Factors Influencing Music Career Choice Among Malaysian Students: A Social Cognitive Career Theory Perspective

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Abstract

Careers in music have begun to gain attention within the Malaysian community. With formal music education available from primary to tertiary levels, students are increasingly likely to pursue music careers, a process that involves a series of cognitive and behavioural changes. Using Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) as a basis, semi-structured interviews were conducted in this study to identify cognitive, contextual, and affective attributes that influence music career choices in Malaysia. Thematic and socio-cultural analyses, supported by NVivo software, revealed several key factors: enthusiasm (cognitive), parental and environmental support (contextual), and spirituality (affective). These attributes are seen to greatly influence the tendency towards choosing a music career in the Malaysian context.

Keywords: cognitive, contextual, and affective factors; Malaysian music education; music career choices; Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT); thematic analysis

Introduction

A career in music is gaining increasing recognition in Malaysia (Norshafawati et al., 2010). The proliferation of music-related professions—like music teachers, session musicians, recording engineers, artist managers, music producers, booking agents, music publicists, composers, and arrangers (Berklee Online, 2019; Suruhanjaya Perkhidmatan Awam Malaysia, 2024)—has significantly contributed to the country's income-generating music industry (Farihad, 2023; Jabatan Perpaduan Negara dan Integrasi Nasional, 2010; Statista, 2021). This trend may encourage younger Malaysians to view music careers as promising sources of income.

However, studies on music careers in Malaysia are limited. Although global scholarship has examined the psychological and behavioural aspects of professional musical paths, the situation in Malaysia remains under-researched, especially with regard to cognitive factors. The music performance industry (Miksza et al., 2021) has attracted the interest of psychologists and researchers who analyse and predict career intentions (Chan et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2008; Kim & Seo, 2014), yet existing studies often overlook Malaysia's unique context (Syamsul, 2022) and largely fail to explore the potential connection between music careers and cognitive factors. Current research on Malaysian music tends to focus on geographical, social, political, and cultural aspects of local music (Adil, 2021; Lockard, 1991), music education and pedagogy (Shahanum, 2006, 2021), as well as issues of modernity and globalisation (Barendregt, 2014; Chopyak, 1986; Weintraub & Barendreght, 2017).

Most investigations into music performance students' career behaviour center on improving their marketability, examining how musical identity changes during learning, assessing how these shifts affect future career considerations, as well as providing curriculum feedback to prepare students for international (Bennett, 2012, 2016; López-Íñiguez & Bennett, 2020; Pike, 2015; Rowley et al., 2021) or local careers (Ghaziah & Bennett, 2017). Notably, these studies have neither employed a cognitive theory perspective nor provided predictive insights into students' career intentions. Understanding the cognitive, contextual, and affective factors that influence music career choices is crucial for developing educational programmes that effectively equip students for the realities of the music industry. The objective of this study is to identify these factors among Malaysian students.

The Approach

Theoretical Phase

Many factors influence students' career intentions, including personality and musical experience (Kaufmann & Rawlings, 2004), self-efficacy (Bennett & Chong, 2018), environmental influences (Parker et al., 2021), career identity (Burland, 2005), interests and preferences (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2008), outcome expectations (Diegelman & Subich, 2001), and self-motivation (Miksza et al., 2021). Music performance students are more likely to pursue a career in music, and the process of making this decision often involves a series of cognitive and behavioural changes.

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), a widely used psychological framework, is well-suited to explain students' career decision-making processes and intentions (Lent et al., 1994). However, prior studies show that the role of motivation can vary across fields—especially in music, where success is closely tied to individual ability and talent—which emphasises the need for further exploration (Lavigne et al., 2007). Unlike studies that primarily focus on motivation (Wang & Wong, 2022), the present study draws attention to cognitive, contextual, and affective factors that influence career intentions.

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)

SCCT has been extensively applied across various psychosocial functions and has gained popularity within academic circles (Chan et al., 2018; Kim & Seo, 2014; Samina, 2015), but its application in music-related research remains limited (Bulgren, 2017; Kuebel, 2019; Thornton & Bergee, 2008; Wang & Wong, 2022) and often lacks systematic rigour. For example, Thornton and Bergee (2008) approached SCCT solely from a cognitive perspective, whereas Bulgren's (2017) study, despite addressing multiple aspects, relied mainly on discrete analyses. Additionally, most of the existing studies are qualitative in nature and lack sound quantitative methodologies (Wang & Wong, 2022). Given that past research has predominantly used either qualitative or quantitative methods in isolation, it is imperative to adopt qualitative approaches that provide empirical insights to yield more robust findings.

Developed by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994), SCCT is a widely recognised framework for understanding career development, particularly how individuals cultivate interests, make academic and occupational choices, and achieve career success (see Figure 1). SCCT draws substantially from Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory, which proposes that human functioning arises from the dynamic interaction of personal attributes, behavioural patterns, and environmental factors, termed reciprocal determinism. At the core of SCCT are two principal constructs derived from Bandura's original framework: self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations. Self-efficacy refers to a person's confidence in their ability to perform specific tasks successfully, whereas outcome expectations pertain to their beliefs about the anticipated consequences of engaging in those

tasks. These constructs are fundamental in explaining how people come to prefer and pursue particular educational and career activities. Specifically, SCCT suggests that individuals are more likely to develop strong vocational interests in activities for which they hold high self-efficacy beliefs and expect favourable outcomes.

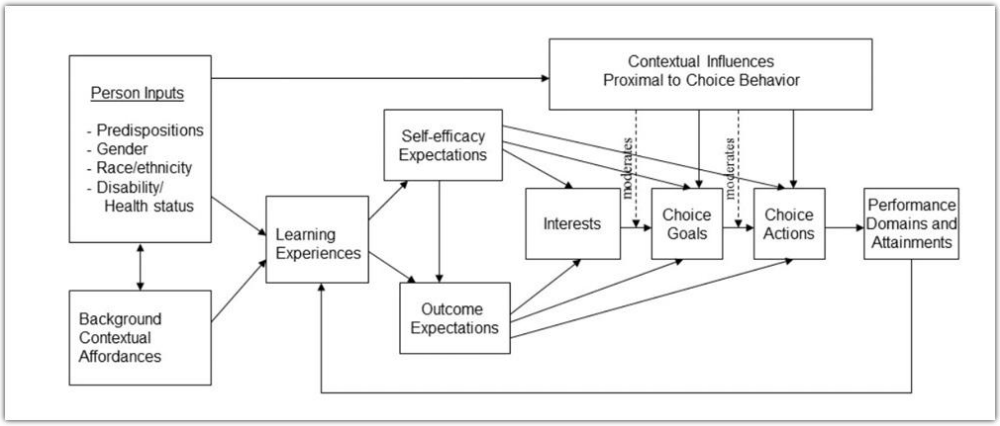

Figure 1. *The Social Cognitive Career Theory model that integrates "career-related interest development" with "making choices" (Bandura, 1986; Lent et al., 1994)*

The SCCT model, as illustrated by Lent et al. (1994), begins with person inputs (e.g., gender, predispositions, ethnicity, and health status) that interact with broader background contextual affordances, including socio-economic status, cultural norms, family expectations, and access to resources. These background factors influence the kinds of learning experiences to which individuals are exposed. Learning experiences, in turn, shape both self-efficacy and outcome expectations through the interpretation of personal successes, failures, vicarious learning, social persuasion, and physiological or emotional states. As individuals form and refine their beliefs about their capabilities and the expected outcomes of various activities, they develop corresponding interests, which function as motivational forces guiding goal setting. These choice goals reflect intentions to pursue particular academic or occupational pathways. However, the translation of goals into concrete choice actions, such as applying to a specific academic programme or entering a professional field, is not automatic.

A critical feature of SCCT is its emphasis on proximal contextual influences that moderate the relationship between goals and actions. These include immediate environmental factors such as financial constraints, parental support, institutional access, and social networks, which can either facilitate or inhibit individuals' ability to act on their career intentions. These influences serve as moderators, meaning that even those with strong interests and intentions may be limited by external barriers or enabled by supportive conditions. The final component of the SCCT model concerns performance attainments, outcomes resulting from career-related actions, such as academic success, job acquisition, or skill mastery. These attainments feed back into the model to influence future learning experiences and reinforce or modify self-efficacy and outcome expectations. This cyclical feedback loop demonstrates

the theory's dynamic nature, that is, career development is continuously shaped by the interaction between internal cognitions and external circumstances.

Overall, SCCT provides a comprehensive framework that integrates individual agency and structural factors influencing career trajectories. Its utility is particularly evident in research focusing on under-represented or marginalised populations, where contextual barriers and disparities in access significantly impact career outcomes. As such, SCCT has become a foundational model in contemporary vocational psychology and career counseling research.

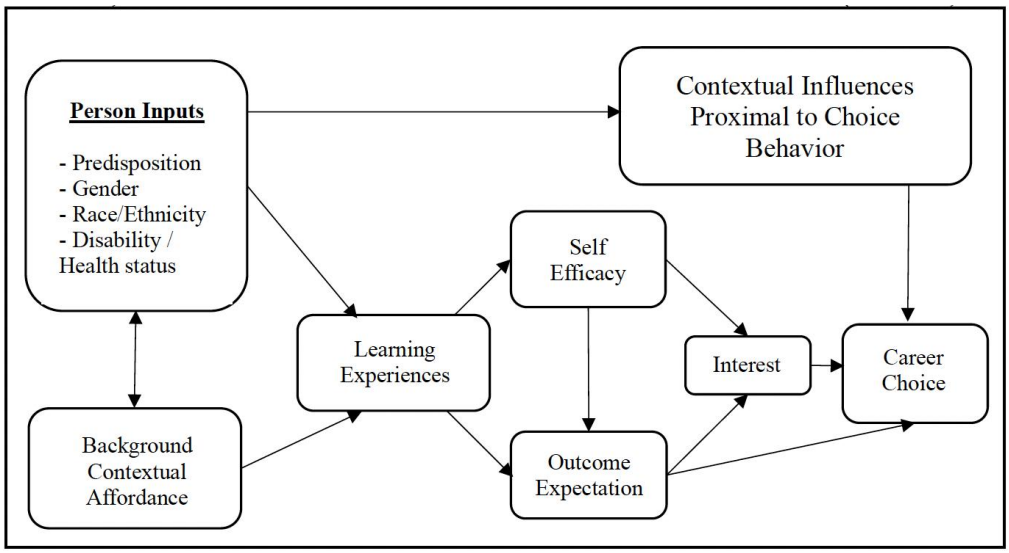

Figure 2. *The Social Cognitive Career Theory model used for this study*

This research was conducted empirically using SCCT (see Figure 2) to explore the career intentions of music students at local public and private higher education institutions aiming for a music career. The study focused solely on career choice and excluded "choice actions" and "performance domains and attainments" as these areas require distinct theoretical frameworks and are beyond the scope of this study.

The adapted SCCT model presented in Figure 2 retains the conceptual framework developed by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) while refining certain components to suit the study's specific focus. In this version, the constructs of "choice goals" and "choice actions" have been integrated under the unified term "career choice." This consolidation reflects a more streamlined and outcome-oriented representation of how individuals decide upon and commit to a particular academic or occupational path. Such simplification is advantageous in applied research contexts, in which the emphasis lies in understanding the determinants of actual career decisions, rather than distinguishing between goal setting and behavioural implementation.

The adapted model begins with person inputs**,** which include predisposition, gender, race or ethnicity, and disability or health status. These individual attributes influence the nature and quality of learning experiences**,** which themselves are

informed by broader background contextual affordances such as cultural norms, family socio-economic status, or community support systems. The learning experiences, then, contribute to the development of two central cognitive mechanisms: self-efficacy and outcome expectations. As has been mentioned previously, self-efficacy refers to one's belief in their capability to perform career-related tasks successfully, whereas outcome expectations concern the anticipated results of engaging in such tasks. These beliefs are shaped by both direct and vicarious learning experiences, including previous success or failure, verbal persuasion, and emotional or physiological states during task performance.

Once self-efficacy and outcome expectations are formed, they play a critical role in shaping interests**.** Interests, in this context, are not passive inclinations but motivational constructs that direct attention, persistence, and engagement in career-relevant activities. When a person's interests are congruent with their self-beliefs and expectations for positive outcomes, they are more likely to develop clear career choices. In the simplified model, "career choice" includes both the intention to pursue a specific field (formerly "choice goals") and the steps taken to act upon this intention (previously "choice actions"). This unification supports the practical focus on identifying and analysing the immediate determinants of students' career decisions without unnecessarily separating goal formation from goal execution.

Additionally, the model includes contextual influences proximal to choice behaviour. These include immediate and situational factors, e.g., financial aid availability, family approval, institutional policies, or peer influences, which can enable or constrain career choices. These influences serve as moderators in the decision-making process, acknowledging that strong internal motivations alone may be insufficient to translate intentions into actions without supportive environmental conditions.

Importantly, this adaptation of the SCCT model excludes the performance attainment components, which in the original model refer to the actual success or accomplishment achieved following career actions (e.g., academic achievement, employment, job satisfaction). The exclusion is intentional, as the study's primary objective is to examine factors influencing the formation of career choices rather than the outcomes that result from those choices. Including performance outcomes would shift the focus towards post-decision effects and necessitate a longitudinal research design to track such data, which exceeds the methodological parameters of the current study.

In summary, the revised SCCT framework retains the theoretical integrity of the original model while tailoring it for focussed inquiry into how personal, contextual, and cognitive factors converge to shape career decision-making amongst music students. By combining "choice goals" and "choice actions" into "career choice," and by excluding performance outcomes, the model achieves greater conciseness and direct relevance to the study's aims. For clarification, the constructs in this study are operationalised as follows (see Table 1):

Table 1. *Operationalisation of constructs in this study*

FACTOR	CONSTRUCT	EXPLANATION
Cognitive	Respondent input	• Operationalised as a respondent's background information, e.g., pre-disposition, gender, race, ethnicity; also used as a demographic
	Self-efficacy	• Operationalised as an individual's confidence in entering the music performance industry
	Learning experience	• Operationalised as formal and informal experiences that have been experienced
	Outcome expectations	• Conceptualised as students' assessment and expectations regarding their immersion in the music performance industry
Contextual	Background contextual affordance	• Operationalised as family socio-economic status
	Contextual influences proximal to choice behaviour	• Conceptualised as the support students receive from their families, including interactions that influence their pursuit of a desired career • Also conceptualised as an obstacle faced by students in pursuit of their dream to achieve the intended career
Affective	Interests	• Conceptualised as the student's self-determined motivation to enter the music performance industry
Choice making	Career decision	• Operationalised as an individual's choice of a chosen career in the domain of the music performance industry

Empirical Phase

Method

This study adopted a qualitative approach to gain empirical insights into respondents' personal experiences. Interviews served as the primary data collection method, with questions designed to elicit narratives about the career choices of music course alumni. Data analysis was conducted using NVivo software, which facilitated the coding, organisation, and visualisation of attributes derived from the original theoretical framework through thematic and socio-cultural analysis (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). NVivo's capabilities helped to manage large datasets and ensured a thorough, systematic analysis.

Instrument

The questions were developed specifically for this study under the main author's supervisor's guidance and mapped to the two main SCCT models: interest development and choice making. They addressed: 1) cognitive factors, including respondent input, self-efficacy, learning experience, and outcome expectations; 2) contextual factors, for example, background affordances and proximal contextual influences on choice behaviour; and 3) affective factors, including interests. In NVivo, respondent input was coded and visualised using the "Treemap" from the Hierarchy Chart tab, as it provided a clearer visual representation. Larger boxes indicate higher response rates and values, arranged from left to right.

Procedure

Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face and privately in a closed room, at times and places chosen by the respondent. Each interview lasted about two hours. Audio and visual recordings were made, but only the audio was used as the main source of reference for this study. All interviews were transcribed verbatim (and translated, if necessary) for analysis.

The analysis was carried out using NVivo software, starting with coding, followed by theme identification based on the three main SCCT factors: cognitive, contextual, and affective. The coding and determining themes produced descriptive statistics, coded text, and analytical memos, which are explained and interpreted in the discussion section of this article.

Respondents

The seven people who agreed to be interviewed were music major alumni based in Malaysia with full-time or freelance music careers. Purposive convenience sampling (Etikan, 2016; Wu Suen et al., 2014) was used to identify the respondents. To maximise diversity among the limited number of music professionals in Malaysia, sample selection emphasised varied experiences, perspectives, and gender balance.

Some demographic identifiers such as gender, marital status, state of birth, and upbringing environment (e.g., rural or urban) were adjusted and balanced to reflect socio-cultural diversity. Respondents' occupations included full-time teaching staff and part- or full-time performers. All held at least a bachelor's degree in music to ensure comprehensive theoretical and practical training in music. They agreed to disclose their names for credibility; however, for reference purposes, they were assigned nicknames based on their first and last names.

The participants included: 1) SC, born in Tawau, Sabah in 1979, holds a bachelor's degree in music composition and is a part-time music teacher and full-time performer at various Kuala Lumpur clubs and events; 2) JB is a dean at a local university offering music courses and performs part-time at special local events; 3) IP, born and raised in Kuala Lumpur, holds a doctorate in orchestral composition and serves as the head of music for the Kuala Lumpur City Hall orchestra; 4) ZM is a mallet percussionist teaching drumlines at various Malaysian institutions and schools; 5) RR, a percussionist and Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) alumnus, has travelled and performed internationally and remains active in the industry; and 6 & 7) MH and AR are educators specialising in gamelan and jazz, respectively. Table 2 below provides a snapshot of the respondents' demographics.

Table 2. *Respondent demographics*

Name	**State**	**Gender/ Ethnicity**	**Education**	**Marital Status**	**Occupation**
Sharon Chong (SC)	Sabah	Female Kadazan	Bachelor's (music composition)	Single	Full-time performer
James Boyle (JB)	Penang	Male Serani	Doctorate (musicology)	Married	Lecturer & part-time performer
Isabella Pek (IP)	Kuala Lumpur	Female Chinese	Doctorate (orchestral composition)	Single	Head of music
Ruviyamin Ruslan (RR)	Kuala Lumpur	Male Malay	Bachelor's (music composition)	Married	Full-time performer & composer
Zahrein Mustafa (ZM)	Selangor	Male Malay	Bachelor's (music education, percussion)	Married	Educator & part-time performer
Mumtazah Hanafi (MH)	Kelantan	Female Malay	Bachelor's (music education, strings)	Single	Educator
Adib Rani (AR)	Kedah	Male Malay	Bachelor's (music education, brass)	Married	Educator

Findings

The analysis was conducted using NVivo software for coding and theme identification based on the main SCCT factors, i.e., cognitive, contextual, and affective. NVivo's hierarchy chart (see Figure 3) shows these factors as boxes sized according to theme saturation, read from largest to smallest, without numeric values. The results indicate that cognitive factors have the greatest influence, followed by affective and then contextual elements, which have the least impact.

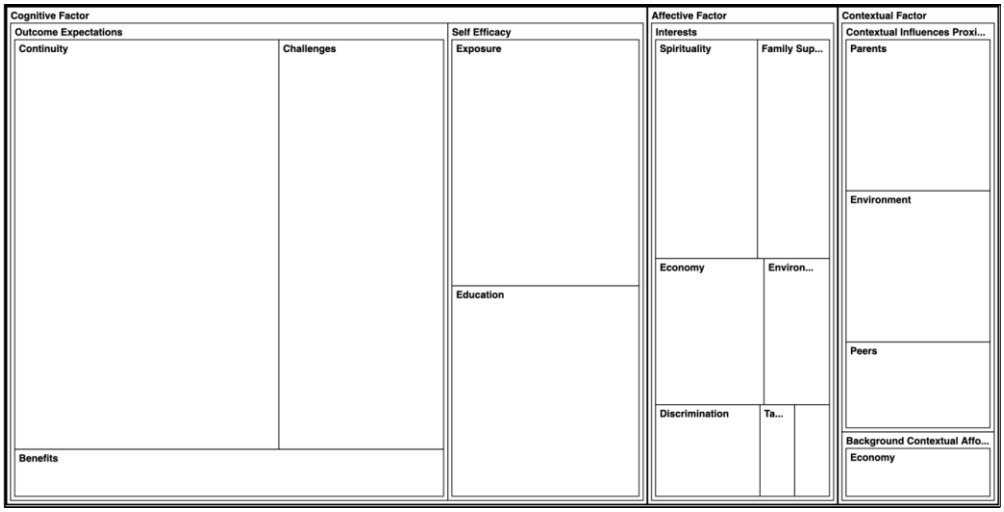

Figure 3. *Influence of cognitive, contextual, and affective factors (chart generated using NVivo)*

The results of the study are presented below according to three factors: cognitive, identified as the most influential; 2) contextual, which includes environmental and social influences on career choice; and 3) affective, the least influential, related to selection bias.

Cognitive Factors

According to SCCT, cognitive factors primarily comprise self-efficacy and outcome expectations, followed by learning experience as a smaller construct. Detailed analysis shows that outcome expectations have a greater influence than self-efficacy. Although early exposure and education can affect decisions, anticipated outcomes—specifically, continuity, challenges, and benefits—play a more important role.

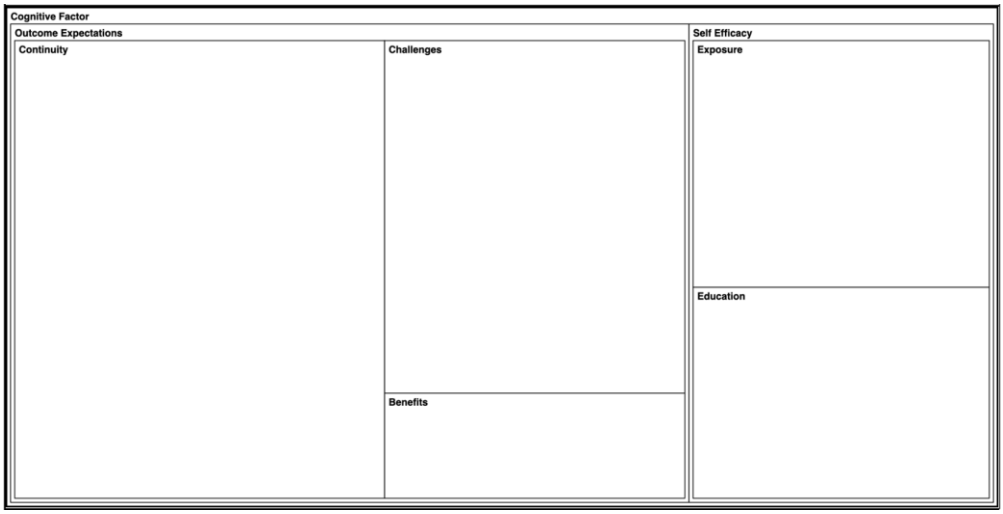

Figure 4. *Cognitive factor constructs and attributes (chart generated using NVivo)*

As seen in Figure 4, the continuity factor, under the theme of outcome expectations, emerged as the most influential, driven by environment and enthusiasm. All respondents agreed that the environment acts as a key stimulus that boosts motivation. Cities such as Kuala Lumpur and states like Selangor, Penang, and Johor are especially important because performance events occur more frequently there than in rural regions.

Enthusiasm—the "spirit" factor—is the second biggest attribute within the survival factor (i.e., elements influencing career longevity and persistence), supported by respondents' feedback during interviews:

> 'The calling' is my motivation. (SC)
>
> A passion for music, for me. (JB)
>
> My late mother bought an organ for her to learn, but end up I'm the one who's learning it. (IP)
>
> I have many more dreams with this career because I am really interested in music. (MH)
>
> What makes them stay in music is passion, pure passion. (ZM)

Respondents unanimously agreed that great interest or passion is essential for pursuing a music career. Economic factors are also important but less so, because the majority of students and their families are aware that financial returns in the field of music can take time. Reputation also influences career sustainability; according to JB, "Musicians or artists continue to stay [in the industry] because when they are at the top, they [hold] a 'strong command' and 'strong legacy'."

Of the factors influencing career selection, family support and the scarcity of alternative options had the least impact. Respondents noted that such

encouragement typically stems from the career's capacity to provide income for the family, either directly or indirectly. They also agreed that some individuals pursue music careers due to a lack of other skills.

Once the survival factors are identified, respondents agreed that challenges follow within the outcome expectations construct. These include issues related to discipline and focus, recognition, reputation, economic considerations, and performance. Discipline and focus primarily refer to individual attributes. JB explained: "If you are disciplined, if you are focused on and believe what you actually know, what you actually want, and you actually work on your goals, of course you will survive no matter how."

The advantage factor, the smallest influencing factor within the survival construct, includes appreciation, income, and time. Many choose a music career because it offers recognition from individuals, organisations, or even nations, and fulfills their desire to be valued for their talents and skills. Moreover, musicians have control over their income by accepting performance opportunities based on payment and can set their own working hours. As ZM noted, "You can relax, take your time. No need to go out in the morning, come back at night." According to the respondents, time flexibility is important, especially since music events are mostly held in urban areas where high population density means busy and competitive conditions.

From a self-efficacy perspective, both exposure and education are vital. Early exposure to music (both Western and local), whether through family or the environment, is essential. The analysis found that Western music has a stronger influence than local music. Furthermore, that all respondents received formal music education from a young age suggests that their parents were aware of the financial sacrifices required in supporting such training. In Malaysia, in the authors' observation, it is common for people to avoid pursuing goals perceived as beyond their financial means or economic status.

Contextual Factors

As illustrated in Figure 5 below, respondents emphasised parental support, environment, and peers as key contextual factors, which form the construct "contextual influences proximal to choice behaviour," followed by economic factors comprising the "background contextual affordance" construct.

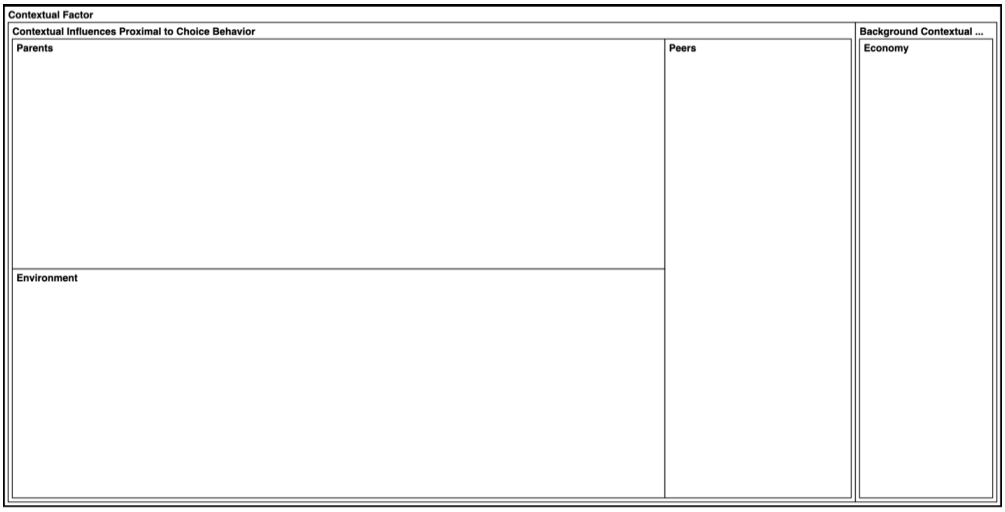

Figure 5. *Contextual factor constructs and attributes (chart generated using NVivo)*

Two out of four respondents reported receiving full parental support, as their fathers, both music teachers, were actively involved in music education and mentoring young people. Nevertheless, parental support differed among respondents, as reflected in their statements:

> The support from my mother was great, but she often reminds me to find a job with a steady salary. (JB)

> Basically, it is my father who told me to do so. (MH)

However, the other two respondents had parents who were only casual listeners of music and not directly involved as teachers or enthusiasts. One received encouragement from his mother but not his father, while the other spent four years trying to convince her parents to allow her to learn an instrument. Their experiences illustrate the variability of parental backing:

> My mother supports what I want to do, but my father's reaction is that he supports me loving music, but he does not support me wanting to be serious about music and make music a career. (ZM)

> Since I'm four until I'm eight years old, every day I begged for four years, then my parents let me just to shut me up. I received support but with a lot of pain. I don't think they were 100% supportive even until today. I think they feel very worried. (SC)

The environmental factor emerged as particularly significant—it had the largest percentage and was the most discussed topic during the interviews. All respondents agreed that geographical location played a major role in their exposure to music. More developed places like Kuala Lumpur and Penang were more likely to host music events compared to less developed areas like Sabah and Kelantan.

Consequently, the general perception of a music career was predominantly negative and regarded as uncertain or unstable. Although peers could exert some influence on career choices, respondents felt this impact was limited and expressed greater confidence in their own decisions. As ZM said, "My friends are mostly supportive, they said what I do is 'cool', but they always ask, 'Can you make money with this thing you do?'"

Analysis of the "background contextual affordance" construct shows that economic factors play a central role. Three respondents reported that finances were not a major issue because their parents understood the high costs associated with music education. Nonetheless, one respondent cited financial constraints as a key factor influencing his decision to pursue a music career.

Affective Factors

The affective factor, conceptualised within the construct of interest, includes attributes such as spiritual beliefs, economic conditions, discrimination, family support, environment, sharing, and talent, as shown in Figure 6. Among these, spiritual factors have the biggest influence, followed by economic considerations and family support. Additionally, environmental factors, sharing, and talent also play important roles, while discrimination considerably impacts certain respondents.

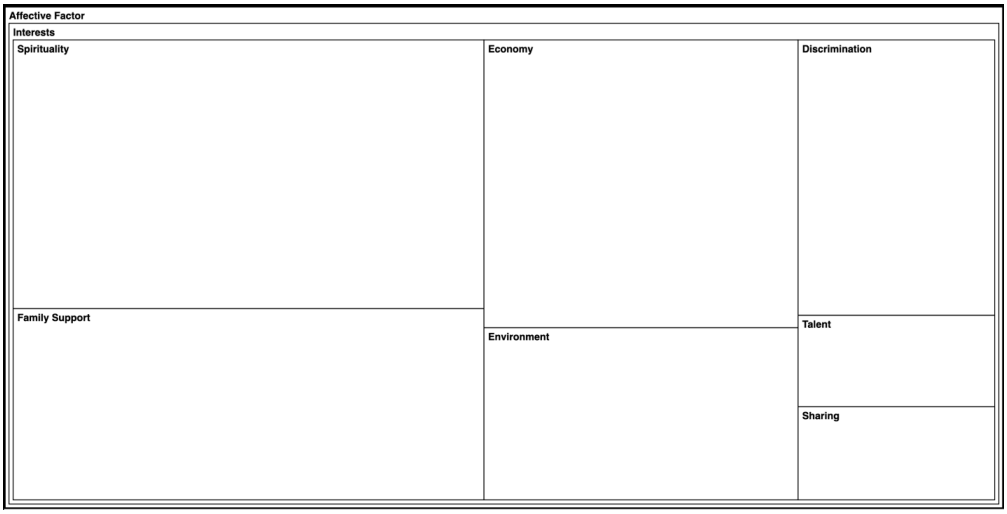

Figure 6. *Constructs and attributes of affective factors (chart generated using NVivo)*

Two informants reported that spiritual factors strongly impacted their career choices. JB described it as if "the music chose me," while SC referred to it as a "calling" he recognised since the age of four. SC's experience reflects a sense of purpose and fulfilment rooted in spirituality, shaped by his religious beliefs and engagement with faith-based books and organisations, which likely bolstered his confidence in pursuing music.

During the interviews, discrimination was identified as a significant factor that impacted respondents and motivated them to continue pursuing their music

careers. SC said, "I'm not a category A student. Usually, category A students are those who can play jazz or virtuoso classical music." Respondents reported discrimination in higher education, where the categorisation of students by ability and background produced pressure that many converted into motivation. MH recalled, "When I was in high school, I joined the band. There were boys and girls; what made me angry was that only boys could learn to play musical instruments, but the girls were not allowed." MH said that this unequal treatment in high school inspired her to become a music teacher committed to equal rights for all students.

Finally, talent, described by JB as "something that you are blessed with," provides people with an advantage in pursuing a music career. However, the analysis shows that talent plays a surprisingly small role among affective factors influencing career choice.

Discussion

In examining cognitive factors through the constructs of outcome expectations and self-efficacy, it is evident that the outcome expectations construct plays a greater role. Interview feedback indicates that respondents are more inclined to focus on career continuity than on challenges or benefits. However, this survival-oriented focus is highly dependent on key attributes such as environmental factors, enthusiasm, economic considerations, and reputation. Other elements, including diversity, family support, and limited alternatives, also affect career choice but to a lesser degree. Previous research has shown that sustaining a music career demands a commitment to continuous learning and growth (López-Íñiguez & Bennett, 2020). Consistent with this, IP, JB, SC, and ZM emphasised that musicians must be holistic individuals, not just skilled in their instruments but also maintaining an eagerness to acquire new knowledge.

The second most important cognitive construct is "challenge," which includes attributes like discipline, focus, economy and finance, performance, recognition, and reputation. The analysis shows that discipline and focus are the most significant within this construct, and all respondents emphasised their crucial role in choosing a music career. This reinforces findings from previous research (Ghaziah & Bennett, 2017). The "advantages" construct—comprising appreciation, income, and time—is the smallest, but respondents acknowledged these factors as sources of pride and as persuasive reasons compared to other careers. Self-efficacy appears to have less impact, likely because respondents received extensive exposure and education from primary through higher education. In addition, their families, especially their parents, recognised the substantial costs associated with music education.

Respondents' answers indicate that self-efficacy positively and significantly predicts both career intentions (Chan et al., 2018; Parkes & Jones, 2012; Wang & Wong, 2022) and outcome expectations (Kim & Seo, 2014; Navarro et al., 2007). However, this finding contrasts with some SCCT studies that report a negative relationship between expected outcomes and career intentions (Navarro et al., 2007; Samina, 2015). According to Bandura (1977), negative outcome expectations may inhibit certain behaviours. This view is supported by Lent et al. (1994), who argued that even with high self-efficacy, they can be obstacles to career intentions.

Contextual factors are categorised into two constructs: "contextual influences proximal to choice behaviour," and "background contextual affordance." The results of the interview analysis corroborate previous studies that found that social support positively affects self-efficacy and career intentions (Chan et al., 2018; Lent & Brown, 2008). This support shapes occupational identity and career decisions (see Isbell, 2008 and Kos, 2018). The extent of social support, however, hinges on an individual's environment. Parents' exposure to and awareness of music careers, for instance, differ by place of origin. Generally, parents from more developed nations understand music career options better than those from less developed ones, unless they have personal involvement in music.

The economic attribute is the biggest factor within the contextual factors, and it reveals two issues: parental sacrifice and community understanding. Respondents unanimously agreed that their parents understood the high expenses associated with a music career, and despite economic constraints, invested heavily to support their children. However, community awareness of the financial viability of music careers was limited, with little to no support for programmes from local to government levels. This awareness tended to exist only among those who were already involved in music.

The affective factor, centered on the construct of interest, includes attributes such as spirituality, family encouragement, economy, environment, discrimination, sharing, and talent, which were identified through interview analysis. Among these, three stood out. First, spirituality was frequently mentioned: two respondents described choosing a music career as a calling, suggesting a possible religious influence. Although prior studies link music and religion (Belzen, 2013; de Rosen, 2020; Laack, 2015), further research is needed. Second, discrimination emerged as a concern, primarily related to gender and skill. Despite studies showing a 60% female to 40% male ratio in the music education workforce (Pembrook & Craig, 2023), respondents reported discrimination against women in teaching and learning settings. Similarly, students with stronger skills received more attention. These issues warrant further study. Finally, intrinsic interest was confirmed as the most important factor in choosing a music performance career, corroborated by findings by Jones and Parkes (2010) and other research on interest (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2017; Miksza et al., 2021).

Implications

The results of this study have important theoretical and practical implications for Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) within the context of music career choices.

They reinforce the central role of self-efficacy in career decision-making—supporting Bandura's (1997) foundational work—and confirm outcome expectations as a key factor shaping career paths, consistent with Lent, Brown, and Hackett's model (1994). By identifying new attributes related to self-efficacy and career intention specific to the Malaysian context, the study extends SCCT and addresses calls for more culturally nuanced research in music careers (Lent & Brown, 2019). The focus on personal goals is in line with Bandura's (2001) agentic perspective and underscores individuals' active role in directing their own career journeys. Furthermore, environmental factors such as family support and access to resources are also significant and reflect SCCT's attention to contextual influences (Lent et al., 2000). The results of this study suggest the need for further investigation into how these external influences interact with personal variables, which may lead to refinements of SCCT for broader applicability.

On a practical level, the central role of self-efficacy points to the importance of interventions that build students' confidence through hands-on experiences, social modeling, and receiving positive feedback. Helping students set and pursue meaningful career goals can enhance motivation and persistence. Career counselors can facilitate this by guiding students to establish their goals and develop realistic, positive expectations about the music industry. Policy makers also have a role in creating supportive environments by ensuring access to financial aid, resources, and infrastructure to promote music education and career exploration. These insights can guide music institutions and practitioners in designing strategies that address cognitive, contextual, and affective factors to improve students' career aspirations and performance. Future research should build on this study's findings and use qualitative methods to deepen understanding of music students' career choices.

Study Limitations and Suggestions for Further Study

This research has some limitations, notably the exclusion of certain constructs from existing models to better fit the Malaysian context, where formal music education and career interest are growing. Including these omitted constructs would require a different research framework, which suggests the need for a more comprehensive design. Additionally, new attributes identified in this qualitative study should be tested quantitatively among music students in Malaysian higher education to verify their relevance to local sociological factors.

Conclusion

This study illustrates the importance of examining career intentions related to music in Malaysia. Since the establishment of a formal music education system in 1983 and government initiatives supporting the creative industry since 2010, the music sector has become a significant contributor to Malaysia's GDP (Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, 2021). Given ongoing cognitive and behavioural changes, applying Social Cognitive Career Theory is appropriate, as many music performance students are likely to pursue music careers. The study also identifies new attributes specific to the Malaysian milieu, which can help educators and

administrators to develop strategies that enhance students' career aspirations by addressing cognitive, contextual, and affective factors.

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