



Career Decision-Making Difficulties, Career Indecision, and Generalized Anxiety Among University Students: Mediating Role of Social Influence

Subham Thakur¹, Mehak Shams²

¹Master Scholar, School of Educational Science, Anhui Normal University, Wuhu, China,
Email: Suvamthakur2019@gmail.com

²Master Scholar, School of Educational Science, Anhui Normal University, Wuhu, China,
Email: mehakshams@ahnu.edu.cn

Abstract

Difficulties in career decision making have been linked to psychological distress in university students, especially when they enter the workforce, is a growing concern. This study used convenience sampling method and a cross-sectional correlational design to explore the relationship between career decision making difficulties, career indecision, generalized anxiety and social influence among university students of Pakistan and Nepal. Overall, 380 participants (171 males, 209 females) completed the Career Decision-Making Difficulties Questionnaire (CDDQ), Career Indecision Profile–Short Form (CIP-Short), Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7) and Social Influence Scale. All data were analyzed with SPSS version 27, and Pearson correlation, mediation and independent-samples t-test were used. Results indicated that there were positive correlations among career decision making difficulties and career indecision ($r = .38$) and generalized anxiety ($r = .27$) both of which were statistically significant at the .01 level. Social influence was also significantly related to career indecision and anxiety. Career decision making difficulties significantly predicted career indecision and generalized anxiety ($\beta = .28, p < .001$ and $\beta = .18, p = .001$, respectively) in the regression analyses. The results of the mediation analysis also showed that social influence was a partial mediator between career decision making difficulties and anxiety. No gender difference was found for any of the key variables in the study. The results indicate that those students who are having more problems in career decision making tend to be more susceptible to career indecision and anxiety, especially when there is greater social pressure. Results can assist university counsellors to develop interventions for students with regards to career decision-making skills, social support and anxiety management.

Keywords: Career decision-making difficulties, Career indecision, Generalized anxiety, social influence, University students, Career counselling

Introduction

Making career choices is a developmental and significant task of emerging adulthood, especially for university students as they move toward the next stage in professional identity development and preparing for their futures. But, there are significant numbers of students who struggle with making clear and confident career decisions, resulting in career indecision, uncertainty and career distress (Gati et al., 1996; Song et al., 2025). Career indecision is defined as persistent indecision and uncertainty about one's career choice and/or willingness to pursue a chosen career path and has been

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linked to lower academic engagement, less career confidence, and poorer psychological wellbeing (Braunstein-Bercovitz et al., 2012; Song et al., 2025).

There are indications that cognitive, emotional, and environmental factors can have an impact on career decision-making. A problem with students' self-knowledge, lack of occupational information, fear of failure, and uncertainty about future occupational outcomes are often encountered (Osborn et al., 2024). Such challenges can contribute to feelings of anxiety, especially when facing the stakes of making a successful career decision in educational and occupational settings that are competitive.

Generalized anxiety involves generalized and ongoing worry for several areas of life such as school and work-related anxiety (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Previous research has shown that students with higher levels of career uncertainty are more likely to report higher levels of career CDMS self-efficacy, avoidance behaviors, and career anxiety (Zhou et al., 2022; Çelik, 2026). Anxiety can disrupt the rational decision-making processes by raising fear of failure and uncertainty about future outcomes.

The fact that social influence also has a significant role in students' career development cannot be denied. Students' career choices, confidence, and career decision making patterns may be influenced by family expectations, peers' opinions, and societal norms (Wang et al., 2022). Parental expectations and social approval play a significant role in career choices, especially in collectivistic societies like Pakistan and Nepal. Too much social pressure can lead to stress, confusion and indecision for students in their career exploration and decision-making process, while supportive social environments can help.

While prior studies have studied career decision-making issues, generalized anxiety, and social influences individually, few studies have explored both career decision-making and generalized anxiety and social influence, simultaneously, in one mediation model, especially in South Asian populations. In addition, social influence in the relationship between career decision-making difficulties and psychological outcomes has yet to be fully examined.

The main goal of the current study was hence to look into the connection between career decision making difficulty, career indecision, generalized anxiety and social influence among the university students of Pakistan and Nepal. In particular, this study examined the mediation effect between career decision-making difficulties and psychological distress outcomes of social influence.

The following hypotheses were made:

The difficulties in career decision making will positively predict career indecision.

The difficulty with career decision will positively predict generalized anxiety.

H3: Social influence will be a mediator between career decision making difficulty and career indecision.

The hypothesis is that there will be a mediation effect between the generalized anxiety and career decision making difficulties by social influence.

H5: There will be significant gender differences on the scores of career indecision and generalized anxiety.

Literature Review

Career Decision-Making Difficulties

Career decision making problems are those difficulties that an individual may have in choosing and choosing to pursue a career. Career decision making problems have been attributed to poor self-knowledge, inadequate occupational information, and inadequate decision-making skills (Gati et al., 1996; Osborn et al., 2024). Career choices are difficult during emerging adulthood, especially for university students, because they often are not certain about their abilities, interests, or future career opportunities.

Previous research has shown that a significant percentage of students has moderate to high levels of career decision-making difficulties when they make transitions in education (Gati et al., 2020). These difficulties are linked to confusion, slower decision making, lower confidence in their career, and adapting to future work requirements. Other research also shows that students facing more challenges with decision making tend to have less clear professional plans and lower academic motivation and career readiness (Osborn et al., 2024).

Career Indecision

Career indecision is defined as a lack of stable career decisions and/or uncertainty. It is viewed as one of the most frequent psychological and developmental problems in university students (Braunstein-Bercovitz et al., 2012). While it is normal for students to be unsure about their career, chronic indecision can have detrimental effects on students' academic achievement, emotional health and future career satisfaction.

Research has shown that career indecision is associated with a decrease in self-efficacy, self-confidence in career planning and psychological distress (Song et al., 2025). Indecisiveness about the career choices has been correlated with avoidance behaviors, fear of failure, and problems adjusting to the demands of the occupation. In addition, students may have difficulty making informed decisions about career options and making realistic career choices if they delay too long.

Generalized Anxiety and Career Indecision

Generalized anxiety refers to excessive and persistent worry regarding multiple areas of life, including academic, social, and occupational concerns (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Among university students, anxiety is frequently associated with uncertainty about future employment, career success, and fear of making incorrect career decisions.

Previous research has consistently shown a positive relationship between anxiety and career indecision (Zhou et al., 2022). Students with elevated anxiety levels often experience greater difficulty processing career-related information and making confident decisions. Anxiety may increase indecisiveness by intensifying fear of uncertainty and reducing career decision-making self-efficacy (Çelik, 2026). As a result, students may avoid career exploration activities and delay important vocational decisions, further increasing psychological distress.

Social Influence and Career Development

Students' career development & decision making is heavily influenced by social factors. Students' expectations, peer opinions, and societal norms have a major influence on their educational and occupational decisions, especially in collectivist societies like Pakistan and Nepal (Wang et al., 2022; Gao, 2024). Favourable social contexts could boost student self-confidence and help with career exploration. Career decision making self-efficacy and psychological wellbeing have been positively associated with parental encouragement and peer support (Söner & Gultekin, 2024). But too much social pressure and unrealistic expectations could be linked to stress, confusion and the fear of not living up to others' standards, which can lead to career indecision and anxiety.

However, there is growing evidence that social influence can indirectly influence psychological outcomes by influencing students' self-perceptions of competence, success and social acceptance. It can therefore be concluded that social influence can be one of the mediators between the career decision making difficulties and emotional distress of students.

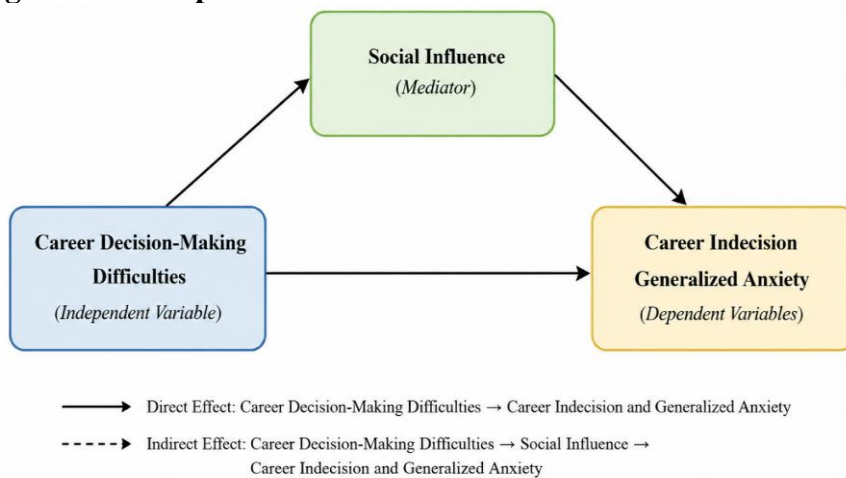
Research Gap

While there have been studies that have separately investigated career indecision, generalized anxiety, and social support, few studies have investigated these variables in the same mediation model at the same time. There is a lack of evidence on the mediating effect of social influence in the relationship between career decision-making difficulties and psychological outcomes among university students in South Asian contexts, in particular.

Besides, majority of the available research has been conducted in western population where collectivistic family and society values play a significant role in career selection in countries like Pakistan and Nepal. The current study is designed to fill this gap by examining the relationship between career decision making difficulties, career indecision, generalized anxiety and social influence, as well as the possibility of a mediating role of social influence between these variables.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Note. The model proposes that social influence mediates the relationship between career decision-making difficulties and the psychological outcomes (career indecision and generalized anxiety).

Rationale of the study

The determinants of career decision-making problems have been studied in recent years, such as predictors of social support (Zhou et al., 2024), personality traits and decision-making styles (Aydemir & Arli, 2025), emerging career indecision profiles in higher education (Alotaibi et al., 2025). While such contributions have helped the field, there has been a surprising lack of studies that examine career indecision and generalized anxiety as two aspects of career decision-making difficulties, especially in South Asian cultural contexts where collective norms create unique career-related pressures. Moreover, although social and familial factors are known to be influential on students' career development, the mediating role they play between the internal difficulties in decision making and their psychological outcomes has not been extensively tested. The difference highlights the importance of empirical studies that can help to understand the interaction of social influence and cognitive and emotional processes in university student populations.

Methods

Research Design

The current study used a cross-sectional correlational research design to explore the relationship between career decision-making difficulties, career indecision and generalized anxiety and social influence among students in Universities in Pakistan and Nepal. This study was designed to examine the prevalence and correlates of career indecision and career anxiety and the effect of social influences as a mediator.

Ethical Considerations

The present study was conducted with the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Haripur. All the respondents were voluntary and informed consent was obtained before data collection. Participants were told about the purpose of the study, confidentiality of the responses, and their right to leave the study at any time without any penalty.

Inclusion Criteria

The participants were undergraduate and postgraduate students from both the universities in Pakistan and Nepal. Eligible participants were 18-35 years old and eager to participate in the study voluntarily. Students who did not answer all the questions or did not complete the questionnaires were not included in the final analysis.

Instruments

CDDQ - Short Form (CDDQ-Short) – Career Decision-Making Difficulties Questionnaire – Short Form

Career Decision-Making Difficulties Questionnaire-Short (CDDQ-Short) was used to determine career decision-making difficulties. Gati, Krausz and Osipow (1996) created the original scale, which rates the three critical areas: lack of readiness, lack of information and inconsistent information. Items are scored on a 9 point Likert scale from 1 (“does not describe me at all”) to 9 (“describes me well”) with higher scores reflecting more career decision making difficulties.

Social Influence Scale

The Social Influence Scale in the present study was derived from the concepts of informational and normative social influence used in previous literature on career development. The questionnaire evaluated the influence of family expectations, peers and significant others on students' career decision making process. A 5 item instrument was made that assessed perceived social pressure, contradictory information about a career and lack of support in career decisions. Responses were scored on a 5 point Likert scale 1 (“Strongly Disagree”) to 5 (“Strongly Agree”) with higher scores reflecting higher perceived social influence. In the current study, the scale showed good internal consistency reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .81$).

Career Indecision Profile (CIP) – Short Form

The Career Indecision Profile–Short Form (CIP-Short) developed by Xu and Tracey (2017) was used to measure emotional and personality-related aspects of career indecision. The scale contains 20 items that measure the aspects of neuroticism/negative affectivity, choice anxiety, lack of readiness, and interpersonal conflict. Responses are scored on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree), with higher scores representing more career indecision.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7)

Symptoms of generalized anxiety over the past 2-week period were measured using the Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7) by Spitzer et al. (2006). The scale has 7 items which are rated on a 4-point Likert response scale from 0 (not at all) to 3 (nearly every day). The higher the score, the more severe the anxiety.

Table 1: Reliability Coefficients of Study Measures

Scale	Number of Items	Cronbach’s Alpha
Career Decision-Making Difficulties Questionnaire (CDDQ-Short)	44	.94
Career Indecision Profile – Short Form (CIP-Short)	20	.84
Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7)	7	.92
Social Influence Scale	Variable by version	.81

Procedure and Participants

A total of 380 university students aged 18–35 years participated in the study, including 171 males (45.0%) and 209 females (55.0%). Participants were recruited using convenience sampling from universities in Pakistan and Nepal. Convenience sampling was selected due to accessibility and feasibility considerations within university settings. Participant informed consent was obtained, and data was gathered using both online and paper questionnaires. The questionnaires were self-administered using electronic method or face-to-face, depending on the participants' availability and preference.

The data collected were checked for missing values and inconsistencies in the answers. Responses that lacked or contradicted were not included in the final data set. IBM SPSS Statistics version 27.0 was used for analysis of the cleaned data. The statistical analysis consisted of Pearson correlation, regression analysis, mediation analysis and independent-samples t tests to explore correlations among variables for the study. For future research, the PROCESS Macro Model 4 by Hayes, with 5,000

bootstrap samples and bias-corrected confidence intervals, would need to be used to get more robust estimation of indirect effects.

Table 2: Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	171	45.0
	Female	209	55.0
Age	18–25	154	40.5
	26–35	226	59.5
Country	Pakistan	250	65.8
	Nepal	130	34.2

Results

Table 3: Correlation among Career Decision-Making Difficulties, Career Indecision Profile, Generalized Anxiety and Social Influence

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. CDDQ_Total	1			
2. CIP_Total	.38**	1		
3. GAD_Total	.27**	.39**	1	
4. SI_Total	.38**	.37**	.30**	1

**Note. Correlations are significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients among Career Decision-Making Difficulties (CDDQ), Career Indecision (CIP), Generalized Anxiety (GAD), and Social Influence (SI). The findings revealed that Career Decision-Making Difficulties were significantly and positively associated with Career Indecision and Generalized Anxiety. Social Influence was also positively correlated with both Career Indecision and Anxiety, indicating that greater perceived social pressure was related to higher levels of psychological distress and career-related uncertainty among students.

Table 4: Regression Model among Career Decision-Making Difficulties and Social Influence in which Career Indecision Profile is dependent

Predictor	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
	B	SE	β	t	P
Constant	24.74	3.70	—	6.69	.000
CDDQ_Total	0.12	0.02	.28	5.69	.000
SI_Total	0.57	0.11	.27	5.33	.000

Dependent Variable: CIP

The regression analysis results for predicting Career Indecision from Career Decision-Making Difficulties and Social Influence are shown in Table 4. The results showed that Career Decision-Making Difficulties had a significant effect on the Career Indecision of the University students. Social Influence was also found to be a significant predictor, with higher family and peer pressures associated with higher career indecision.

Table 5: Regression Model among Career Decision-Making Difficulties and Social Influence in which Generalized Anxiety is dependent

Predictor	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	2.06	1.30	—	1.59	.113
CDDQ_Total	0.03	0.01	.18	3.48	.001
SI_Total	0.16	0.04	.23	4.37	.000

Dependent Variable: GAD

The results of the regression analysis predicting Generalized Anxiety from Career Decision-Making Difficulties and Social Influence are displayed in Table 5. The results showed that those who were more struggling in making career choices were found to be significantly more anxious than their counterparts. Additionally, Social Influence was a key factor in anxiety, suggesting that external pressure and expectations can add to psychological distress in students.

Table 6: Mediation Analysis Examining Social Influence as a Mediator Between Career Decision-Making Difficulties and Psychological Outcomes

	Model 1 B	Model 2 B	95%CI
Constant	2.06	2.06	[-0.49, 4.61]
CDDQ_Total (IV)	0.03	0.02	[0.01, 0.03]
Social Influence (M)		0.16	[0.09, 0.23]
R ²	.09	.13	
F	36.87**	18.52**	
ΔR^2		.04	
ΔF		21.44**	

**p<.01; B for Unstandardized regression coefficient; CI for Confidence Interval

Table 6 shows the mediation analysis here which looks into the mediating role of Social Influence between Career Decision-Making Difficulties and Psychological outcomes. The results of the analyses showed that Social Influence partly mediated the relationship between Career Decision-Making Difficulties and Career Indecision and Generalized Anxiety. This indicates that pressures and external expectations may lead to a higher level of anxiety and indecision for students who are having more difficulties in their career choice.

Table 7: T Test Analysis

Variable	Male (n = 171) M (SD)	Female (n = 209) M (SD)	t	p	95% CI [LL, UL]	Cohen's d
CDDQ	178.97 (44.60)	172.87 (39.70)	1.41	.159	[-2.41, 14.62]	0.15
CIP	60.00 (18.51)	59.21 (17.18)	0.43	.665	[-2.81, 4.40]	0.05
GAD	10.42 (5.71)	10.68 (6.10)	-0.44	.660	[-1.47, 0.93]	-0.05
SI	24.58 (8.53)	24.46 (8.16)	0.15	.884	[-1.56, 1.81]	0.02

Note. N=380 *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001; M=Mean, SD= Standard Deviation.

Table 7 presents the independent samples t-test analysis examining gender differences in Career Indecision and Generalized Anxiety among university students. The findings revealed no statistically

significant gender differences across the major study variables, indicating that male and female students experienced comparable levels of career-related difficulties and psychological distress.

Discussion

This study focused on the relationship between career decision-making difficulties, career indecision, generalized anxiety and social influence among university students. Results revealed that students with higher levels of CDM difficulties had increased career indecision and generalized anxiety. Moreover, social influence partially explained these relationships, indicating that the expectations of family members, the opinions of peers, and societal pressure are important factors in students' psychological distress and career uncertainty.

The results indicated that there was a significant positive correlation between career decision-making problems and career indecision. When students felt confused, lacked information about careers and had not reached a decision on career goals, they indicated more difficulties with making career decisions. The results are in line with past studies that have found that poor career preparedness and ambiguity lead to career distress and postponing career commitment (Gati et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). The findings indicate that career-related information processing problems could affect students' confidence in making successful career decisions.

In addition, there was a significant positive correlation between career decision-making difficulties and generalized anxiety. Worry and psychological distress were greater among students who were uncertain about future occupational outcomes. The results are in line with previous studies showing that career uncertainty is associated with anxiety, fear of failure, and decreased emotional well-being among university students (Zhou et al., 2022; Çelik, 2026). Career related stress could then impact students' capacity to make sure and rational career decisions.

Another factor that contributed to career indecision and anxiety was social influence. Students who felt higher parental, peer and social pressures had more career decision uncertainty and emotional distress. Collectivistic societies like Pakistan and Nepal, the family's expectations and social approval play a large part in the career choice. Having supportive social environments can support students' career exploration, but if the pressure is too great, it can have an adverse impact on students' confidence and decision-making skills.

The mediation analysis also revealed that social influence partially mediated the relation between career decision making difficulties and psychological results. The results indicate that students who are having more problems with their careers may be more susceptible to experiencing anxiety and indecision when faced with more external pressure and conflicting expectations. The results are in line with the previous study that revealed parents' expectations and social comparison as significant factors impacting students' career related stress and emotional wellbeing (Wang et al., 2023; Gao, 2024).

The present study has significant practical implications for the educational setting and mental health practitioners. Career counseling programs for universities to help students enhance career decision-making ability, reduce anxiety and deal with social pressure can be developed. Career planning and self-efficacy, and emotional regulation workshops can also help students make informed and confident career decisions.

There are some study limitations, although the study has made contributions. Limited generalizability to other student populations may be due to the use of convenience sampling. Moreover, causal interpretation of the relationships between variables is limited by the cross-sectional study design. Self-report measures can also lead to response bias. Longitudinal and multi-method designs are recommended as methods for further exploring the long-term effects of social influence on career-related psychological outcomes in future studies.

The overall results indicated that the difficulties in career decision-making were strongly related to career indecision and generalized anxiety among university students. Social influence seems to be one of the significant mediators in this relationship, especially in collectivistic cultures. Therefore, it is important to consider both psychological and social issues, which can assist students in dealing with career-related problems and issues more effectively.

Study Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There are some limitations of the present study which should be taken into account while interpreting the findings of the study. First, cross-sectional design places limitations on drawing causal inferences between career decision making difficulties, generalized anxiety and social influence. Future studies should use longitudinal approaches to better account for the directionality of these relationships and to better understand the long-term implications of the relationships. Second, self-report measures were used, which can lead to socially desirable responding and response bias. Participants might have underestimated or exaggerated their psychological responses and/or concerns regarding their career. Further, the convenience sampling approach might reduce the generalizability of results to other university populations.

In addition, the mediation analysis was conducted by hierarchical regression analysis instead of Hayes' PROCESS Macro with bootstrapped confidence intervals, which could possibly reduce the accuracy in estimating the indirect effect. Additional research should utilize PROCESS Model 4 with 5,000 bootstrap samples to get more stable and reliable mediation estimates. Further studies are also recommended to explore other psychological and contextual factors, such as career decision making self-efficacy, personality, coping style and socioeconomic status, to gain a deeper understanding of psychological distress in relation to career of university students.

Conclusion

The present study revealed that, the variables of career decision making difficulties were significantly correlated with career indecision and generalized anxiety in University students. Career decision-making difficulties partially mediated the relationship between career decision-making difficulties and anxiety, indicating the role of contextual pressures in influencing students' psychological outcomes.

The results indicate that cognitive issues that are associated with careers are strongly related to emotional wellbeing. Thus, internal decision-making difficulties and external social factors could be related to fostering adaptive career development and psychological resilience in university students, and addressing both of these factors might be beneficial.

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