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Psychological Factors Associated with Career Anxiety among University Students: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Career anxiety is an important concern among university students as they prepare for career entry amid changing educational, economic, technological, and labor-market conditions. This study aims to identify and synthesize the antecedents and consequences associated with career anxiety among university students based on recent empirical evidence. **Methods:** A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was conducted following the PRISMA 2020 framework. The literature search was performed in the Scopus database between 4 June and 1 July 2026 using the search string TITLE-ABS-KEY("career anxiety" AND ("student" OR "students" OR "university student")). The search was limited to English-language empirical journal articles published between 2021 and 2026. Following the identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion processes, eleven studies met the predetermined criteria and were analyzed through thematic synthesis. The methodological quality of the included studies was assessed using the revised JBI Critical Appraisal Tool for Analytical Cross-Sectional Studies. **Findings:** The synthesis identified four major themes: career development factors, individual psychological factors, environmental factors, and consequences of career anxiety. Career development and individual psychological resources, including career adaptability, future-oriented perspectives, occupational awareness, self-efficacy, and psychological resilience, were generally associated with lower levels of career anxiety, whereas environmental uncertainties, including COVID-19-related conditions and perceptions of Artificial Intelligence, were associated with greater career-related uncertainty. Career anxiety was also associated with adverse psychological, academic, and career-related outcomes, including lower life satisfaction, academic performance, career choice goals, and employability confidence. Given the predominantly cross-sectional nature of the evidence, these findings indicate associations rather than causal relationships. **Research Implications:** The findings provide a conceptual basis for higher education institutions, career service centers, and counselors to develop integrated career-development and psychological support programs that strengthen students' career readiness and psychological resources. However, the findings should be interpreted in light of the limited evidence base, including the small number of studies, reliance on a single database, and heterogeneity across study contexts and methods. **Originality:** This study contributes a synthesized conceptual framework that distinguishes career development factors, individual psychological factors, and environmental conditions associated with career anxiety from its reported consequences. By integrating these dimensions from recent empirical evidence, the review provides a structured basis for understanding career anxiety among university students and identifies priorities for future research, particularly longitudinal investigation of its antecedents and consequences.

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INTRODUCTION

The increasing competition in today's labor market requires university students to develop academic competencies while simultaneously preparing themselves to face various uncertainties related to their future careers (James et al., 2021). The rapidly evolving world of work also demands that students be capable of adapting to changing industry requirements, shifts in job types, and the growing demands for professional competencies (World Economic Forum, 2025). During the transition into the workforce after completing higher education, students are encouraged to explore career options, develop relevant competencies, and make various important decisions concerning their professional futures (Magnano et al., 2021). The continuously evolving dynamics of the labor market have made the transition process from education to employment increasingly complex and challenging. Such conditions heighten uncertainty regarding career prospects and require students to possess adequate preparedness and various resources that support a successful transition into the workforce (Tomlinson, 2017).

Various challenges that emerge during the transition into the workforce expose students to increasingly higher levels of uncertainty concerning their future careers. This uncertainty is not only related to employment opportunities but also encompasses concerns regarding personal abilities to meet competency demands, decide on career options, and adapt to the rapidly changing world of work (Santilli et al., 2017; Rudolph et al., 2017). Several studies have indicated that perceptions of limited job opportunities and career uncertainty are associated with increased psychological distress and reduced confidence among students in navigating the transition into the workforce (Petruzziello et al., 2022). These conditions suggest that the transition into the workforce is not only an academic and professional challenge but also has the potential to generate various negative psychological responses related to students' future careers.

Career anxiety is one of the psychological issues commonly experienced by students as they prepare to enter the workforce. Career anxiety is characterized by feelings of worry, fear, and uncertainty regarding employment prospects and future career development (Zhou et al., 2022). Such experiences may manifest as concern and tension when individuals are confronted with various choices and demands related to their future careers (Pisarik & Rowell, 2017). Students constitute a group particularly vulnerable to career anxiety because they face various career developmental tasks as well as uncertainty regarding future employment prospects (Müceldili et al., 2025).

Career anxiety may generate various negative consequences for students. High levels of career anxiety are known to impede the career decision-making process, causing individuals to experience difficulties in determining career choices that align with their future goals (Jia et al., 2022). Career anxiety may also diminish students' psychological well-being and life satisfaction, thereby limiting their ability to fulfill developmental demands optimally (Müceldili et al., 2025). Career anxiety is therefore not only related to preparedness for entering the workforce but also constitutes a psychological issue that may affect students' overall quality of life.

From a theoretical perspective, the emergence of career anxiety can be understood through Stress and Coping Theory, developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). Based on this theory, stress and anxiety arise as a result of an individual's appraisal of a situation perceived as threatening or demanding when available resources are considered insufficient to cope with it (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In the context of career development, students may perceive various demands associated with preparing to enter the workforce, such as increasingly competitive labor market conditions and uncertainty regarding future careers, as sources of pressure that trigger career anxiety. Differences in individuals' psychological resources may influence how students interpret and cope with these demands, ultimately affecting the level of career anxiety they experience. Consistent with this perspective, Career Construction Theory proposed by Savickas (2013) emphasizes individuals' ability to adjust when facing change, prepare for the future, and respond effectively to career-related challenges as a psychological resource that supports the management of developmental tasks and career transitions. Limitations in such psychological resources may increase students' vulnerability to experiencing career anxiety.

Previous studies have demonstrated that career anxiety among students is a complex phenomenon associated with various psychological aspects of the individual. Differences in psychological resources and personal characteristics are known to influence how students prepare themselves and respond to uncertainties concerning their future careers (Rudolph et al., 2017). Certain psychological characteristics have also been found to either increase or decrease the level of career anxiety experienced by individuals (Zhang et al., 2025). These findings indicate that career anxiety is not determined solely by external factors but is also closely associated with various psychological aspects within the individual.

Previous literature reviews have provided an important foundation for understanding career anxiety among students, but their analytical focus differs from the present study. Atikah et al. (2023), for example, conducted a systematic literature review of 17 articles to examine how students' career anxiety has been defined, measured, and

related to other variables. Their review identified individual, environmental, and psychological resources associated with students' career anxiety. However, the review primarily sought to describe the conceptualization, measurement, and correlates of career anxiety rather than systematically synthesize recent empirical findings according to the psychological functions and roles of the identified factors. Another systematic review by Sari et al. (2023) specifically examined the effectiveness of Career Construction Theory in reducing career anxiety among college students, with particular attention to career adaptability and CCT-based interventions. These previous reviews demonstrate that systematic efforts to understand student career anxiety have been conducted, but they leave room for a more focused synthesis of recent empirical evidence concerning the psychological factors associated with career anxiety and the contextual conditions and consequences reported alongside them.

Although numerous empirical studies have identified several psychological factors associated with career anxiety among students, the findings remain distributed across different constructs and research contexts. Existing studies generally examine individual factors separately, such as career adaptability, future time perspective, self-efficacy, psychological resilience, or other personal characteristics, without sufficiently integrating their relationships into a broader conceptual understanding of career anxiety. Consequently, the contribution of different psychological resources to students' responses to career-related uncertainty remains insufficiently integrated. The present study addresses this gap by synthesizing recent empirical evidence and organizing the identified findings according to their conceptual roles in relation to career anxiety.

The period from 2021 to 2026 was selected to capture recent developments in research on career anxiety following substantial changes in the educational, economic, and technological environment. This period includes empirical studies examining career anxiety in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, changing employment conditions, and the growing influence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on perceptions of future employment. These developments are reflected in studies examining COVID-19-related career anxiety (Rahimi et al., 2023; Üngüren & Kaçmaz, 2022; Qazi et al., 2024) and more recent research examining perceptions of Artificial Intelligence and career anxiety among students (Dağ et al., 2026). The 2021–2026 period therefore provides a relevant temporal boundary for identifying recent evidence concerning the psychological and contextual conditions associated with career anxiety during students' transition toward the workforce.

To address this research gap, the present study focuses primarily on psychological factors associated with career anxiety among university students while also considering environmental conditions and reported consequences as complementary dimensions of the phenomenon. In this study, the term "factors associated with career anxiety" is used broadly to distinguish antecedent-related factors from consequences. Career development factors, individual psychological factors, and environmental factors are treated as dimensions associated with the emergence or variation of career anxiety, whereas consequences of career anxiety are analyzed separately as outcomes reported in the reviewed studies. This distinction is important because consequences should not be treated as antecedents of career anxiety. Through this analytical distinction, the study seeks to provide a more coherent understanding of both the factors associated with career anxiety and its reported implications for university students.

Based on the synthesis framework developed in this study, the identified findings are subsequently organized into four conceptual themes: career development factors, individual psychological factors, environmental factors, and consequences of career anxiety. The first three themes describe conditions and resources associated with the emergence or level of career anxiety, whereas the fourth theme describes the outcomes associated with career anxiety. This classification does not imply that all four themes are psychological factors or that consequences constitute antecedents. Rather, the classification is intended to integrate the psychological, developmental, and contextual dimensions of career anxiety while maintaining a clear conceptual distinction between factors associated with anxiety and its consequences.

Accordingly, this study aims to identify and synthesize recent empirical findings concerning psychological factors associated with career anxiety among university students through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach. The study also seeks to examine how career development, individual psychological resources, and environmental conditions are associated with career anxiety and to identify the consequences reported in the recent literature. Through this synthesis, the study develops a more systematic conceptual understanding of career anxiety among university students and extends previous reviews by focusing on recent empirical evidence published during the 2021–2026 period.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study addresses the following research questions: RQ1: What psychological and related factors are associated with career anxiety among university students based on empirical studies published during 2021–2026?, RQ2: How can the identified factors associated with career anxiety be conceptually categorized into career development, individual psychological, and environmental factors?, RQ3: What

consequences of career anxiety among university students have been reported in the empirical literature during 2021–2026?

Answering these questions is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological dynamics underlying students' career anxiety while clarifying the relationship between its associated factors and consequences. The findings are also anticipated to support the development of future research and the design of career development and psychological interventions aimed at assisting university students in coping with career-related uncertainty.

METHOD

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to identify, evaluate, and synthesize empirical evidence concerning psychological factors associated with career anxiety among university students. The SLR approach was selected because it enables relevant empirical findings to be identified and systematically synthesized to provide a comprehensive understanding of factors related to career anxiety. The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 framework to improve the transparency, systematicity, and reproducibility of the identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion processes.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted using the Scopus database because it provides access to a broad range of peer-reviewed scientific literature and applies established standards for indexing and publication quality. The search was conducted from 4 June 2026 to 1 July 2026. The search strategy was formulated using Boolean operators and search-field specifications to ensure that the retrieved literature was directly relevant to the research topic. The search was conducted in the title, abstract, and keywords fields (TITLE-ABS-KEY) using the following search string:

*TITLE-ABS-KEY("career anxiety" AND ("student" OR "students" OR "university student")**

The use of parentheses was applied to ensure that the Boolean operators were interpreted appropriately and that the search retrieved studies addressing career anxiety in student populations. The search strategy was intentionally not restricted by specific psychological constructs at the initial search stage. This approach enabled potentially relevant psychological, career-development, and contextual factors to emerge from the empirical literature and subsequently be categorized during the synthesis process.

The search was limited to English-language journal articles published between 2021 and 2026. Only empirical research articles indexed in Scopus were considered. Conference proceedings, books, book chapters, editorials, review articles, and other non-empirical publications were excluded. The publication period of 2021–2026 was selected to capture recent empirical evidence concerning career anxiety among university students within the context of changing labor-market conditions, post-pandemic career uncertainty, and emerging developments affecting students' perceptions of their future careers.

Eligibility Criteria

The eligibility criteria were formulated to ensure consistency between the research objectives, the retrieved studies, and the synthesis framework. Studies were included when they met all of the following criteria: (1) Empirical quantitative studies examining career anxiety among university students or examining factors associated with career anxiety in university-student populations; (2) Studies involving university or college students as the study population; (3) Studies published between 2021 and 2026; (4) studies published as English-language journal articles indexed in Scopus; (5) Studies reporting an empirical relationship between career anxiety and psychological, career-development, individual, or environmental factors; (6) Studies providing sufficient empirical information to identify the role of career anxiety, associated variables, and/or reported consequences.

The eligibility criteria did not require career anxiety to function exclusively as a dependent variable. This adjustment was made to ensure methodological consistency with the empirical studies ultimately included in the review. Career anxiety was considered in relation to other variables regardless of whether it was examined as an outcome, predictor, or variable associated with other constructs. Antecedent-related factors and consequences were subsequently distinguished during the synthesis stage, so that consequences of career anxiety were not conceptually treated as antecedents.

Studies were excluded when they met one or more of the following criteria: (1) the population did not consist of university or college students; (2) the study did not examine career anxiety or its relationship with relevant factors; (3) the publication was not an empirical research article; (4) the publication was a conference proceeding, book, book chapter, editorial, review, or other non-empirical publication; (5) the article was not written in English; (6) the article

was not indexed in Scopus; or (7) the article did not provide sufficient information to identify the variables and findings relevant to the research questions.

Study Selection and Screening Process

The study selection process followed the stages recommended in the PRISMA 2020 framework, comprising identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion. All records retrieved through the Scopus search were initially compiled for screening. Duplicate records, when identified, were removed before the title and abstract screening stage. The remaining records were screened based on their titles and abstracts against the predetermined eligibility criteria. Articles considered potentially relevant were subsequently assessed through full-text examination.

During the full-text assessment, each article was evaluated against the complete inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies that failed to satisfy the eligibility requirements or did not provide sufficient information relevant to the research questions were excluded at this stage. The reasons for exclusion at the full-text stage were recorded to maintain transparency in the selection process. Following completion of the screening and eligibility assessment, 11 articles satisfied the predetermined criteria and were included in the final synthesis. The overall selection process is presented in Figure 1, which illustrates the number of records identified, screened, assessed for eligibility, excluded, and ultimately included in the systematic review.

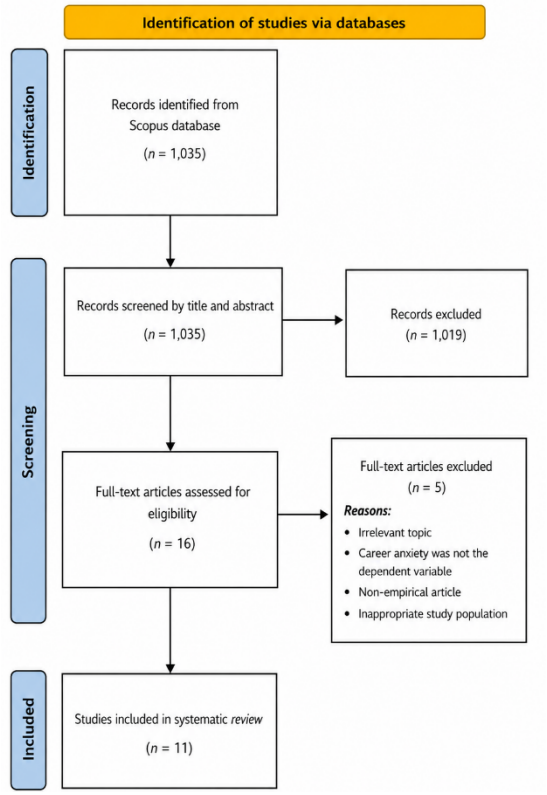


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram for the Journal Selection Process

Data Extraction

A structured data-extraction procedure was used to ensure consistency in the collection of information from the 11 included studies. The extracted information comprised: (1) author and publication year; (2) study population and sample characteristics; (3) research context; (4) research design; (5) variables examined; (6) measurement of career anxiety and relevant psychological constructs; (7) the role of career anxiety within the study; (8) principal empirical findings; and (9) methodological quality based on the JBI Critical Appraisal Tool.

The extracted findings were subsequently compared across studies to identify recurring patterns, similarities, and differences in the factors associated with career anxiety. Particular attention was given to psychological resources, career-development characteristics, environmental conditions, and the consequences reported in relation to career anxiety. This procedure enabled the findings from individual studies to be integrated into a broader conceptual synthesis rather than being interpreted as isolated empirical relationships.

Thematic Synthesis Procedure

The included studies were analyzed using a thematic synthesis approach. The synthesis was conducted through several sequential stages. First, relevant findings from each included study were extracted and coded according to the variables and relationships reported. Second, the initial codes were compared across studies to identify similarities and recurring patterns. Third, related codes were grouped into descriptive themes representing the substantive characteristics of the reported factors. Fourth, the descriptive themes were compared and interpreted to develop broader analytical themes that captured the conceptual relationships between the identified factors and career anxiety.

Through this process, the findings were organized into four analytical themes: (1) career development factors, (2) individual psychological factors, (3) environmental factors, and (4) consequences of career anxiety. The first three themes represent factors associated with the development, variation, or experience of career anxiety, whereas the fourth theme represents outcomes or consequences associated with career anxiety. Therefore, consequences were not treated as antecedents. This distinction was maintained throughout the synthesis to avoid conceptual conflation between factors that contribute to or are associated with career anxiety and outcomes that may occur following or alongside career anxiety.

The thematic synthesis was subsequently used to construct a more comprehensive conceptual framework for understanding career anxiety among university students. The framework integrates psychological resources, career-development characteristics, and environmental conditions while separately identifying the consequences associated with career anxiety. This approach enables findings that were previously examined across different empirical studies to be synthesized into a coherent conceptual structure.

Quality Assesment

The methodological quality of the included studies was assessed using the revised JBI Critical Appraisal Tool for Analytical Cross-Sectional Studies developed by the Joanna Briggs Institute (Barker et al., 2026). This appraisal tool was selected because all the 11 studies included in this systematic review employed quantitative analytical cross-sectional designs. The assessment was conducted to evaluate the methodological rigor of the included studies and to identify potential limitations that could affect the interpretation of the synthesized findings. The revised JBI tool comprises eight appraisal criteria addressing the clarity of the inclusion criteria, description of the study subjects and setting, validity and reliability of exposure measurement, use of objective and standard criteria for measuring the outcome, identification of confounding factors, strategies for addressing confounding factors, validity and reliability of outcome measurement, and appropriateness of statistical analysis (Barker et al., 2026). Each criterion was assessed as Yes (Y), No (N), Unclear (U), or Not Applicable (NA) based on the methodological information reported in each article. The appraisal results were used to describe the methodological quality of the included studies and to inform the interpretation of the findings during the synthesis process.

Table 1. Quality Assessment of Included Studies Using the JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist

Authors	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8
Boo et al. (2021)	U	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Nguyen (2025)	U	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Alexander SL, Skues J, Wise L, Sharp J (2025)	U	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Merve Gerçek & Cem Güney Özveren (2026)	U	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y
Vandana et al. (2025)	U	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y
Rahimi et al. (2023)	U	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Erhan Dağ et al. (2026)	U	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Wasim Qazi et al. (2024)	U	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y
Üngüren & Kaçmaz (2022)	U	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y
Büşra Müceldili et al. (2025)	U	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Boo et al. (2022)	U	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

***Note**: Y= Yes; N= No; U= Unclear; NA= Not Applicable.*

RESULTS

Characteristics of the Included Studies

Following the identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and selection processes conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework, 11 articles met the predetermined eligibility criteria and were included in the final synthesis. All included studies were published between 2021 and 2026 and examined career anxiety in university or college student populations. The studies represented

diverse educational contexts, including general university students as well as students in education, health sciences, management, and tourism. The included studies examined career anxiety in relation to career-development characteristics, individual psychological resources, environmental conditions, and several outcomes associated with career anxiety.

The methodological characteristics of the included studies were also examined to assess the strength and limitations of the available evidence. The included studies predominantly employed quantitative analytical cross-sectional designs, consistent with the eligibility criteria and the JBI Critical Appraisal Tool used for quality assessment. The studies differed in their research contexts, variables, measurement approaches, and analytical procedures. Because the available study extraction did not consistently report the country, exact sample size, measurement instruments, statistical analysis techniques, or effect estimates for every included article, these characteristics are explicitly identified as not reported (NR) where the information was unavailable in the extracted study data. This approach avoids introducing information that was not reported in the included evidence. The characteristics of the 11 included studies, together with their methodological quality assessment, are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Characteristics of the Included Studies

Authors	Year	Country	Sample	Research Design	Research Focus	Measurement / Instrument	Statistical Analysis	Main Findings
Büşra Müceldili, Berivan Tatar, Oya Erdil	2025	Türkiye	University students	Quantitative analytical cross-sectional	Career anxiety, meaning in life, career decision-making self-efficacy, and life satisfaction	Career anxiety, meaning in life, self-efficacy, and life satisfaction measures	Mediation analysis	Career anxiety was associated with lower life satisfaction through meaning in life.
Boo et al.	2022	NR	University students	Quantitative analytical cross-sectional	Career anxiety, career choice goals, and academic performance	Career anxiety and career-related measures	Quantitative survey analysis	Career anxiety was negatively associated with academic performance and career choice goals.
Erhan Dağ et al.	2026	Türkiye	Health sciences students	Quantitative analytical cross-sectional	Artificial Intelligence perceptions and career anxiety	AI perception and career anxiety measures	Quantitative survey analysis	Perceptions of Artificial Intelligence were associated with higher career anxiety.
Wasim Qazi et al.	2024	NR	University students	Quantitative analytical cross-sectional	COVID-19 phobia, career anxiety, and employability confidence	COVID-19 phobia, career anxiety, and employability confidence measures	Quantitative survey analysis	COVID-19 phobia was associated with career anxiety, while career anxiety was associated with lower employability confidence.
Nguyen	2025	Vietnam	Education students	Quantitative analytical cross-sectional	Time perspective and career anxiety	Time perspective and career anxiety measures	Quantitative survey analysis	Positive time perspective was associated with lower career anxiety.
Alexander SL, Skues J, Wise L, Sharp J	2025	NR	University students	Quantitative analytical cross-sectional	Occupational awareness, career adaptability, and career anxiety	Occupational awareness, career adaptability, and career anxiety measures	Quantitative survey analysis	Occupational awareness and career adaptability were associated with lower career anxiety.
Vandana, Haricharan P, Kumar V, Oberoi SS	2025	NR	Management students	Quantitative analytical cross-sectional	Factors contributing to career anxiety	Self-belief, irrational beliefs, and career anxiety measures	Quantitative survey analysis	Self-belief and irrational beliefs were associated with career anxiety.

Authors	Year	Country	Sample	Research Design	Research Focus	Measurement / Instrument	Statistical Analysis	Main Findings
Boo et al.	2021	United States and China	American students (n = 293); Chinese students (n = 267)	Quantitative analytical cross-sectional	Career adaptability, future time perspective, and career anxiety	Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS), Future Time Perspective scale, and 25-item career anxiety scale	PLS-SEM and PLS-MGA	Future time perspective → career anxiety: −0.29*** among American students and −0.11 among Chinese students.
Rahimi R, Akgunduz Y, Bilgihan A	2023	United Kingdom	Tourism students	Quantitative analytical cross-sectional	Fear of COVID-19, psychological resilience, and career anxiety	Fear of COVID-19, psychological resilience, and career anxiety measures	Quantitative survey analysis	Psychological resilience was associated with lower career anxiety, while fear of COVID-19 was associated with career anxiety.
Üngüren & Kaçmaz	2022	Türkiye	Tourism students	Quantitative analytical cross-sectional	The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on career anxiety	COVID-19 and career anxiety measures	Quantitative survey analysis	COVID-19-related conditions were associated with increased career anxiety.
Merve Gerçek & Cem Güney Özveren	2026	Türkiye	University students	Quantitative analytical cross-sectional	Self-efficacy, future work self, career anxiety, and life satisfaction	General self-efficacy, future work self, career anxiety, and life satisfaction measures	Sequential mediation analysis	Self-efficacy and future work self were associated with lower career anxiety, while career anxiety was associated with lower life satisfaction.

Based on Table 2, the eleven included studies were published between 2021 and 2026 and examined career anxiety among diverse university-student populations, including general university students and students from education, health sciences, management, and tourism programs. The studies were conducted in different national contexts, with several studies originating from Türkiye, while other studies examined students in the United States, China, Vietnam, and other contexts. Despite differences in educational backgrounds and research settings, the included studies consistently examined career anxiety in relation to career-development factors, individual psychological characteristics, environmental conditions, and psychological or career-related outcomes.

Most of the included studies employed quantitative analytical cross-sectional designs and used survey-based approaches to examine relationships among career anxiety and other variables. The studies examined a broad range of variables, including career adaptability, future time perspective, occupational awareness, self-efficacy, psychological resilience, self-belief, fear of COVID-19, perceptions of Artificial Intelligence, meaning in life, employability confidence, academic performance, career choice goals, and life satisfaction. The methodological quality of all included studies was assessed separately using the revised JBI Critical Appraisal Tool for Analytical Cross-Sectional Studies, as presented in Table 1. The quality assessment was considered when interpreting the synthesized findings.

The findings further indicate that career anxiety was not examined exclusively as an outcome variable. Most studies investigated factors associated with higher or lower levels of career anxiety, whereas several studies also examined career anxiety in relation to subsequent outcomes, including life satisfaction, academic performance, career choice goals, and employability confidence. Therefore, the synthesis distinguishes between antecedent-related factors and consequences associated with career anxiety. Given that the included studies predominantly used cross-sectional designs, the relationships identified in this review are interpreted as associations rather than causal relationships.

Overall Characteristics of the Evidence

The eleven included studies demonstrate that research on career anxiety among university students has addressed the phenomenon across diverse educational and contextual settings during the 2021–2026 period. The studies primarily employed quantitative analytical cross-sectional approaches to examine associations between career anxiety and

psychological, career-development, or environmental variables. The research contexts included general university populations and students from specific academic fields, particularly education, health sciences, management, and tourism.

The included studies also differed in the role assigned to career anxiety within their analytical models. Several studies primarily examined career anxiety in relation to antecedent-related factors, including career adaptability, future time perspective, occupational awareness, self-efficacy, psychological resilience, self-belief, and perceptions of external conditions. Other studies examined career anxiety in relation to outcomes such as life satisfaction, academic performance, career choice goals, and employability confidence. Therefore, the synthesis distinguishes factors associated with career anxiety from consequences associated with career anxiety, rather than treating all identified variables as antecedents.

The methodological characteristics of the included studies indicate that quantitative analytical cross-sectional designs were predominantly used to examine relationships among the variables. The studies employed different measures and analytical procedures according to their respective research objectives. The methodological quality of the eleven studies was assessed using the revised JBI Critical Appraisal Tool for Analytical Cross-Sectional Studies, as presented in Table 1. The assessment indicates that most studies fulfilled several methodological criteria, although some limitations were identified, particularly concerning the identification and management of confounding factors. These methodological considerations were taken into account when interpreting the synthesized findings.

Overall, the characteristics of the included studies indicate that career anxiety has been examined from multiple perspectives rather than as a single-dimensional psychological phenomenon. The literature addresses factors associated with students' career anxiety as well as outcomes associated with the experience of career anxiety. Because the included studies predominantly employed cross-sectional quantitative designs, the relationships identified in this review are interpreted as associations rather than causal relationships. This distinction is maintained throughout the subsequent thematic synthesis to ensure that the interpretation remains consistent with the methodological characteristics of the included evidence.

Major Themes of the Synthesis Results

Following the characterization and quality assessment of the included studies, the findings were synthesized using a thematic synthesis approach. The synthesis involved identifying relevant findings from each study, coding recurring variables and relationships, grouping similar codes into descriptive categories, and subsequently developing broader analytical themes. This procedure followed the general principles of thematic synthesis described by Popay et al. (2006) and Thomas and Harden (2008).

The synthesis identified four analytical themes: (1) career development factors, (2) individual psychological factors, (3) environmental factors, and (4) consequences of career anxiety. These themes represent the authors' synthesis of the empirical findings rather than categories adopted directly from a single theoretical framework. The first three themes represent factors associated with the experience or level of career anxiety, while the fourth theme represents outcomes associated with career anxiety.

Importantly, the frequency of studies contributing to each theme does not indicate the strength or magnitude of an effect. Given that the included studies predominantly used cross-sectional quantitative designs and differed in their variables and analytical approaches, the number of studies addressing a particular theme should be interpreted only as an indication of how frequently the theme appeared in the included literature.

Table 3. Synthesized Themes of the Antecedents and Consequences of Career Anxiety Among University Students

Synthesized Theme	Authors	Sample	Findings
Career Development Factors	Boo et al. (2021)	University students	Career adaptability and future time perspective were negatively associated with career anxiety.
	Nguyen (2025)	Education students	A positive time perspective reduced career anxiety.
	Alexander SL, Skues J, Wise L, Sharp J (2025)	University students	Occupational awareness and career adaptability helped reduce career anxiety.
	Merve Gerçek & Cem Güney Özveren (2026)	University students	Future work self was associated with lower career anxiety and higher life satisfaction.
Individual Psychological Factors	Vandana et al. (2025)	Management students	Self-belief and irrational beliefs contributed to career anxiety.
	Rahimi et al. (2023)	Tourism students	Psychological resilience functioned as a protective factor against career anxiety.

Synthesized Theme	Authors	Sample	Findings
Environmental Factors	Merve Gerçek & Cem Güney Özveren (2026)	University students	Self-efficacy was associated with lower career anxiety.
	Erhan Dağ et al. (2026)	Health sciences students	Perceptions of Artificial Intelligence increased career anxiety.
	Wasim Qazi et al. (2024)	College students	COVID-19 phobia increased career anxiety and reduced employability confidence.
	Rahimi et al. (2023)	Tourism students	Fear of COVID-19 increased career anxiety.
	Üngüren & Kaçmaz (2022)	Tourism students	The COVID-19 pandemic triggered increased career anxiety among students.
Consequences of Career Anxiety	Büşra Müceldili et al. (2025)	University students	Career anxiety reduced life satisfaction through meaning in life.
	Boo et al. (2022)	University students	Career anxiety was negatively associated with academic performance and career choice goals.
	Wasim Qazi et al. (2024)	University students	Career anxiety reduced employability confidence.
	Merve Gerçek & Cem Güney Özveren (2026)	University students	Career anxiety was associated with lower life satisfaction.

Based on Table 3, career development factors represent the most dominant theme in research on career anxiety among university students. Variables such as career adaptability, future time perspective, future work self, and occupational awareness were consistently found to be related with lower grades of career anxiety. These findings indicate that most studies view career anxiety as a consequence of suboptimal career readiness among students. Therefore, the development of competencies and career readiness has become the primary focus in efforts to reduce students' anxiety regarding their future employment.

Career Development Factors

Career development factors constituted one of the most frequently represented themes, appearing in four of the 11 included studies. The identified factors included career adaptability, future time perspective, future work self, and occupational awareness. Boo et al. (2021) reported negative associations between career adaptability, future time perspective, and career anxiety. Similarly, Nguyen (2025) identified a relationship between time perspective and career anxiety, while Alexander SL et al. (2025) reported relationships involving occupational awareness and career adaptability. Merve Gerçek and Cem Güney Özveren (2026) further identified an association between future work self and career anxiety.

Taken together, these findings suggest that students' career-development resources and orientations are consistently represented in the literature as factors associated with differences in career anxiety. Students with stronger career-related resources tended to report lower levels of career anxiety in the included studies. However, because the available evidence predominantly derives from cross-sectional research, these findings should be interpreted as associations rather than evidence that career-development resources directly cause reductions in career anxiety.

The recurrence of career adaptability and future-oriented constructs across several studies indicates that students' perceptions of their ability to manage career transitions and anticipate their future careers are important areas of investigation. Nevertheless, the frequency of these variables in the reviewed studies should not be interpreted as evidence that career development factors have a stronger effect than other categories. Rather, they were among the themes most frequently represented in the 11 included studies.

Individual Psychological Factors

The second theme concerns individual psychological factors, which appeared in three of the included studies. The identified variables included self-belief, irrational beliefs, psychological resilience, and self-efficacy. Vandana et al. (2025) examined self-belief and irrational beliefs in relation to career anxiety, while Rahimi et al. (2023) identified an association between psychological resilience and career anxiety. Merve Gerçek and Cem Güney Özveren (2026) reported an association between self-efficacy and career anxiety.

The synthesized findings indicate that individual psychological resources are consistently examined in relation to students' responses to career uncertainty. Higher levels of psychological resources such as resilience and self-efficacy were generally associated with lower levels of career anxiety, whereas maladaptive beliefs were associated with higher career anxiety. These findings are consistent with the conceptual orientation of the study, which views psychological resources as relevant to how students respond to uncertainty and demands associated with future careers.

Nevertheless, the findings do not establish a causal pathway between these psychological characteristics and career anxiety. The appropriate interpretation is that the identified psychological characteristics were associated with variations in career anxiety within the populations examined by the respective studies. Differences in study design, measurement, and analytical procedures should also be considered when comparing these findings.

Environmental Factors

Environmental factors were also represented in four of the 11 included studies. The identified environmental conditions primarily involved major external changes, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic and perceptions of Artificial Intelligence. Erhan Dağ et al. (2026) examined students' perceptions of Artificial Intelligence in relation to career anxiety. Wasim Qazi et al. (2024) examined COVID-19 phobia and career anxiety, while Rahimi et al. (2023) investigated fear of COVID-19 in relation to career anxiety. Üngüren and Kaçmaz (2022) examined the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and students' career anxiety.

The findings indicate that external conditions characterized by uncertainty were repeatedly examined alongside students' career anxiety. Perceptions of Artificial Intelligence, fear related to COVID-19, and perceptions of pandemic-related uncertainty were associated with higher levels of career anxiety in the respective studies. These findings suggest that career anxiety should not be understood exclusively through individual psychological characteristics because students' perceptions of changes in their external environment may also be related to their career-related concerns.

However, the term "triggered" is not used to characterize these findings because the available evidence does not establish causal relationships. Instead, the findings indicate that these environmental conditions were associated with higher levels of career anxiety in the relevant samples. This distinction is particularly important because the included studies primarily employed cross-sectional quantitative designs.

Consequences of Career Anxiety

In addition to factors associated with career anxiety, four studies examined outcomes associated with career anxiety. Büşra Müceldili et al. (2025) found an association between career anxiety and lower life satisfaction through meaning in life. Boo et al. (2022) reported a negative association between career anxiety and academic performance and career choice goals. Wasim Qazi et al. (2024) identified an association between career anxiety and lower employability confidence, while Merve Gerçek and Cem Güney Özveren (2026) reported an association between career anxiety and lower life satisfaction.

These findings indicate that career anxiety is not only examined as a psychological condition associated with career-development and environmental factors but also in relation to students' broader psychological, academic, and career-related outcomes. The outcomes identified in the reviewed literature include life satisfaction, academic performance, career choice goals, and employability confidence.

The evidence concerning consequences should nevertheless be interpreted cautiously. Because most included studies used cross-sectional designs, the findings demonstrate relationships or associations rather than definitive evidence that career anxiety directly causes reductions in life satisfaction, academic performance, career choice goals, or employability confidence. Accordingly, these outcomes are treated in this review as consequences reported in association with career anxiety, rather than as empirically established causal effects.

DISCUSSION

Career Development Factors

The synthesis identified career development factors as one of the most frequently represented themes, appearing in four of the eleven included studies. The variables included career adaptability, future time perspective, time perspective, occupational awareness, and future work self (Boo et al., 2021; Nguyen, 2025; Alexander SL, Skues J, Wise L, & Sharp J, 2025; Merve Gerçek & Cem Güney Özveren, 2026). Across these studies, career development variables were generally negatively associated with career anxiety, indicating that students reporting stronger career-related resources tended to report lower levels of career anxiety. The findings should be interpreted as associations rather than causal effects because the included studies predominantly employed quantitative cross-sectional designs.

Career adaptability was consistently examined as an important career-development resource. Boo et al. (2021) found a negative association between career adaptability and career anxiety, while Alexander SL, Skues J, Wise L, and Sharp J (2025) similarly reported a relationship between occupational awareness, career adaptability, and career anxiety. Future-oriented constructs were also relevant. Boo et al. (2021) identified future time perspective as negatively associated with career anxiety, Nguyen (2025) examined the relationship between time perspective and career anxiety, and Merve Gerçek and Cem Güney Özveren (2026) reported that future work self was associated with lower career anxiety and higher life satisfaction. Taken together, these findings suggest that career-related resources may operate through complementary dimensions involving adaptability, future orientation, and awareness of occupational demands.

The findings are consistent with Career Construction Theory (CCT), which conceptualizes career development as an adaptive process through which individuals respond to changing vocational and developmental demands (Savickas, 2005, 2013). Within this framework, career adaptability comprises concern, control, curiosity, and confidence, which constitute psychosocial resources for dealing with career transitions and uncertainty (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). The present synthesis does not establish that these resources directly reduce career anxiety; rather, the reviewed evidence indicates that stronger career adaptability and related future-oriented resources are associated with lower levels of career anxiety. Future time perspective and future work self can therefore be understood as resources that provide direction for future career planning, while occupational awareness may reduce informational uncertainty by increasing students' understanding of occupational environments and employment requirements.

The four studies also demonstrate some conceptual variation within the career development theme. Career adaptability emphasizes students' capacity to adjust to changing career demands, whereas future time perspective and future work self emphasize orientation toward future goals and possible professional selves. Occupational awareness, in contrast, concerns students' understanding of the world of work. This variation indicates that career anxiety is associated with several dimensions of career readiness rather than a single career-development characteristic. The consistency of the direction of the reported relationships across these studies strengthens the interpretation that career-development resources are relevant to students' experiences of career anxiety, although differences in study populations, contexts, and measurement approaches limit the extent to which the findings can be generalized uniformly across all university students.

From an integrative perspective, career development factors can be positioned as career resources within the broader relationship identified by this SLR. Career adaptability, future orientation, and occupational awareness may provide students with resources for interpreting and responding to uncertainty, while individual psychological resources such as self-efficacy and resilience represent another layer of protection discussed in the subsequent theme. Environmental conditions, including technological and labor-market changes, may simultaneously create pressures that challenge these resources. Career anxiety can consequently be understood within an interaction between students' available career resources and the uncertainties they encounter during the transition from university to employment. This interpretation extends Career Construction Theory by situating career adaptability within a broader conceptual structure that connects career resources with individual psychological resources and environmental stressors.

The practical implication of these findings is that university career-development services should address multiple dimensions of career readiness rather than focusing exclusively on technical employability. Career counseling, career-planning activities, occupational information, experiential learning, internship opportunities, and mentoring may provide students with opportunities to develop career-related resources. However, because the evidence synthesized in this review is predominantly correlational, such interventions should be regarded as theoretically informed strategies rather than interventions proven by this SLR to directly reduce career anxiety.

Overall, the evidence from the four studies indicates that stronger career-development resources are consistently associated with lower career anxiety among university students (Boo et al., 2021; Nguyen, 2025; Alexander SL, Skues J, Wise L, & Sharp J, 2025; Merve Gerçek & Cem Güney Özveren, 2026). The findings support the relevance of Career Construction Theory while also suggesting that career adaptability, future orientation, and occupational awareness should be considered together as interconnected career resources. Nevertheless, the limited number of studies and the predominantly cross-sectional nature of the evidence require cautious interpretation and do not support a definitive causal conclusion that improving these factors will necessarily reduce career anxiety.

Individual Psychological Factors

The synthesis identified individual psychological factors as another important theme associated with career anxiety among university students. This theme comprised self-efficacy, psychological resilience, self-belief, and irrational beliefs regarding employment (Vandana et al., 2025; Rahimi et al., 2023; Merve Gerçek & Cem Güney Özveren, 2026). Across these studies, stronger psychological resources were generally associated with lower levels of career

anxiety, whereas negative or irrational beliefs regarding personal capabilities and employment were associated with greater career-related anxiety. These findings indicate that students' psychological resources are relevant to how they respond to uncertainty surrounding their future careers, although the predominantly cross-sectional designs do not permit causal conclusions.

Self-efficacy represents one of the key psychological resources identified in this theme. Merve Gerçek and Cem Güney Özveren (2026) reported an association between self-efficacy and lower career anxiety, suggesting that students who perceive themselves as more capable of managing career-related demands tend to experience less anxiety concerning their professional futures. This finding is consistent with Social Cognitive Theory, which emphasizes the role of self-efficacy in shaping individuals' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to challenging situations (Bandura, 1986, 1997). From this perspective, students' perceptions of their own capabilities may influence how they appraise career uncertainty and whether they perceive future career demands as manageable challenges or difficult situations.

Psychological resilience provides a complementary perspective. Rahimi et al. (2023) identified psychological resilience as a protective factor associated with career anxiety among tourism students during a period of pandemic-related uncertainty. Resilience may provide students with psychological resources for adapting to difficult circumstances without experiencing the same level of career-related distress. Vandana et al. (2025), meanwhile, identified self-belief and irrational beliefs regarding employment as factors related to career anxiety. Taken together, these findings suggest that individual psychological factors encompass both protective resources, such as self-efficacy and resilience, and psychological vulnerabilities, such as negative or irrational beliefs about employment.

The findings also demonstrate that the psychological factors identified across the studies are not entirely homogeneous. Self-efficacy concerns perceived capability to perform or manage career-related tasks, resilience concerns the capacity to adapt to adversity, while self-belief and irrational beliefs concern how students interpret themselves and employment-related circumstances. Thus, these variables should not be treated as interchangeable indicators of a single psychological construct. Their common contribution within the synthesis is that they represent individual-level psychological resources or vulnerabilities that are associated with students' responses to career uncertainty.

The relationship between these factors and career anxiety can be further integrated with the career-development findings discussed previously. Career adaptability and future-oriented resources provide students with career-related resources for navigating future transitions, whereas self-efficacy and resilience provide psychological resources that may support the use of those career resources when students encounter uncertainty. Environmental stressors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and technological changes, may place additional demands on these resources. Within this integrative framework, career anxiety can therefore be understood as emerging within the interaction between career resources, individual psychological resources, and environmental demands, rather than being attributable to a single psychological characteristic.

The context of the reviewed studies should also be considered when interpreting these findings. Rahimi et al. (2023) examined psychological resilience in the context of tourism students experiencing pandemic-related uncertainty, whereas Merve Gerçek and Cem Güney Özveren (2026) examined self-efficacy among university students in relation to career anxiety and life satisfaction. Vandana et al. (2025) focused on management students and included beliefs regarding employment. These differences in academic field, research context, and variables examined indicate that the observed associations may be influenced by the particular career demands and environmental circumstances experienced by different student populations. Consequently, the findings should not be generalized as though all university students experience career anxiety through identical psychological mechanisms.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that university career-development services may benefit from incorporating psychological dimensions alongside career-planning activities. Career counseling can provide opportunities for students to develop confidence in their career-related capabilities, evaluate negative beliefs about employment, and strengthen adaptive responses to uncertainty. Nevertheless, the present SLR does not establish that increasing self-efficacy or resilience will directly reduce career anxiety. Such interventions should therefore be considered theoretically informed implications derived from the observed associations rather than effects demonstrated causally by the reviewed evidence.

Overall, the synthesis indicates that individual psychological factors constitute an important dimension of career anxiety among university students. Self-efficacy and psychological resilience were associated with lower career anxiety, whereas self-belief and irrational beliefs regarding employment were associated with students' experiences of career-related anxiety (Vandana et al., 2025; Rahimi et al., 2023; Merve Gerçek & Cem Güney Özveren, 2026). The findings support the relevance of Social Cognitive Theory while also complementing Career Construction Theory by

demonstrating that career-related adaptability may operate alongside broader psychological resources. However, the limited number of studies addressing these factors and the predominantly cross-sectional nature of the evidence require cautious interpretation and further research using longitudinal and diverse student populations.

Environmental Factors

The synthesis identified environmental factors as another important theme associated with career anxiety among university students. Four of the eleven included studies examined external conditions, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic and perceptions of Artificial Intelligence (AI), in relation to career anxiety (Erhan Dağ et al., 2026; Wasim Qazi et al., 2024; Rahimi et al., 2023; Üngüren & Kaçmaz, 2022). These studies indicate that changes in the social, economic, and technological environment are associated with students' perceptions of uncertainty concerning employment and future career prospects. Because the evidence is predominantly based on quantitative cross-sectional studies, these findings should be interpreted as associations rather than evidence that environmental changes directly cause career anxiety.

The COVID-19 pandemic represents the environmental condition most frequently examined in the included literature. Wasim Qazi et al. (2024) examined the relationship between COVID-19 phobia, career anxiety, and employability confidence, while Rahimi et al. (2023) examined fear of COVID-19 and psychological resilience in relation to career anxiety among tourism students. Üngüren and Kaçmaz (2022) also examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' career anxiety. Although these studies were conducted in different contexts, their findings consistently indicate an association between pandemic-related concerns and higher levels of career anxiety. The consistency of this pattern suggests that widespread disruptions to employment opportunities and uncertainty surrounding the labor market may constitute important environmental stressors during students' transition from education to employment.

A different environmental stressor was identified by Erhan Dağ et al. (2026), which examined perceptions of Artificial Intelligence and career anxiety among health sciences students. The finding indicates that students' perceptions of technological development are associated with their concerns about future careers. Unlike pandemic-related uncertainty, which represents a temporary but widespread disruption, technological transformation represents an ongoing change in occupational structures and competency requirements. The inclusion of AI-related perceptions alongside pandemic-related factors therefore broadens the environmental dimension of career anxiety beyond immediate economic disruption to include students' perceptions of longer-term changes in the world of work.

These findings can be interpreted through Conservation of Resources Theory proposed by Hobfoll (1989). The theory suggests that psychological distress may arise when individuals perceive threats to valued resources or anticipate potential resource loss. In the context of career development, uncertainty regarding employment opportunities, changing occupational requirements, and perceived technological disruption may be interpreted as threats to students' anticipated career resources. From this perspective, the environmental conditions identified in the reviewed studies may increase the demands placed on students while simultaneously creating uncertainty regarding whether their existing competencies will remain sufficient for future employment. This theoretical interpretation, however, represents an explanatory framework rather than evidence that the environmental conditions directly caused career anxiety.

The synthesis also reveals heterogeneity in the environmental evidence. The studies examining COVID-19-related factors were conducted in contexts and student populations that differed from the study examining perceptions of AI. Rahimi et al. (2023) focused on tourism students, Üngüren and Kaçmaz (2022) examined tourism students in the context of the pandemic, Wasim Qazi et al. (2024) examined university students in relation to COVID-19 phobia and employability confidence, while Erhan Dağ et al. (2026) focused on health sciences students and perceptions of AI. These differences suggest that the relationship between environmental uncertainty and career anxiety may depend partly on students' academic fields and the particular employment conditions they anticipate. Pandemic-related uncertainty may be especially salient for students whose prospective employment sectors were strongly affected by COVID-19, whereas concerns about AI may be more closely related to perceptions of technological transformation within particular professional fields.

The role of psychological resources further demonstrates that environmental factors should not be considered independently from individual characteristics. Rahimi et al. (2023) found that psychological resilience was associated with career anxiety in the context of fear of COVID-19, suggesting that students may respond differently to similar environmental uncertainty depending on their available psychological resources. This finding complements the individual psychological theme discussed previously. Environmental stressors may create uncertainty, while resources such as resilience may shape students' capacity to respond to that uncertainty. Thus, the present synthesis supports an

integrative interpretation in which environmental conditions represent external demands that interact with students' career and psychological resources.

The findings have practical implications for higher education institutions. Career-development services should not only focus on individual preparedness but also provide students with relevant information about labor-market changes, technological developments, and emerging occupational requirements. Career counseling may help students distinguish realistic changes in the labor market from exaggerated perceptions of occupational threat, while digital-literacy and future-work programs may assist students in developing competencies relevant to technological transformation. These recommendations should nevertheless be regarded as implications derived from the synthesized associations rather than interventions whose causal effectiveness has been established by the included studies.

Overall, the environmental evidence indicates that career anxiety among university students is associated not only with individual psychological and career-development characteristics but also with broader changes in the social, economic, and technological environment. The COVID-19 pandemic and perceptions of AI emerged as the principal environmental conditions examined in the eleven studies (Erhan Dağ et al., 2026; Wasim Qazi et al., 2024; Rahimi et al., 2023; Üngüren & Kaçmaz, 2022). Within the integrative framework of this SLR, environmental stressors may place pressure on students' career and psychological resources, while the availability of such resources may shape how students respond to uncertainty. The limited number of studies and differences in populations and contexts, however, require caution in generalizing these findings to all university students.

Consequences of Career Anxiety

Compared with the studies examining factors associated with career anxiety, relatively fewer studies in the present SLR examined its consequences. Four of the eleven included studies addressed outcomes associated with career anxiety, including life satisfaction, academic performance, career choice goals, and employability confidence (Büşra Müceldili et al., 2025; Boo et al., 2022; Wasim Qazi et al., 2024; Merve Gerçek & Cem Güney Özveren, 2026). Across these studies, higher levels of career anxiety were generally associated with less favorable academic, psychological, and career-related outcomes. Because the included evidence is predominantly based on cross-sectional quantitative designs, these findings indicate relationships between variables rather than demonstrating that career anxiety directly causes the reported outcomes.

Life satisfaction was one of the psychological outcomes identified in the synthesis. Büşra Müceldili et al. (2025) reported that career anxiety was associated with lower life satisfaction through meaning in life, while Merve Gerçek and Cem Güney Özveren (2026) also identified an association between career anxiety and lower life satisfaction. These findings are consistent with the concept of Subjective Well-Being proposed by Diener (1984), in which life satisfaction represents an individual's cognitive evaluation of the quality of their life. From this perspective, persistent uncertainty concerning future employment may be accompanied by less favorable evaluations of one's present and anticipated life circumstances. The present synthesis, however, does not establish a causal pathway between career anxiety and life satisfaction; rather, it identifies a recurring association across the reviewed studies.

The consequences of career anxiety also extend to academic and career-related domains. Boo et al. (2022) found that career anxiety was negatively associated with academic performance and career choice goals. Wasim Qazi et al. (2024) similarly reported an association between career anxiety and lower employability confidence. These findings suggest that career anxiety is related not only to students' psychological well-being but also to their perceptions and functioning in academic and career-development domains. However, the direction of these relationships should be interpreted cautiously because students experiencing weaker academic or career-related confidence may also become more anxious about their future careers. The cross-sectional evidence therefore does not establish whether career anxiety precedes these outcomes or whether the relationships may operate in both directions.

The findings further demonstrate heterogeneity in the outcomes examined across the included studies. Büşra Müceldili et al. (2025) and Merve Gerçek and Cem Güney Özveren (2026) focused on life satisfaction, while Boo et al. (2022) examined academic performance and career choice goals, and Wasim Qazi et al. (2024) examined employability confidence. The populations and research contexts also differed across the studies. Such variation indicates that the consequences associated with career anxiety may occur across several domains of students' lives rather than being confined to psychological well-being. At the same time, the small number of studies addressing consequences and the differences in outcomes measured limit the possibility of determining whether one consequence is more consistently associated with career anxiety than another.

The relationship between career anxiety and its consequences can be integrated with the preceding themes in the present SLR. Career-development resources, individual psychological resources, and environmental stressors represent conditions associated with students' experiences of career anxiety, while life satisfaction, academic performance, career

choice goals, and employability confidence represent outcomes associated with that experience. This suggests a broader conceptual structure in which career and psychological resources interact with environmental demands, career anxiety represents a central psychological response, and subsequent academic, psychological, and career-related outcomes may be associated with that response. This integrative interpretation connects the four themes identified in the synthesis rather than treating antecedents and consequences as independent categories.

The findings are also relevant to the Subjective Well-Being perspective because career anxiety appears to coincide with less favorable evaluations of students' lives and future prospects (Diener, 1984). However, the evidence suggests that the consequences of career anxiety extend beyond subjective well-being. Associations with academic performance, career choice goals, and employability confidence indicate that career anxiety may be relevant to students' ability to engage with academic and career-development tasks. These findings reinforce the importance of considering career anxiety within the broader context of students' transition from higher education to employment rather than viewing it solely as an emotional concern.

The present synthesis does not support the interpretation of a self-reinforcing cycle involving career anxiety, employability confidence, internships, and networking because such a mechanism was not directly established by the eleven included studies. Although lower employability confidence was associated with career anxiety in Wasim Qazi et al. (2024), extending this finding to subsequent avoidance of internships or networking would go beyond the available evidence. Therefore, such mechanisms should be examined in future longitudinal research rather than presented as a direct finding of this SLR.

From a practical perspective, the findings indicate that university interventions should consider the broader consequences associated with career anxiety. Career counseling and psychological support may help students address career-related uncertainty, while academic and employability services can provide complementary support for students experiencing difficulties in career planning or confidence. Such services may be particularly valuable when career anxiety coexists with lower life satisfaction, academic difficulties, or reduced employability confidence. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of specific interventions cannot be established from the present synthesis because the included studies primarily examined associations rather than intervention effects.

Overall, the synthesis indicates that career anxiety is associated with multiple academic, psychological, and career-related outcomes, particularly lower life satisfaction, academic performance, career choice goals, and employability confidence (Büşra Müceldili et al., 2025; Boo et al., 2022; Wasim Qazi et al., 2024; Merve Gerçek & Cem Güney Özveren, 2026). These findings complement the three antecedent-related themes by positioning career anxiety within a broader framework connecting career resources, individual psychological resources, environmental stressors, career anxiety, and associated outcomes. However, the limited number of studies addressing consequences, differences in populations and outcome measures, and the predominantly cross-sectional evidence require cautious interpretation. Future research should employ longitudinal and, where appropriate, experimental designs to clarify the temporal and potentially reciprocal relationships between career anxiety and students' academic, psychological, and career-related outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to identify and synthesize the factors associated with and consequences of career anxiety among university students based on empirical studies published between 2021 and 2026. The systematic review of eleven eligible studies identified four interconnected themes: career development factors, individual psychological factors, environmental factors, and consequences of career anxiety. Overall, the findings indicate that career anxiety is a multidimensional phenomenon associated with students' career-related resources, psychological resources, and changing environmental conditions. Career adaptability, future-oriented perspectives, occupational awareness, self-efficacy, and psychological resilience were generally associated with lower levels of career anxiety, whereas environmental uncertainties were associated with greater career-related uncertainty. Career anxiety was also associated with less favorable psychological, academic, and career-related outcomes, although evidence concerning these consequences remains comparatively limited.

Conceptually, this review contributes by integrating these findings into a framework that distinguishes factors associated with career anxiety from its associated consequences, providing a multidimensional basis for understanding career anxiety among university students. The findings also offer practical implications for higher education institutions, career service centers, and counselors in strengthening students' career readiness alongside psychological resources for coping with career uncertainty. However, the evidence should be interpreted cautiously because the synthesis is based on only eleven studies, predominantly using cross-sectional designs, and therefore does not establish

causal relationships. Although the included studies were assessed using the revised JBI Critical Appraisal Tool, methodological concerns, particularly regarding confounding, were identified.

This review is further limited by its reliance on a single database, the predefined search strategy and eligibility criteria, the relatively small number of included studies, and heterogeneity in populations, contexts, measures, and analytical approaches. These limitations may have restricted the comprehensiveness and comparability of the available evidence. Future research should therefore broaden database coverage and research populations, employ longitudinal and, where appropriate, experimental or quasi-experimental designs, and further investigate the consequences and temporal dynamics of career anxiety. Such efforts are needed to strengthen causal inference and provide a more robust evidence base for developing and evaluating interventions to support university students' career development and psychological well-being.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

NC: Research conceptualization, development of the research design, literature search and selection, data extraction and analysis, synthesis of research findings, manuscript drafting, revision, and editing.
OP: Providing academic guidance, direction in research development, feedback on the analysis and substance of the manuscript, conducting a critical review, and approving the final version of the manuscript.

AI DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

In preparing this manuscript, the author made limited use of artificial intelligence-based tools as a means to enhance clarity of expression and the quality of linguistic structure. All ideas, analyses, and interpretations presented in this study are entirely the author's own. Furthermore, the manuscript has undergone a thorough review and editing process by the author, who is solely responsible for the entire content of this publication.

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