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Stigma, Habitus, and Higher Education: Delegitimizing University Pathways in a Coastal Community of Indonesia

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Abstract:
This study analyzes how stigma toward higher education is produced and sustained in the coastal community of Perupuk Village, Batu Bara Regency, North Sumatra. The article argues that low participation in higher education is not determined solely by economic constraints and access, but by social processes that delegitimize higher education as a life choice perceived as impractical and uncertain. Using a qualitative approach, the study draws on field observations and interviews with fifteen informants consisting of working youth and parents. The findings show that the community recognizes higher education as symbolically valuable—as a marker of intelligence and social status—yet weakens it in practice through family- and community-level risk calculations. Community members perceive higher education as costly, long-term, and lacking guarantees of employment, especially when contrasted with coastal work that provides immediate income and visibly contributes to household livelihoods. Stigma emerges through everyday social interactions, including evaluative community language, the circulation of narratives about unemployed university graduates, early-work culture, and family norms, which collectively frame work as the safest, most realistic, and most meaningful life orientation. Drawing on the social stigma theory of Crocker, Major, and Steele, the article demonstrates that stigma operates as a collective symbolic mechanism that lowers the legitimacy of the identity of prospective students/students. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* helps explain why this delegitimation appears natural and stable: dispositions toward early work, shaped by coastal lived experience, reproduce preferences for short-term returns and suppress long-term educational investment. Practically, efforts to increase higher education participation in coastal areas require interventions that go beyond financial assistance to include cultural-symbolic strategies that restore the legitimacy of higher education as a viable life pathway.
Keywords: Social Stigma, Habitus, Higher Education, Coastal Communities, Early-Work Culture.

Abstrak:
Studi ini menganalisis bagaimana stigma terhadap pendidikan tinggi diproduksi dan dipertahankan dalam masyarakat pesisir Desa Perupuk, Kabupaten Batu Bara, Sumatera Utara. Penelitian ini berangkat dari argumen bahwa rendahnya partisipasi pendidikan tinggi tidak semata ditentukan oleh keterbatasan ekonomi dan akses, melainkan oleh proses sosial yang mendelegitimasi pendidikan tinggi sebagai pilihan hidup yang dianggap tidak praktis dan tidak pasti. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui observasi lapangan dan wawancara terhadap lima belas informan yang terdiri atas remaja pekerja dan orang tua. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pendidikan tinggi diakui bernilai secara simbolik sebagai penanda kecerdasan dan status, tetapi dilemahkan

secara praktis melalui kalkulasi risiko keluarga dan komunitas. Pendidikan tinggi dipersepsikan mahal, berjangka panjang, dan tidak menjamin kepastian kerja, terutama ketika dibandingkan dengan kerja pesisir yang memberi pemasukan cepat dan "terlihat" kontribusinya. Stigma diproduksi melalui interaksi sosial sehari-hari—bahasa evaluatif komunitas, sirkulasi cerita pengangguran sarjana, budaya kerja dini, serta norma keluarga—yang secara kolektif membingkai kerja sebagai orientasi hidup paling aman, realistis, dan bermakna. Dengan teori stigma sosial Crocker, Major, dan Steele, artikel ini menunjukkan bahwa stigma bekerja sebagai mekanisme simbolik kolektif yang menurunkan legitimasi identitas "calon mahasiswa/mahasiswa." Konsep habitus Bourdieu membantu menjelaskan mengapa delegitimasi tersebut tampak wajar dan stabil: disposisi kerja dini yang dibentuk oleh pengalaman pesisir mereproduksi preferensi pada hasil jangka pendek dan menekan investasi pendidikan jangka panjang. Secara praktis, peningkatan partisipasi pendidikan tinggi di wilayah pesisir memerlukan intervensi yang tidak hanya ekonomi, tetapi juga kultural-simbolik untuk memulihkan legitimasi pendidikan tinggi.
Kata Kunci: *Stigma Sosial, Habitus, Pendidikan Tinggi, Masyarakat Pesisir, Budaya Kerja Dini.*

INTRODUCTION

Coastal communities in Indonesia reflect complex educational challenges that cannot be explained solely by economic constraints or institutional access (Nugraha, 2024; Stacey et al., 2021). Numerous reports indicate persistent inequality in higher education participation, particularly among marginalized communities such as coastal societies that face limited facilities, dependence on traditional economic sectors, and pressure from short-term livelihood needs (Ilham & Hamidy, 2021; Tobin, 1999). Data from the Central Statistics Agency show that Indonesia's gross enrollment ratio (GER) in higher education reached only 31.45 percent in 2025, indicating that the majority of secondary school graduates do not continue to university (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024). This condition has prompted the Directorate General of Higher Education (2025) to emphasize the need for a national strategy to increase the GER to 38.04 percent by 2029 in line with the National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN). However, participation gaps intersect with the educational structure of coastal communities themselves: approximately 80 percent of small-scale fishers have completed education only below the junior secondary level, as reported in the 2023 Outlook discussion of the Indonesian Traditional Fishers Union, citing data from the Directorate of Primary Education of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Doaly, 2023). These findings suggest that low higher education participation in coastal areas reflects not only access and macro-policy issues but also weak social legitimacy of formal education in fishers' everyday lives, raising concerns about stalled occupational regeneration in fisheries without culturally sensitive interventions.

In many coastal communities, young people face an apparently simple but socially loaded choice: continue schooling or immediately engage in family economic activities such as fishing or local enterprises. Families often interpret this choice as a pragmatic decision driven by short-term economic needs, where children's labor contributions appear more tangible than the long-term and uncertain benefits of education (Khaeruddin et al., 2022). This pattern aligns with high dropout rates in Indonesia's coastal regions. Data from TNP2K show that in 2022, 5,988 children from poor households were out of school out of a total of 40,517 school-age children, with most cases concentrated among ages 7–12 and 13–15. This condition corresponds with a sharp decline in school participation rates at higher levels, from 99.96 percent in primary school to 96.75 percent in junior secondary school and only 82.17 percent in senior secondary school, indicating that the transition to upper secondary education constitutes a critical exit point from formal schooling for coastal youth (Elfisha, 2022).

Such readings, however, tend to oversimplify the problem. A growing body of research shows that low interest in higher education reflects not only cost considerations but also how communities interpret and value education itself (Logli, 2016; Schofer et al., 2021; Welch, 2007). Coastal communities often perceive higher education as offering limited immediate benefits, misaligned with coastal livelihoods, and incapable of guaranteeing household economic sustainability (Misnawati, 2019; Misnawati & Tahir, 2021). In contrast, work in fisheries or local enterprises appears more realistic, productive, and socially valued because it meets daily subsistence needs.

These dynamics indicate that choosing work over higher education represents a form of practical rationality rooted in lived experience and social structure. Within instrumental rationality frameworks, people assess activities by immediate utility and short-term certainty (Nieswandt, 2024; Wedgwood, 2011). Coastal communities thus position work as a culturally legitimate and meaningful practice, while they symbolically devalue higher education because it conflicts with work-oriented *habitus* and practical consciousness (Nismawati et al., 2022; Nurcahyani et al., 2022). Communities do not openly reject education; instead, education gradually loses social legitimacy because people consider it incompatible with everyday coastal life. Consequently, low higher education

participation reflects deeper social processes through which communities shape, negotiate, and normalize educational meaning.

At this point, social stigma becomes analytically central. Stigma toward higher education emerges through everyday narratives that frame education as irrelevant, time-wasting, or economically risky. Crocker, Major, and Steele (1998) define stigma as a social process that devalues an identity through negative labeling and symbolic differentiation. In education, stigma operates not merely as an individual attitude but as a collective mechanism legitimated by language, norms, and power relations within communities. Expressions such as "college does not guarantee anything" or "it is better to work right away" function not as personal opinions but as stigmatizing language that draws symbolic boundaries between valued and devalued life choices.

Through this mechanism, higher education appears "alien" and unrealistic, even threatening coastal worker identities. Stigma not only devalues education but also redirects youth life orientations toward work perceived as socially safer and more rational (Himawan et al., 2018; Logli, 2016; Rosser, 2023; Welch & Aziz, 2022). From Bourdieu's perspective (1990), this process reflects the operation of *habitus*—a structure of dispositions formed through repeated social experience and lived as natural. Coastal work *habitus*, shaped by fishing, physical labor, and environmental dependency, reproduces views that practical work yields more meaning than long-term educational investment (Dadman et al., 2025). Families and social environments transmit these views intergenerationally, gradually positioning higher education as unnecessary.

Families and social environments thus constitute the primary arenas for stigma reproduction. In many fishing households, short-term economic needs outweigh long-term educational investment. Families often perceive higher education as a cost burden disproportionate to its promised returns (Muliani et al., 2024; Wijaya et al., 2021). Parents play a decisive role in children's educational trajectories, including through gendered role allocation. Families frequently direct boys to follow their fathers into fishing, while they position girls within domestic spheres (Alfaza et al., 2025). Limited symbolic support for education within social environments further normalizes early work choices (Juhardin & Deluma, 2024). Local coastal culture reinforces these dynamics. Traditions emphasizing daily productive labor—fishing, trading, and local enterprises—implicitly downgrade higher education as a life pathway for younger generations (Aziz et al., 2025). In this context, stigma toward higher education intertwines with cultural reproduction, work *habitus*, and intergenerational value legitimation.

Perupuk Village in Batu Bara Regency, North Sumatra, clearly exemplifies these dynamics. In this village, residents strongly believe that higher education does not guarantee the future, while they regard work as the most sensible and meaningful life choice (Anita & Pasaribu, 2025; Sinaga & Sudarno, 2022; Waspada.id, 2025). The lack of successful local role models from higher education, limited information on scholarships, and weak symbolic support from community and religious leaders further reinforce the delegitimation of higher education (Waspada.id, 2025). Previous studies in other fishing communities, such as Puger Kulon Village, similarly show that low interest in higher education reflects not only economic constraints but also early internalization of educational meanings (Wijaya et al., 2021).

Research on education in fishing and coastal communities generally clusters into three approaches: economic and access factors, cultural and family roles, and individual perceptions of education. Studies demonstrate that parental education, household income, and asset ownership significantly influence children's educational outcomes (Asmiati et al., 2022; Ritonga et al., 2023). Other work highlights parental attitudes and social environments in shaping educational choices, while perception-focused studies often interpret negative educational views as individual attitudes (Alokamai, 2023; Cahaya, 2015; Glaser et al., 2022; Nurhidayah et al., 2022). Despite their value, these approaches remain largely descriptive and normative and rarely position social stigma as a symbolic mechanism that collectively erodes higher education legitimacy.

Addressing this gap, this article shifts analytical focus from general educational challenges to social stigma toward higher education in coastal communities. The study aims to analyze how social stigma toward higher education forms, transmits, and normalizes within the daily lives of Perupuk's coastal residents. By treating stigma as a social mechanism, the article argues that higher education delegitimation stems not merely from poverty or limited access but from social processes that strengthen work legitimacy in coastal sectors while weakening formal education's value. Theoretically, the study contributes to social stigma scholarship within education and marginal community contexts. Contextually, the findings offer a basis for educational policies that better account for the sociocultural dynamics of coastal societies.

METHOD

This study focuses on the construction of social stigma toward higher education in coastal communities, with the unit of analysis being the coastal community of Perupuk Village, Batu Bara Regency, North Sumatra, particularly the social relations between working adolescents and their families. The study selects this unit of analysis because stigma toward higher education does not operate solely at the individual level but forms, negotiates, and reproduces through everyday social interactions within families and communities. Accordingly, the analysis does not merely examine decisions to pursue education or enter work, but rather investigates the social and symbolic processes through which higher education comes to be viewed as less relevant, unrealistic, and delegitimized in coastal life.

The study employs a qualitative approach to understand the meanings, views, and social evaluations attached to higher education by coastal communities. The research adopts a qualitative design because stigma surrounding higher education relates to subjective experiences, everyday language, and social judgments that cannot be reduced to quantitative variables. In line with Creswell (2018), qualitative research enables scholars to understand social phenomena from participants' perspectives by tracing patterns of meaning that develop within specific cultural contexts. In this study, stigma functions as a social mechanism operating through narratives, practices, and interactions, which requires an interpretive approach sensitive to the sociocultural context of coastal communities.

The data sources consist of primary and secondary data. The study collects primary data through observations and interviews with informants who have direct experience with the dynamics of stigma toward higher education. Secondary data support the analysis and include national and international journal articles, reports from national online media, and policy documents and reports related to education and coastal communities. Combining these data sources allows the analysis to engage not only with field narratives but also to situate empirical findings within relevant academic literature.

The research collects data through observation and interviews. Observation aims to understand the everyday context of coastal life, particularly work practices, family relations, and social interactions related to education. The researcher conducted observations in Perupuk Village from February to June 2025. Interviews use open and flexible guidelines that allow informants to develop narratives based on their own experiences and perspectives. The interview instrument draws on sensitizing concepts from social stigma studies, including: (1) forms of symbolic devaluation of higher education; (2) narratives of educational failure or inaccessibility; (3) economic considerations and rationalities for choosing work; (4) the role of family in transmitting educational values; and (5) the social legitimacy of higher education within coastal communities.

The study involves fifteen informants selected through purposive sampling, based on their direct and relevant experiences with stigma toward higher education in coastal society. The informants fall into two main categories: working adolescents (RP) as primary informants and parents or guardians (OW) as supporting informants. This categorization enables intergenerational relational analysis to examine how stigma toward higher education forms and transmits within families. The study determines the number of informants based on data depth and information saturation, indicated by recurring themes and consistent meaning patterns across interviews.

The analysis follows the interactive analysis model developed by Miles and Huberman (2013), which consists of three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involves selecting and focusing field data on themes relevant to the construction of stigma toward higher education. The study then presents the reduced data in narrative form to facilitate identification of meaning patterns and thematic relationships. The final stage of conclusion drawing and verification occurs iteratively throughout the analysis to ensure interpretive consistency and accuracy. The entire research process adheres to qualitative research ethics, including obtaining informed consent, protecting informant confidentiality through coding, and respecting local norms and values within the coastal community.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Higher Education as an Impractical and Uncertain Life Path

This Stigma toward higher education in Perupuk Village does not appear as an explicit rejection of educational values, but rather as a practical judgment shaped by everyday social experience. BU (RP-01) described how community members evaluate young people's futures not through abstract discourses of social mobility, but through direct comparisons between those who have "already earned income" and those who are "still waiting" (Interview, June 15, 2024). In his observation, senior high school graduates who immediately work in the coastal sector appear more useful to their families because they can directly contribute to household income, whereas university graduates often still seem economically dependent on their parents. Community members do not express this assessment as open criticism of education, but as an observation that feels natural and reasonable.

Similar patterns consistently emerged among other adolescents. DA (RP-02) emphasized that the community values hard work with visible and immediate results more highly than academic degrees whose benefits are not instantly felt (Interview, June 16, 2024). In his narrative, university study represents a long process that consumes time and money, while work offers income certainty, even if modest. IK (RP-03) and RS (RP-05) expressed aligned views: working after high school appears to provide a "clearer path" than pursuing higher education with uncertain outcomes (Interview, June 16, 2024). For them, employment certainty—even in the informal sector—carries greater value than the possibility of obtaining a job that may never materialize after graduation.

These views circulate not only among adolescents but also receive strong reinforcement from parents, indicating that stigma toward higher education transmits across generations. J (OW-03) articulated a common anxiety among fishing families when deciding whether to finance university education or allocate resources to household needs and small-scale economic activities (Interview, June 17, 2024). He referred to unemployed university graduates in the village as evidence that higher education does not always yield commensurate returns. S (OW-02) added that the high cost of university education—estimated to reach tens of millions of rupiah—constitutes an excessive risk for coastal families with unstable incomes (Interview, June 17, 2024). Within this logic, families do not view higher education as a long-term investment, but as an economic burden with a high likelihood of failure.

The convergence of perspectives between adolescents and parents appears clearly in the language they use. IH (RP-04) noted that the community respects those who "already have income" more than those who "have degrees but are not yet working" (Interview, June 16, 2024). This statement resonates with UW (OW-04), who acknowledged that higher education is "good," but not always suitable for fishing families' living conditions because it does not guarantee economic independence for children (Interview, June 19, 2024). In this context, the community continues to recognize higher education symbolically as valuable, while practically weakening it as a viable life strategy.

Narratives about the uncertainty of higher education outcomes gain further strength through concrete examples repeatedly cited in everyday conversations. Village data indicate that 17 university graduates remain without stable employment, while 41 senior high school graduates already work and earn regular income (Perupuk Village Data, 2024). Community members continuously reference these figures as social benchmarks to assess the effectiveness of education. PD (RP-09) and MS (RP-10) stated that families frequently use such examples to justify encouraging children to work immediately after graduating from high school (Interview, June 16, 2024). Thus, stigma does not emerge through abstract stereotypes, but through local evidence that residents perceive as tangible and indisputable.

Education costs constitute a key factor that reinforces the delegitimization of higher education. LM (OW-01) argued that funds allocated for university study would be better invested in family enterprises or saved to cope with lean fishing seasons (Interview, June 18, 2024). DS (OW-05) echoed this view by emphasizing that uncertain educational returns make families reluctant to assume substantial financial risks (Interview, June 20, 2024). In a coastal economy dependent on weather conditions and fishing yields, household rationality tends to favor pathways that appear safest and deliver immediate benefits.

The consistency of views among ten adolescents (RP-01 to RP-10) and five parents (OW-01 to OW-05) demonstrates that stigma toward higher education operates not as an individual perception, but as collective social knowledge continuously reproduced within families and the broader community. Adolescents do not formulate their assessments autonomously; instead, they internalize parental perspectives that position work as the most realistic life option. Parents, in turn, reinforce these views by referring to concrete experiences, examples of unemployed graduates, and persistent household economic pressures.

The empirical dynamics observed in Perupuk Village rest on structural foundations linked to the rising and uncertain costs of higher education in Indonesia. A 2025 survey by Katadata Insight Center (KIC) revealed that even Indonesia's middle class—traditionally more economically stable—experiences serious anxiety regarding the affordability of higher education. As many as 96.8 percent of middle-class respondents stated that they require their children to graduate from university, primarily to secure employment opportunities and financial stability in the future (Muhamad, 2025). However, these aspirations confront worsening economic realities: the size of Indonesia's middle class declined sharply from 57.3 million people in 2019 to 47.9 million in 2024 (BPS). Under such conditions, higher education shifts from a rational aspiration to a potential economic burden, even for groups historically positioned as the main supporters of formal education. If middle-class families already perceive higher education

as financially risky, then for fishing households with fluctuating daily incomes, concerns about university costs become far more acute and concrete.

This uncertainty intensifies further through national higher education governance increasingly oriented toward self-financing logic. Although the Minister of Finance, Sri Mulyani, explicitly prohibited universities from increasing single tuition fees (UKT) in 2025 and confirmed continued funding for the KIP Kuliah program, recurring controversies surrounding tuition hikes reflect broader public anxiety about the commercialization of higher education (Wahyuningtyas, 2025). Since the introduction of university autonomy and the transformation of public universities into legal entities or public service agencies, institutions have faced pressure to secure independent funding through business partnerships and tuition adjustments. In this context, higher education increasingly appears as an expensive investment with uncertain returns, while the share of the national budget allocated to higher education remains limited. For coastal families such as those in Perupuk Village, this policy structure reinforces the perception that university education is not only costly, but also socially and economically risky. Consequently, local stigma toward higher education should not be interpreted as anti-education sentiment, but rather as a rational response to a national configuration that renders higher education expensive, class-filtered, and insufficiently protected by the state. Within this framework, choosing to work after high school emerges not as a failure of aspiration, but as the most reasonable life strategy amid structural uncertainty in Indonesia's higher education system.

Accordingly, higher education in Perupuk Village does not face rejection as a moral value or status symbol, but marginalization as a life path perceived as impractical and uncertain. Stigma operates by transforming higher education from a future-oriented investment into an economic risk, and from a social aspiration into a familial burden. Within such a social structure, working after high school appears as the most rational, secure, and socially meaningful choice, while higher education must continuously justify itself and often fails to gain practical legitimacy in the everyday lives of coastal communities.

Family and Early Work Culture as Arenas for the Production of Educational Stigma

The In the social life of Perupuk Village's coastal community, the family functions as the primary arena in which stigma toward higher education is produced, transmitted, and normalized across generations. Decisions to continue schooling or to enter work immediately rarely appear as autonomous individual choices; instead, families frame them as collective decisions tied to household economic needs, parents' lived experiences, and long-standing work norms. Families do not explicitly reject higher education, but they gradually weaken it through practical considerations that circulate repeatedly in everyday family conversations.

Several parents emphasized that their encouragement for children to work early stems from lived experiences with economic uncertainty. J (OW-03) explained that fishing incomes depend heavily on weather and seasons, which makes it difficult for families to bear the high and long-term costs of higher education. "If a child works, even if the income is small, they can help right away. If they study for years, how are we supposed to survive?" he stated (Interview, June 17, 2024). LM (OW-01) expressed a similar view, describing university education as an excessively risky option for families with daily incomes. From his perspective, higher education does not guarantee social mobility; instead, it may create a new economic burden that prolongs children's dependence on their parents (Interview, June 18, 2024).

Adolescent workers accept and internalize this practical logic. BU (RP-01) explained that after graduating from senior high school, working represents the most reasonable option because it generates income immediately and reduces the family's burden. "It's not that I don't want to study, but I see the situation at home. Work is clearer," he said (Interview, June 15, 2024). DA (RP-02) and IK (RP-03) conveyed similar views, understanding post–high school employment as obedience to family needs and as evidence of social maturity (Interview, June 16, 2024). In this context, adolescents do not perceive the decision to work as an educational failure, but as a moral action that demonstrates responsibility toward parents.

Early work culture also gains reinforcement from the social structure of fishing households that places work at the center of life values. In many coastal households, adolescents routinely help parents from an early age, whether at sea, on land, or in small family enterprises. RS (RP-05) and IW (RP-06) noted that early involvement in work makes higher education feel increasingly distant and less relevant to everyday realities (Interview, June 16, 2024). Community members understand work not only as a source of income, but also as a socialization process that shapes identity, discipline, and a sense of usefulness within the family.

Gender-based role divisions further normalize early work and weaken the legitimacy of higher education. S (OW-02) stated that families more strongly encourage boys to work early by following their fathers' paths, while

they often expect girls to complete basic or secondary education before assisting with domestic responsibilities or family enterprises (Interview, June 17, 2024). AS (RP-07) and MK (RP-08) explained that community members rarely contest such role divisions because they consider them "natural life paths" within their environment (Interview, June 16, 2024). Consequently, economic considerations alone do not shape educational decisions; family norms and inherited work cultures also exert strong influence.

Intergenerational experience provides a firm foundation for reproducing this stigma. Many parents evaluate higher education through the lens of their own life trajectories. DS (OW-05) stated that although he never attended university, his family survived through hard work. "We didn't go to college, but we still managed to live and raise children," he said (Interview, June 20, 2024). This perspective reinforces the belief that work constitutes a proven life strategy, while higher education appears foreign, speculative, and misaligned with coastal realities.

The consistent views shared by ten adolescents (RP-01 to RP-10) and five parents (OW-01 to OW-05) indicate that stigma toward higher education operates not as an individual opinion, but as collective social knowledge reproduced continuously within families. Adolescents absorb parental perspectives that position work as the most realistic life option, while parents reinforce these views by referring to lived experience, economic pressure, and concrete local examples. Within the family arena, stigma toward higher education does not merely take shape; families transmit it as a form of practical rationality that frames the future of Perupuk Village's younger generation.

Secondary data indicate that this pattern does not stand in isolation. Research in other coastal areas of Sumatra, such as Bagan Asahan Village, shows that school dropout rates and limited educational continuation among fishers' children result from family factors, economic conditions, and early work culture (Ningsih et al., 2024). At the regional level, the North Sumatra Provincial Education Office reports that Batu Bara Regency ranks among areas with extremely high proportions of senior high school graduates who do not continue to higher education, reaching approximately 94.9 percent. The average years of schooling in Batu Bara—around 8.71 years—also indicate that many children stop at the junior secondary or early senior secondary levels. These data provide broader context, suggesting that early work practices and weak family support for higher education represent structural patterns in coastal regions.

In the everyday lives of fishing families in Perupuk Village, families ultimately understand higher education not as a long-term investment, but as a burden that may disrupt household economic stability. Pressures to work early, gendered role divisions, and references to parents' lived experiences collectively form a shared orientation that places work as the safest and most reasonable life path. Through repeated family practices—in conversations, advice, and daily decisions—this orientation passes from one generation to the next, positioning the family and early work culture as the primary arenas for producing stigma toward higher education in Perupuk Village's coastal community.

Table 1. Family Patterns and Early Work Culture in the Formation of Higher Education Stigma

Family & Cultural Aspects	Findings	Practical Implications
Parental encouragement	Parents direct children to work after senior high school	Higher education is not prioritized
Economic considerations	Families perceive university costs as a financial burden	Work is chosen as a safer option
Gender patterns	Males are expected to work; females are oriented toward domestic roles	Access to higher education becomes unequal
Parents' experiences	Parents did not attend higher education	Work is viewed as a family tradition
Regional context	Rates of transition to higher education are very low	Stigma patterns become structural

Table 1 shows that stigma toward higher education in coastal communities does not arise from a single factor, but from the intersection of family practices, economic needs, and intergenerational experiences that mutually reinforce one another. Parental encouragement for children to enter work early, perceptions of education as a financial burden, and gender-based role divisions collectively shape a shared orientation that places early employment as the most rational and secure option for families. In this context, the decision not to continue to

higher education does not reflect indifference toward education; instead, it represents a pragmatic household calculation among fishing families facing persistent economic uncertainty. Parents' lived experiences of sustaining livelihoods without higher education serve as legitimating references for this choice, while the regional context of very low transition rates to higher education further normalizes these practices. Consequently, the family and early work culture function as the primary arenas for producing and reproducing stigma toward higher education, where early entry into work is understood as an expression of responsibility, social normalcy, and continuity within coastal ways of life.

Higher Education Stigma in Social Interaction and Coastal Community Norms

Field findings show that stigma toward higher education in Desa Perupuk does not operate through formal prohibitions or explicit rejection, but through subtle, repetitive forms of everyday social interaction that become institutionalized within community norms. Higher education does not appear openly as something "bad," yet the community consistently constructs it as a life choice that is "unrealistic" for coastal residents. By contrast, work—especially employment that generates immediate income—appears as the most sensible, secure, and socially respectable life path. Through this process, stigma does not emerge as an individual opinion, but as a shared social truth accepted as common sense.

In community conversations, language plays a central role in producing stigma. Expressions such as "what's the point of going to college?", "work is clearer," or "what matters is having income" recur frequently in family discussions, neighborhood interactions, and informal jokes among youth. DA (RP-02) explained that when someone expressed a desire to pursue higher education, responses almost always questioned its practical usefulness rather than its educational value (Interview, June 16, 2024). The phrase "clearer" does not function neutrally; it serves as a moral–economic standard in which something gains value only if it addresses immediate needs. In this way, stigma operates not through direct condemnation, but through a collectively legitimized practical logic.

This social pressure becomes most visible when adolescents attempt to negotiate aspirations for higher education against community expectations. BU (RP-01) and IK (RP-03) acknowledged that their desire to continue studying often diminished not only because of financial constraints, but also because of discomfort toward parents and fear of becoming the subject of community gossip if they failed (Interviews, June 15–16, 2024). In this context, higher education appears not merely as an educational project, but as a social risk. Academic failure does not register as a structural issue; instead, the community reads it as evidence of an inappropriate life choice, with consequences that extend to the family's reputation.

The reinforcement of stigma occurs through the circulation of repeated failure narratives within the community. Several adolescents, such as RS (RP-05) and IW (RP-06), referred to stories of village youth who attended university but dropped out or graduated without securing stable employment (Interview, June 16, 2024). These stories function as effective "social warnings": the community does not need to prohibit higher education explicitly, because examples of failure already suffice to steer young people's choices. In this logic, a single individual failure transforms into a collective lesson that narrows the future imagination of subsequent generations.

Local authoritative figures also play a significant role in setting these boundaries of normality. AS (RP-07) recalled advice from an elderly village figure that community members frequently repeat: "Why go to college? What matters is working and accumulating capital. You don't need college to be wealthy" (Interview, June 16, 2024). Such advice matters not only for its content, but because it establishes a socially legitimate model of success. The community measures success through work, capital ownership, and local economic independence rather than academic achievement. Within this framework, higher education appears not only as less useful, but also as something that may distance youth from the locally recognized logic of success.

Within this social landscape, work functions as an identity that provides symbolic security. IH (RP-04) and PD (RP-09) explained that adolescents who work—even under harsh and unstable conditions—often receive more respect than those who remain unemployed or pursue education without immediately visible outcomes (Interview, June 16, 2024). Work offers daily proof of social usefulness, whereas higher education demands patience without guaranteeing immediate recognition. As a result, young people tend to choose pathways that provide instant social legitimacy, even when those pathways remain structurally vulnerable.

Stigma further intensifies through narratives of cultural mismatch between coastal youth and university life. MK (RP-08) and MS (RP-10) described how universities appear as social spaces requiring particular lifestyles—appearance, gadgets, and social networks—that seem inaccessible to youth from fishing families (Interview, June 16, 2024). This perception renders higher education not only economically expensive, but also socially

inappropriate. College becomes a space imagined for "others," not for "people like us." At this point, stigma operates at the level of habitus: adolescents exclude the possibility of higher education even before attempting it.

Community economic conditions provide the context that sharpens these narratives. Parents such as J (OW-03) and UW (OW-04) noted that unstable household incomes—often below three million rupiah per month—cause families to imagine higher education as a high-risk project (Interviews, June 17 and 19, 2024). When figures describing tuition costs in the tens of millions of rupiah circulate in community conversations, these numbers function as symbols of economic danger. In such circumstances, labeling higher education as "unrealistic" represents not merely symbolic stigma, but a rational conclusion drawn from lived experiences of uncertainty.

The absence of successful role models who advanced through higher education reinforces stigma empirically. Village data show that seventeen university graduates remain without stable employment, while senior high school graduates who entered work directly contribute economically more quickly. These facts circulate widely in community conversations and serve as evidence that higher education does not guarantee social mobility. LM (OW-01) and DS (OW-05) emphasized that such experiences strengthen parents' hesitation to encourage children to pursue higher education (Interviews, June 18 and 20, 2024). Consequently, adolescents face an uneven choice: work offers tangible social proof, whereas higher education carries narratives of failure.

At the national level, patterns observed in Desa Perupuk do not represent an anomaly, but rather part of Indonesia's broader structural educational challenges. Data from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education indicate that by 2025 approximately 3.9 million children were out of school, including 881,168 dropouts, 1,027,014 graduates who did not continue, and 2,077,596 children who never accessed formal education (Trikarinaputri, 2025). Economic factors and the obligation to work constitute the largest contributors. The Director General of Vocational Education at the Ministry emphasized that lack of financial resources (25.55 percent) and the need to earn income (21.64 percent) remain the primary reasons children do not attend school, followed by marriage or household responsibilities (14.56 percent) and the belief that prior education was "sufficient" (9.77 percent). These findings indicate that decisions to leave school in Indonesia strongly depend on family influence, particularly in poor and vulnerable households where short-term economic needs often outweigh educational considerations.

Furthermore, regional studies and reports confirm that culture, parental mindset, and educational background significantly shape the reproduction of school discontinuation (Faliyandra et al., 2024; Nurhayati et al., 2025). In Magelang Regency, for example, more than 60 percent of children out of school reflect parental attitudes that deem education unimportant, while economic factors explain only about 40 percent of cases (Rukmorini, 2023). This pattern supports the argument that low parental education, lived experiences without higher schooling, and early work orientation form the cognitive framework families use to evaluate children's futures. In this context, stigma toward higher education in Desa Perupuk—where college appears costly, risky, and unrealistic—represents not merely a local attitude, but a reflection of national educational inequality in which families serve as key actors shaping educational continuity. Higher education stigma in coastal communities thus does not indicate irrational rejection of schooling, but a form of family rationality shaped by structural poverty, intergenerational experience, and systemic state failure to secure education as a credible pathway for social mobility.

In sum, higher education stigma in Desa Perupuk emerges and solidifies through repetitive social interactions in which community language, adolescent experiences, local moral authority, and circulating examples generate a collective conclusion: work constitutes the most sensible life choice, while higher education appears too distant and too risky for coastal life. Stigma requires no formal prohibition; it operates through norms that cause young people to feel that choosing higher education means crossing established boundaries of social normality.

DISCUSSION

This study shows that stigma toward higher education in the coastal community of Desa Perupuk does not operate through overt rejection, but through subtle and repetitive forms of delegitimation. Higher education remains symbolically recognized as something "good," yet the community positions it as an impractical, costly, and risky life choice in terms of securing employment. The empirical contrast between unemployed university graduates and senior high school graduates who already earn income produces a powerful social image at the community level, making work appear as the most sensible and respectable life pathway. Stigma, therefore, does not emerge as an individual attitude, but as a collective norm that frames the educational preferences of younger generations.

Within a *rational choice* framework, educational decisions do not rest solely on "interest" or "awareness of the importance of schooling," but on social calculations of cost, risk, and outcome probability. Social networks reinforce

these calculations through the most immediate and frequently cited examples: unemployed university graduates versus senior high school graduates who have already "become somebody" through work (Ritonga et al., 2023). When unemployed graduates themselves struggle to convincingly explain why they remain jobless, this narrative failure intensifies stigma. Higher education then appears not only to fail in providing employment, but also to fail in offering a socially acceptable language to justify that failure in front of the community.

This local dynamic becomes more intelligible when situated within the broader educational landscape. Nationally, the government acknowledges that the gross enrollment ratio (APK) for higher education remains at approximately 31.45 percent and promotes strategies to reach 38.04 percent by 2029 in line with the RPJMN, indicating that access and participation in higher education remain structural problems rather than individual shortcomings (Jatnika, 2024; Kemdiktisaintek.go.id, 2025). Among small-scale fishing households, these constraints appear even more acute. Policy discussions and public reports consistently show that the majority of small-scale fishers have educational attainment below junior secondary school, raising concerns about stalled occupational regeneration and social mobility if educational interventions fail to address the specific barriers faced by coastal communities. In Batu Bara Regency, the 2024 population education profile shows a base dominated by elementary school graduates and individuals who did not complete elementary education, with only a very small proportion attaining higher education. This structure matters because stigma requires "social ground" in order to persist. When only a few individuals experience higher education, collective community experience relies more heavily on salient narratives—such as unemployed graduates—than on abstract statistics about the benefits of education. At this point, the stigma mechanism described by Crocker, Major, and Steele (1998) operates as a collective process: the identity of "prospective student/student" loses value through subtle labeling—"what's the point of college," "it takes too long," "it wastes money," "it may not lead to a job"—which functions as a social cue directing young people back toward the identity considered most legitimate in the coastal context, namely workers who generate income quickly.

Field findings further demonstrate that stigma does not merely exist as "opinion," but as a community norm produced through everyday interactions and transmitted through families, informal leaders, and work environments. Advice from parents and village elders that highlights figures such as "fish traders who never went to college but succeeded" serves as a moral–economic model of success. In this model, success is measured by capital accumulation, cash flow, and immediate household contribution rather than academic credentials. Repeated expressions such as "what's the point of college," "work is clearer," or "what matters is having income" become embedded in daily life and normalize short-term rationality as a social virtue. Here, Bourdieu (1990) helps explain why stigma appears "natural." An early-work habitus—shaped by fishing experience, physical labor, and dependence on daily income—produces dispositions that view long-term investment as an intolerable risk, especially when many households report monthly incomes below three million rupiah. This habitus explains why stigmatizing language circulates without coercion; it aligns with lived experience. Studies of other coastal communities in Sumatra reinforce this interpretation, showing that school dropout and low educational continuation among fishers' children result from weak family support, weather-dependent economies, declining learning motivation, and geographic barriers, including education infrastructure poorly adapted to coastal contexts (Cahaya, 2015; Glaser et al., 2022; Ningsih & Mutaqin, 2024; Nurhidayah et al., 2022). Within this framework, higher education stigma in Perupuk reflects a problematic form of "social efficiency," whereby the community simplifies future uncertainty by normalizing life paths that deliver the fastest returns, even at the cost of narrowing young people's aspirational horizons.

Previous studies also demonstrate that low participation in higher education among coastal communities does not stem solely from financial constraints, but from how education is interpreted in everyday life (Logli, 2016; Schofer et al., 2021; Welch, 2007). Research across fishing communities shows that higher education often appears disconnected from coastal work realities, provides no immediate benefits, and fails to guarantee household economic sustainability (Misnawati & Tahir, 2021; Wijaya et al., 2021). Other studies emphasize instrumental rationality, in which work seems more realistic and productive because it offers short-term certainty compared to education with delayed outcomes (Nieswandt, 2024; Wedgwood, 2011). The literature also highlights the influence of families, early-work culture, and gendered role division in shaping fishers' children's educational choices (Alfaza et al., 2025; Muliani et al., 2024). However, much of this scholarship still frames low college participation as the outcome of economic factors, cultural norms, or individual attitudes, without closely examining the symbolic mechanisms that collectively erode the legitimacy of higher education.

This study contributes by positioning social stigma as a key mechanism linking economic conditions, cultural norms, and educational choices. Unlike earlier descriptive or normative studies, findings from Desa Perupuk show

that higher education loses value through subtle stigmatizing processes embedded in everyday language, social exemplars, and community norms, as articulated by Crocker, Major, and Steele (1998). Stigma attaches not only to individuals who aspire to higher education, but to the life choice of "going to college" itself, which the community frames as costly, risky, and unrealistic. By integrating social stigma theory with Bourdieu's concept of habitus, this study demonstrates how early-work rationality reproduces itself across generations and normalizes itself as social common sense. The novelty of this research lies in shifting the analytical focus from "why fishers' children do not attend college" to how higher education becomes symbolically delegitimized within coastal community life. This perspective opens policy space not only for improving access and affordability, but also for restoring the social meaning and legitimacy of higher education.

At the policy level, the implications are clear. Increasing higher education participation in coastal regions cannot rely solely on tuition assistance, because stigma operates at the level of meaning and legitimacy. Interventions must also target the family "decision ecology" by providing active scholarship information, visible school-to-work bridges such as internships and job placements, strengthening local role models, and creating transition schemes that prevent college from appearing as a prolonged period without income. Without such measures, strategies to raise enrollment ratios will continue to clash with community norms that have already defined higher education as a choice that is "too high" and "unrealistic" for coastal youth.

CONCLUSION

This article concludes that stigma toward higher education in the coastal community of Desa Perupuk, Batu Bara Regency, does not emerge from ideological rejection of schooling or knowledge, but from a process of pragmatic delegitimation rooted in lived experience and the everyday rationality of fishing households. Higher education remains symbolically recognized as a marker of intelligence and status, yet the community simultaneously weakens it as a life choice because it appears costly, long-term, and unable to guarantee employment. Collective risk assessments—especially when families imagine college as an investment requiring tens of millions of rupiah without assured job outcomes—render early entry into work a safer, more reasonable, and morally defensible option. Local social evidence that circulates repeatedly in everyday interactions—namely, unemployed university graduates contrasted with income-earning senior high school graduates—serves as the primary basis for legitimizing work choices and, at the same time, as the foundation of stigma against higher education.

At the family and community levels, this stigma reproduces itself through early-work culture, short-term economic orientations, and daily social interactions that frame higher education as an "unrealistic" option. Parents do not reject education in a normative sense; rather, they assess higher education as a financial burden and risk that proves difficult to justify within the fluctuating economy of coastal livelihoods. Community language—such as "what's the point of college?" or "work is clearer"—functions as an evaluative mechanism that devalues the identity of the "prospective college student" while affirming the "coastal worker" identity as a legitimate and respected life orientation. The absence of local role models who succeed through higher education further reinforces this cycle, leaving higher education present as an abstract symbol but failing to operate as a trusted route of social mobility.

Theoretically, these findings affirm the relevance of the social stigma framework proposed by Crocker, Major, and Steele (1998) for understanding higher education as a collectively negotiated social identity, while enriching the analysis through Bourdieu's concept of habitus to explain why such stigma appears natural and stable in coastal community life. Stigma operates not as an individual prejudice, but as a symbolic mechanism that organizes life preferences, defines social normalcy, and directs younger generations toward early work paths considered most legitimate. The article's contribution lies in shifting the analysis beyond economic constraints and access issues toward an understanding of how higher education loses social legitimacy through repetitive cultural processes. Future research should further examine the dynamics of higher education stigma through comparative studies across coastal communities, analyze the roles of religious and state actors in shaping educational meanings, and evaluate education-to-work transition policies—such as internships, local job placements, and role-model initiatives—that may reduce stigma and restore higher education as a realistic life option for coastal societies.

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