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Career Adaptability and Employment Anxiety among Vocational College Students: The Mediating Role of Resilience

Siyue Li

Jiangxi Agricultural University, Nanchang 330045, China

Abstract: Employment anxiety is an important concern among vocational college students. This study examined the relationship between career adaptability and employment anxiety and explored the mediating role of resilience. Based on a questionnaire survey of 1,196 vocational college students, the results showed that career adaptability was positively associated with resilience and negatively associated with employment anxiety. Resilience partially mediated the relationship between career adaptability and employment anxiety. These findings highlight the importance of developing career adaptability and resilience in alleviating employment anxiety among vocational college students.

Keywords: Vocational College Students, Career Adaptability, Resilience, Employment Anxiety, Mediation Effect.

1. Introduction

The transition from school to the labor market is an important stage in the career development of vocational college students. Changes in employment opportunities, competition related to educational qualifications, evolving skill requirements, and uncertainty in career choices may cause some students to experience persistent tension, worry, and avoidance during job-search preparation and career decision-making. Employment anxiety refers to negative emotional experiences such as tension, uneasiness, worry, or fear in employment-related situations. Excessive anxiety may not only impair psychological well-being but also interfere with information seeking, career decision-making, and job-search behavior [1–2]. Therefore, identifying psychological resources that can help vocational college students cope with employment uncertainty is of practical significance.

Previous studies have explained college students' employment anxiety from various perspectives, including social support, perceived educational discrimination, parenting styles, economic pressure, core self-evaluations, and job-search self-efficacy [2–7]. These studies have revealed the multiple sources of employment anxiety. However, further attention is needed to understand how vocational college students mobilize career-related resources and develop stable capacities for coping with stress. Compared with students in conventional four-year universities, vocational college students' learning experiences are more directly connected with internships, skills assessments, and transitions into employment. Their employment-related psychological experiences are therefore influenced not only by the external structure of employment opportunities but also by their psychological resources for dealing with career-related tasks.

Career adaptability refers to the psychosocial resources that individuals use to cope with current or anticipated career tasks, career transitions, and career-related difficulties. It generally includes four dimensions: career concern, career control, career curiosity, and career confidence [8–9]. Career construction theory suggests that individuals with higher career adaptability are better able to understand changes in the occupational environment, develop action plans, and adjust themselves in uncertain situations. Previous research has found that career adaptability is associated with lower levels of career-choice anxiety [8]. However, the relationship between career adaptability and employment anxiety may not be limited to a direct association. It may also operate through more general resources related to stress recovery.

Resilience refers to the ability and process through which individuals maintain, recover, or regain positive adaptation when facing stress, setbacks, or adversity [10–11]. Previous research has shown that resilience may mediate the relationship between career adaptability and life satisfaction [12]. A systematic review has also suggested that resilience is associated with better emotional health [13]. Students with higher career adaptability are generally more attentive to future career tasks, experience a stronger sense of control, are more willing to explore possible opportunities, and have greater confidence in solving problems. These resources may be related to the ability to interpret stress positively, regulate emotions, and recover from setbacks. Students with higher resilience may be more likely to maintain relatively stable psychological states when facing job-search setbacks, job mismatch, and employment competition, thereby experiencing lower employment anxiety. From this perspective, resilience may represent one psychological pathway through which career adaptability is associated with employment anxiety.

Accordingly, the present study examined the relationships among career adaptability, resilience, and employment anxiety among vocational college students and proposed the following hypotheses:

H1: Career adaptability is significantly negatively associated with employment anxiety among vocational college students.

H2: Career adaptability is significantly positively associated with resilience, whereas resilience is significantly negatively associated with employment anxiety.

H3: Resilience mediates the relationship between career adaptability and employment anxiety among vocational college students.

2. Participants and Methods

(1) Participants and Procedure

A questionnaire survey was conducted from June 2 to June 10, 2026, among students from five higher vocational colleges in Nanchang, China. A convenience sampling method was adopted. With the assistance of teachers at the participating colleges, questionnaires were distributed to students through an online survey platform. The participants were enrolled students from the first to third years of study.A total of 2,170 questionnaires were collected. After excluding questionnaires with excessively short completion times, patterned responses, or missing key information, 1,196 valid questionnaires remained, resulting in a valid response rate of 55.1%.The participants included first- to third-year students from various major categories at higher vocational colleges. Detailed information on the sample characteristics is presented in Table 1.Although the employment anxiety scale used in this study was originally developed for college graduates, it was also considered applicable to vocational college students. Students in different years of study may already experience concerns about their future employment, and such concerns may take the form of anticipatory employment anxiety before graduation. Therefore, the scale was used to assess students' employment-related anxiety in the present study.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Variable		N	Percentage(%)
Gender	Male	281	23.5
	Female	915	76.5
Year of Study	First year	669	55.9
	Second year	409	34.2
	Third year	118	9.9
Residence	Urban	407	34
	Rural	789	66

(2) Measures

1) Employment Anxiety

Employment anxiety was measured using the employment anxiety scale developed by Zhang Xiaoqin. The original scale contains 30 items across four dimensions: employment insecurity, employment fear, interview anxiety, and work anxiety. Two items are reverse-scored. The scale uses a four-point Likert response format, with higher scores indicating higher levels of employment anxiety.A pilot study was conducted before the formal survey. Based on the item analysis and exploratory factor analysis results, the two reverse-scored items were removed because they showed unsatisfactory psychometric performance and formed a separate factor. The final scale therefore contained 28 items. In the present study, the total score was used as an overall indicator of employment anxiety rather than calculating separate scores for the four dimensions. The scale demonstrated good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's α of 0.98.

2) Resilience

Resilience was measured using the 10-item Connor–Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC-10), developed by Connor and Davidson and subsequently shortened by Campbell-Sills and Stein[10,14]. The Chinese version used in this study was developed and validated by Wang Li et al[15]. The scale consists of 10 items and is generally regarded as a unidimensional measure of resilience.Participants responded to each item using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (almost always true). Higher scores indicate greater resilience. The scale showed good internal consistency in the present sample, with a Cronbach's α of 0.93.

3) Career Adaptability

Career adaptability was assessed using the Short Form of the Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS-SF)[16], developed by Maggiori et al. and validated in Chinese by Yu et al[17]. The scale contains 12 items covering four dimensions: career concern, career control, career curiosity, and career confidence, with three items in each dimension.Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale. Higher scores indicate greater career adaptability. In this study, the overall score was used to represent participants' career adaptability. The scale demonstrated good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's α of 0.94.

(3) Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 27.0. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analyses were first conducted to examine the distributions of the main variables and their bivariate relationships. Multiple regression analyses were then performed to examine the predictive relationships among career adaptability, resilience, and employment anxiety.The mediating effect of resilience was tested using Model 4 of the PROCESS macro, version 5.0. The analysis was based on 5,000 bootstrap samples, and 95% percentile bootstrap confidence intervals were calculated. An indirect effect was considered statistically significant when its confidence interval did not include zero. Unstandardized regression coefficients were reported for the mediation analysis. All statistical tests were two-tailed, and the significance level was set at 0.05.

To examine potential common method bias, Harman's single-factor test was conducted. The first unrotated factor accounted for 38.406% of the total variance, which was below the commonly used 40% reference value. This result did not indicate a serious common method bias in the present data.

3. Results

(1)Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Table 2 shows that career adaptability was significantly positively correlated with resilience ($r = 0.693$, $p < 0.001$) and significantly negatively correlated with employment anxiety ($r = -0.459$, $p < 0.001$). Resilience was also significantly negatively correlated with employment anxiety ($r = -0.488$, $p < 0.001$). These findings were consistent with the expectations of H1 and H2 and provided a statistical basis for further examining the indirect effect.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among the Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
1 Career adaptability	3.564	0.594	1		
2 Resilience	3.543	0.616	0.693***	1	
3 Employment anxiety	2.480	0.564	-0.459***	-0.488***	1

(2)Regression Analysis

When resilience was entered as the dependent variable, career adaptability showed a significant positive predictive effect on resilience ($\beta = 0.693$, $t = 33.175$, $p < 0.001$). The model explained 48.0% of the variance in resilience.When

career adaptability and resilience were simultaneously entered into the regression model predicting employment anxiety, both career adaptability ($\beta = -0.233$, $t = -6.787$, $p < 0.001$) and resilience ($\beta = -0.326$, $t = -9.489$, $p < 0.001$) showed significant negative predictive effects. The model explained 26.6% of the variance in employment anxiety.The collinearity diagnostics showed that the tolerance values for career adaptability and resilience were both 0.520, and the variance inflation factor (VIF) values were both 1.922. These values indicated that the regression model did not show serious multicollinearity.

Table 3. Regression Analysis Results

Model	Dependent Variable	Predictor	R	R^2	β	t	p
1	Resilience	Career Adaptability	0.693	0.480	0.693	33.175	<0.001
2	Employment Anxiety	Career Adaptability	0.516	0.266	-0.233	-6.787	<0.001
2	Employment Anxiety	Resilience	-	-	-0.326	-9.489	<0.001

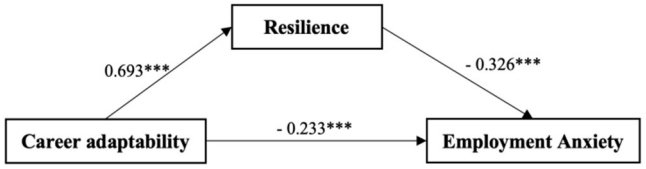


Figure 1. Mediation Model of Resilience

(3)The Mediating Effect of Resilience

The results of the Bootstrap analysis showed that the indirect effect of career adaptability on employment anxiety through resilience was −0.2147, with a Bootstrap standard error of 0.0276 and a 95% confidence interval of [−0.2691, −0.1614]. Because the confidence interval did not include zero, the indirect effect was statistically significant. Meanwhile, after resilience was included in the model, the direct effect of career adaptability on employment anxiety remained significant ($\beta = -0.233$, $p < 0.001$). These results supported the statistical model of partial mediation by resilience, and H3 was supported.

Table 4. Test of the Indirect Effect of Resilience

Effect Type	Effect	Boot SE	95% CI Lower Limit	95% CI Upper Limit
Total effect	-0.4364	0.0244	-0.4843	-0.3884
Direct effect	-0.2217	0.0327	-0.2858	-0.1576
Indirect effect	-0.2147	0.0276	-0.2691	-0.1614

4. Discussion

(1)The Relationship Between Career Adaptability and Employment Anxiety

The results showed that career adaptability was significantly negatively associated with employment anxiety among vocational college students. This negative relationship remained significant after resilience was included in the regression model. This finding was generally consistent with previous research on the relationship between career adaptability and career-choice anxiety [8].From the perspective of career construction theory, career concern enables students to connect their current learning with their future careers, career control strengthens their sense of agency in career decision-making, career curiosity encourages them to explore potential occupations and developmental opportunities, and career confidence supports their efforts to cope with job-search tasks. When these resources are more available, students may be more likely to develop feasible action plans in response to employment uncertainty and may therefore be less likely to experience persistent worry and helplessness.

This relationship has particular significance in the context of vocational education. Vocational students' professional learning is closely connected with occupational roles, while internships, skills assessments, and job seeking often occur within a relatively short period. Career adaptability is therefore reflected not only in a generally positive attitude but also in students' ability to understand changes in occupational requirements, adjust their skills preparation, and develop realistic career expectations. However, the present study did not directly measure job opportunities, perceived educational discrimination, or family economic pressure. Therefore, employment anxiety cannot be attributed entirely to individual adaptability.

(2)The Mediating Role of Resilience

The Bootstrap results supported a significant indirect effect of resilience in the relationship between career adaptability and employment anxiety. Higher career adaptability was associated with greater resilience, whereas resilience was associated with lower employment anxiety. This finding suggests that career adaptability may be related not only to career planning and career-related actions but also to individuals' ability to restore psychological balance after job-search setbacks, job mismatch, and conflicts in career choices. Students with higher resilience may be more likely to interpret temporary setbacks as problems that can be adjusted or resolved, rather than as a comprehensive negation of their self-worth and career prospects.

It should be noted that the mediation results were based on self-reported data collected at a single time point. They indicate that the covariance structure among career adaptability, resilience, and employment anxiety was consistent with the theoretically proposed sequence, but they

cannot rule out the possibility that employment anxiety may in turn weaken resilience and career adaptability. Nor can the potential influence of common factors, such as general self-efficacy, social support, and family economic pressure, be excluded. Therefore, a more accurate interpretation is that resilience may represent one psychological pathway through which career adaptability and employment anxiety are associated, rather than a transmission mechanism that has been strictly established through causal evidence.

(3)Practical Implications

The findings suggest that career guidance in higher vocational colleges could extend beyond the provision of employment information and skills training to include the development of career-related psychological resources. Career adaptability training could be designed around future concern, proactive control, career exploration, and confidence in performing career-related tasks. Psychological support could focus on stress identification, cognitive reappraisal, recovery from setbacks, and help-seeking skills.Combining these two approaches may help avoid interpreting employment anxiety simply as a lack of students' ability to cope with stress. It may also help connect individual psychological support with real career-related tasks and experiences.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

(1)Conclusion

This study examined the relationships among career adaptability, resilience, and employment anxiety among vocational college students. The results showed that career adaptability was significantly positively associated with resilience and significantly negatively associated with employment anxiety. Resilience was also significantly negatively associated with employment anxiety. Furthermore, resilience partially mediated the relationship between career adaptability and employment anxiety.These findings suggest that career adaptability may be associated with lower employment anxiety partly through its relationship with resilience. However, due to the cross-sectional design and the use of self-report measures, the findings do not establish causal relationships among the variables.

(2)Recommendations

1) Integrate Career Adaptability Development into Career Education

Higher vocational colleges should incorporate career adaptability development into career education throughout students' college years. For first-year students, career education may focus on professional cognition, career awareness, and concern for future development. For second-year students, more attention may be given to career exploration, internship preparation, and the development of career decision-making abilities. For third-year students, career guidance may emphasize employment decision-making, job-search preparation, and adaptation to the transition from school to work.

2) Combine Career Education with Resilience Development

Career guidance should be combined with activities that help students develop resilience through practical experiences. Colleges may organize mock interviews, résumé preparation and feedback, internship reflection, and group activities related to job seeking. These activities can provide students with opportunities to experience setbacks, adjust their strategies, and develop confidence in dealing with employment-related difficulties.In addition, psychological support services should provide students with guidance on stress recognition, emotional regulation, cognitive reappraisal, and help-seeking. Students who experience persistent or severe employment anxiety should be referred to appropriate professional psychological services when necessary.

3) Provide Differentiated and Stage-Specific Support

Employment-related psychological support should take into account differences in students' year of study, internship experience, family economic pressure, and job-search progress. Support for lower-year students may focus on reducing uncertainty about future careers, whereas support for graduating students may focus more on employment decision-making, interview preparation, and coping with job-search setbacks.At the same time, assessment tools should be used primarily to identify students' support needs and provide appropriate assistance, rather than to label or categorize students.

4) Strengthen the Connection Between Career Education and Real Employment Contexts

Career education should be connected more closely with real occupational contexts. Higher vocational colleges may strengthen cooperation with enterprises, introduce practical projects, provide authentic job-related experiences, and invite alumni or industry mentors to participate in career guidance. These activities may help students develop a clearer understanding of occupational requirements and improve their ability to respond to changes in the employment environment.However, the effectiveness of these approaches requires further empirical examination.

(3)Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design prevents firm conclusions about causal relationships among career adaptability, resilience, and employment anxiety. Future research could adopt longitudinal or experimental designs to examine the temporal relationships among these variables.Second, all variables were measured through self-report questionnaires, which may be affected by common method bias and social desirability. Future studies could combine self-report measures with interviews, behavioral indicators, or evaluations from other sources.Third, two reverse-scored items were removed from the employment anxiety scale during the pilot study. Although the final scale showed good internal consistency, the implications of removing these items for the scale's structural validity require further investigation.Fourth, the participants were recruited from five higher vocational colleges in Nanchang, and the sample included students from different years of study. Therefore, the generalizability of the findings to students from other regions, institutions, or educational stages should be examined with caution.Finally, future research could incorporate additional variables, such as social support, family economic pressure, perceived educational discrimination, and job-search self-efficacy, to further explore the mechanisms underlying employment anxiety among vocational college students.

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