their parents or guardians, it may be difficult to consider alternative career paths.

A study conducted by Mortimer, Zimmer-Gembeck, Holmes and Shanahan (2002) contradicts our finding. According to Mortimer, Zimmer-Gembeck, Holmes and Shanahan (2002), adolescents do make early career choices. They are actually encouraged to delay the decision-making process. This is linked to some factors like delay of marriage, persistent economic dependence on parents and the likelihood to continue education.

Positive career-related social media communities and platforms can provide students with valuable insights, mentorship and networking opportunities. Engaging with professions and peers who share similar career interests can reinforce students' aspirations and provide them with guidance on how to achieve their goals. Social media platforms often serve as sources of information about emerging career trends, job openings and educational opportunities. Students who actively engage with career-focused content may benefit from staying informed and inspired. This is similar to Mitchell, Jones, and Krumboltz's (1971) social learning theory which assumes that people make job decisions as a result of learning from events that have good or bad impact on them.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that, the moderating effect of peer influence on career aspirations and career choices is not fixed; there could be variations depending on the influence of peers. Peers can positively influence students to pursue higher career aspirations as well as negatively, to pursue lower aspirations. Career counsellors have a crucial role in guiding students in their career decision making. By acknowledging the influence of peers, collaborating with schools, and promoting responsible social media use, counsellors can provide the necessary support and resources for students to make informed career choices.

Consequently, the moderating role of social media on career aspirations and career choice indicate that active engagement with career-focused content may be beneficial to students from staying informed and inspired while excessive focus on irrelevant content drives students away from career aspirations.

It was therefore recommended that Heads of senior high schools should help work to intensify access to Guidance and Counselling services in their various schools to help make readily available, accurate, current and relevant information on career choices to students.

Implications for Counsellors

The findings of this study have several implications for career counselling and interventions.

According to Akosah-Twumasi, Emeto, Lindsay, Tsey, and Malau-Aduli (2018) career counsellors should acknowledge the significance of peer influence in career decision making. Incorporating group counselling sessions or peer mentoring programmes can facilitate interactions between students and provide opportunities to learn from one another's experiences. This can help students expand their knowledge about various careers and gain insights into different career options. Peer support groups can also create a safe and supportive environment for students to discuss their career aspirations and receive feedback and guidance from their peers.

Furthermore, career counsellors can educate students about the advantages and potential risks of using social media for career-related purposes Zainudin, Hassan, Abu Talib, Ahmad, Yusop, and Asri, (2020). They can help students acquire critical digital literacy skills, such as evaluating information credibility, protecting

privacy, and maintaining a positive online presence. By promoting responsible social media use, counsellors can help students access valuable career-related resources and opportunities.

Crișan, Pavelea, and Ghimbuluț (2015) states that counsellors can guide students towards reputable social media platforms for career development and networking. They can recommend platforms that provide reliable information on industries, job search strategies, resume construction, and interview tips. Additionally, counsellors can assist students in finding online mentorship opportunities through social media platforms. They can help students identify professionals in their desired career fields who are willing to offer advice and support. Career counsellors also play a crucial role in highlighting the importance of establishing a favourable online presence and networking abilities. However, it is important for counsellors to address potential obstacles and risks associated with social media, such as negative online encounters and cyberbullying. They can offer guidance on how to handle these challenges and establish healthy boundaries.

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