



Repositioning Technical and Vocational Education and Training in National Education Hierarchies: A Marketing Management Analysis of Reputational Equity in The Gambia

Ozioma Ikonne

Abstract: This study examines the formation and constraints of reputational equity within the Technical and Vocational Education and Training sector in The Gambia, extending marketing theory by conceptualising TVET as a sector-level (macro-brand) system rather than a collection of individual institutions. A convergent mixed methods design was employed, combining large-scale survey data with in-depth stakeholder interviews across multiple regions. Quantitative and qualitative data were analysed concurrently and integrated to examine how institutional signalling, stakeholder perceptions, and symbolic legitimacy interact to shape reputational outcomes. The findings reveal a functional-symbolic reputational paradox, in which Technical and Vocational Education and Training is widely perceived as economically valuable for employability and entrepreneurship, yet remains constrained by low prestige and identity-based hesitation. While signalling infrastructure positively influences stakeholder perceptions, its impact is moderated by symbolic legitimacy structures that filter how value is interpreted. Reputational equity is shown to enhance trust and advocacy, but its conversion into enrolment preference remains conditional on overcoming stigma and status-based hierarchies. The study advances marketing management scholarship by (i) extending reputational equity to a sector-level market system, (ii) introducing the functional-symbolic paradox as a boundary condition in value-choice relationships, and (iii) developing a signal-dependent, multi-stakeholder model of reputational formation in education markets. The findings provide a transferable framework for analysing reputational dynamics in Technical and Vocational Education and Training and other public service sectors, particularly in emerging economies.

Keywords: TVET; Reputational Equity; Brand Equity; Corporate Reputation; Signaling; Vocational Stigma; The Gambia

Nomenclature:

KMC: Kanifing Municipal Council
BCC: Banjul City Council
GBA: Greater Banjul Area
WCR: West Coast Region
NDP: National Development Plan

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TVET: Technical and Vocational Education and Training
SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals
SPSS: Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

I. INTRODUCTION

The Gambia's National Development Plan (NDP 2023–2027) articulates national priorities centred on reducing youth unemployment, promoting self-reliance, and aligning Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) with the evolving needs of the economy. These priorities are consistent with global development frameworks, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 and 8, which emphasise inclusive and equitable quality education, skills development, employment generation, and entrepreneurship (Karseth et al., 2024; Mante et al., 2025) [14]. In response to these strategic imperatives, The Gambia developed and validated its first National TVET Policy in 2022, marking a significant institutional shift toward a more structured and policy-driven TVET system.

The introduction of this policy framework implies that prior TVET practices in The Gambia evolved in a largely fragmented and uncoordinated manner, without a comprehensive guiding structure. Consequently, the repositioning of TVET within the NDP (2023–2027) has generated increased practitioner and scholarly interest in understanding its role within the broader tertiary and higher education ecosystem (Pilz, 2025a) [18]. In particular, there is a growing need to examine how TVET is perceived relative to academic education pathways and to identify the factors that shape its image and reputation among key stakeholders.

Despite its strategic importance, research on The Gambia's tertiary and higher education sector remains limited, resulting in a significant gap in understanding the reputational dynamics of TVET in the country. Addressing this gap, the present study adopts a marketing management perspective by conceptualising the TVET sector not merely as a collection of institutions but as a macro-brand system, whose collective reputation constitutes a shared strategic asset. This perspective aligns with contemporary branding and reputation scholarship, which emphasises the role of stakeholder perceptions and interactions in shaping value assessments and the translation of reputation into brand equity (Adewole, 2024) [2].

Within this framework, the TVET sector is conceptualised as a brand-portfolio ecosystem, in which institutional-level performance aggregates into sector-level reputational capital. Rather than treating graduate



employability or training effectiveness solely as educational outcomes, this study interprets them as brand performance signals that communicate value to key stakeholders, including students, employers, government, industry partners, and international collaborators. Such signals are central to the formation of reputational equity, particularly in contexts where stakeholders rely on observable outcomes and experiential cues to evaluate institutional credibility and relevance (Hoque et al., 2024 [10]; Shahid et al., 2024) [24].

The study is therefore framed as a sector-level reputational equity audit, drawing on contemporary brand equity and corporate reputation perspectives to examine how performance indicators, stakeholder perceptions, and institutional alignment contribute to the overall image of TVET in The Gambia (Veh et al., 2019; Samet, 2024). Specifically, the study evaluates dimensions such as perceived quality, market orientation, access, and symbolic associations. It maps these onto sector-level indicators, including graduate employment rates, employer relevance ratings, enrolment patterns, and public perceptions of TVET.

By integrating marketing and educational perspectives, this study provides an empirical basis for understanding the drivers of TVET reputational equity. It offers insights to improve the design, delivery, and strategic positioning of TVET in The Gambia.

II. RESEARCH QUESTION AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

As articulated in The Gambia's National Development Plan (NDP 2023–2027), Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is a strategic mechanism for promoting youth empowerment by developing practical skills, employability competencies, and entrepreneurial capabilities across diverse occupational fields. This policy orientation aligns with broader global recognition of TVET as a critical driver of inclusive growth, workforce development, and socio-economic transformation (Mante et al., 2025; Pilz, 2025a) [18].

However, despite its strategic importance, TVET continues to experience persistent image and reputational challenges, both within The Gambia and globally. Prior studies indicate that TVET is often perceived as a second-choice pathway relative to academic education, with negative associations linked to social status, quality perceptions, and limited progression opportunities (Hoque et al., 2024; Samet, 2024). These perceptions have significant implications for enrolment patterns, stakeholder engagement, and the overall effectiveness of TVET systems.

Against this background, this study adopts a marketing and reputational equity perspective to investigate the underlying drivers of TVET perception and positioning in The Gambia. Specifically, the study seeks to address the following research questions:

- A. **RQ1:** What are the current levels of awareness of TVET in The Gambia?
- B. **RQ2:** What are the key structural dimensions of TVET's reputational equity in The Gambia?
- C. **RQ3:** What marketing and strategic interventions can reposition TVET within the national education hierarchy in The Gambia?

III. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A. Conceptual Foundation

Reputational equity can be conceptualised as the accumulated value derived from stakeholders' collective evaluations of an institution's credibility, legitimacy, and capacity to create sustained value over time. In contemporary reputation literature, reputation is consistently treated as perceptual, comparative, and enduring, as it develops cumulatively through repeated stakeholder interactions, signals, and experiences (Yi, 2023) [30]; Rodríguez-Aceves et al., 2025; Li et al., 2025).

The conceptual foundations of reputational equity are located at the intersection of brand equity and corporate reputation scholarship. On the one hand, brand equity refers to the aggregate of positive and negative associations attributed to a brand that influence stakeholders' preferences, loyalty, and behavioural intentions. As such, brand equity functions as a precursor to institutional value creation by shaping how stakeholders interpret and respond to organisational offerings (Adewole, 2024; Marvi et al., 2024) [15]; Ismail et al., 2025) [11].

On the other hand, corporate reputation represents the collective evaluation of an institution based on its past performance and anticipated future behaviour (Hoque et al., 2024). It is an intangible, time-dependent asset that enhances institutional relevance and competitive positioning. Samet (2024) further argues that corporate reputation consolidates institutional value through the accumulation of stakeholder impressions, which evolve into reputational capital—often regarded as one of the most critical strategic assets available to organisations.

Drawing on these perspectives, this study conceptualises reputational equity as a multi-layered, socially constructed, and signal-dependent construct operating at the intersection of brand equity and corporate reputation theory. Existing research suggests that reputational equity accumulates through recurring signals and stakeholder experiences, which are interpreted through institutional attributes such as performance quality, credibility, and legitimacy (Yi, 2023; Li et al., 2025) [12].

In the context of TVET institutions, quality and performance signals are reflected in innovation outputs, graduate employment outcomes, and service delivery standards (Awal, 2026) [6]. Credibility signals, in turn, are derived from stakeholder perceptions of institutional consistency, governance, transparency, and reliability. Legitimacy signals emerge through alignment with societal expectations, social responsibility initiatives, and policy relevance.

Furthermore, third-party amplification mechanisms—such as media narratives, institutional rankings, accreditation systems, and employer endorsements—play a critical role in strengthening reputational trust, particularly in contexts characterised by information asymmetry (Reitsamer & Brunner-Sperdin, 2021) [21]; Shahid et al., 2024). These mechanisms enhance stakeholder confidence, facilitate partnerships, and reinforce institutional legitimacy.



B. Reputational Equity of TVET

There is a broad consensus in contemporary literature that TVET systems across diverse national contexts face persistent reputational challenges (Owusu-Agyeman et al., 2025) [16]; Mante et al., 2025). These studies consistently report that TVET is often perceived as a lower-status educational pathway relative to academic routes. This perception reflects deeply embedded social and cultural stigma associated with vocational education (Aldossari, 2020) [3].

The resulting reputational deficit contributes to a cycle in which TVET institutions struggle to attract high-performing students and qualified instructors, further reinforcing negative perceptions. The underlying insight from this body of research is that the reputation is fundamentally shaped by social perception and stigma-related legitimacy challenges (Pilz, 2025b) [19]; Aldossari, 2020) [3].

These perceptions are often linked to concerns regarding limited career progression opportunities, weak labour market outcomes, and the perceived inferiority of vocational qualifications. Adams et al. (2023) [1] further demonstrate that public perceptions of TVET play a critical role in shaping enrolment decisions, reinforcing the influence of stakeholder attitudes and social evaluation processes in determining participation patterns within vocational education systems. These findings highlight the importance of perception-driven dynamics in the formation of reputational equity in TVET contexts.

C. Factors Shaping TVET Reputational Equity

Recent studies indicate that the reputational equity of TVET is influenced by multiple interrelated factors, including social legitimacy, market relevance, vocational identity, institutional credibility, and stakeholder engagement mechanisms (Weinreb & Bamberger, 2025) [29]. Social legitimacy, in particular, is shaped by the persistent perception that TVET is not a first-choice educational pathway, leading to scepticism among parents and prospective students regarding its ability to deliver long-term socio-economic benefits.

Market relevance represents another critical determinant of reputational equity. Mante et al. (2025) highlight that many TVET systems—particularly in developing economies—remain supply-driven, with limited alignment between curricula and labour market demands. This mismatch contributes to weak employment outcomes, reduced employer confidence, and diminished credibility of TVET qualifications.

These dynamics collectively generate negative narratives that affect learners' self-perception, pride, and identity, thereby reinforcing the sector's reputational challenges. However, emerging evidence suggests that the credibility of TVET can be strengthened through visible improvements in training quality, including access to modern equipment, competent instructors, reliable assessment systems, and trusted certification frameworks.

Subrahmanyam (2020) argues that enhancing employer confidence through stronger institution–industry linkages, improved employment outcomes, and clearly defined career progression pathways can significantly improve the market relevance and reputational standing of TVET systems. These

factors collectively contribute to rebuilding stakeholder trust and strengthening the sector's overall reputational equity [25].

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Guiding this study were two complementary theoretical perspectives in marketing management: brand equity theory and corporate reputation theory. These frameworks provide the conceptual basis for understanding how stakeholder perceptions, performance signals, and institutional attributes collectively shape the TVET sector's reputational equity.

From a contemporary brand equity perspective, reputational value is understood as a function of stakeholder awareness, perceived quality, and associative meaning structures that influence behavioural responses toward an institution or sector (Raut et al., 2019) [20]; Ismail et al., 2025). In this context, brand awareness reflects the extent of public knowledge and recognition of TVET, while perceived quality captures stakeholder evaluations of training standards, relevance, and outcomes. Brand associations, in turn, encompass perceptions related to employability, skills development, innovation capacity, and institutional credibility. These dimensions collectively influence stakeholder loyalty, including students' enrolment preferences and employers' trust in TVET graduates.

At a sectoral level, reputational equity is therefore conceptualised as an aggregated outcome of stakeholder perceptions and associative structures, rather than the performance of individual institutions in isolation. This implies that fragmented or inconsistent brand signals across institutions may dilute sectoral equity, even when individual institutions perform effectively. Consequently, the reputational standing of the TVET sector is shaped by cumulative stakeholder impressions, informed by policy coherence, institutional alignment, and the broader regulatory environment. This insight is particularly relevant in the Gambian context, where the formalisation of the TVET policy framework only occurred in 2022, thereby influencing the consistency and strength of sector-wide reputation signals.

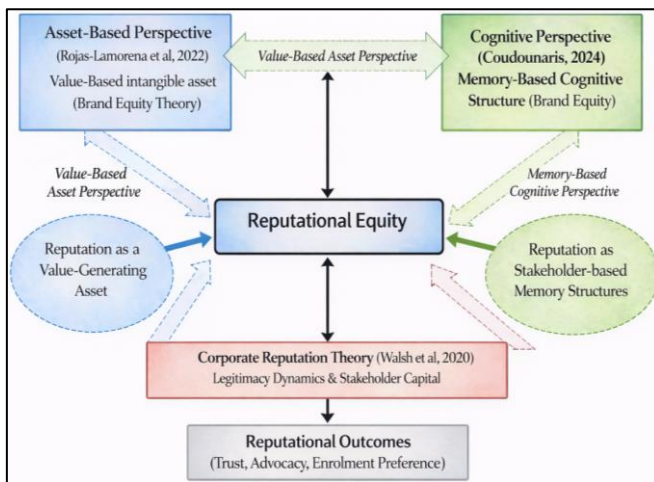
Extending this perspective, recent scholarship argues that reputational equity moves beyond traditional consumer-based models by incorporating stakeholder-driven processes of perception, interaction, and value co-creation (Adewole, 2024; Marvi et al., 2024) [4]. In the context of TVET and higher education systems, these evaluations include regulatory frameworks, employer perceptions, community endorsement, alumni outcomes, and strategic partnerships. The cumulative effect of these stakeholder judgments enhances institutional credibility, strengthens social legitimacy, and contributes to the development of reputation-based strategic assets.

Furthermore, contemporary studies highlight that reputational equity is shaped by the interaction between stakeholder awareness (salience), perceived performance (functional value), and symbolic meaning (emotional and social value), which together influence stakeholder judgments, trust, and loyalty (Raut et al., 2019; Ismail et al., 2025). These elements

contribute to the formation of stable cognitive associations and memory structures, which underpin long-term evaluations of institutional capability, responsiveness, and sustainability (Makatita et al., 2022) [13].

From the perspective of corporate reputation theory, reputation is conceptualised as a longitudinal, stakeholder-driven evaluative construct that is shaped by performance signals, credibility assessments, and perceived legitimacy (Veh et al., 2019) [28]; Samet, 2024) [26]. These signals enable stakeholders to evaluate both past performance and future expectations, particularly in environments characterised by information asymmetry. As such, reputational equity is understood as a dynamic, legitimacy-driven construct that evolves through the continuous interaction between institutional actions and stakeholder interpretations.

Integrating these perspectives, this study conceptualises reputational equity as a multi-dimensional, multi-stakeholder, and signal-based construct, shaped by the interaction between brand-related perceptions and reputation-driven evaluations [27].



[Fig.1: Integrated Conceptual Framing of Reputational Equity]

Figure 1 visually represents the conceptual architecture underpinning this study. The model integrates asset-based, cognitive, and corporate reputation perspectives to conceptualise reputational equity as a multidimensional construct emerging from the interaction among institutional signalling, stakeholder perceptions, and symbolic interpretation processes. The directional relationships illustrated in the framework highlight how signalling infrastructure shapes stakeholder evaluations, which are subsequently filtered through symbolic legitimacy structures before accumulating into reputational equity and influencing behavioural outcomes.

To provide analytical clarity and guide empirical interpretation, the relationships depicted in Figure 1 are further articulated through a set of theoretically informed propositions. These propositions serve as explanatory extensions of the conceptual model, translating its visual structure into analytically tractable relationships that support the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings within the study’s convergent mixed methods design.

V. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND PROPOSITIONAL DEVELOPMENT

This study adopts a multidimensional conceptualisation of reputational equity as a market-level construct that emerges from the interaction among institutional signalling, stakeholder perception, and symbolic interpretation processes. Beyond firm-level brand equity models, the framework positions Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in The Gambia as a macro-brand system in which reputational value is co-produced through the aggregation of signals and evaluations from multiple institutions and stakeholders.

As illustrated in Figure 1, reputational equity is conceptualised as the outcome of three interrelated theoretical streams: (i) the asset-based perspective, which frames reputation as a value-generating intangible resource; (ii) the cognitive perspective, which conceptualises reputation as a stakeholder-based memory structure; and (iii) the corporate reputation perspective, which situates reputation within broader processes of legitimacy construction and stakeholder evaluation. The integration of these perspectives provides a holistic account of how reputational value is formed, mediated, and translated into behavioural outcomes in education markets.

The framework further specifies four analytically distinct but interconnected dimensions: signalling infrastructure, perceptual mediation, symbolic interpretation, and reputational outcomes. Signalling infrastructure refers to the observable institutional cues through which TVET providers communicate quality, capability, and relevance (e.g., facilities, programmes, graduate outcomes, partnerships, and endorsements). Perceptual mediation captures how stakeholders interpret these signals in forming judgments about quality, relevance, and credibility. Symbolic interpretation reflects the influence of socially embedded meanings, including prestige hierarchies, identity alignment, and stigma, which shape whether perceived value is accepted as socially desirable. Reputational outcomes represent the cumulative effects of these processes on trust, advocacy, and enrolment preferences.

Within this structure, the study introduces a central theoretical tension. The functional-symbolic reputational paradox is one in which strong perceived functional value coexists with constrained symbolic legitimacy. This paradox highlights the conditional nature of reputational equity formation, particularly in contexts where cultural hierarchies and social narratives influence educational choice.

To guide empirical interpretation within the convergent mixed methods design, the study advances a set of theoretically informed propositions. These propositions do not function as formal hypotheses to be statistically tested; rather, they serve as analytical anchors that structure the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings and support theory development.

A. P1: Signalling Infrastructure and Stakeholder Perception

i. Proposition 1 (P1)

The strength and coherence of institutional signalling





infrastructure positively influence stakeholder perceptions of TVET quality, relevance, and credibility.

This proposition is grounded in marketing and signalling theory, which emphasises the role of observable cues in reducing information asymmetry and shaping perceived value. In the context of TVET, where awareness and visibility are often limited, credible signals, such as modern facilities, industry partnerships, and demonstrable graduate outcomes, are expected to enhance stakeholder confidence and improve perceptions.

B. P2: Functional Value and Reputational Equity (Conditional Relationship)

i. Proposition 2 (P2)

Stakeholder perceptions of functional value positively contribute to reputational equity; however, this relationship is moderated by symbolic legitimacy.

While traditional brand equity models assume a direct relationship between perceived quality and preference, this study argues that such relationships are contextually contingent. In education markets characterised by social stratification, the conversion of perceived usefulness into reputational strength depends on whether the offering is also symbolically validated within prevailing status hierarchies.

C. P3: Functional-Symbolic Reputational Paradox

i. Proposition 3 (P3)

Negative symbolic associations, including low prestige and status-based stigma, weaken the translation of perceived functional value into enrolment preference in TVET markets.

This proposition captures the core theoretical contribution of the study. It posits that even when stakeholders recognise the economic and practical benefits of TVET, symbolic constraints may limit behavioural uptake. This extends existing marketing theory by introducing symbolic legitimacy as a boundary condition in the relationship between perceived value and choice.

D. P4: Reputational Equity and Behavioural Outcomes

i. Proposition 4 (P4)

Higher levels of reputational equity increase stakeholder advocacy, enrolment intention, and institutional trust in TVET systems.

Reputational equity is expected to function as a cumulative evaluative construct that shapes behavioural outcomes. As stakeholders develop stronger perceptions of credibility and legitimacy, they are more likely to recommend TVET pathways, consider enrolment, and express trust in institutional offerings.

E. The Rationale for Propositions Development

Within the convergent mixed methods design, these propositions serve as interpretive lenses through which quantitative patterns and qualitative insights are integrated. Rather than being treated as variables subjected to direct statistical testing, the propositions guide the analysis by:

- i.* Structuring the interpretation of relationships observed in the survey data
- ii.* Providing a theoretical basis for explaining patterns emerging from qualitative interviews
- iii.* Supporting the identification of convergence, divergence, and complementarity across data strands.

In this way, the study maintains methodological coherence while advancing theory-informed empirical interpretation, enabling both validation and refinement of the proposed relationships.

VI. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Philosophy, Design, and Approach

This study is grounded in the pragmatist research paradigm, which is well-suited to addressing complex, real-world problems by integrating multiple theoretical and methodological perspectives. Pragmatism supports the use of mixed methods by prioritising practical outcomes and enabling the combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches to generate comprehensive insights (Arbale & Mutisya, 2024) [5].

Consistent with this paradigm, the study adopts a convergent mixed-methods design, integrating survey data with qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews. This approach enables both measuring reputational constructs and exploring stakeholder perceptions, thereby providing a more holistic understanding of TVET reputational equity.

B. Target Population, Sampling Technique, and Sample Size

A cross-sectional survey was conducted in the Greater Banjul Area (GBA), comprising Banjul City Council (BCC), Kanifing Municipal Council (KMC), and the West Coast Region (WCR). The study targeted a diverse set of stakeholders, including secondary school students, employer organisations, TVET institutions, and community-based organisations. 380 respondents (n = 380) were recruited across 42 enumeration sites, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Enumeration Site Categories

Pilot Site Category	Number of Sites
Secondary Schools	10
Employer Organisations	20
TVET Institutions	7
Community-Based Organisations	5
Total	42

Out of the total respondents, 323 valid responses (85%) were retained for analysis after data cleaning. In addition, 65 participants voluntarily participated in semi-structured interviews, ensuring representation across all stakeholder categories.

C. Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was conducted over ten days using a structured questionnaire. The collected data were first entered into Microsoft Excel, where initial coding and data cleaning were performed. This process involved identifying and removing invalid, duplicate, and incomplete responses by cross-referencing them against completed questionnaires.

The cleaned dataset was subsequently exported to Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 for quantitative analysis. Descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were applied to examine patterns in stakeholder awareness, perceptions, and reputational dimensions. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews, recorded using audio devices and supplemented with field notes.



The recorded data were transcribed, coded, and categorised using thematic analysis techniques. This process enabled the identification of recurring themes, patterns, and dominant stakeholder perspectives. The qualitative findings were then triangulated with survey results to enhance the study's robustness and validity (Donko, 2023).

D. Reliability and Validity

The reliability and validity of the survey instrument were assessed using established statistical procedures. Internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha (α) for key scale items (QB3, QC7, and QC10), yielding values of 0.883, 0.835, and 0.845, respectively. These values exceed the commonly accepted threshold of $\alpha \geq 0.70$, indicating a high level of internal consistency and reliability of the measurement scales (Hair et al., 2019) [9].

Content validity was ensured by aligning survey items with the study's conceptual constructs, while the consistency of responses across related variables supported construct validity. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data further enhances the study's validity through methodological triangulation.

E. In-Depth Interviews

The semi-structured interviews served as the primary source of qualitative data, providing deeper insights into stakeholder perceptions of TVET. A total of **65 participants** were selected from the survey respondents through voluntary participation, ensuring representation across all stakeholder categories.

The interviews were designed to capture participants' subjective experiences and perceptions related to TVET awareness, reputation, and positioning. Data were collected through audio recordings and note-taking, followed by transcription and thematic coding.

The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns, dominant viewpoints, and emergent themes. These insights were systematically compared with survey findings to ensure consistency and complementarity. This triangulated approach enhances the credibility and depth of the study's findings by integrating multiple data sources.

VII. RESULTS AND SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

A. RQ1: TVET Awareness Levels in The Gambia

The findings indicate significant gaps in the visibility and public awareness of TVET in The Gambia. Approximately 41% of respondents perceive overall TVET visibility as poor, while 44% believe that TVET institutions lack a strong public presence. Only 27% of respondents consider national awareness of TVET to be good. In contrast, 59% of respondents report good knowledge of university institutions, compared to 45% for TVET institutions, while 31% rate their knowledge of TVET as poor relative to universities. These results highlight a clear asymmetry in institutional visibility between academic and vocational education pathways.

From a theoretical perspective, this pattern reflects the weak cognitive salience of TVET within the national education system, indicating limited awareness, recall, and recognition among stakeholders. This suggests that the TVET sector is

currently constrained by insufficient signalling strength in the public domain.

B. RQ2: Structural Dimensions of TVET Reputational Equity

The findings reveal that perceived quality, relevance, employment prospects, and symbolic prestige are the primary determinants shaping stakeholder perceptions of TVET in The Gambia.

First, perceptions of training quality appear mixed. At the same time, 35% of respondents express positive views, and a comparable 34% report negative perceptions. Although teaching and classroom quality receive relatively favourable ratings, 43% and 41% of respondents rate recreational facilities and technical equipment as poor, respectively. These infrastructural deficits appear to undermine overall perceived quality and weaken service-based reputation signals.

Second, perceived relevance and usefulness emerge as comparatively strong dimensions. Nearly 48% of respondents consider TVET training relevant or highly relevant to the job market, while 47% associate TVET skills with improved graduate wellbeing. Furthermore, 58% believe TVET is useful for securing employment, and 50% indicate that it enhances employability outcomes. These findings suggest that TVET maintains a strong position in terms of functional value and labour market alignment.

Third, perceptions of employment prospects are notably favourable. A combined 59% of respondents believe that TVET graduates have good job prospects, while 62% perceive them as having better chances of early employment than university graduates. Additionally, 67% associate TVET graduates with higher entrepreneurial potential, reinforcing the sector's alignment with practical and self-employment pathways.

Finally, despite strong functional perceptions, symbolic prestige remains a critical constraint. Although 82.5% of respondents indicate willingness to recommend TVET pathways, qualitative evidence reveals a divergence between advocacy and personal choice. Many respondents acknowledge the practical advantages of TVET—such as faster employment and self-reliance—yet still prefer university education due to its perceived higher social status, prestige, and earning potential.

Interview findings further highlight deeply embedded societal narratives that position TVET as a secondary pathway for academically weaker individuals, often reinforced by parental expectations and cultural norms. This disconnect between high advocacy and low personal adoption represents a key reputational paradox and underscores the importance of symbolic value in shaping educational choices.

C. RQ3: Marketing Interventions for Repositioning TVET

The findings suggest that effective repositioning of TVET within the national education hierarchy requires a multi-dimensional reputational strategy that strengthens both functional and symbolic value signals. Key interventions include:

- i. Strengthening labour market intelligence



- systems to reinforce relevance and employability signalling
- ii. Full implementation and institutionalisation of the national TVET policy framework to enhance governance credibility and regulatory consistency
- iii. Expanding publicity and strategic marketing efforts to improve awareness, visibility, and cognitive salience
- iv. Investing in infrastructure and training facilities to strengthen tangible service quality signals
- v. Introducing early-stage exposure to TVET pathways within the education system to reshape cultural narratives and influence perception formation

Collectively, these interventions align with a reputational repositioning strategy to enhance visibility, credibility, legitimacy, and stakeholder engagement across the TVET ecosystem.

VIII. DISCUSSION: THEORETICAL INTERPRETATION AND PROPOSITION REASSESSMENT

This study set out to examine how reputational equity is formed and constrained within the TVET sector in The Gambia, using a convergent mixed methods design. The findings provide strong support for the multidimensional framework presented in Figure 1 and offer important refinements to the proposed relationships. By integrating quantitative patterns with qualitative insights, the discussion advances a more nuanced understanding of how signalling, perception, and symbolic interpretation interact to shape reputational outcomes.

A. Signalling Infrastructure and Perceptual Formation

The findings provide consistent support for Proposition 1, confirming that the strength and visibility of institutional signalling significantly influence stakeholder perceptions of TVET. Quantitative results indicate moderate-to-high agreement among respondents on the functional relevance of TVET, particularly regarding employability and entrepreneurship outcomes. These findings are reinforced by qualitative evidence, in which participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of observable institutional cues, including training facilities, equipment, the credibility of certifications, and industry linkages.

This convergence aligns with contemporary marketing and signalling theory, which emphasises that in contexts characterised by information asymmetry, stakeholders rely heavily on visible and credible signals to form evaluative judgments (Sharma & Romero, 2022) [23]. However, the findings also reveal that signalling within the TVET sector remains fragmented and uneven, limiting its cumulative effect at the sector level. This suggests that while signalling is necessary for perceptual formation, its impact depends on system-level coherence rather than on isolated institutional efforts.

B. Functional Value and Conditional Reputational Formation

The results provide partial support for Proposition 2, indicating that while stakeholders recognise the functional value of TVET, this does not consistently translate into strong reputational equity. Survey findings indicate positive

evaluations of TVET in terms of the acquisition of practical skills and economic utility. Yet, these perceptions are not reflected in proportionate levels of prestige, desirability, or first-choice preference.

Qualitative insights help explain this divergence. Respondents frequently acknowledged the usefulness of TVET but also expressed reservations related to social perceptions, parental expectations, and perceived status hierarchies. This supports the argument that the relationship between perceived value and reputational equity is not linear, but rather contingent on symbolic validation processes.

This finding extends customer-based brand equity theory by demonstrating that perceived quality alone is insufficient to generate reputational strength in contexts where social meaning structures are contested (Dwivedi et al., 2021) [7]. Instead, reputational equity emerges only when functional value is legitimised within prevailing cultural and social frameworks.

C. The Functional-Symbolic Reputational Paradox

The most significant theoretical contribution of this study is the strong empirical support for Proposition 3, which conceptualises the functional-symbolic reputational paradox. Across both data strands, there is clear evidence that TVET is simultaneously perceived as economically valuable and symbolically inferior. This duality creates a structural constraint in which stakeholders may advocate for TVET in principle, yet hesitate to choose it in practice. Quantitative findings reveal relatively high agreement on the usefulness of TVET, alongside comparatively lower scores on prestige-related indicators. Qualitative narratives highlighting stigma, status discounting, and identity misalignment, particularly in comparison to university education pathways, corroborate this pattern.

This paradox contributes to emerging debates in marketing and institutional theory by showing that symbolic legitimacy acts as a boundary condition in value translation processes (Parente-Laverde et al., 2026) [17]. In effect, reputational equity is not simply accumulated through performance signals but is filtered through socially constructed hierarchies of worth that determine whether an offering is considered desirable.

D. Reputational Equity and Behavioural Outcomes

The findings also support Proposition 4, demonstrating that reputational equity is positively associated with advocacy, trust, and enrolment intention. Respondents who expressed higher confidence in TVET were more likely to recommend it to others and to consider it a viable educational pathway. This relationship is consistent with established marketing literature linking brand and reputational strength to behavioural outcomes such as loyalty, advocacy, and choice (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Foroudi et al., 2021) [8].

However, the study also reveals that these outcomes remain attenuated at the aggregate level, due to the intervening effects of symbolic constraints. While advocacy intentions appear relatively strong, actual enrolment preference remains moderated by concerns related to prestige and social acceptance. This suggests that reputational equity in TVET operates as a necessary but insufficient condition for



behavioural conversion, reinforcing the importance of addressing symbolic legitimacy deficits.

E. Integrated Interpretation: Reputational Equity as a System-Level Construct

Taken together, the findings reinforce the central premise of Figure 1, which conceptualises reputational equity as a system-level outcome arising from the interaction among signalling, perception, and symbolic interpretation. The convergent mixed methods approach reveals that these dimensions do not operate independently; rather, they are dynamically interrelated and collectively shape market-level perceptions of TVET. Importantly, the study demonstrates that reputational equity in vocational education is not fully controllable at the institutional level but is co-produced through multi-stakeholder evaluation processes involving students, parents, employers, and policymakers. This aligns with recent advances in marketing systems theory, which emphasise the distributed and socially constructed nature of value formation in complex service ecosystems (Rodríguez-Aceves et al., 2025) [22].

F. Refinement of Propositions

Based on the empirical findings, the study offers the following refinements:

- i. *P1 (Refined)*: The effectiveness of signalling infrastructure depends not only on visibility but also on consistency and alignment across institutions.
- ii. *P2 (Refined)*: The relationship between perceived functional value and reputational equity is conditionally mediated by symbolic legitimacy structures.
- iii. *P3 (Extended)*: Symbolic stigma not only constrains behavioural choice but also shapes how functional value itself is interpreted and socially evaluated.
- iv. *P4 (Refined)*: Reputational equity enhances advocacy and trust more readily than it converts into enrolment preference under conditions of symbolic constraint.

IX. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION TO MARKETING MANAGEMENT

This study contributes to marketing management theory by advancing the conceptualisation of reputational equity as a market-shaping construct operating at the sector level, rather than solely as a firm- or brand-level asset. While extant marketing literature has examined brand equity and corporate reputation within organisational boundaries, this study extends these logics to conceptualise TVET as a macro-brand system, in which multiple institutional actors collectively co-produce and signal a shared reputational field. This shift responds to a key limitation in marketing theory, namely its insufficient attention to multi-actor, system-level reputation formation in public and quasi-market contexts. By doing so, the study introduces a meso-to-macro analytical layer that complements traditional micro-level brand equity models and broadens the applicability of marketing theory to education and public service markets.

Second, the study contributes to marketing theory by identifying and theorising a functional-symbolic misalignment in value perception, which we conceptualise as

the *functional-symbolic reputational paradox*. While conventional brand equity models assume that perceived quality and functional benefits translate positively into preference and choice, the findings demonstrate that this relationship is non-linear and conditionally mediated in contexts characterised by status hierarchies and cultural signalling asymmetries. Specifically, even where TVET is perceived as economically valuable (e.g., employability and entrepreneurial outcomes), this value does not fully convert into enrolment preference due to symbolic constraints related to prestige, identity, and social desirability. This contribution extends customer-based brand equity theory by introducing symbolic legitimacy as a moderating mechanism in the value-choice relationship, thereby offering a more context-sensitive explanation of consumer decision-making in education markets.

Third, the study advances marketing scholarship by developing a signal-dependent, multi-stakeholder model of reputational equity formation. Moving beyond firm-centric communication perspectives, the study demonstrates that reputational equity is co-constructed through the interaction of institutional signalling (e.g., infrastructure, programmes, and outcomes), stakeholder cognitive processing, and socially mediated narratives, including endorsements from government, industry, and peer networks. This reconceptualisation aligns with contemporary marketing debates on market systems, signalling theory, and institutional trust, showing that reputation emerges through distributed evaluative processes rather than unilateral brand management efforts. In this sense, reputational equity is reframed as an outcome of ecosystem-level signalling coherence and interpretive alignment.

Fourth, the study contributes methodologically to marketing management by offering a diagnostic framework for reputational performance in fragmented markets, structured around four interrelated dimensions: signalling infrastructure, perceptual mediation, symbolic interpretation, and reputational outcomes. This multidimensional architecture provides a practical and theoretically grounded tool for analysing how reputational value is generated, constrained, or distorted across different stakeholder groups. It is particularly relevant for markets where formal branding mechanisms are weak and where informal narratives, institutional trust deficits, and uneven information flows shape reputation.

Collectively, these contributions reposition reputational equity within marketing management as a dynamic, socially constructed, and system-dependent phenomenon, rather than a static firm-level asset. The study, therefore, extends the boundaries of marketing theory into underexplored domains of vocational education and emerging markets while also offering a transferable conceptual foundation for future research on stigma, legitimacy, and signalling dynamics in other complex service sectors.

X. MANAGERIAL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study offer important implications for policymakers, institutional leaders, and industry stakeholders seeking to



strengthen the reputational positioning of TVET systems. By conceptualising reputational equity as a function of signalling infrastructure, stakeholder perception, and symbolic legitimacy, the study highlights that improving TVET uptake requires coordinated interventions across both functional and symbolic dimensions of value.

A. Strengthening Signalling Infrastructure

The study demonstrates that signalling plays a foundational role in shaping stakeholder perceptions. However, the effectiveness of signalling depends on visibility, credibility, and system-level coherence. Policymakers and institutional managers should therefore prioritise developing a coordinated signalling architecture across the TVET ecosystem. This includes:

- i. Investing in modern training infrastructure and equipment that are visibly aligned with industry standards
- ii. Establishing certification systems and quality assurance mechanisms that enhance credibility
- iii. Strengthening industry partnerships and apprenticeship pathways to signal labour market relevance
- iv. Developing national-level communication strategies that present TVET as a unified and credible system

Crucially, signalling should move beyond isolated institutional efforts toward a collective sector-wide branding approach, ensuring consistency in messaging and reducing fragmentation.

B. Converting Functional Value into Reputational Strength

While TVET is widely perceived as functionally valuable, this value is not fully translating into reputational equity. This suggests that policymakers must go beyond improving technical quality to manage how value is interpreted and socially validated actively. To address this gap:

- i. Communication strategies should explicitly link TVET outcomes (employment, entrepreneurship, income generation) to broader narratives of success and social mobility
- ii. Institutions should showcase visible success stories, including alumni achievements and career progression pathways
- iii. Labour market outcomes should be systematically tracked and publicly communicated, reinforcing the economic credibility of TVET

These efforts can help shift stakeholder perceptions from viewing TVET as a secondary option to recognising it as a strategically valuable pathway.

C. Addressing the Functional-Symbolic Reputational Paradox

The most critical implication of this study is addressing the functional-symbolic reputational paradox, in which high perceived utility coexists with low prestige. This requires deliberate interventions to reconfigure symbolic legitimacy. Policy and managerial actions should include:

- i. Integrating TVET into national development narratives, positioning it as central to industrialisation, innovation, and economic transformation

- ii. Engaging high-status endorsers, including government leaders, industry executives, and successful professionals with TVET backgrounds
- iii. Embedding TVET pathways within mainstream education discourse, reducing the perception of hierarchy between academic and vocational routes
- iv. Promoting parity of esteem policies, including progression pathways from TVET to higher education.

Therefore, symbolic repositioning should be treated as a long-term cultural transformation process, rather than a short-term communication exercise.

D. Enhancing Reputational Outcomes: Trust, Advocacy, and Enrolment

The study confirms that reputational equity positively influences trust and advocacy, but its translation into enrolment remains constrained by symbolic factors. This suggests that interventions should focus on strengthening the full conversion pathway from perception to behaviour. Key actions include:

- i. Building trust through transparency, including clear information on programme quality, outcomes, and career pathways.
- ii. Encouraging peer and community advocacy, leveraging students, alumni, and employers as credible messengers.
- iii. Designing targeted engagement strategies for parents and guardians, who play a critical role in educational decision-making.
- iv. Creating structured transition pathways (e.g., internships, job placements) that reduce perceived risk associated with TVET choices.

These interventions can help convert reputational equity into tangible behavioural outcomes, particularly enrolment preference.

E. A System-Level Approach to Reputational Management

A key insight from this study is that reputational equity in TVET is not controlled by individual institutions alone, but is co-produced across a multi-stakeholder ecosystem. As such, reputational management should be approached as a system-level strategic function. This requires:

- i. Coordinated action between government ministries, training institutions, industry partners, and development agencies
- ii. The establishment of national TVET branding and positioning frameworks
- iii. Continuous monitoring of stakeholder perceptions and reputational indicators
- iv. Integration of reputational considerations into policy design, funding decisions, and institutional performance metrics.

By adopting a system-level approach, policymakers can move beyond fragmented interventions toward a more coherent and sustainable reputational strategy.

XI. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While the study provides a robust empirical and conceptual foundation, several limitations



should be acknowledged. First, the analysis is context-specific to The Gambia, and while the conceptual framework is transferable, further research is needed to test its applicability across different institutional and cultural settings. Second, the study adopts a cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to capture how reputational dynamics evolve. Longitudinal studies would be valuable in examining how signalling interventions and policy reforms influence reputational trajectories.

Future research should also explore the quantitative modelling of symbolic legitimacy and stigma as moderating variables within reputation-choice relationships, as well as comparative analyses across TVET systems in other African and developing economy contexts. Additionally, there is scope to investigate the role of digital platforms and media narratives in shaping reputational signalling and stakeholder perception in education markets.

XII. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the formation and constraints of reputational equity within the TVET sector in The Gambia, positioning the sector as a macro-brand system shaped by the interplay of institutional signalling, stakeholder perceptions, and symbolic legitimacy processes. Drawing on a convergent mixed-methods design, the study provides empirical and theoretical insights into how reputational value is constructed, mediated, and translated into behavioural outcomes within a fragmented public service market.

The findings reveal a central structural tension—the functional-symbolic reputational paradox—in which TVET is widely recognised for its economic relevance, particularly in relation to employability and entrepreneurship, yet continues to experience constrained prestige and moderated enrolment preference. This paradox underscores a critical insight: reputational equity is not determined by functional performance alone, but emerges through the alignment of signalling credibility, stakeholder cognition, and socially embedded legitimacy structures.

By integrating asset-based, cognitive, and corporate reputation perspectives, the study advances a multidimensional conceptualisation of reputational equity that extends beyond firm-level analysis to a sector-level marketing system. The results demonstrate that signalling infrastructure plays a foundational role in shaping stakeholder perceptions, but its effectiveness depends on the system's coherence and credibility. At the same time, symbolic legitimacy operates as a boundary condition, filtering how functional value is interpreted and whether it translates into preference and choice.

Importantly, the study shows that reputational equity exerts a positive influence on trust and advocacy, but its conversion into enrolment behaviour remains contingent on overcoming symbolic constraints. This highlights the need to move beyond technical improvements in service delivery toward a more integrated approach that addresses both functional value creation and symbolic repositioning.

Taken together, the study contributes to marketing management scholarship by repositioning reputational equity as a dynamic, socially constructed, and system-dependent phenomenon, while also providing a diagnostic and strategic

framework for strengthening TVET positioning in emerging economies. The findings suggest that improving TVET uptake requires coordinated action across signalling, narrative, and legitimacy domains, supported by multi-stakeholder alignment and long-term cultural change.

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