



The Cascading Effects of Uncertainty: A Review of the Causes and Consequences of Career Anxiety Among Students and Early-Career Professionals

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Abstract

Background: Career anxiety is a phenomenon associated with stress, fear, and uncertainty about one's future professional prospects, and it is a growing area of psychological concern for students and young professionals globally. Various factors such as fast-changing technologies, economic turbulence, increased competition, and even the ongoing coronavirus pandemic have contributed to this vulnerability.

Objectives: The present literature review provides a systematic evaluation of current empirical research on the causes of career anxiety in young people and the impact it has on their psychology, academics, and professional life. Moreover, an attempt will be made to formulate an integrative theoretical framework for explaining the cyclical nature of career anxiety.

Methods: A narrative systematic review method was used in order to analyze 18 empirical peer-reviewed articles published between 2021 and 2025. Findings were thematically coded as causes and consequences of career anxiety.

Results: Important individual triggers of career anxiety include neuroticism, uncertainty intolerance, and lack of self-control. In addition to social triggers, such as peer and familial pressure and perception of favoritism, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic served as an important trigger for career anxiety due to fear and educational disruption caused by the pandemic. Implications of career anxiety appear in the form of depression, stress, suicidality, poor academic outcomes, indecisiveness, and decreased career readiness. A holistic cyclical model demonstrates how career anxiety enhances its triggers, thus creating a cycle of psychological and career challenges.



Conclusion: Career anxiety can be described as a complex psychological condition that has serious negative implications for the mental well-being and career success of youth. To disrupt this cycle, one should take steps to cultivate psychological resilience and career adaptability.

Novelty: This review provides a novel cyclical framework based on recent empirical findings concerning career anxiety.

Keywords: Career Anxiety, Causes, Consequences, Mental Health, Students

1. Introduction

At present, for young people across the world, the transition from schooling to work experience is becoming a more vulnerable and risky process. Nowadays, it is impossible not to notice increased technological development, economic insecurity, and competition. These factors have become some of the most prominent determinants that lead to psychological problems (Zhou et al., 2022). The notion of 'career anxiety' means a condition of fear, stress, and uncertainty concerning future career opportunities (Söner, 2025). It is a kind of anxiety related to a person's future career of a person.

These psychological problems have become more obvious because of the occurrence of global events (for instance, the pandemic of COVID-19 that caused an 'infodemic' and affected the careers and education of many students and young people (Abdelwahed & Ramish, 2024; Rahimi et al., 2023). Therefore, an increasing number of scientific works have been conducted to study the causes and consequences of career anxiety. Consequently, the current review aims to evaluate the available body of knowledge (from 2021 to 2025) in order to answer the following questions: (1) What are the main causes of career anxiety of students and young people? and (2) What are the consequences of experiencing career anxiety?

2. Research Objective

The overall aim of this literature review is a systematic collection and evaluation of the most up-to-date empirical data (from 2021 to 2025) in order to understand the causes of career anxiety among students and young people and its consequences. In particular, the objectives of this literature review are the following: (1) identifying and differentiating the major factors (psychological, environmental, systemic) that cause career anxiety among students and young people; (2) assessing the impact of career anxiety on the psychological condition, academic achievements, and professional decisions of the individual; and (3) building a theoretical framework of the vicious cycle, including career anxiety and its causes and consequences.

3. Methodology

In this systematic narrative review, the systematic narrative synthesis method was applied using information received from 18 empirical studies related to career anxiety in the peer-reviewed literature of 2021-2025. Articles for the present systematic narrative review were selected from the available database of scientific literature on the topic. Each article was chosen to be included in the pool of relevant studies because each of them provided certain information on the problem of career anxiety or related concepts, such as future career anxiety and employment



anxiety. Systematic extraction of information about the research methodology, demographics of the participants, independent and dependent variables, major findings, and other contextual data was done (e.g., location, field of study, presence of the pandemic, etc.). Thematic analysis of the selected papers was conducted in order to reveal major recurring themes. In the end, these themes were divided into two groups: (1) causes of career anxiety (psychological factors of individuals, stressors of the social environment, pandemic-induced triggers) and (2) consequences of career anxiety (psychological issues, limited academic/career potential, weak professional identity).

4. Causes of Career Anxiety

There are many causes of career anxiety, which involve interaction between psychological factors of individuals, social-environmental factors, and systemic factors.

4.1 Individual Psychological Factors

Various individual difference variables (personality, cognitive styles, etc.) should be taken into account as predictors of career anxiety. For example, one of the individual difference variables, which can be considered as the predictor of the problem under discussion, is neuroticism. As it was demonstrated by Zhang et al. (2025), neuroticism predicted career anxiety in serial fashion through perceived stress and low self-control among nursing interns. This means that people with negative reactions are more likely to perceive stress at workplace as a threat (Zhang et al., 2025). Moreover, another psychological trait, so-called "intolerance of uncertainty (IoU)", which is characterized by a negative response to ambiguity, correlated with career anxiety of Chinese undergraduates during the pandemic period, with fear of contracting COVID-19 and depressive mood as chain mediators (Zhou et al., 2022). Also, low self-concept and body dysmorphic disorder could contribute to high career anxiety because one feels threatened by the competition in the labor market (Hafni et al., 2025).

4.2 Social and Environmental Stressors

Social factors also play an important role in the development of career anxiety. Peer pressure is one of them. Acar & Soyer (2025) revealed that career anxiety was accounted for by the perception of peer pressure by 45%. This finding is connected with the competitive nature of social interactions in educational settings. Another factor is the family (Acar & Soyer, 2025). Al-Safasfeh & Al-Safasfh (2025) found that situational regret of transferring academic majors was associated with career anxiety because of the significance of academia in people's lives and the influence of families on this decision. Finally, students experience high career anxiety because of the feeling of helplessness due to the presence of nepotism and corruption in educational institutions (Sırkıntıoğlu Yıldırım et al., 2024).

4.3 The COVID-19 Pandemic as a Catalyst

The coronavirus pandemic has become a trigger of career anxiety in various ways. First, several research articles show the connection between anxiety and depression caused by the virus (COVID-19 phobia) and increased levels of future career anxiety, either directly or indirectly (due to uncertain feelings) (Abdelwahed & Ramish, 2024; Shindi et al., 2023). Moreover, the



pandemic resulted in the emergence of the concept of "prolonged fear", when students worried about the possibility of education interruption and hence loss of career opportunities (Rahimi et al., 2023). In addition, among medical students, the high risk of infection and witnessing the burnout of frontline workers caused career anxiety and reevaluation of professional choice (Lumban Raja et al., 2022). Finally, even several years after the start of the pandemic, the feeling of stress related to coronavirus resulted in emotional disorders and future career anxiety (Aftab Khan Khattak & Zohra Altaf, 2025).

5. Consequences of Career Anxiety

Implications of career anxiety are numerous and could impact different spheres of people's lives.

5.1 Psychological and Emotional Distress

At first, there is a negative impact on psychological well-being. Career anxiety is associated with depression, stress, and suicidal attempts. Therefore, as mentioned by Onyishi (2023), the relationship between career anxiety and suicide attempts is statistically significant in the case of Nigerian college students. The specified implications include a negative attitude toward life and suicidal tendencies. It should be stated that the implications of career anxiety are dangerous (even fatal) (Onyishi, 2023). Also, the effects of career anxiety include insomnia, tiredness, and psychological problems (Dönmezgil et al., 2025). The consequences could manifest themselves through the "quarter-life crisis" when the person experiences hopelessness because of the problems of the early adulthood stage (Sari Amalia & Putri Ayuningsih, 2025).

5.2 Impaired Academic and Career Development

Secondly, career anxiety paradoxically prevents preparation for having a good job. Career anxiety is negatively related to career adaptability and optimism; anxious students cannot be flexible and confident in coping with career decisions (Söner, 2025). Consequently, the process of decision-making on the issue of choosing a career path is hindered because of the presence of indecisiveness and dysfunctional views about the profession (Hiaruman et al., 2025). Research shows that career plan training could reduce career anxiety and increase self-efficacy; hence, career anxiety prevents proactive career behavior (Elfina & Weißmann, 2025). Besides, career anxiety impacts academic success since it is a predictor of academic stress and the intention to leave school in the case of gastronomy students (DEMİR, 2025).

5.3 Impact on Professional Identity and Readiness

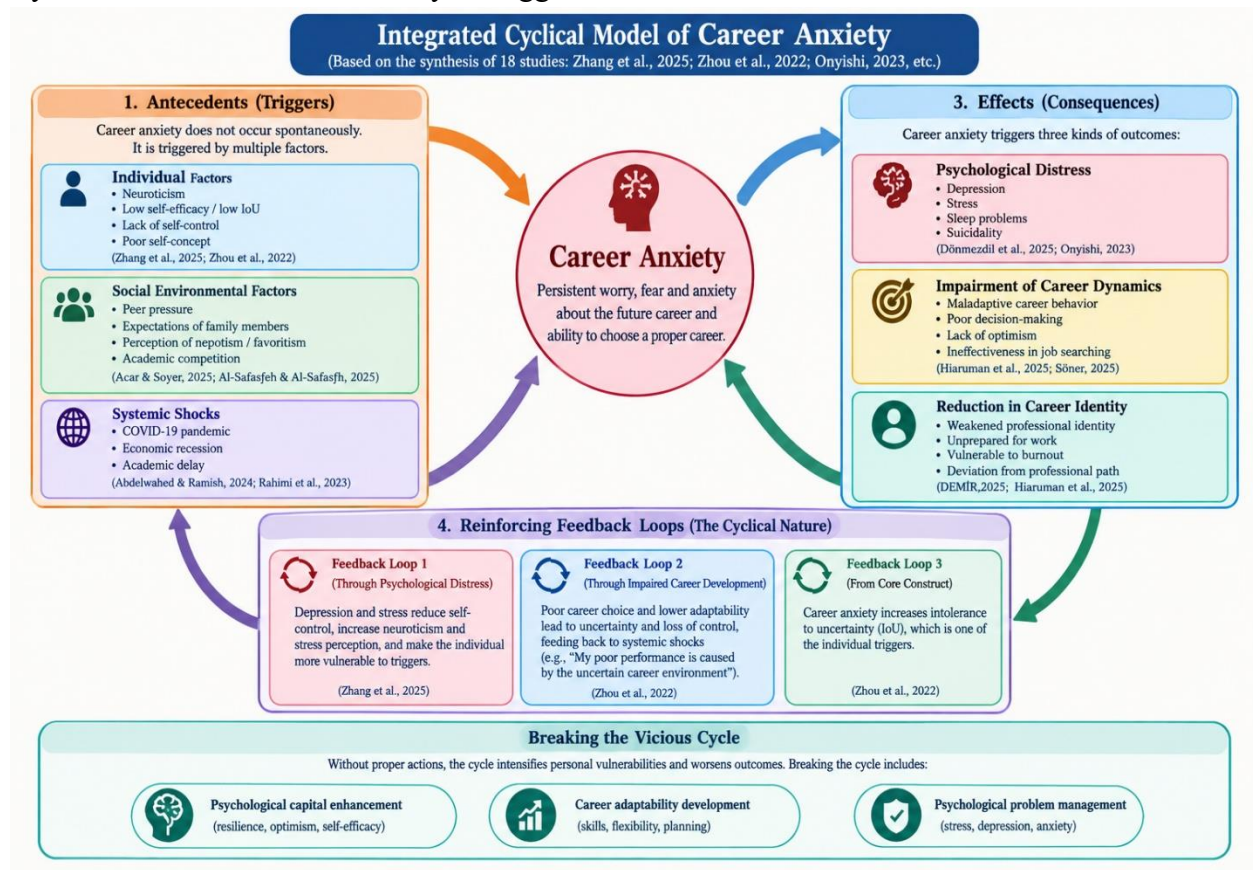
In addition, career anxiety in students pursuing professional education influences the sense of professionalism and career readiness. It was shown that career anxiety impacts the work preparedness of the nursing students. Thus, graduates suffering from career anxiety could feel unready to join their profession (Hiaruman et al., 2025). Moreover, the feelings of failure and inadequacy experienced by students with body dysmorphic disorder lead to the fear of rejection by future employers and the inability to imagine oneself as a successful professional (Hafni et al., 2025).

6. An Integrated Model of Career Anxiety

Summarizing the above-mentioned facts, one should say that the existing literature provides strong evidence in favor of the multidimensional model of career anxiety, which includes different vulnerability factors (neuroticism, low self-efficacy, uncertainty tolerance) on the individual level, social and environmental factors (peer pressure, expectations of family members, the perception of nepotism), and systemic shocks (the pandemic, economic recession) that cause career anxiety. Activated career anxiety is not a harmless condition; it is a pathology that is accompanied by various negative outcomes (psychological problems such as depression and suicidality; behavioral problems such as poor career planning and lack of interest in academia).

The thing is to note the cyclical nature of career anxiety in relation to all other variables and conditions mentioned above. Specifically, as it was seen in one of the studies, the connection between neuroticism and career anxiety can be explained by the effect of stress perception, low self-control, and depression (Zhang et al., 2025). In addition, the fear of a pandemic is viewed as one more factor that leads to depression in students, thus provoking future career anxiety and uncertainty (Zhou et al., 2022).

Taking into account the synthesis of the 18 studies mentioned above, the following 'Integrated Cyclical Model of Career Anxiety' is suggested.





As it is seen in the diagram above, the cycle begins with the predisposing factors that provoke career anxiety and result in negative consequences, which reinforce the initial causes.

The model is built according to the results obtained in the literature review (e.g., Zhang et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2022; Onyishi, 2023) and includes four layers interacting with each other.

1. Antecedents (Triggers)

Career anxiety does not occur spontaneously. There are three types of predisposing factors that cause career anxiety:

- **Individual Factors:** Individual factors like being neurotic, having low IoU, lack of self-control, and self-concept make an individual psychologically vulnerable (Zhang et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2022).
- **Social Environmental Factors:** Social environmental factors like peer pressure, family pressure, perception of favoritism, and academic competition may lead to career anxiety about the future (Acar & Soyer, 2025; Al-Safasfeh & Al-Safasfh, 2025).
- **Systemic Shocks:** Systemic shocks like the outbreak of COVID-19, economic downturn, and academic delay may be the trigger for career anxiety (Abdelwahed & Ramish, 2024; Rahimi et al., 2023).

2. Central Construct (Career Anxiety)

The 'career anxiety' at the center of the model is defined as persistent worry, fear, and anxiety about the future career and his/her ability to choose a proper career.

3. Effects (Consequences)

Career anxiety triggers three kinds of outcomes:

- **Psychological Distress:** This is an immediate effect of career anxiety, which 'consists of depression, stress, sleep problems, and even suicide contemplation' (Dönmezgil et al., 2025; Onyishi, 2023).
- **Impairment of Career Dynamics:** Career anxiety negatively affects the behavioral patterns of individuals, resulting in 'maladaptive career behavior, poor decision-making, lack of optimism, and ineffectiveness in job searching' (Hiaruman et al., 2025; Söner, 2025).
- **Reduction in Career Identity:** Another long-term effect of career anxiety is the weakening of a student's sense of identity as a professional, which leaves him/her 'unprepared for work, vulnerable to burnout and deviation from his/her professional path' (DEMİR, 2025; Hiaruman et al., 2025).

4. Reinforcing Feedback Loops (The Cyclical Nature)

And that is the crucial role of the model. The effect does not bring the process to its end but rather feeds back on its antecedents, creating a vicious circle.

- **Feedback Loop 1 (Through the Effect of Psychological Distress):** Depression and stress (consequences) reduce the ability of an individual 'to control his/her life effectively', leading to 'neuroticism and perception of high levels of stress and being more predisposed to triggers of the process' (Zhang et al., 2025).



- **Feedback Loop 2 (Through Impaired Career Development):** Poor career choice and lower adaptability (Consequences) lead to an increase in a student's feeling of "uncertainty and loss of control" and go back to one of the systemic shocks – "My poor performance is caused by the uncertain career environment" (Zhou et al., 2022).
- **Feedback Loop 3 (From Core Construct):** Career anxiety of a person leads to higher intolerance to uncertainty (IoU), which is one of the individual triggers (Zhou et al., 2022).

Without proper actions, a person might find himself/herself trapped in a vicious cycle, starting from any of its elements, from the development of neurotic traits to the emergence of a pandemic situation or failure. Career anxiety will keep on declining and negatively impact one's psychological state and professional preparation. Moreover, the negative vicious cycle will intensify the personal vulnerabilities and weaknesses of a person, causing the problem initially. Breaking the vicious circle includes many actions, such as psychological capital enhancement, career adaptability development, and psychological problem management.

7. Conclusion and Recommendation

It is clear from this literature review that career anxiety is one of the actual disabling issues of today's students and young professionals. Career anxiety is formed due to personal characteristics of a person, features of his/her environment, and some external factors, including the situation of the pandemic caused by COVID-19. Career anxiety leads to many negative consequences related to poor academic performance, career failure, and even mental diseases, including suicidal intentions. Career anxiety is not only the result of fierce competition in the labor market, but also a psychological disorder itself.

Based on the conclusions formulated in this literature, the following measures are recommended:

1. A lecture on developing self-control, resiliency, and positive thinking skills must be incorporated into the course curriculum.
2. Conduct regular workshops concerning career planning and counseling (like career planning counseling workshops and cognitive restructuring counseling workshops).
3. Further empirical investigation should be conducted to discover the causality of career anxiety with its possible determinants and/or consequences.

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