From Intention To Admission: How Benefits, Social Influences, and Perceived Control Shape Malaysian SPM Leavers' Intentions to Pursue Tertiary Education

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Abstract: As part of Malaysia's national agenda to strengthen its knowledge-based economy, multiple pathways have been established for Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) [Malaysian Certificate of Education] leavers to pursue tertiary education. Nevertheless, tertiary enrolment rates remain relatively low, potentially undermining national human capital development objectives. Guided by an extended Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) framework, this study examined the factors associated with SPM leavers' intention to pursue tertiary education. A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 385 respondents using a 44-item questionnaire comprising eight predictor constructs and an intention measure. Multiple linear regression analysis showed that financial support ($\beta = 0.313$, $p < 0.001$), peer influence ($\beta = 0.270$, $p < 0.001$), academic preparedness ($\beta = 0.246$, $p < 0.001$), perceived benefits ($\beta = 0.137$, $p = 0.005$), and social media influence ($\beta = 0.094$, $p = 0.037$) were positively associated with intention. In contrast, social stigma was negatively associated with intention ($\beta = -0.188$, $p < 0.001$), whereas family influence and lack of knowledge regarding admission processes did not make statistically significant independent contributions. These findings indicate that, within the sampled SPM leavers, financial support, peer influence, academic preparedness, perceived benefits, and social media influence were independently associated with stronger intentions to pursue tertiary education, whereas social stigma was associated with weaker intentions.

Keywords: Malaysia; SPM leavers; tertiary education; educational intention; theory of planned behaviour

Introduction

Tertiary education remains central to Malaysia's aspiration to become a high-income, knowledge-driven economy because national competitiveness increasingly depends on a workforce able to respond to rapid technological and labour-market change. National development agendas emphasise advanced competencies, including digital and artificial intelligence capabilities, and closer alignment between graduate skills and Industry 4.0 requirements (Hamzah, 2024; Sharef et al., 2024). Investment in education and human-capital development is also associated with

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economic growth, employment opportunities, and broader social progress (Chaiya, 2024). However, highly skilled workers account for 24.9% of the workforce, below the national target of 35% by 2030 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023; Government of Malaysia, 2025; Bernama, 2022). This shortfall reinforces the importance of sustaining progression to tertiary education as part of Malaysia's broader human-capital agenda.

For Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) [Malaysian Certificate of Education] leavers, the transition after secondary school represents a critical point at which further study competes with employment and other pathways. FINCO (2023) identified financial constraints, poor academic performance, and family obligations as prominent reasons among surveyed upper-secondary students who intended or were inclined to work after SPM. Separate evidence indicated that approximately 390,000 SPM graduates, or 72.1%, were not inclined to continue their studies in 2019, while 258,497 of 373,974 SPM candidates did not pursue tertiary education in 2022 (Mutalib, 2022; Abd Hamid & Othman, 2024). These participation concerns coexist with labour-market mismatches.

Demand for skilled professionals is growing, yet digital skills gaps and occupational mismatches persist, and TalentCorp identifies occupations where employer demand exceeds the available supply of talent (Tee et al., 2024; TalentCorp and Institute of Labour Market Information and Analysis, 2024). At the same time, concerns about graduate unemployment, underemployment, and relatively low starting salaries have raised questions about the labour-market returns to tertiary qualifications (Che Awang, 2022; Othman et al., 2023; Radzi et al., 2024). Such mixed labour-market signals may affect how SPM leavers evaluate tertiary education as an investment and whether its anticipated benefits justify the financial, academic, and opportunity costs involved.

SPM leavers' intentions to pursue tertiary education are likely to reflect multiple considerations rather than academic performance alone. Previous research identifies concerns about the value of tertiary qualifications, fear of academic failure, limited parental support, household financial constraints, and the attractiveness of immediate employment or alternative career pathways (Hamid et al., 2024; Othman et al., 2023; Radzi et al., 2024). Evidence that tertiary education is not the preferred destination for some school leavers, including those with good SPM results, further suggests that academic attainment does not, by itself, explain post-school intentions (Radzi et al., 2024; Mohd Salleh, 2022). These considerations can be organised around three broad domains relevant to the present study: attitudinal beliefs about the benefits of tertiary education, social and normative influences, and control-related conditions and resources. Family expectations and peer relationships may shape perceived social support for further study, while social stigma may reinforce doubts about the value or relevance of tertiary qualifications (Damas & Kurniawati, 2025; Radzi et al., 2024). Social and digital environments form another important part of the context in which SPM leavers evaluate tertiary education. Contemporary digital environments extend these influences beyond face-to-face relationships. In this study, social media influence refers to the broader influence of online content and interactions, whereas social media influencers are individuals or content creators who may constitute one source of that influence. Social media influencers and online content may promote tertiary education and professional development, but may also portray entrepreneurship, content creation, gig-economy work, or rapid financial success as viable alternatives to formal qualifications (Lajnef, 2023; UCSI Poll Research Centre, 2023; Humairoh et al., 2026). These competing narratives illustrate why social media influence should not be assumed to operate uniformly in either a positive or negative direction. The feasibility of pursuing tertiary education also depends on the resources, capabilities, and information available to SPM leavers. Financial strain, educational debt, academic preparedness, and uncertainty about admission procedures may affect whether tertiary education is perceived as feasible or attainable (Benjamin et al., 2011; Bettinger et al., 2012; Hamid et al., 2024; Jumat@Mohamed et al., 2022). Financial support may provide access to enabling economic resources, academic preparedness may inform perceived capability to manage tertiary-level study, and lack of knowledge regarding admission processes may create an informational or procedural barrier. These conditions therefore provide a conceptual bridge to the control-belief domain of the Theory of Planned Behaviour.

Theory of Planned Behaviour

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) provides a suitable framework for examining these considerations because it explains behavioural intention in relation to attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. It also offers a coherent basis for examining how context-specific beliefs and conditions may be relevant to the formation of intention without requiring those variables to be treated as substitutes for the original constructs. Within TPB, attitudes are underpinned by behavioural beliefs about the likely outcomes of performing a behaviour, subjective norms by normative beliefs concerning the expectations of salient social referents, and perceived behavioural control by control beliefs about conditions that may facilitate or constrain behavioural performance (Ajzen, 1991). Accordingly, the eight predictors in this study were selected as context-specific factors aligned with these underlying belief domains, rather than as direct measures or replacements of the three canonical TPB constructs. Their inclusion reflects both TPB reasoning and recurring issues identified in research on educational intentions and post-SPM decision-making in Malaysia (Hamid et al., 2024; Mosbah et al., 2019; Othman et al., 2023; Yusoff et al., 2022).

Perceived benefits capture behavioural beliefs about anticipated returns from tertiary education, including career prospects, earnings, personal development, employment opportunities, and social mobility, and are therefore positioned as attitudinally relevant. Family and peer influence represent traditional social referents, while social media influence extends the normative environment to online content, communities, and social media influencers. Social stigma captures broader social judgements that may shape perceived approval of tertiary education. These four constructs are therefore treated as sources of normative influence relevant to subjective norms. Financial support represents access to facilitating economic resources, academic preparedness reflects perceived capability to manage tertiary-level study, and lack of knowledge regarding admission processes represents an informational or procedural barrier. These three constructs are consequently treated as control-related factors relevant to perceived behavioural control.

Although Malaysian studies have applied TPB to intentions concerning postgraduate study and educational programme choice (Mosbah et al., 2019; Yusoff et al., 2022), comparatively limited attention has been given to SPM leavers and the post-SPM transition. In particular, less attention has been directed towards examining attitudinally relevant, normative, and control-related contextual factors simultaneously, including contemporary normative influences such as social media influence and social stigma. Addressing this gap is important because post-SPM educational decisions may be made under intersecting academic, financial, social, and informational constraints.

Accordingly, this study examines the factors associated with SPM leavers' intention to pursue tertiary education using an extended TPB framework. Eight context-specific predictors are considered: perceived benefits, family influence, peer influence, social media influence, social stigma, financial support, academic preparedness, and lack of knowledge regarding admission processes. The study positions perceived benefits as an attitudinally relevant factor, the four social constructs as sources of normative influence, and the three resource- and capability-related constructs as control-related factors. This specification permits examination of the independent associations between these factors and intention while preserving the conceptual distinction between the contextual predictors and the original TPB constructs.

Rather than assuming that all eight factors are equally important, the study assesses their relative contributions within a single multivariable model. By focusing specifically on SPM leavers at the transition from secondary education, the study seeks to provide contextually relevant evidence on tertiary-education intentions in Malaysia and to identify factors that may inform more targeted educational and policy responses. Figure 1 summarises the proposed extended framework and the hypothesised associations between the eight predictors and the intention to pursue tertiary education.

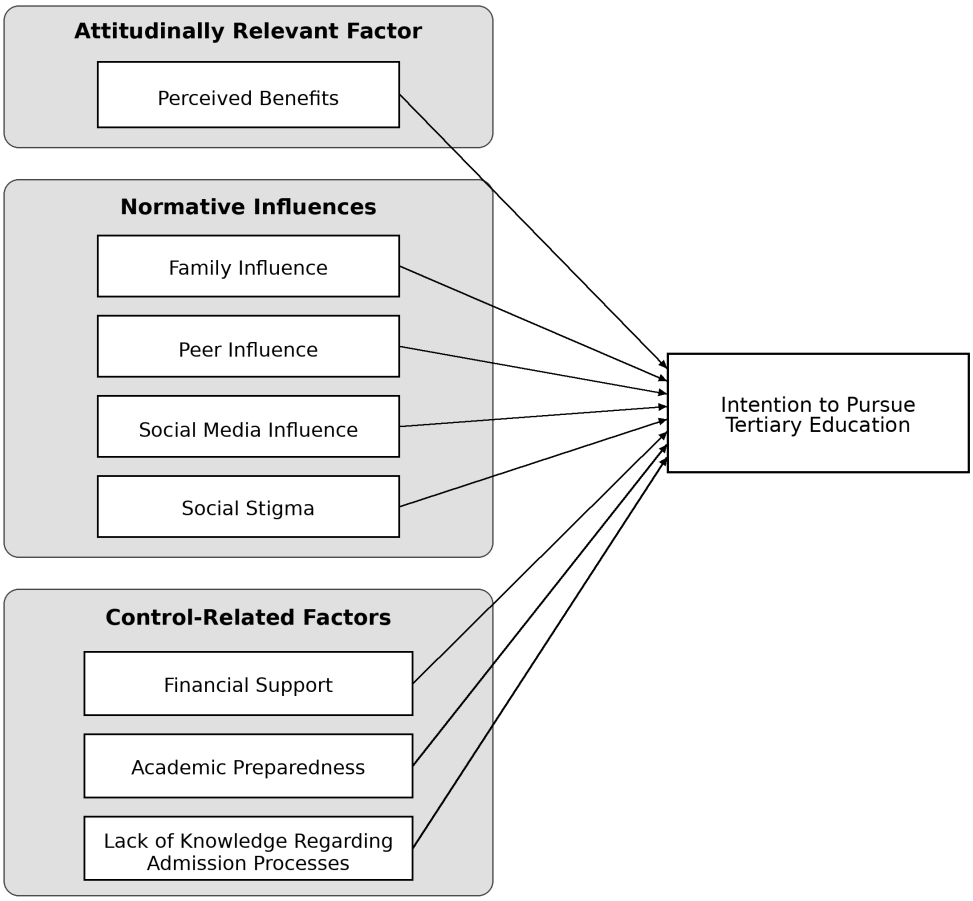


Figure 1. Proposed Extended TPB Framework of Context-Specific Factors Associated with SPM Leavers' Intention to Pursue Tertiary Education

Source: Authors

Note. The eight predictors are context-specific factors aligned with attitudinal, normative, and control-related domains of TPB and are not direct measures of the canonical constructs of attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control.

Literature Review

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) as aforementioned, is a widely used framework for examining behavioural intentions, including educational intentions. TPB integrates attitudinal, normative, and control-related determinants of intention and has been extensively validated across diverse behavioural domains (Ajzen, 1991; Hagger & Hamilton, 2024). The theory holds that intention is shaped by three proximal determinants: attitudes towards the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. Behavioural intention is proposed as the most proximal antecedent of behaviour, while perceived behavioural control may also contribute directly to behaviour when it accurately reflects actual control (Ajzen, 1991).

Although TPB specifies the principal psychological determinants of intention, context-specific background factors may influence the behavioural, normative, and control beliefs that underpin

the core constructs rather than serving as substitutes for them (Ajzen, 1991). Applied studies may therefore examine contextually relevant variables that reflect the social, economic, institutional, and cultural conditions surrounding the behaviour under investigation. In the context of tertiary-education participation, individuals may report stronger intentions to pursue tertiary education when they hold favourable attitudes towards the behaviour, perceive stronger support from significant others, and believe they have greater control over the resources and opportunities required to do so (Mosbah et al., 2019; Yusoff et al., 2022).

The constructs examined in the present study are aligned with the TPB domains as contextually relevant factors rather than treated as direct equivalents of the original TPB constructs. Perceived benefits capture behavioural beliefs about expected outcomes and are therefore positioned as an attitudinally relevant factor. Family influence, peer influence, social media influence, and social stigma represent sources of normative influence relevant to subjective norms. Financial support, academic preparedness, and lack of knowledge regarding admission processes represent control-related factors relevant to perceived behavioural control, as they capture perceived resources, capabilities, informational barriers, and procedural constraints associated with pursuing tertiary education.

Extending the TPB with these eight context-specific constructs enables the framework to better reflect the social, economic, and educational conditions experienced by Malaysian SPM leavers. Although previous research supports the theoretical relevance of these factors, the strength and direction of their associations with intention may vary across populations, behaviours, and institutional contexts (Hagger & Hamilton, 2024).

Perceived Benefits of Tertiary Education

Perceived benefits are students' beliefs about the economic, occupational, social, and personal returns associated with tertiary education. Within the TPB framework, such beliefs are best understood as behavioural beliefs that may shape attitudes towards pursuing tertiary education, rather than as attitudes themselves (Ajzen, 1991). Anticipated benefits may include higher lifetime earnings, improved career prospects, greater employment security, personal development, and enhanced opportunities for upward social mobility (Bernal et al., 2024; Mahdzar et al., 2022). Perceived benefits therefore constitute an attitudinally relevant factor in SPM leavers' decisions about whether to pursue tertiary education. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Perceived benefits are positively associated with SPM leavers' intention to pursue tertiary education.

Family Influence

Family expectations, parental encouragement, and household support are important social influences on students' educational trajectories. Within the TPB framework, family expectations and encouragement may contribute to subjective norms when perceived as approval or expectations from significant others (Ajzen, 1991). Parental involvement and high educational expectations are generally associated with stronger aspirations to pursue tertiary education, although the strength of this relationship may vary with household socioeconomic status and parents' educational backgrounds (Abd Hamid & Othman, 2024; Bernal et al., 2024; Damas & Kurniawati, 2025). Family influence may therefore be associated with educational intentions through normative expectations, while practical resources provided by families may also relate to perceived behavioural control. Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Family influence is positively associated with SPM leavers' intention to pursue tertiary education.

Peer Influence

Peers are another important source of normative influence relevant to subjective norms within the TPB framework. Their influence may be supportive or discouraging, depending on the social and cultural norms operating within schools, friendship groups, and local communities. Positive peer influence may strengthen intentions to pursue tertiary education by fostering aspirations, reinforcing academic motivation, and normalising participation in tertiary education. Peer contexts may also operate through comparative processes, meaning that peer expectations need not be uniformly associated with higher-education participation (Van den Broeck et al., 2023). Peer influence should therefore be regarded as an important normative factor associated with the intention to pursue tertiary education. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Peer influence is positively associated with SPM leavers' intention to pursue tertiary education.

Social Media Influence

Social media influence may shape young people's perceptions of education, employment, entrepreneurship, and success. In this study, social media influence refers to the impact of social media content and interactions on educational decision-making, whereas social media influencers are individuals or content creators who may exert such influence. Social media influence may operate in either a supportive or a discouraging direction (Lajnef, 2023; Humairoh et al., 2026). Social media influencers who promote education, skills development, and professional qualifications may encourage their followers to pursue tertiary education. In contrast, some influencers may discourage continued academic participation by portraying rapid income, entrepreneurship, or online fame as attainable without formal qualifications (Bernama, 2024). Based on the proposed relationship in this study, the following hypothesis is advanced.:

H4: Social media influence is positively associated with SPM leavers' intention to pursue tertiary education.

Social Stigma

Social stigma surrounding tertiary education may constitute a barrier to tertiary participation in Malaysia, particularly among school leavers who question the value and relevance of tertiary qualifications. Within this framework, social stigma refers to negative social judgements and narratives that devalue tertiary education or its perceived returns. Concerns about graduate unemployment, skills-related underemployment, rising educational costs, uncertain labour-market conditions, and the returns on educational investment may fuel doubts about whether tertiary education offers sufficient economic and occupational benefits (Abd Hamid & Othman, 2024; Moo & Wan, 2023). Such perceptions may reduce the perceived desirability of tertiary education and be associated with weaker intentions among SPM leavers to pursue tertiary education. On this basis, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: Social stigma is negatively associated with SPM leavers' intention to pursue tertiary education.

Lack of Knowledge Regarding Admission Processes

A lack of knowledge about tertiary admission processes may constrain students' perceived behavioural control by increasing uncertainty about how to pursue tertiary education. Uncertainty about entry requirements, financial-aid information, and application procedures may heighten the

perceived difficulty of navigating post-secondary applications (Bettinger et al., 2012; Gurantz et al., 2021). Consequently, limited knowledge of admission processes may be associated with lower confidence in navigating applications to tertiary institutions. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6: Lack of knowledge regarding admission processes is negatively associated with SPM leavers' intention to pursue tertiary education.

Academic Preparedness

Academic preparedness is the extent to which students possess the knowledge, competencies, and learning capabilities required to succeed in tertiary education. Within the extended TPB framework, academic preparedness is treated as a control-related factor because perceptions of preparedness may shape students' confidence in their ability to manage the academic demands of tertiary education. These capabilities may include proficiency in core subjects, particularly English and mathematics, as well as the ability to engage in self-directed learning (Hamid et al., 2024; Radzi et al., 2024). Students who perceive themselves as academically prepared are likely to have greater confidence in meeting the demands of tertiary education. Conversely, students who lack confidence in their academic abilities may view tertiary education as excessively challenging or beyond their capabilities, thereby weakening their intention to pursue tertiary education (Kramer et al., 2025). Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H7: Academic preparedness is positively associated with SPM leavers' intention to pursue tertiary education.

Financial Support

Financial strain is a major structural barrier to tertiary participation. Limited household resources, high tuition fees, living expenses, transport costs, and other education-related expenditures may reduce students' perceptions of the financial feasibility of tertiary education (Benjamin et al., 2011; Bernal et al., 2024). Conversely, targeted financial support mechanisms, including tuition subsidies, scholarships, student loan schemes, and work-study opportunities, may mitigate these constraints and make tertiary education more financially feasible. Addressing financial strain is therefore important for promoting equitable participation in tertiary education across socioeconomic groups. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H8: Financial support is positively associated with SPM leavers' intention to pursue tertiary education.

Method

Research Design and Participants

This cross-sectional study was conducted among Malaysian Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) leavers in March and April 2024. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Teknologi MARA. Participation was voluntary, and all information collected from participants was treated as confidential. Eligible participants were required to (i) have completed Form 5 and (ii) belong to the 2023 SPM examination cohort. This group was selected because SPM leavers were at a transitional stage at which decisions about pursuing tertiary education or entering the workforce were particularly salient.

Sampling and Sample Size

Participants who met the inclusion criteria were recruited through snowball sampling. This approach was used to facilitate access to eligible SPM leavers during the specified data-collection period. The survey invitation, which included a link to the questionnaire hosted on Google Forms, was initially distributed via WhatsApp. Recipients were then encouraged to share the survey link with eligible friends, relatives, and other contacts within their social networks.

The target sample size was estimated using the Raosoft sample-size calculator. The population parameter was based on the 395,870 candidates officially reported by the Ministry of Education Malaysia as having registered for the 2023 SPM examination nationwide (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2024). With a 95% confidence level, a 5% margin of error, and a 50% response distribution, the estimated minimum sample size was approximately 384 respondents. The final analytical sample comprised 385 respondents. Because participants were recruited via non-probability snowball sampling, these parameters served as a sample-planning benchmark rather than implying statistical representativeness of the wider population.

Conceptual Basis for Predictor Selection

The selection of the eight predictor factors was guided by a synthesis of the theoretical and empirical literature on students' educational aspirations and decisions to pursue tertiary education. Rather than treating these predictors as independent, the study conceptualises them as five interrelated dimensions that may shape tertiary education aspirations: individual, social, informational, academic, and financial determinants. Perceived Benefits represents the individual dimension, reflecting students' perceptions of the potential personal, educational, and career-related value of tertiary education. The social dimension encompasses Family Influence, Peer Influence, Social Media Influence, and Social Stigma, recognising that educational aspirations can be shaped by interpersonal relationships, social expectations, digital environments, and perceived societal attitudes. Lack of Knowledge Regarding Admission Processes represents the informational dimension, capturing barriers arising from inadequate awareness or understanding of tertiary education pathways and admission requirements. Academic Preparedness represents the academic dimension, reflecting students' perceived readiness and capacity to meet the academic demands of tertiary education. Finally, Financial Support represents the financial dimension, acknowledging that the availability of economic resources and support may facilitate or constrain students' ability to pursue further education. Collectively, these eight factors provide a multidimensional framework for examining tertiary education aspirations by incorporating both individual perceptions and the broader social and structural conditions surrounding students' educational decision-making.

Instrumentation

Data were collected using a self-administered, structured questionnaire informed by the TPB and previous studies of behavioural and educational intentions (Mokhlis et al., 2022; Mosbah et al., 2019; Yusoff et al., 2022). The instrument comprised 44 scale items and a sociodemographic section, organised into five sections covering participants' sociodemographic characteristics, perceived benefits, normative influences, control-related factors, and intention to pursue tertiary education. The first section collected participants' sociodemographic information, including gender, age, ethnicity, household income, state of residence, locality, and year of the SPM examination.

The second section assessed perceived benefits as behavioural beliefs relevant to attitudes towards pursuing tertiary education. The items measured respondents' evaluations of the anticipated social, economic, personal, skills-related, and career benefits of pursuing tertiary education. These items were adapted from previous studies on expected benefits and educational intentions to ensure their conceptual relevance to SPM leavers (Gayatri et al., 2010; Mosbah et al., 2019).

The third section assessed four sources of normative influence relevant to subjective norms: (i) family influence, (ii) peer influence, (iii) social media influence, and (iv) social stigma surrounding SPM leavers' educational choices. Items measuring parental and peer-related normative pressures were adapted from established research on educational intentions (Mosbah et al., 2019). Items on social media influence were informed by empirical studies of social media influencers and shifting norms among young people (Lajnef, 2023; Lou & Kim, 2019). Items measuring social stigma were adapted from regional studies examining social perceptions of students' participation in tertiary education (Radzi et al., 2024).

The fourth section assessed three control-related factors relevant to perceived behavioural control: (i) financial support, (ii) lack of knowledge about admission processes, and (iii) academic preparedness. The items were adapted from previous empirical studies on financial support, informational barriers, and preparedness for tertiary education (Bettinger et al., 2012; Jumat@ Mohamed et al., 2022; Shamsudin et al., 2019).

The fifth section operationalised participants' intention to pursue tertiary education using a five-item composite scale informed by previous studies of educational intention (Mosbah et al., 2019; Yusoff et al., 2022). The items were contextualised for SPM leavers and assessed intention to pursue tertiary education, plans to enrol in a tertiary programme, determination to continue studies at the tertiary level, expectations of pursuing tertiary education after SPM, and willingness to make the necessary effort to enrol. Accordingly, the five-item composite served as the study's measure of intention to pursue tertiary education.

All scale items were measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The development of the scales and the wording of the items were grounded in established TPB literature and educational-intention research to ensure conceptual alignment with the constructs under investigation (Gayatri et al., 2010; Mosbah et al., 2019). The complete questionnaire is provided in Appendix A.

Content Validity, Face Validity, and Reliability

The questionnaire underwent content validation by a panel of three experts with backgrounds in college counselling, school counselling, and psychology. The relevance of the items was assessed using the Item-level Content Validity Index (I-CVI) and the Scale-level Content Validity Index (S-CVI). Both indices reached 1.00, indicating unanimous agreement among the experts on the relevance of the questionnaire items (Polit et al., 2007).

Face validation was subsequently conducted with five recent SPM leavers to assess the clarity, comprehensibility, and suitability of the questionnaire. The Item-level Face Validity Index (I-FVI) and Scale-level Face Validity Index (S-FVI) both achieved values of 1.00, indicating that the questionnaire was considered clear and understandable by the target respondents (Yusoff, 2019).

A pilot study was then conducted with 30 SPM leavers to assess the internal consistency of the scales. Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from 0.734 to 0.862 across the constructs, exceeding the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70 and indicating acceptable to good internal consistency (Taber, 2018). The reliability coefficients for each construct are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Cronbach's alpha Reliability Coefficients for the Study Constructs

Domain	Construct	Items	Cronbach's alpha
Attitudinally Relevant Factor	Perceived Benefits	5	0.792
Normative Influences	Family Influence	5	0.788
	Peer Influence	5	0.788
	Social Media Influence	4	0.796
	Social Stigma	5	0.862
Control-Related Factors	Lack of Knowledge Regarding Admission Processes	5	0.740
	Academic Preparedness	5	0.779
	Financial Support	5	0.734
Intention to Pursue Tertiary Education		5	0.810

As shown in Table 1, all constructs demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency. The Cronbach's alpha values for perceived benefits, family influence, peer influence, social media influence, social stigma, financial support, academic preparedness, and lack of knowledge regarding admission processes exceeded the commonly accepted minimum threshold of 0.70. These findings indicate that the items within each construct demonstrated acceptable internal consistency.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics, version 26.0. Descriptive statistics summarised participant characteristics and the distributions of the study variables. Continuous variables were reported as means (M) and standard deviations (SD), whereas categorical variables were presented as frequencies (n) and percentages (%).

Composite mean scores were calculated for intention and each of the eight predictor constructs. Although individual Likert-scale items are ordinal, composite scores derived by averaging or summing multiple items measured on scales with five or more response categories are commonly treated as approximately continuous. This approach permits the use of means, standard deviations, and parametric statistical analyses (Norman, 2010).

For descriptive interpretation, mean scores on the five-point Likert scale were classified into three levels: low (1.00–2.33), moderate (2.34–3.66), and high (3.67–5.00). These cut-off points divide the scale into three equal intervals and are consistent with approaches used in Malaysian educational research (Ab Jalil & Amran, 2023; Jamil Ahmad, 2002).

Multiple linear regression (MLR) was conducted with all eight predictor constructs entered simultaneously to examine their independent associations with SPM leavers' intention to pursue tertiary education. Before the regression analysis, the relevant statistical assumptions were assessed. Multicollinearity was evaluated using the variance inflation factor (VIF). All predictors had VIF values below 5, indicating no problematic multicollinearity. Homoscedasticity was assessed by visually examining the residual scatterplot, which revealed no clear systematic pattern. The normality of the residuals was evaluated using a probability–probability plot, and the independence of residuals was assessed using the Durbin–Watson statistic. All statistical tests were two-tailed, and significance was set at $p < 0.05$..

Findings

Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Participants

The study had 385 respondents (Appendix B). The largest proportion of respondents was 17 years old (38.4%), followed by those aged 18 years (34.8%) and 19 years (26.8%). The gender distribution was nearly equal, with 50.9% male and 49.1% female. In terms of ethnicity, 48.8% of the respondents were Malay, 28.1% were Indian, 22.9% were Chinese, and 0.3% belonged to other ethnic groups. Household income was distributed across four categories: RM2,001–RM4,000 (29.9%), RM4,001–RM6,000 (24.9%), below RM2,000 (24.2%), and above RM6,001 (21.0%). Respondents were from various states, with the largest proportions from Johor (15.1%), Selangor (11.4%), and Pulau Pinang (9.6%). Most respondents lived in urban areas (58.7%), whereas 41.3% resided in rural areas.

Levels of Intention and Related Study Constructs

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the constructs associated with SPM leavers' intentions to pursue tertiary education.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Interpretation Levels of the Study Constructs

Construct	Attributes	Mean	SD	Level
Attitudinally Relevant Factor	Perceived Benefits	4.353	0.593	High
Total Mean		4.353		
Normative Influences	Family Influence	4.440	0.588	High
	Peer Influence	4.375	0.607	High
	Social Media Influence	4.281	0.651	High
	Social Stigma	4.215	0.793	High
Total Mean		4.328		
Control-Related Factors	Financial Support	4.321	0.617	High
	Lack of Knowledge Regarding Admission Processes	4.308	0.622	High
	Academic Preparedness	4.359	0.574	High
Total Mean		4.329		
Intention to Pursue Tertiary Education		4.378	0.584	High

Perceived benefits, the attitudinally relevant construct, recorded a mean score of 4.353 (SD = 0.593). This score was classified as high, indicating that respondents generally perceived tertiary education as offering substantial personal, educational, and occupational benefits.

Four normative-influence constructs were assessed. Family influence recorded the highest mean score (M = 4.440, SD = 0.588), followed by peer influence (M = 4.375, SD = 0.607), social media influence (M = 4.281, SD = 0.651), and social stigma (M = 4.215, SD = 0.793). Family influence therefore had the highest mean among the four normative-influence constructs.

Three control-related constructs were assessed: financial support, lack of knowledge regarding admission processes, and academic preparedness. Academic preparedness recorded the highest mean score (M = 4.359, SD = 0.574), followed by financial support (M = 4.321, SD = 0.617) and lack of knowledge regarding admission processes (M = 4.308, SD = 0.622). Academic preparedness therefore had the highest mean among the three control-related constructs.

The mean score for intention to pursue tertiary education was 4.378 (SD = 0.584), indicating a high level of intention among respondents. Overall, respondents reported high mean scores for perceived benefits, the four normative-influence constructs, the three control-related constructs, and for intention to pursue tertiary education.

Regression Diagnostic Tests

The assumptions underlying MLR analysis were assessed before interpreting the regression model. All the points in the probability–probability plot were distributed relatively closely around the diagonal reference line (Appendix C). The histogram of the residuals also displayed an approximately normal distribution (Appendix D). These findings suggested that the normality assumption was adequately satisfied. The scatterplot of the standardised residuals against the standardised predicted values (Appendix E).

The residuals were distributed randomly around zero, with no clear systematic or funnel-shaped pattern. This distribution indicated that the variance of the residuals was approximately constant across the predicted values, satisfying the assumption of homoscedasticity. Table 3 presents the tolerance and VIF values used to assess multicollinearity.

Table 3. Multicollinearity Diagnostics for the Predictor Variables

Construct	Attributes	Tolerance	VIF
Attitudinally Relevant Factor	Perceived Benefits	0.287	3.486
Normative Influences	Family Influence	0.326	3.070
	Peer Influence	0.331	3.025
	Social Media Influence	0.340	2.945
	Social Stigma	0.373	2.678
Control-Related Factors	Financial Support	0.319	3.131
	Lack of Knowledge Regarding Admission Processes	0.335	2.981
	Academic Preparedness	0.319	3.136

All tolerance values exceeded 0.10, while all VIF values were below 5. These results indicated that the predictor variables did not exhibit problematic multicollinearity.

Factors Associated with SPM Leavers' Intention to Pursue Tertiary Education

Table 4 presents the summary of the multiple linear regression model.

Table 4. Summary of the Multiple Linear Regression Model

R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Standard Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
0.861	0.742	0.736	1.499	1.915

The multiple correlation coefficient was R = 0.861. The model explained 74.2% of the variance in intention (R^2 = 0.742), with an adjusted R^2 of 0.736. The Durbin–Watson statistic was 1.915, suggesting no substantial first-order autocorrelation in the residuals. Table 5 presents the analysis of variance for the regression model.

Table 5. Analysis of Variance for the Multiple Linear Regression Model

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p-value
Regression	2424.445	8	303.056	134.855	< 0.001*
Residual	844.973	376	2.247		
Total	3269.418	384			

Note: * Statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.

The overall regression model was statistically significant, $F(8, 376) = 134.855$, $p < 0.001$, indicating that the set of eight predictors collectively explained a statistically significant proportion of the variance in SPM leavers' intention to pursue tertiary education. The significance of the overall model does not imply that each predictor made a statistically significant independent contribution. Table 6 presents the regression coefficients for the individual predictors.

Table 6. Multiple Linear Regression Coefficients for Factors Associated with SPM Leavers' Intentions to Pursue Tertiary Education

Construct	Attributes	Unstandardised		Standardised	p-value	Results
		B	Std. Error	Beta (β)		
Attitudinally Relevant Factor	Perceived Benefits	0.135	0.048	0.137	0.005*	Supported
Normative Influences	Family Influence	0.088	0.046	0.089	0.054	Not Supported
	Peer Influence	0.259	0.044	0.270	<0.001*	Supported
	Social Media Influence	0.085	0.040	0.094	0.037*	Supported
	Social Stigma	-0.138	0.032	-0.188	<0.001*	Supported
Control-Related Factors	Financial Support	0.296	0.044	0.313	<0.001*	Supported
	Lack of Knowledge Regarding Admission Processes	-0.043	0.042	-0.046	0.314	Not Supported
	Academic Preparedness	0.251	0.047	0.246	<0.001*	Supported

Note: * sig. at p-value at 0.05.

Perceived benefits were positively and significantly associated with intention to pursue tertiary education ($\beta = 0.137$, $p = 0.005$). Respondents reporting higher perceived benefits tended to report stronger intentions to pursue tertiary education. Therefore, H1 was supported.

Peer influence was positively and significantly associated with intention to pursue tertiary education ($\beta = 0.270$, $p < 0.001$). Respondents reporting higher peer influence tended to report stronger intentions to pursue tertiary education. Therefore, H3 was supported.

Social media influence was positively and significantly associated with intention to pursue tertiary education ($\beta = 0.094$, $p = 0.037$). Respondents reporting higher levels of social media influence tended to report stronger intentions to pursue tertiary education. Therefore, H4 was supported.

Family influence was positively, though not significantly, associated with the intention to pursue tertiary education ($\beta = 0.089$, $p = 0.054$). Thus, after accounting for the other predictors in the model, family influence did not make a statistically significant independent contribution, and H2 was not supported.Social stigma was negatively and significantly associated with the intention

to pursue tertiary education (β = -0.188, p < 0.001). Respondents reporting higher levels of social stigma tended to have weaker intentions to pursue tertiary education. Therefore, H5 was supported.

Academic preparedness was positively and significantly associated with intention to pursue tertiary education (β = 0.246, p < 0.001). Respondents reporting greater academic preparedness tended to report stronger intentions to pursue tertiary education. Academic preparedness was among the strongest positive predictors in the model. Therefore, H7 was supported.

Financial support had the largest positive standardised coefficient and was positively and significantly associated with intention to pursue tertiary education (β = 0.313, p < 0.001). Respondents reporting higher levels of financial support tended to report stronger intentions to pursue tertiary education. Therefore, H8 was supported.

Lack of knowledge of admission processes was negatively, though not significantly, associated with the intention to pursue tertiary education (β = -0.046, p = 0.314). Thus, after accounting for the other predictors in the model, lack of knowledge of admission processes did not make a statistically significant independent contribution, and H6 was not supported.

Discussion

This study examined the factors associated with SPM leavers' intention to pursue tertiary education using an extended Theory of Planned Behaviour framework. Perceived benefits, peer influence, social media influence, academic preparedness, and financial support were positively associated with intention, whereas social stigma was negatively associated with it. Family influence and lack of knowledge regarding admission processes did not make statistically significant independent contributions after accounting for the other predictors. Based on the standardised coefficients, financial support, peer influence, and academic preparedness were comparatively prominent. These findings concern behavioural intention, not subsequent enrolment, and the cross-sectional design does not establish causal relationships.

Attitudinally Relevant Beliefs: Perceived Benefits

Within the TPB framework, perceived benefits are best understood as behavioural beliefs that inform attitude formation rather than as attitude itself. SPM leavers who perceived greater anticipated benefits from tertiary education tended to report stronger intentions to pursue it. This finding aligns with research linking favourable evaluations of anticipated educational outcomes to stronger educational intentions (Cain & Sucuahi, 2024; Gayatri et al., 2010; Mahdzar et al., 2022) and with the TPB proposition that behavioural beliefs about expected outcomes contribute to attitudes towards performing a behaviour (Ajzen, 1991).

The perceived value of tertiary education, however, is likely to reflect expectations of its labour-market returns. Concerns about graduate employability, starting salaries, skills mismatch, educational costs, and debt may weaken confidence that a tertiary qualification will deliver adequate returns (Othman et al., 2023; Wong et al., 2015; Jumat@Mohamed et al., 2022; Che Awang, 2022). SPM leavers may therefore recognise the general benefits of tertiary education while remaining uncertain about the employment prospects and financial returns of particular programmes or fields of study (Moo & Wan, 2023).

Normative Influences: The Role of Family, Peers, Social Media, and Social Stigma

The normative findings indicate that social influences were source-specific rather than uniform. Peer and social media influences were positively associated with intention, social stigma was negatively associated with intention, and family influence did not make a statistically significant independent contribution. This variation is theoretically relevant because subjective norms concern perceived

expectations from salient others, whereas the present study distinguished several contextual sources through which normative pressures or social judgements may be experienced.

Peer influence was among the comparatively prominent positive predictors. During the post-SPM transition, friendship networks may provide social validation, practical information, and examples of possible post-secondary trajectories. When tertiary education is valued within these networks, further study may appear socially supported and attainable. This interpretation aligns with evidence linking supportive peer relationships to educational aspirations and attainment (Lorijn et al., 2022). Longitudinal research also indicates that stronger peer expectation cultures regarding post-secondary education are associated with higher subsequent participation in higher education (Van den Broeck et al., 2023). Peer influence is therefore best interpreted as a context-specific normative source rather than as the subjective-norm construct itself.

Social media influence was also positively associated with intention after accounting for the other predictors, suggesting that SPM leavers' normative and informational environments extend beyond face-to-face relationships. Here, social media influence refers to the measured construct, whereas social media influencers are individuals or content creators who may represent one source of that influence. Online communities, institutional platforms, and content creators may expose young people to information about educational pathways and to social cues concerning tertiary education (Raaper et al., 2024; Raaper et al., 2024; Humairoh et al., 2026). Research also suggests that students may perceive social media influencers as socially influential actors, although this does not establish a direct effect on educational intention (Council & Olowoyo, 2026).

The positive coefficient should not be taken as evidence that social media influence is inherently favourable. Digital environments can convey competing narratives about tertiary education and alternative routes to economic success. Related research has linked social media engagement to higher-education choice intentions via informational and attitudinal pathways (Nguyen et al., 2021; El-Merabet et al., 2025). The present study did not measure specific online content, source credibility, platform characteristics, or mediation pathways. Social media may therefore shape intention through several mechanisms, but these remain theoretical interpretations rather than effects demonstrated by the present data.

Social stigma showed the opposite pattern. Respondents who reported stronger negative social judgements about tertiary education tended to report weaker intentions to pursue it. Such stigma may reflect narratives that portray tertiary education as costly, unnecessary, or unlikely to yield returns commensurate with the required investment. In the Malaysian context, these judgements may become more salient when immediate employment is perceived as a more practical response to financial pressure (Othman et al., 2023; Radzi et al., 2024). This finding suggests that broader community narratives form part of the normative environment in which SPM leavers evaluate tertiary education.

This interpretation is broadly consistent with research indicating that stigmatising social narratives can intersect with educational participation and educational failure (Lisitsa et al., 2022). It also distinguishes social stigma from interpersonal influence. Whereas peers may convey approval or encouragement from salient individuals, social stigma may operate through broader judgements about the value or practicality of tertiary education. The present cross-sectional analysis did not directly test these mechanisms, so this explanation remains tentative.

The non-significant independent contribution of family influence should not be interpreted as evidence that families are unimportant in educational decision-making. Previous research identifies parental expectations, encouragement, and support as relevant to educational aspirations and attainment (Schörner & Bittmann, 2024). The present result indicates only that family influence did not explain additional variation in intention at the conventional level of statistical significance once the other predictors were considered simultaneously.

One possible explanation is that family influence overlaps with financial support, perceived benefits, or academic preparedness, leaving a smaller unique contribution in the model. Families may also shape educational decisions indirectly through beliefs about the value of tertiary education,

confidence in managing tertiary-level study, or access to financial and practical assistance (Hayek et al., 2022). These overlapping or indirect pathways were not tested in the present analysis and warrant further investigation.

Control-Related Factors: Academic Preparedness, Financial Support, and Lack of Knowledge Regarding Admission Processes

Among the control-related factors, academic preparedness was positively associated with intention and was among the more prominent positive predictors. Within the extended TPB framework, academic preparedness is relevant to perceived behavioural control because it reflects students' perceived capability to manage tertiary-level academic demands. SPM leavers who regarded themselves as more academically prepared tended to report stronger intentions to pursue tertiary education, suggesting that perceived readiness may influence whether further study appears attainable. Academic preparedness should, nevertheless, be understood as a context-specific control-related factor rather than a direct measure of perceived behavioural control.

The finding is consistent with evidence that academic self-efficacy predicts intentions to pursue higher education, even after accounting for academic performance and other background characteristics (Kramer et al., 2025). Longitudinal evidence likewise links a stronger academic self-concept with subsequent educational progression (Hansen et al., 2023). Together, these studies support the interpretation that perceived academic capability matters beyond objective academic performance alone and may help explain why academic preparedness retained a comparatively prominent independent association with intention.

Financial support had the largest positive standardised coefficient in the model. Within the extended TPB framework, it is best interpreted as a facilitating economic resource that may influence whether tertiary education appears financially feasible. This finding aligns with Malaysian evidence linking financial constraints and perceived financial aid to decisions and intentions regarding further study (Benjamin et al., 2011; Shamsudin et al., 2019; Drahman et al., 2025; Abd Hamid & Othman, 2024). Access to financial resources may therefore reduce perceived economic barriers to pursuing tertiary education.

Financial assistance does not necessarily resolve all economic concerns. Earlier Malaysian evidence has highlighted affordability constraints among lower- and average-income households (Benjamin et al., 2011), while anticipated educational debt and uncertain future earnings may continue to shape assessments of financial feasibility (Jumat@Mohamed et al., 2022; Wong et al., 2015). The present finding therefore concerns perceived access to a facilitating resource rather than evidence that financial support directly produces enrolment. Because the study measured intention at a single point in time, it cannot establish whether financial support subsequently enables application, enrolment, or persistence.By contrast, lack of knowledge of admission processes did not make a statistically significant independent contribution after accounting for the other predictors. One possible explanation is that respondents had sufficient access to admission-related information via centralised application systems, institutional websites, school counsellors, or social media, although this was not measured directly. If basic procedural information was readily available, variation in admission knowledge may have been less influential on intention than perceived academic capability or financial feasibility. This interpretation remains tentative and should not be read as evidence that admission information is unimportant for all SPM leavers.

International evidence also suggests that information alone may be insufficient to alter post-secondary decisions. Gurantz et al. (2021) found no overall enrolment change from simplified college-search and application information, while Bettinger et al. (2012) reported International evidence also suggests that information alone may be insufficient to alter post-secondary decisions. Gurantz et al. (2021) found no overall change in enrolment following the provision of simplified college-search and application information, whereas Bettinger et al. (2012) reported stronger outcomes when information was paired with direct application assistance. Informational barriers may therefore

matter differently across the transition from intention to application and enrolment, particularly when information is not accompanied by direct application support (Bettinger et al., 2012; Gurantz et al., 2021). Consequently, the non-significant coefficient in this study is limited to its independent association with intention within the present sample.

Integration with the Broader TPB Literature

Taken together, the findings broadly align with the TPB's emphasis on attitudinal, normative, and control-related considerations in forming behavioural intention. However, the study examined context-specific predictors aligned with these domains rather than direct measures of attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. The substantial variance explained by the model should therefore be interpreted as evidence of the empirical relevance of this contextual specification, not as a direct test of the complete canonical TPB model. This distinction preserves the theoretical role of the original constructs while allowing social, economic, educational, and informational conditions relevant to Malaysian SPM leavers to be examined explicitly.

The differentiated results across the normative and control-related domains are also informative. The contrasting associations of peers, family, social media, and social stigma indicate that normative influences may vary by source. Likewise, academic preparedness, financial support, and lack of knowledge about admission processes showed independent associations with intention, suggesting that perceived capability, facilitating resources, and informational barriers need not contribute equally. This pattern is consistent with the broader TPB proposition that perceived capabilities and facilitating conditions can be relevant to behavioural control (Rhodes & Courneya, 2003).

Theoretical Contributions

Three theoretical contributions follow from this pattern. First, the study demonstrates the contextual utility of an extended TPB framework for examining Malaysian SPM leavers' intention to pursue tertiary education. By organising context-specific predictors around attitudinally relevant beliefs, normative influences, and control-related factors, the analysis links post-SPM decision-making to the TPB while preserving the distinction between these predictors and the canonical constructs. This provides a theoretically disciplined basis for examining locally salient conditions surrounding educational intention.Second, incorporating social media influence and social stigma broadens the normative context beyond traditional interpersonal referents and recognises that contemporary educational decisions may also be embedded in digital environments and wider social narratives. Third, the distinct independent associations across the eight predictors show that theoretically relevant contextual variables should not be assumed to contribute uniformly within an extended TPB framework. The contribution lies in demonstrating a differentiated pattern of context-specific associations that can inform more refined future tests of educational intention and subsequent enrolment behaviour.

Practical and Policy Implications

The practical and policy implications arise primarily from the significant associations of perceived benefits, peer influence, social media influence, social stigma, academic preparedness, and financial support with SPM leavers' intention to pursue tertiary education. Financial support had the largest positive standardised coefficient, followed by peer influence and academic preparedness. Because the study was cross-sectional and assessed intention rather than actual enrolment, these findings identify potential priorities for policy and institutional attention rather than interventions of demonstrated effectiveness.

The positive association with perceived benefits and the negative association with social stigma suggest that SPM leavers' evaluations of the value and legitimacy of tertiary education warrant attention. Tertiary institutions and relevant agencies could provide balanced, programme-specific information on educational costs, skills development, graduate outcomes, career pathways, and labour-market returns. This implication aligns with evidence that employability, affordability, and the value of qualifications inform post-SPM decisions (Benjamin et al., 2011; Othman et al., 2023; Moo & Wan, 2023). Such communication should draw on verifiable evidence and acknowledge labour-market uncertainty.

The positive associations of peer and social media influence suggest that the social and digital environments surrounding SPM leavers are relevant to their intention to pursue tertiary education. Schools and tertiary institutions could therefore consider engaging credible alumni as student-facing ambassadors to communicate realistic educational experiences and programme-to-career pathways across face-to-face and digital platforms. This implication aligns with research linking peer relationships and social media engagement to educational aspirations and institutional perceptions (Chen et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2021; Raaper et al., 2026). Such an approach would draw on alumni as relatable social referents rather than treating social media influence as inherently positive.

As a Malaysian example, Mohamad Sharhan Syazwan Mohd Ashri, professionally known as Chaan, is a UiTM Diploma in Music alumnus who later built a professional career as a music director (Jabatan Komunikasi Korporat, UiTM, 2008; Ruslan, 2023). His trajectory illustrates how an alumnus can offer prospective students a concrete example of a possible pathway from tertiary study to professional practice. However, such examples should be presented as individual trajectories rather than typical outcomes, and institutions should acknowledge that career development also depends on individual capability, continued practice, professional networks, industry experience, and labour-market conditions. The effectiveness of alumni-based outreach in shaping application or enrolment decisions should therefore be evaluated empirically.Academic preparedness was among the more prominent positive predictors, underscoring the need to attend to SPM leavers' perceived readiness for tertiary-level study. Secondary schools and tertiary institutions could consider targeted transition support, such as readiness assessments, academic counselling, or preparatory provision, for students reporting lower academic confidence. This implication aligns with evidence linking academic self-efficacy and self-concept to educational intentions and progression (Kramer et al., 2025; Hansen et al., 2023). Such support should be evaluated against subsequent application and enrolment outcomes.

Financial support warrants particular policy attention because it had the strongest positive standardised association with intention. Together with Malaysian evidence on affordability, financial aid, and educational debt, this finding supports improving access to targeted assistance and transparent communication about its conditions (Benjamin et al., 2011; Shamsudin et al., 2019; Drahman et al., 2025; Jumat@Mohamed et al., 2022; Wong et al., 2015). Providers of student financial assistance, including the National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN), could clearly explain eligibility, coverage, repayment obligations, and expected financial commitments. Whether such measures translate intention into actual enrolment requires programme evaluation and longitudinal follow-up.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study is subject to several limitations. First, although the sample size of 385 respondents was adequate for the statistical analyses conducted, participants were recruited using snowball sampling. As a non-probability sampling technique, this approach may have produced a sample of socially or demographically similar respondents and may have introduced selection bias through network-based recruitment. The findings therefore should not be interpreted as statistically representative of the broader population of Malaysian SPM leavers.Second, the cross-sectional design captured

respondents' perceptions and intentions at a single point in time. Consequently, the findings cannot establish causal or temporal relationships between the predictor variables and the intention to pursue tertiary education. Longitudinal research is therefore needed to determine whether these intentions remain stable over time and whether they subsequently translate into actual applications and enrolment.Third, the analysis relied on multiple linear regression, which assumes linear and additive relationships among the variables. This approach may not capture more complex relationships, including interaction effects, indirect pathways, and non-linear patterns. Future studies could apply structural equation modelling to examine the measurement model and assess theoretically specified mediating or moderating relationships among the extended TPB constructs. Machine-learning approaches may also be used as complementary exploratory tools to identify complex predictive patterns, provided that their application remains theoretically grounded.

A further limitation concerns the measurement of the intention to pursue tertiary education. Although the five-item intention measure demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.810$), the predictor and outcome constructs were assessed using related self-report statements about the same educational decision. For example, the intention item "I plan to enrol in a tertiary-education programme" measures a respondent's plan to enrol, whereas the academic-preparedness item "I am confident that I can manage the academic workload expected in tertiary education" measures perceived capability rather than intention. These concepts are related but not identical. A student may feel confident about managing tertiary-level study yet not plan to enrol, while another may intend to enrol despite low academic confidence. Because the predictor and outcome items address closely related aspects of the same educational decision and were all self-reported, some observed associations may have been stronger, which may partly explain the relatively high R^2 of 0.742. Future studies should further assess the distinctiveness of these constructs and follow respondents longitudinally to determine whether stated intentions translate into actual applications and enrolment.Finally, the study relied on self-reported Likert-scale responses to measure perceptions and intentions. Self-report data may be affected by response styles, social-desirability bias, and shared method variance. In addition, treating composite Likert-scale scores as approximately continuous assumes that the aggregated scores provide a sufficiently interval-like measure for parametric analysis. Future research could strengthen the evidence by using larger and more diverse samples and by combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews, focus groups, or longitudinal follow-up of actual application and enrolment behaviour.

Conclusion

This study identified a distinct pattern of associations between context-specific factors and Malaysian SPM leavers' intention to pursue tertiary education within an extended TPB framework. Among the sampled respondents, perceived benefits, peer influence, social media influence, academic preparedness, and financial support were positively associated with intention, whereas social stigma was negatively associated with it. These findings indicate that tertiary-education intention reflects a combination of attitudinally relevant beliefs, social influences, perceived academic capability, and access to financial resources.Family influence and lack of knowledge about admission processes did not make statistically significant independent contributions in the multivariable model. Based on the standardised coefficients, financial support, peer influence, and academic preparedness showed the strongest positive associations with intention. Taken together, the findings support the value of a contextually extended TPB perspective for understanding educational intention among the sampled SPM leavers, although the cross-sectional, non-probability design precludes causal inference and national generalisation. Future policy and institutional responses should therefore focus on reducing financial and academic barriers, strengthening credible social support, and addressing stigmatising narratives, while evaluating whether changes in intention translate into actual tertiary participation.

Note

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Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used OpenAI's ChatGPT to assist with language editing, consistency checking, and refinement of academic presentation. The authors retained full responsibility for the study design, data collection, statistical analysis, interpretation, theoretical framing, and final manuscript content. AI was not used to generate or alter the study data or to conduct statistical analyses. All AI-assisted revisions were reviewed and approved by the authors.

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Appendix A. Questionnaire Factors Associated with SPM Leavers' Intention to Pursue Tertiary Education

Instructions: For Sections B-E, indicate the extent to which you agree with each statement.
1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neutral 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree

Section A. Eligibility and Sociodemographic Information
Eligibility for the study is based on completion of Form 5 and membership of the 2023 SPM examination cohort.

Item	Information	Response
D1	Have you completed Form 5?	Yes / No
D2	Year of SPM examination	2023 / Other: _____
D3	Age (years)	_____
D4	Gender	Male / Female / Other / Prefer not to say
D5	Ethnicity	Malay / Chinese / Indian / Other / Prefer not to say
D6	Monthly household income	RM2,000 or below / RM2,001-RM4,000 / RM4,001-RM6,000 / RM6,001 or above / Prefer not to say
D7	State of residence	_____
D8	Locality	Urban / Rural

Section B. Attitudinally Relevant Factor

Item	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
	PERCEIVED BENEFITS					
P1	Obtaining a tertiary qualification would enable me to contribute positively to my community.					
P2	Obtaining a tertiary qualification would improve my prospects of securing well-paid employment.					
P3	Pursuing tertiary education would help me develop skills that are useful for my future career.					
P4	Completing tertiary education would give me a strong sense of personal achievement.					
P5	Obtaining a tertiary qualification would improve my opportunities for career advancement.					

Section C. Normative Influences

Item	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
	FAMILY INFLUENCE					
F1	My parents or guardians encourage me to pursue tertiary education.					
F2	People in my family whose opinions matter to me generally value tertiary education.					
F3	My parents or guardians expect me to pursue tertiary education.					
F4	My parents or guardians believe that pursuing tertiary education would be a good choice for me.					
F5	My parents or guardians would support my decision to pursue tertiary education.					

Appendix A. Questionnaire Factors Associated with SPM Leavers' Intention to Pursue Tertiary Education (Continued)

Item	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
	PEER INFLUENCE					
I1	My friends encourage me to pursue tertiary education.					
I2	Most of my friends plan to pursue tertiary education.					
I3	My friends generally have favourable views of tertiary education.					
I4	My friends think that I should pursue tertiary education.					
I5	My friends would support my decision to pursue tertiary education.					

Item	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
	SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE					
S1	Content I see on social media generally encourages consideration of tertiary education.					
S2	I consider information shared on social media when evaluating my educational options.					
S3	Social media influencers or content creators whom I follow generally present tertiary education as valuable.					
S4	Educational experiences shared by students or graduates on social media encourage me to consider tertiary education.					

Item	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
	SOCIAL STIGMA					
T1	People around me sometimes view pursuing tertiary education instead of working immediately as impractical.					
T2	People around me often question whether tertiary education is worth the time required.					
T3	People around me often doubt whether tertiary education leads to worthwhile career opportunities.					
T4	In my community, tertiary education is sometimes regarded as an unnecessary financial burden.					
T5	People around me commonly believe that tertiary qualifications are unnecessary for success.					

Section D. Control-Related Factors

Item	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
	FINANCIAL SUPPORT					
C1	I have access to sufficient financial support to pursue tertiary education.					
C2	Financial support from my family or household would be available if I pursued tertiary education.					

Appendix A. Questionnaire Factors Associated with SPM Leavers' Intention to Pursue Tertiary Education (Continued)

Item	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
C3	I would have financial support available to help cover my living expenses while studying.					
C4	I could obtain external financial assistance if needed to pursue tertiary education.					
C5	The financial support available to me would be sufficient to sustain my tertiary studies.					

Item	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
	LACK OF KNOWLEDGE REGARDING ADMISSION PROCESSES					
L1	I am unsure about the entry requirements for tertiary-education programmes.					
L2	I lack sufficient information about the tertiary-education programmes available to me.					
L3	I am unfamiliar with the procedures for applying to tertiary institutions.					
L4	I am unsure about the application deadlines for tertiary institutions.					
L5	I do not know where to obtain reliable information about tertiary-education admissions.					

Item	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
	ACADEMIC PREPAREDNESS					
A1	My SPM education has adequately prepared me for tertiary-level study.					
A2	My SPM academic results indicate that I am academically prepared for tertiary-level study.					
A3	I am able to analyse and solve academic problems effectively.					
A4	I am able to study independently.					
A5	I am confident that I can manage the academic workload expected in tertiary education.					

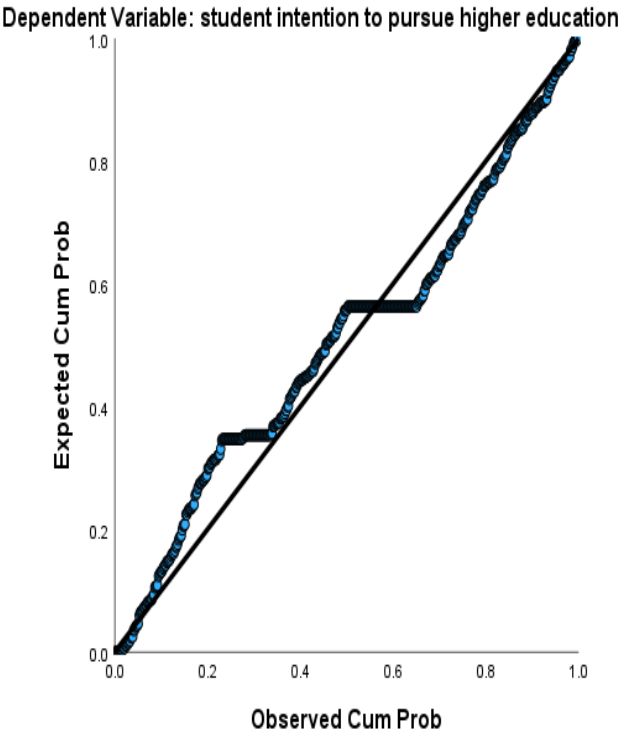
Section E. Intention to Pursue Tertiary Education

Item	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
	INTENTION TO PURSUE TERTIARY EDUCATION					
E1	I intend to pursue tertiary education.					
E2	I plan to enrol in a tertiary-education programme.					
E3	I am determined to continue my studies at the tertiary level.					
E4	I expect to pursue tertiary education after SPM.					
E5	I am willing to make the necessary effort to enrol in tertiary education.					

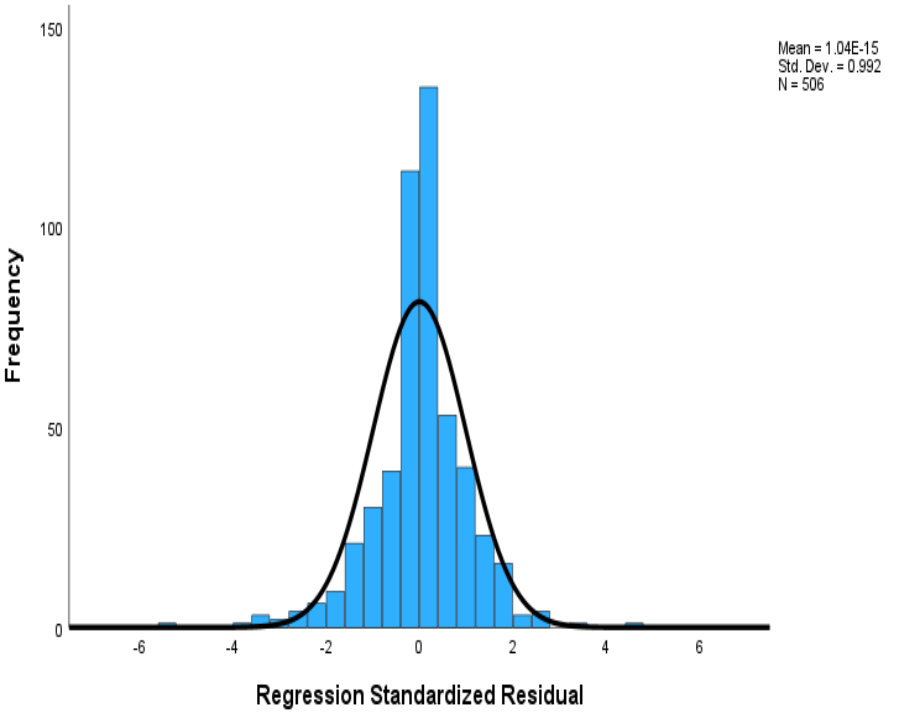
Appendix B. Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Respondents (N = 385)

Characteristics		n	%
Age (years)	17	148	38.44
	18	134	34.81
	19	103	26.75
Gender	Male	196	50.90
	Female	189	49.10
Ethnicity	Malay	188	48.80
	Indian	108	28.10
	Chinese	88	22.90
	Others	1	0.30
Household Income	< 2,000	93	24.20
	2,001 – 4,000	115	29.90
	4,001 – 6,000	96	24.90
	> 6,001	81	21.00
States	Johor	58	15.10
	Kedah	24	6.20
	Kelantan	22	5.70
	Melaka	19	4.90
	Negeri Sembilan	28	7.30
	Pahang	24	6.20
	Pulau Pinang	37	9.60
	Perak	32	8.30
	Sabah	27	7.00
	Sarawak	16	4.20
	Selangor	44	11.40
	Terengganu	31	8.10
	Wilayah Persekutuan	23	6.00
Locality	Urban	226	58.70
	Rural	159	41.30

Appendix C. Normal P–P Plot of Standardised Regression Residuals.



Appendix D. Histogram of Standardised Regression Residuals



Appendix E. Scatterplot of Standardised Residuals Against Standardised Predicted Values

