



Social Cognitive Career Theory and Career Choice Action among Students in Nepal

Mahananda Chalise, PhD

Professor and Dean

Faculty of Management, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal

mahananda.chalise@tu.edu.np

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7210-1244>

Basu Dev Lamichhane, PhD

Assistant Professor

Tribhuvan University, Saraswati Multiple Campus, Kathmandu, Nepal

basudev.lamichhane@smc.tu.edu.np

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7987-6512>

Sajeeb Kumar Shrestha

Faculty of Management, Tribhuvan University, Nepal

drsajeeb@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5227-771X>

Dipak Mahat*

Researcher, Nepal Philosophical Research Center, Nepal

dipakmahatdm2047@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0540-1180>

Corresponding Author*

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Abstract

Objective: This study focused on the application of social cognitive career theory (SCCT) (Lent et al., 1994) in relation to the career choices of secondary and higher secondary levels students in Nepal.

Methods: A cross-sectional study was conducted with 385 students (grades 9–12). Multiple linear regression in SPSS was used to analyze four predictors: career goals, learning



experiences, self-efficacy, and outcome expectations, and contextual supports, which were based on the SCCT model.

Results: The regression model was significant, $F(4, 380) = 56.79, p < .001$, explaining 37.4% of the variance in career choices ($R^2 = .374$; adjusted $R^2 = .368$). Self-efficacy and outcome expectations were the strongest predictors ($\beta = .431, p < .001$), followed by career goals ($\beta = .201, p < .001$) and learning experiences ($\beta = .139, p = .009$). There was no statistical significance for contextual supports ($\beta = .061, p = .197$). Model robustness and the lack of any significant common method bias were confirmed with diagnostic testing.

Conclusion: The results validated the SCCT model, where internal cognitive components had a more significant effect on career selection than contextual supports among secondary school students in Nepal.

Keywords: Social Cognitive Career Theory, career choice action, self-efficacy, contextual supports, secondary school students, Nepal

Introduction

Adolescent career decision making is one of the most important developmental experiences that a young person can experience, influencing their future educational course, employment, and long-term welfare (Lent et al., 1994; Lee et al., 2022). Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) has been one of the most used theories to describe the development of interests, career choices, and academic and career performance, and it is an extension of Bandura's (1986) general social cognitive theory to the vocational area (Brown & Lent, 2019). Based on learning experiences, SCCT theorizes that self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations come together to produce career interests and goals, which then motivate concrete choice actions; all within a network of contextual supports and barriers (Lent et al., 1994, 2000).

While SCCT has been widely used in North American and, more recently, East Asian and European samples (Sheu et al., 2010), there are not as many empirical tests of SCCT in South Asian secondary school populations. Nepal is a theoretically interesting country to study career guidance infrastructure, as it is not as well-developed as in many other countries and is inconsistent in many Nepali schools (Mahatara, 2024); career pathways are often determined by family and economic influences rather than by individual interests (Ghimire, 2026); and collectivist cultural norms can influence how contextual supports translate into individual choice behavior (Hagger et al., 2014). The present study aims to fill this gap by testing a four-predictor SCCT choice model in Nepal, namely Career Goals, Learning Experiences, Self-efficacy and Outcome Expectations, and Contextual Supports, which is measured by the student's relationship with a 'career-relevant role model'.

The specific aims of this study were: (a) to assess the four SCCT predictors on career choice action; (b) to examine the relationship between SCCT factors and career choice and (c) to analyze the impact SCCT factors on students career choice context of Nepal.

Literature Review



Social Cognitive Career Theory: Theoretical Backgrounds

Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) initially created SCCT as a continuum that integrated the study of career and academic interest development, career choice-making, and career performance. Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory is the foundation of SCCT, which places self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals at the center of the cognitive-person variables that individuals use to exercise agency in their career development; and it recognizes extra-personal contextual variables, including family support, socioeconomic status, and access to guidance resources, that facilitate and hinder that agency (Lent et al., 2000). The interest, choice, performance, and recently, the satisfaction and self-management models provide significant empirical evidence that has accrued over the last 30 years (Brown & Lent, 2019).

Self-Efficacy and Outcome Expectations

Self-efficacy is a person's self-confidence in being able to perform the behaviors necessary to achieve a desired outcome, and outcome expectations are beliefs about the outcomes of behaviors (Lent et al., 1994). The findings of the present study are consistent with those of other studies conducted in the field of motivation, which consistently found that self-efficacy and outcome expectations are among the strongest and most reliable predictors in the SCCT choice model, either directly or indirectly, because of their impact on interests and goals (Sheu et al., 2010).

Learning Experiences

Lent et al. (1994) proposed that learning experiences such as personal mastery experiences, vicarious learning, social persuasion, and physiological/affective states are the developmental antecedents of self-efficacy and outcome expectations. A credible role model is a powerful vicarious learning situation that can provide students with opportunities to see that others have achieved similar outcomes and with social validation that they can.

Contextual Supports and Barriers

Lent et al. (2000) expanded the original SCCT model to include contextual supports (family encouragement, financial resources, and access to mentors) and barriers (discrimination and financial constraints) to the development of choice goals and behaviors. However, some research has found that contextual supports have little direct effect on choice action, and in fact, directly impact choice action primarily through self-efficacy (Lent et al., 2000).

Career Goals and Choice Action

Career goals are defined as the desire to pursue a specific education or occupation and are thought to be the closest cognitive antecedent to choice action the actionable steps (e.g., attend a course, ask for advice, follow a path) that lead to the implementation of a career goal (Lent et al., 1994). Goals have been a reliable predictor across the SCCT predictor set in various meta-analytic syntheses (Sheu et al., 2010).

SCCT in the Nepali Context

It is observed that the process of career decision-making among secondary-level students in the Nepalese context is limited by formal career guidance, highly influenced by family and



economic choices on the educational path, and significantly affected by the economic necessity of youth emigration for employment, and lack of intrinsic interest. Ghimire (2026) reported that, among 470 students of higher secondary and first-year university students in Nepal, the parameters of intrinsic interest and perceived future employment opportunities were found significant in predicting career choice, whereas financial considerations were not significant as it is expected to be the most important deciding factor in a developing country. Likewise, Sapkota and Amatya's (2015) study of Nepali medical students using the SCCT model revealed that none of the constructs of SCCT were significant in predicting the choice of practice setting, suggesting that some SCCT pathways might have different or weaker effects in the institutional and cultural context of Nepal. The results of these studies inspire the current study to examine what SCCT predictors still hold their theoretical value with secondary students in Nepal.

Hypotheses

H1: Career Goals positively predict Choice Action.

H2: Learning Experiences positively predict Choice Action.

H3: Self-Efficacy and Outcome Expectations positively predict Choice Action.

H4: Contextual Supports positively predict Choice Action.

Method

Research Design

Based on the existing literature in the field of applied SCCT (Ghimire, 2026), a quantitative (cross-sectional) survey design was used to test the hypothesized SCCT-based model using a multiple linear regression analysis.

Participants

A total of 385 secondary and higher secondary levels students (Grades 9–12) in Nepal participated in the study. The sample consisted of 173 males (44.9%) and 212 females (55.1%). Regarding age, 20.8% were 13–14 years, 48.3% were 15–16 years, 15.3% were 17–18 years, and 15.6% were above 18 years. By grade level, 35.3% were in Grade 9, 39.7% in Grade 10, 6.2% in Grade 11, and 18.7% in Grade 12. When considering fathers' occupation, the most frequent was business/self-employment (30.9%), followed by “other” (27.8%), government service (14.3%), and private employment (12.5%). The most frequent occupations for mothers were homemakers (44.2%), business/self-employment (17.7%), and “other” (16.9%).

Measures

To operationalize career choice action and its SCCT-derived predictors, students' relationship with a self-identified career-relevant role model was used (Lent et al., 1994, 2000), as the theory was that exposure to a role model serves as a condensed form of vicarious learning, social persuasion, and perceived contextual support. Items were rated on a 5-point scale for each construct, and the questionnaire items for each construct are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Mapping of SCCT Constructs to Questionnaire Items

Variable	SCCT Construct	Items
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IV1	Contextual Supports	CS4, CS5, CS6
IV2	Learning Experiences	LE5, LE6, LE7, LE8
IV3	Self-Efficacy & Outcome Expectations	SE3, SE4, SE7, SE9, SE10
IV4	Career Goals	CG1, CG8, CG3, CG6
DV	Choice Action	C1, C2, C5, C6, C8, C11, C12

Procedure

Data were collected through a structured self-administered questionnaire given to students in the participating schools in Nepal. Appropriate informed consent/assent procedures for the minor population were followed, and anonymous responses were obtained.

Data Analysis

IBM SPSS was used for data analysis. The internal consistency of each scale was determined by Cronbach's alpha. Harman's single-factor test (Podsakoff et al., 2003) was used to test for common method bias. Descriptive statistics and bivariate (Pearson) statistics were calculated for each of the study variables, and a standard multiple linear regression was used to predict the score on Choice Action from the scores on Career Goals, Learning Experiences, Self-Efficacy, and Outcome Expectations, and Contextual Supports. The assumptions and robustness of the regression model were assessed using regression diagnostics (standardized residuals, Mahalanobis distance, Cook's distance, centered leverage values).

Results

Reliability Analysis

The internal consistency reliability ranged from acceptable to good for all constructs (Table 2). The Learning Experience construct was marginally below the conventional .70 threshold (Nunnally, 1978) but still acceptable for exploratory research (Hair et al., 2019), with an α value of .653. The four constructs were higher than the conventional .70 level (Nunnally, 1978), while Learning Experience ($\alpha = .653$) was slightly lower than the conventional .70 level but still in the acceptable range for exploratory research (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 2

Reliability Statistics

Construct	Cronbach's α	N of Items
Contextual Supports	.721	3
Learning Experience	.653	4
Self-Efficacy & Outcome Expectations	.746	5
Career Goals	.702	4
Choice Action	.729	6

Common Method Bias

The single-factor test conducted by Harman resulted in eight factors with eigenvalues over 1.0, with the first factor (the largest) accounting for 28.31% of variance, which was below 50%

recommended by Podsakoff et al. (2003). Therefore, common method bias was not thought to be a threat to validity.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

The descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations are displayed in Tables 3 and 4 and Figure 1. All variables were measured on a 1–5 scale. The correlations of Choice Action with outcomes for Self-Efficacy and Outcome Expectations were the highest ($r = .560, p < .01$), and with Learning Experience, the second highest ($r = .425, p < .01$), while Career Goals were the lowest but still significant ($r = .263, p < .01$).

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics (N = 385)

Variable	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Contextual Supports	1.00	5.00	3.4814	.85307
Learning Experience	1.00	5.00	3.7383	.76346
Self-Efficacy & Outcome Expectations	1.00	5.00	3.7631	.73922
Career Goals	1.00	5.00	3.0364	.92631
Choice Action	1.00	5.00	3.1377	.78189

Table 4

Pearson Correlations among Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Contextual Supports	—				
2. Learning Experience	.461**	—			
3. Self-Efficacy & OE	.401**	.589**	—		
4. Career Goals	.175**	.018	.113*	—	
5. Choice Action	.333**	.425**	.560**	.263**	—

Note. ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$ (2-tailed).

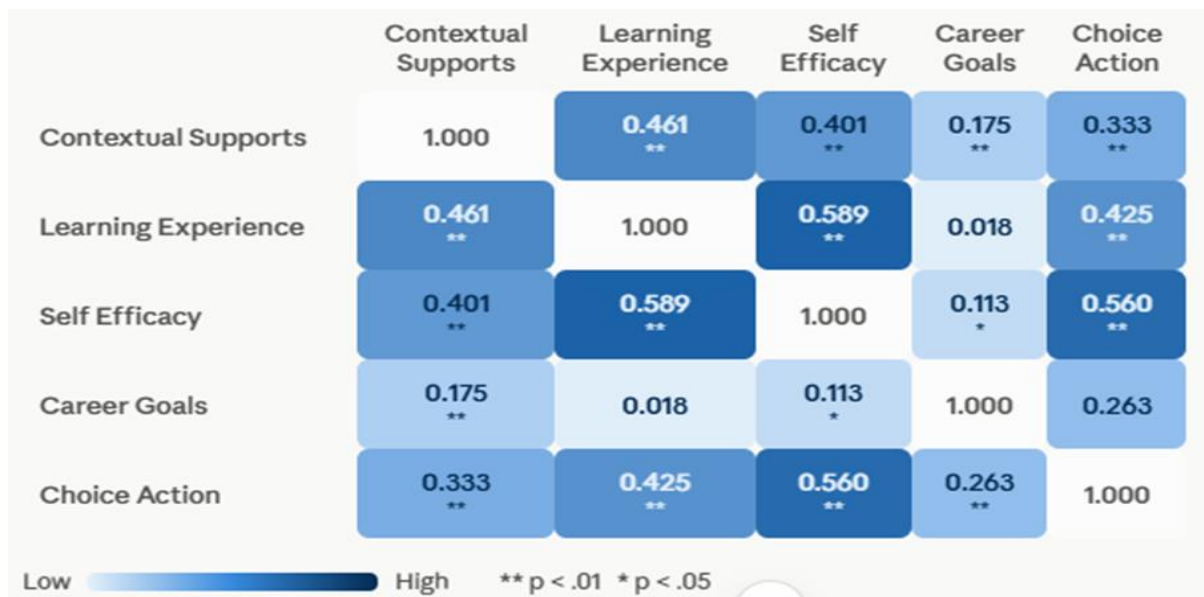


Figure 1. Heat map of Pearson correlations among study variables.

Regression Analysis

A multiple linear regression was performed using Career Goals, Learning Experiences, Self-Efficacy and Outcome Expectations as predictors of Choice Action, with a standard regression analysis. The overall model was statistically significant, $F(4, 380) = 56.789$, $p < .001$, and accounted for 37.4% of the variance in Choice Action ($R = .612$, $R^2 = .374$, adjusted $R^2 = .368$; Table 5 and Table 6).

Table 5

Model Summary and ANOVA

R	R ²	Adj. R ²	F(4, 380)	Sig.
.612	.374	.368	56.789	< .001

Table 6

Regression Coefficients Predicting Choice Action

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	Sig.
(Constant)	.178	.205	—	.865	.388
Contextual Supports	.056	.043	.061	1.292	.197
Learning Experience	.143	.054	.139	2.628	.009
Self-Efficacy & OE	.456	.054	.431	8.410	.000
Career Goals	.170	.035	.201	4.846	.000

Note. Dependent variable: Choice Action. OE = Outcome Expectations.

Based on the results presented in Table 6, Self-Efficacy and Outcome Expectations had the largest association with Choice Action ($\beta = .431$, $p < .001$), Career Goals ($\beta = .201$, $p < .001$), and Learning Experience ($\beta = .139$, $p = .009$). There was no significant relationship between Contextual Supports and Choice Action ($\beta = .061$, $p = .197$). The support for H1, H2 and H3 were therefore accepted, and H4 was not accepted.

**Regression Diagnostics**

There were no influential outliers that skewed the results from the regression model (see Table 7), and the model met all the standard assumptions for regression. The standardized residuals ranged between -3.245 and 2.519 , which is within the ± 3.29 guideline. The Mahalanobis distance ranged from 0.470 to 13.727 and was not greater than the critical chi-square value for the same degrees of freedom (4) and significance level (.001); thus, there were no serious multivariate outliers. The maximum Cook's distance value was $.079$, which is very low and low relative to the conservative value of 1.0 , indicating that no single value was unduly influential in the estimation of the regression. One case exhibited a positive centered leverage value ($.062$), which is higher than the conventional cut-off values ($2\times$ and $3\times$ the average leverage); however, the Cook's distance for this case is very small and therefore, this case was not further treated.

Table 7*Regression Diagnostics Summary*

Statistic	Min	Max	Threshold
Standardized Residual	-3.245	2.519	± 3.29
Mahalanobis Distance	$.170$	13.727	< 18.47 (df = 4, $p < .001$)
Cook's Distance	$.000$	$.079$	< 1.0
Centered Leverage Value	$.000$	$.062$	$< .026$ ($2\times$) / $< .039$ ($3\times$)

In addition to the above quantitative diagnostics, visual checks of the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity were performed. The histogram of standardized residuals (Figure 2) was approximately normally distributed ($M=1.18E-16$, $SD=0.995$) and the Normal P-P Plot of standardized residuals (Figure 3) indicated points were generally near the diagonal reference line, affirming the assumption that the residuals were normally distributed. The residuals were plotted against the predicted values (Figure 4) and the pattern was approximately rectangular with no funnel or curvilinear pattern, thus confirming the assumptions of linearity and homoscedasticity.

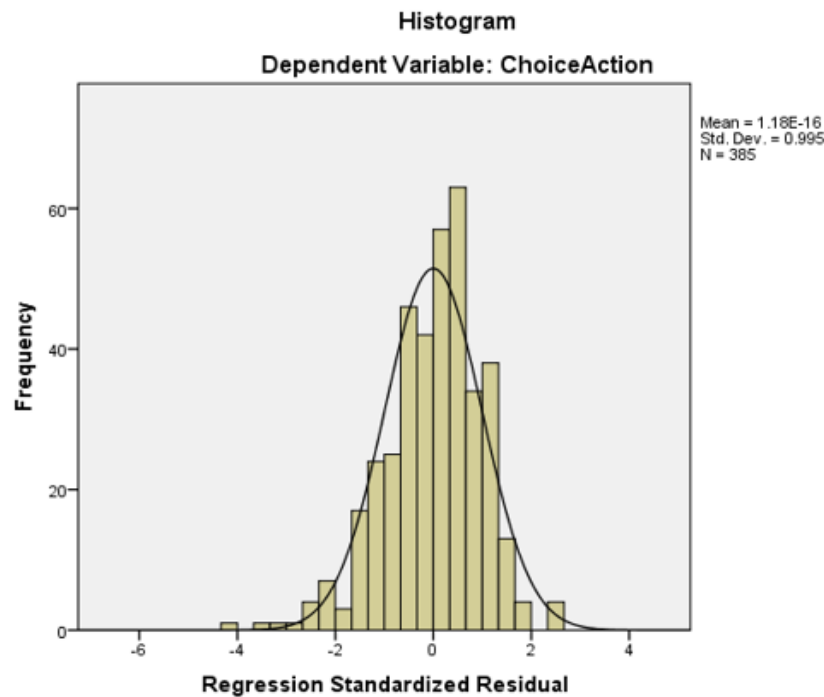


Figure 2. Histogram of regression standardized residuals (Dependent Variable: Choice Action).

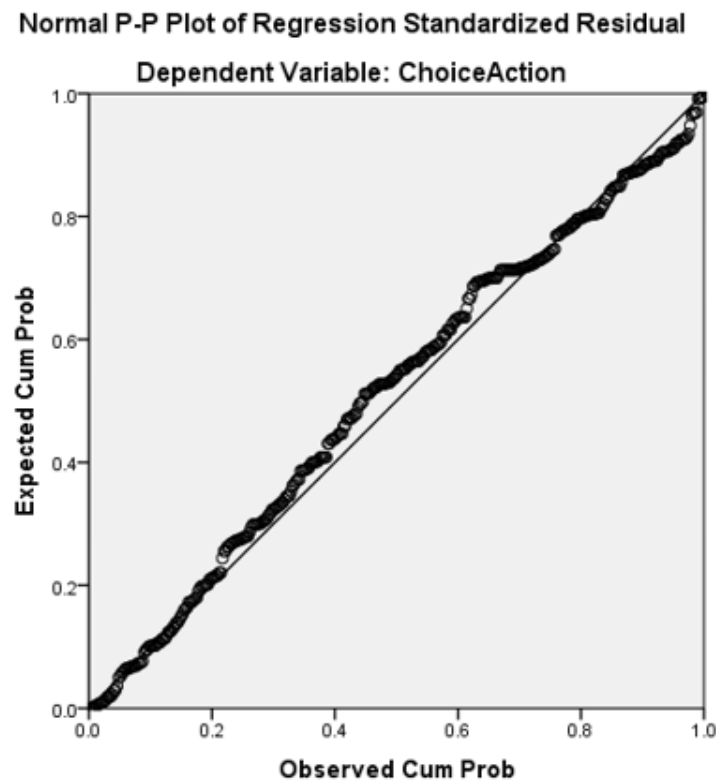


Figure 3. Normal P-P plot of regression standardized residuals (Dependent Variable: Choice Action).

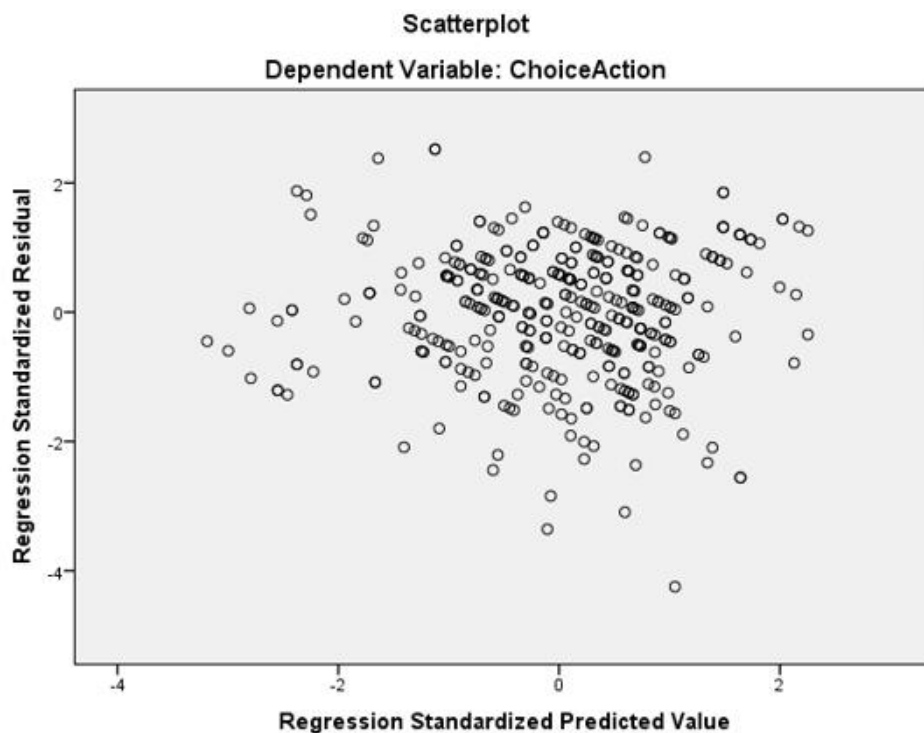


Figure 4. Scatterplot of regression standardized residuals against standardized predicted values (Dependent Variable: Choice Action).

Discussion

The current study aimed to test a four-predictor model of choice (SCCT) in this study with secondary school students of Nepal to test the relative contribution of Career Goals, Learning Experiences, Self-Efficacy, and Outcome Expectations, and Contextual Supports to Choice Action. As in the broader SCCT literature (Sheu et al., 2010), Self-Efficacy and Outcome Expectations were the most significant predictors, supporting SCCT's main premise that beliefs regarding one's own competence and the potential results of one's action are key factors in career-related action (Lent et al., 1994). Career Goals also strongly predicted Choice Action, as predicted by the theory that argues that goals are the most proximal cognitive antecedent of concrete choice action.

The relationship between learning experience and choice action was also significant but smaller in magnitude than the relationship between self-efficacy and choice action; this is consistent with the conceptualization of learning experiences as a relatively more distal source of influence that may act primarily through self-efficacy and outcome expectations, and not directly on choice behavior, as suggested by SCCT (Lent et al., 1994).

Contrary to hypothesis H4, there was no significant relationship between Contextual Supports and Choice Action. This result contradicts the initial SCCT theory that contextual supports have a direct proaction effect on choice goals and actions, but it is consistent with a wealth of previous SCCT research that found contextual supports tend to work through a mediating role in strengthening self-efficacy more than they have a strong direct effect (Lent et al., 2000).



Additionally, the variance in the perceived contextual support experienced by students may be limited to predict choice behavior in this sample, due to the relatively low prevalence of formal career guidance structures in secondary education in Nepal (Mahatara, 2024). This is consistent with Sapkota and Amatya (2015), who reported that none of the constructs in the SCCT was significant in predicting future practice-location choice among medical students in Nepal, and Ghimire (2026), who reported that extrinsic, resources dependent factors were less predictive than intrinsic, person dependent factors among higher-secondary students in Nepal.

The results indicate that the core cognitive-person pathway (self-efficacy – goals – action) of SCCT seems to transfer well to the secondary-school context in Nepal, although some adaptation in modeling “support” as a pathway variable (between self-efficacy and goals) or in operationalizing “support” (e.g., family expectation as a pathway variable versus family encouragement as a pathway variable) is needed, as suggested by Lent et al. (2000).

Limitations

There are several caveats to keep in mind. First, the cross-sectional design does not allow for causal inference to be made between the variables studied. Second, the data were obtained from a single source, self-report, even though the Harman's single-factor test result was acceptable, common method variance was not completely excluded. Third, the constructs of Career Goals, Learning Experiences, Self-Efficacy, and Contextual Supports were operationalized specifically in terms of students' relationships with a self-identified role model, which were theoretically grounded in SCCT's learning-experience mechanisms, but may not have fully reflected the constructs as they have been defined in the broader SCCT literature. Fourth, the sample was not balanced across grade levels, as there were fewer Grade 11 students (6.2%) than might be expected across the secondary and higher secondary levels, potentially reducing the generalizability of the results.

Conclusion

This study supports the applicability of social cognitive career theory in explaining the action involved in career choice among secondary school students in Nepal. All three constructs, self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and career goals and learning experiences, were found to be significant predictors of the career choice actions of secondary school students in Nepal. However, contextual support was not a significant predictor of choice action, indicating that in resource-poor environments, cognitive-person internal processes could have a comparatively greater influence on students' career choice actions than external, resource-dependent processes. For school counselors and policy makers in Nepal, these findings have practical implications in two ways: First, while the provision of more contextual support infrastructure is important, interventions that boost students' self-efficacy beliefs and clarity of career objectives such as creating exposure and mentorship opportunities with role models can be expected to provide more immediate behavioral returns, albeit that also contextual support infrastructure is important. Longitudinal study designs and more comprehensive measurement



of contextual support should be used in future studies to better explain these relationships in the educational context in Nepal.

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