

Research Article

Career Anxiety, Behavioral Intention, and Job-Seeking Behavior among Economics Students in Hanoi, Vietnam: A PLS-SEM Approach

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ABSTRACT

In an increasingly competitive labor market, employment has become a major concern for university students, particularly those in economics-related fields. In Vietnam, youth unemployment and the mismatch between graduates' fields of study and employment have raised concerns about students' career orientation and readiness to enter the workforce. These pressures may also be shaped by broader technological changes, including the development of artificial intelligence and digital technologies. This study examines the relationship between career anxiety, behavioral intention, and job search behavior among economics students in Hanoi, with behavioral intention positioned as a mediating variable. A quantitative approach was employed using survey data collected from 174 economics students. The proposed relationships were tested using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS. The results show that career anxiety does not directly affect job search behavior but has a positive effect on behavioral intention. Behavioral intention, in turn, has a strong positive effect on job search behavior and plays an important role in linking career anxiety to job search behavior. These findings suggest that career anxiety may function as a psychological signal that encourages students to form clearer job search intentions. The study provides implications for universities and career support services in strengthening students' career planning, job search preparation, and transition from higher education to the labor market.

Keywords: Behavioral intention; Career anxiety; Higher education; Job search behavior; PLS-SEM

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1. Introduction

Employment has long been a topic of significant concern in society. In recent years, the labor market in Vietnam has imposed increasingly stringent recruitment requirements. This has placed greater pressure on workers, particularly young people. According to the General Statistics Office, the unemployment rate among youth aged 15 - 24 reached 7.96% in 2024, indicating growing challenges for young individuals entering the labor market. In addition, a survey conducted by the International School - Vietnam National University, Hanoi, revealed that 41% of graduates work in fields unrelated to their majors, reflecting a lack of career orientation and uncertainty in post-graduation job choices.

These changes have become more pronounced amid the rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) and digital technologies. Graduating students now face increasingly intense competition. Collectively, these factors indirectly increase psychological pressure known as career anxiety - a psychological state characterized by

worry, uncertainty, and concern about future career prospects. Therefore, career anxiety is an important construct to examine, as it is not only an emotional response but may also directly influence students' preparation and job-search behavior.

Although career anxiety is widely recognized as a common phenomenon among students, the mechanism through which this anxiety translates into concrete job search actions remains unclear. According to Kim et al. (2022), higher levels of anxiety may motivate students to seek jobs to reduce uncertainty actively. At the same time, anxiety may also lead to procrastination, avoidance, or indecisiveness in behavior. This demonstrates the dual effects of career anxiety.

This suggests that the relationship between career anxiety and job-search behavior is not linear. Instead, an intermediate cognitive mechanism may determine whether anxiety promotes or inhibits behavior. According to the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), behavioral intention is considered the closest predictor of actual behavior, serving as a link between psychological states and specific actions. From this perspective, career anxiety may influence job search behavior by shaping behavioral intention. However, empirical studies examining this mechanism in student populations remain limited, particularly in current economic contexts.

Existing studies reveal two main research gaps. The first is a conceptual gap in explaining the mechanism linking career anxiety and job search behavior. Previous studies often examined the direct relationship between emotional factors and career behavior without considering the intermediate cognitive stage. Kim and Lee (2021) emphasized that the ability to recognize and manage emotions helps students maintain more stable, proactive job-search behavior, regardless of whether they experience negative or positive emotions. Meanwhile, Wang et al. (2017) found that emotion regulation strategies influence the shaping of job search behavior. Cognitive reappraisal is positively associated with job-search behavior, whereas emotional suppression shows a negative relationship.

These findings indicate that although career anxiety has been shown to influence decision-making, career preparation, and career attitudes, very few studies have examined the mediating role of behavioral intention. Therefore, the psychological mechanism explaining how career anxiety translates into job search behavior remains unclear.

The second gap relates to the research context. Most previous studies were conducted in developed countries characterized by individualistic cultures and stable labor markets. In contrast, Vietnam is a developing economy with collectivist cultural characteristics, a rapidly expanding higher education system, and intense competition among graduates. In particular, economics students in Hanoi face considerable pressure due to large student populations, broad career options, and unclear career orientation. These contextual characteristics may alter how career anxiety influences job search behavior. Therefore, examining the relationship among career anxiety, behavioral intention, and job search behavior in this context is necessary to provide additional empirical evidence and extend existing theoretical frameworks.

Based on the research gaps identified above, this study aims to examine the impact of career anxiety on job-search behavior among economics students in Hanoi, with behavioral intention as a mediator. The study focuses on clarifying whether career anxiety directly affects job search behavior or indirectly influences it through the formation of behavioral intention. Accordingly, the following research questions are proposed:

1. RQ1: Does career anxiety directly affect job search behavior among economics students in Hanoi?
2. RQ2: Does behavioral intention mediate the relationship between career anxiety and job search behavior?
3. RQ3: Does career anxiety positively predict job search behavioral intention?

This study contributes to both theoretical and practical aspects. First, it extends the Theory of Planned Behavior by empirically testing the pathway from career anxiety to job-search behavior via behavioral intention. While traditional TPB focuses on attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, this study introduces career anxiety as a psychological antecedent influencing the formation of intention.

Second, this study reconceptualizes career anxiety not only as a barrier but also as a potential motivational factor. Rather than viewing anxiety solely as a negative element, the study considers the possibility that a certain level of anxiety may stimulate job search intentions and encourage proactive behavior.

Third, this research provides empirical evidence in the context of an emerging Southeast Asian economy, helping address the lack of studies conducted in developing contexts. Finally, the findings offer practical implications for university career support centers. If behavioral intention plays a mediating role, support programs should focus on intention formation through career orientation activities, job search planning, and job search skills training. This approach may help transform career anxiety into a positive motivator and support students in making a more effective transition from education to the labor market.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

The Theory of Planned Behavior, proposed by Icek Ajzen (1991), explains that human behavior is directly predicted by behavioral intention. Intention, in turn, is shaped by three determinants: attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. Among these components, intention is widely recognized as the most immediate and powerful predictor of behavior.

Empirical studies across various domains consistently support the central role of intention in predicting actual behavior. When individuals form a strong intention, they are more likely to translate that intention into action (Ajzen, 1991). This theoretical framework has been widely applied in areas such as health behavior, consumer behavior, and career-related decision-making. In the context of job search, activities such as submitting applications, attending interviews, and actively seeking job opportunities are not random actions. They are planned and goal-directed behaviors that require cognitive effort and preparation. Individuals often assess their abilities, social expectations, and available resources before deciding to engage in job search activities. Therefore, TPB provides a suitable and robust framework for explaining job search behavior.

However, TPB mainly focuses on cognitive determinants and pays less attention to emotional factors. In real-life situations, emotional states can significantly influence decision-making processes. To address this limitation, recent studies suggest integrating affective variables into the TPB framework to enhance its explanatory power. Following this approach, the present study incorporates career anxiety as an additional antecedent of behavioral intention. By doing so, the study aims to capture the influence of emotional responses on job search intention and behavior, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the decision-making process.

2.2. Career Anxiety (CA)

Career anxiety (CA) is considered a negative psychological state that influences how individuals approach and make career-related decisions. This state may alter how individuals perceive, evaluate, and respond to issues related to their future careers. Previous studies indicate that career anxiety emerges at different stages of the career development and exploration process. According to Gerçek and Özveren (2025), career anxiety is defined as negative emotions experienced before or during various stages of career decision-making, as well as during job performance. Similarly, Yun-Jeong Shin and Ji-Yeon Lee (2019) emphasize the critical role of emotions in shaping how individuals approach career choices and decisions. However, Atikah et al. (2023) argue that although career anxiety has been widely discussed in the literature, there is still a lack of a systematic conceptualization of this construct. In particular, career anxiety is often measured in a narrow way and does not fully capture its multidimensional nature. In their review, Atikah et al. (2023) conceptualize career anxiety among students as a temporary psychological state that includes emotional, cognitive, and negative responses arising when individuals face complex career decisions or concerns about future employment.

In this study, the authors adopt the definition proposed by Atikah et al. (2023) as the main conceptual foundation for career anxiety. Accordingly, CA is not merely understood as a feeling of worry, but as a situational psychological state that includes emotional distress, cognitive disruption, and stress responses when individuals confront career-related issues such as career choice, job opportunities, and the quality of future employment.

2.3. Job Search Behavior (JSB)

Job search behavior refers to a set of goal-directed activities undertaken by individuals to obtain employment. These activities include searching for job information, networking, submitting applications, and attending interviews. This definition has been widely adopted in prior research on job search processes (Blau, 1994). The literature distinguishes between preparatory job search behavior and active job search behavior. Preparatory behavior involves activities such as gathering information and preparing application materials, whereas active behavior includes direct actions such as applying for jobs and participating in interviews (Kanfer et al., 2001). This study focuses on active job search behavior because it reflects actual engagement in the job search process. Active behavior provides a more accurate measure of how individuals translate their intentions into action. Previous studies have identified several key antecedents of job search behavior, including self-efficacy, motivation, and self-regulation (Kanfer et al., 2001; Song et al., 2005). Emotional factors such as anxiety have also been examined, but their role remains less clear. In particular, the indirect effect of career anxiety on job search behavior through behavioral intention has not been fully explored. This gap highlights the need for further investigation, which is addressed in the present study.

2.4. Behavioral Intention (INT) as a Mediator

Behavioral intention is defined as the degree to which an individual is willing to perform a specific behavior (Ajzen, 1991). It reflects both the motivation and the planned effort that a person is prepared to invest in carrying out the behavior. In the context of job search, behavioral intention represents a student's deliberate commitment to seeking employment. It captures the readiness to take concrete steps, such as applying for jobs or attending interviews. A large body of research confirms that behavioral intention is a strong and consistent predictor of actual behavior. Individuals with higher levels of intention are more likely to engage in job search activities and sustain their efforts over time. In addition to its direct effect on behavior, intention also plays a mediating role in

many behavioral models. It acts as a bridge between psychological factors and observable actions. This means that emotional or cognitive variables often influence behavior indirectly through intention. Based on this reasoning, the present study positions behavioral intention as a mediator in the relationship between career anxiety and job search behavior. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how internal psychological states translate into external actions.

2.5. Hypothesis Development

Previous studies have reported inconsistent findings regarding the impact of anxiety on behavior. Some studies suggest that anxiety reduces behavioral engagement, as individuals tend to avoid uncertain or risky situations. In contrast, other studies indicate that anxiety can stimulate action when individuals perceive it as a warning signal that requires attention and response. These conflicting findings suggest that the effect of anxiety depends on how individuals appraise the situation. According to the Theory of Planned Behavior proposed by Icek Ajzen (1991), behavior is directly predicted by behavioral intention. Therefore, when intention is included in the model, the direct effect of anxiety on behavior may decrease or become statistically insignificant.

However, to provide a comprehensive examination, this study still considers the direct relationship between career anxiety and job search behavior. In the context of students facing career pressure, anxiety may encourage them to engage more actively in job search activities in order to reduce uncertainty.

H1: Career anxiety has a positive direct effect on job search behavior.

From the perspective of cognitive appraisal theory, when individuals perceive a threat, they are likely to take action to manage the situation. In the career context, anxiety may motivate individuals to form job search intentions as a coping strategy.

H2: Career anxiety positively affects job search intention.

According to the Theory of Planned Behavior, intention is the most immediate and strongest predictor of behavior (Ajzen, 1991). When individuals develop a clear intention, they are more likely to translate it into actual behavior.

H3: Behavioral intention positively affects job search behavior.

Based on the above arguments, career anxiety may influence behavior not only directly but also indirectly through behavioral intention. Intention acts as a mechanism that transforms psychological states into actual actions.

H4: Behavioral intention mediates the relationship between career anxiety and job search behavior.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationships among career anxiety, behavioral intention, and job search behavior among economics students in Hanoi, Vietnam. A cross-sectional design was considered appropriate because the data were collected at a single point in time to test the proposed theoretical model and analyze the relationships among latent constructs. The study was guided by the Theory of Planned Behavior, which positions behavioral intention as a proximal predictor of actual behavior. In this study, career anxiety was examined as a psychological antecedent of behavioral intention, while job search behavior was treated as the behavioral outcome. Ethical considerations were addressed

during the data collection process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study before completing the questionnaire. Participation was voluntary, responses were collected anonymously, and the data were used solely for academic research purposes.

3.2. Sample and Data Collection

The target population of this study consisted of full-time economics students enrolled at universities in Hanoi. Students from the second to the fourth year were selected because they were considered more likely to have begun thinking about career planning, internship opportunities, and job search preparation. Data were collected using a structured online questionnaire. A convenience sampling method was employed because it allowed the researchers to reach student respondents efficiently within the study context. A total of 200 questionnaires were distributed. After the data screening process, 174 valid responses were retained for further analysis.

The final sample size was considered adequate for PLS-SEM analysis. The research model consisted of three latent constructs and a relatively limited number of structural relationships. Following Hair et al. (2017), sample adequacy in PLS-SEM should be considered in relation to model complexity, the number of indicators, and the relationships being estimated. Therefore, the retained sample of 174 respondents was considered sufficient to estimate the proposed measurement and structural models.

3.3. Measurement Instruments

The questionnaire consisted of items measuring three main constructs: career anxiety, behavioral intention, and job search behavior. Career anxiety was initially measured using six indicators, behavioral intention was measured using nine indicators, and job search behavior was measured using five indicators. Thus, the study initially employed 20 observed indicators. The measurement scales were adapted from established studies relevant to the three constructs. The items were modified to fit the context of economics students in Vietnam while maintaining their original conceptual meaning. The questionnaire was administered in Vietnamese, and the adapted items were checked through a translation and back-translation procedure to improve linguistic accuracy and conceptual equivalence.

Before the main data collection, a pilot test was conducted with 30 students to evaluate the clarity, relevance, and readability of the questionnaire items. The results of the pilot test indicated that the items were generally understandable and appropriate for the target respondents. All constructs were measured using multi-item Likert-type scales to capture variations in respondents' perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral tendencies.

3.4. Data Analysis Method: PLS-SEM

The data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS software. PLS-SEM was selected because it is suitable for examining relationships among latent constructs, including mediation effects. It is also appropriate for studies with moderate sample sizes and does not require strict normality assumptions (Hair et al., 2017). The analysis was conducted in two stages. First, the measurement model was assessed to evaluate the reliability and validity of the constructs. Internal consistency reliability was examined using Cronbach's Alpha and composite reliability. Convergent validity was evaluated using outer loadings and average variance extracted. Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT), with the HTMT criterion applied following Henseler et al. (2015). Second, the structural model was assessed to test the proposed hypotheses. The analysis included the examination of path coefficients, t-values, p-values, coefficient of determination, and predictive relevance. The mediating effect of behavioral intention in the relationship between career anxiety

and job search behavior was tested using the bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples and a 95% confidence interval, following Hair et al. (2017). The indirect effect was considered significant when the confidence interval did not include zero.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics and Sample Profile

A total of 174 valid responses were analyzed in this study. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the respondents, including gender, age, university classification, year of study, work or internship experience, job search status, and self-assessed job search capability.

The sample was dominated by female respondents, accounting for 75.29% of the total sample, while male respondents represented 18.97%. Most respondents were between 18 and 20 years old, indicating that the sample largely consisted of undergraduate students in the early to middle stages of their university education.

In terms of institutional background, 62.64% of respondents came from key universities in economics and finance, while 37.36% came from other universities in Hanoi. Most respondents were in their second year of study. In addition, 68.97% of respondents reported having work or internship experience, suggesting that a considerable proportion of the sample had already been exposed to employment-related activities.

Regarding job search status, 48.85% of respondents were currently seeking employment, 28.16% were not seeking employment, and 22.99% were already employed. Most respondents rated their job search capability as neutral. Overall, the sample was relevant to the purpose of this study because the respondents represented university students who were likely to experience career-related concerns and job search preparation during their transition from higher education to the labor market.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Survey Sample

Characteristics	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	33	18.97
	Female	131	75.29
	Prefer not to specify	10	5.75
Age	18–19 years old	59	33.91
	19–20 years old	80	45.98
	20–21 years old	24	13.79
	21–22 years old	10	5.75
	Above 22 years old	1	0.57
University	Key universities in economics and finance	109	62.64
	Other universities	65	37.36
Year of study	Year 1	20	11.43
	Year 2	116	66.29
	Year 3	18	10.29
	Year 4	19	10.86
	Graduated	2	1.14
Work/Internship experience	Yes	120	68.97
	No	54	31.03
Job search status	Currently seeking	85	48.85

	Not seeking	49	28.16
	Already employed	40	22.99
Self-assessed job search capability	Very unconfident	1	0.57
	Unconfident	15	8.62
	Neutral	111	63.79
	Confident	35	20.11
	Very confident	12	6.90
Total sample size		174	100

Note. The classification of “key universities in economics and finance” was based on the 2026 discipline-based ranking published by VNUR. After filtering for institutions in Hanoi, this group included National Economics University, Thuongmai University, Foreign Trade University, Banking Academy, and Academy of Finance. The “other universities” group included other participating institutions, such as University of Economics, Vietnam National University Hanoi, Thang Long University, and others.

4.2. Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was evaluated to assess the reliability and validity of the constructs. The assessment included outer loadings, Cronbach’s Alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted.

As shown in Table 2, the career anxiety construct initially consisted of six indicators. However, CA3 was removed because its outer loading was below the acceptable threshold. After removing CA3, the model was re-estimated. Most indicators showed acceptable loading values, although several indicators, particularly CA4, CA5, CA6, INT1, and INT3, were below the ideal threshold of 0.708. These indicators were retained because the construct-level reliability and convergent validity values remained acceptable.

The Cronbach’s Alpha values ranged from 0.821 to 0.906, indicating good internal consistency across all constructs. Composite reliability values ranged from 0.836 to 0.923, exceeding the recommended minimum threshold. The AVE values ranged from 0.517 to 0.622, indicating that all constructs met the minimum requirement for convergent validity. Therefore, the measurement model demonstrated acceptable reliability and convergent validity.

Table 2. Measurement Model Assessment Results

Construct	Indicators	Outer Loadings	Cronbach’s Alpha	CR	AVE
Career Anxiety	CA1	0.909	0.821	0.836	0.517
	CA2	0.857			
	CA4	0.631			
	CA5	0.558			
	CA6	0.560			
Behavioral Intention	INT1	0.691	0.906	0.923	0.574
	INT2	0.759			
	INT3	0.695			
	INT4	0.803			
	INT5	0.773			
	INT6	0.822			
	INT7	0.810			
	INT8	0.744			
	INT9	0.706			

Job Search Behavior	JSB1	0.720	0.848	0.891	0.622
	JSB2	0.834			
	JSB3	0.787			
	JSB4	0.750			
	JSB5	0.844			

Note. CA3 was removed from the model because its outer loading was below the acceptable threshold.

4.3. Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the heterotrait-monotrait ratio. The results are presented in Table 3.

Based on the Fornell-Larcker criterion, discriminant validity between behavioral intention and job search behavior was not clearly established because the correlation between the two constructs was slightly higher than the square root of AVE for behavioral intention. This suggests that behavioral intention and job search behavior were closely related.

To further examine discriminant validity, the HTMT criterion was assessed. The HTMT value between behavioral intention and job search behavior was 0.894, which remained below the threshold of 0.90 for conceptually related constructs. The HTMT values for the other construct pairs were substantially lower. Therefore, the discriminant validity of the measurement model was considered acceptable, although the close relationship between behavioral intention and job search behavior should be acknowledged.

Table 3. Discriminant Validity Results

Construct	Fornell-Larcker CA	Fornell-Larcker INT	Fornell-Larcker JSB	HTMT CA	HTMT INT	HTMT JSB
CA	0.719					
INT	0.373	0.757		0.302		
JSB	0.225	0.794	0.789	0.201	0.894	

Note. CA = Career Anxiety; INT = Behavioral Intention; JSB = Job Search Behavior.

4.4. Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

The structural model was assessed to examine the hypothesized relationships among career anxiety, behavioral intention, and job search behavior. Table 4 presents the path coefficients, t-values, p-values, and hypothesis testing results.

The direct effect of career anxiety on job search behavior was negative and not statistically significant ($\beta = -0.083$, $t = 1.201$, $p = 0.230$). Therefore, H1 was not supported. This result indicates that career anxiety did not directly predict job search behavior among economics students in the present model.

The effect of career anxiety on behavioral intention was positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.373$, $t = 2.732$, $p = 0.006$). Therefore, H2 was supported. This finding suggests that students with higher levels of career anxiety tended to report stronger intentions to engage in job search activities.

The effect of behavioral intention on job search behavior was also positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.825$, $t = 16.199$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, H3 was supported. This indicates that behavioral intention was a strong predictor of job search behavior.

Table 4. Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	CA → JSB	-0.083	1.201	0.230	Not supported
H2	CA → INT	0.373	2.732	0.006	Supported
H3	INT → JSB	0.825	16.199	<0.001	Supported

Note. CA = Career Anxiety; INT = Behavioral Intention; JSB = Job Search Behavior.

The explanatory power of the model was examined using R^2 , while predictive relevance was assessed using Q^2 . As presented in Table 5, career anxiety explained 13.9% of the variance in behavioral intention, indicating a low level of explanatory power. In contrast, career anxiety and behavioral intention together explained 63.6% of the variance in job search behavior, indicating a substantial level of explanatory power for the behavioral outcome. The Q^2 values for both endogenous constructs were greater than zero, suggesting that the model had predictive relevance.

Table 5. Coefficient of Determination and Predictive Relevance

Endogenous Construct	R^2	Interpretation	Q^2	Interpretation
Behavioral Intention	0.139	Low	0.072	Predictive relevance
Job Search Behavior	0.636	Substantial	0.382	Predictive relevance

4.5. Mediation Analysis

The mediating role of behavioral intention in the relationship between career anxiety and job search behavior was examined through bootstrapping. The results are presented in Table 6.

The indirect effect of career anxiety on job search behavior through behavioral intention was positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.307$, $SE = 0.112$, $t = 2.741$, $p < 0.01$). Since the direct effect of career anxiety on job search behavior was not significant, while the indirect effect through behavioral intention was significant, behavioral intention can be interpreted as a full mediator in the relationship between career anxiety and job search behavior.

This finding indicates that career anxiety does not directly lead students to engage in job search behavior. Instead, career anxiety appears to influence job search behavior indirectly by strengthening students' behavioral intention to seek employment.

Table 6. Mediation Analysis

Hypothesis	Indirect Path	Indirect Effect	SE	t-value	p-value	Mediation Type	Result
H4	CA → INT → JSB	0.307	0.112	2.741	<0.01	Full mediation	Supported

Note. CA = Career Anxiety; INT = Behavioral Intention; JSB = Job Search Behavior.

5. Discussion

5.1. Hypothesis H1 is Rejected: No Direct Effect of Career Anxiety on Job Search Behavior

The results indicate that career anxiety does not have a direct and statistically significant effect on students' job search behavior. This finding suggests that anxiety

alone may not be sufficient to encourage students to engage directly in job search activities. In other words, although students may experience concerns about their future careers, such concerns do not automatically lead to concrete job-seeking actions.

This finding differs from previous studies suggesting that anxiety may reduce career-related proactivity by encouraging avoidance, hesitation, or psychological withdrawal (Wanberg et al., 2000; McCarthy & Goffin, 2004). However, the result can be understood through the Theory of Planned Behavior proposed by Ajzen (1991), which emphasizes that actual behavior is more directly influenced by behavioral intention than by emotional states alone. From this perspective, career anxiety may need to be transformed into a clear intention before it can influence job search behavior.

The absence of a direct effect may also be related to differences in research context, labor market conditions, and the way job search behavior is measured. In the context of economics students in Hanoi, career anxiety may function more as an internal psychological signal than as an immediate behavioral trigger. Therefore, students who experience career-related anxiety may not necessarily act unless they also develop a clear intention to seek employment.

5.2. Hypothesis H2 is Supported: Career Anxiety Positively Predicts Behavioral Intention

The findings show that career anxiety has a positive and statistically significant effect on behavioral intention. This result indicates that students with higher levels of career anxiety tend to report stronger intentions to engage in job search activities. Rather than directly producing job search behavior, career anxiety appears to influence the cognitive stage in which students begin to plan, prepare, and form intentions related to employment.

This finding is consistent with Barlow's (2002) view of anxiety as a psychological response that can signal potential threats or uncertainties. In the context of career development, students who perceive uncertainty in the labor market may experience anxiety, which can encourage them to think more seriously about their future employment. Thus, career anxiety may not only function as a negative emotional state but may also serve as a motivating factor that encourages students to prepare for their transition from university to work.

This result also provides a more balanced understanding of career anxiety. While excessive anxiety may hinder decision-making or lead to avoidance, a certain level of anxiety may encourage students to develop stronger job search intentions. In the context of higher education, this finding suggests that career-related concerns should not only be viewed as problems to be reduced, but also as signals that students may need structured career guidance, career planning support, and practical preparation for the labor market.

5.3. Hypothesis H3 is Supported: Behavioral Intention Positively Predicts Job Search Behavior

The results demonstrate that behavioral intention has a positive and significant effect on job search behavior. This finding supports the central assumption of the Theory of Planned Behavior, which identifies intention as the most immediate predictor of behavior (Ajzen, 1991). In this study, students who had stronger intentions to seek employment were more likely to engage in actual job search behavior.

This result is also consistent with previous research by Van Hooft et al. (2012), which emphasized the important role of intention in explaining job search behavior. Similarly, Van Hooft et al. (2005) found that intention is an important predictor of job

search activity among students and job seekers. The present study reinforces this line of evidence by showing that behavioral intention plays a central role in explaining how economics students in Hanoi engage in job search activities.

From an educational perspective, this finding highlights the importance of helping students develop clear and realistic career intentions. Job search behavior is not merely a spontaneous response to labor market pressure; rather, it is a planned behavior that requires readiness, motivation, and goal-directed preparation. Therefore, universities can play an important role in supporting students by providing career planning programs, job search training, mentoring, and internship preparation.

5.4. Hypothesis H4 is Supported: The Mediating Role of Behavioral Intention

The findings indicate that behavioral intention mediates the relationship between career anxiety and job search behavior. This means that career anxiety does not directly lead students to engage in job search behavior; instead, it influences job search behavior through the formation of behavioral intention. In this model, career anxiety first shapes students' intention to seek employment, and this intention subsequently encourages actual job search behavior.

This finding provides useful insight into the psychological mechanism linking career anxiety and job search behavior. It suggests that the influence of anxiety on behavior is not automatic or immediate, but operates through an intentional and cognitive process. This interpretation is consistent with Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior, which places behavioral intention as a key mechanism between internal factors and actual behavior.

The mediating role of behavioral intention also has important implications for student development in higher education. If students experience career anxiety but do not develop clear job search intentions, they may remain uncertain or passive in their career preparation. Therefore, career support programs should focus not only on reducing anxiety, but also on helping students transform career-related concerns into concrete plans, goals, and job search intentions.

5.5. Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to the literature by extending the application of the Theory of Planned Behavior to the context of career anxiety and job search behavior among university students. While TPB traditionally emphasizes cognitive predictors of behavior, this study positions career anxiety as a psychological antecedent that can influence behavioral intention. In doing so, the study provides evidence that emotional factors can play an important role in shaping students' career-related intentions.

The study also contributes to the understanding of career anxiety by showing that anxiety does not necessarily lead directly to behavior. Instead, its influence depends on whether it is translated into behavioral intention. This finding supports a more nuanced view of career anxiety, in which anxiety may act not only as a barrier but also as a signal that encourages students to prepare for their future careers.

In addition, this study provides empirical evidence from Vietnam, an emerging Southeast Asian context where students face increasing competition in the transition from higher education to employment. By focusing on economics students in Hanoi, this study adds contextual evidence to the literature on career development, job search behavior, and student readiness for the labor market.

5.6. Practical Implications

The findings offer several practical implications for universities, career support centers, academic advisors, and internship programs.

For university career support centers, the results suggest the need to design programs that help students convert career anxiety into clear job search intentions. Such programs may include career planning workshops, job search strategy training, mock interviews, CV preparation, and structured goal-setting activities. These activities can help students move from general career concerns to more concrete and actionable employment plans.

For academic advisors and faculty members, the findings indicate the importance of supporting students in understanding career anxiety as a common experience during the transition from university to work. Rather than treating anxiety only as a weakness or problem, educators can help students use career-related concerns as a starting point for reflection, planning, and preparation. This support is particularly important for students who may feel uncertain about their career direction or lack confidence in their job search capability.

For employers and internship programs, the findings highlight the value of early exposure to professional environments. Internship opportunities, career mentoring, and employer engagement can help students clarify their career goals and strengthen their intention to seek employment. Early practical experience may also reduce uncertainty by helping students understand workplace expectations and develop more realistic career plans.

The findings suggest that higher education institutions should strengthen career development initiatives that connect psychological support, career readiness, and practical job search preparation. By doing so, universities can help students transform career anxiety into constructive intention and, eventually, into active job search behavior.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between career anxiety, behavioral intention, and job search behavior among 174 economics students in Hanoi, Vietnam, using PLS-SEM. The findings provide insight into how psychological factors shape students' career-related intentions and job search behavior during the transition from higher education to employment. The results show that career anxiety does not have a significant direct effect on job search behavior. This suggests that emotional distress or concern about future employment does not automatically lead students to engage in job-seeking activities. Instead, job search behavior appears to be a planned and intentional process. Career anxiety was found to have a positive and significant effect on behavioral intention, indicating that students who experience greater career-related concerns may develop stronger intentions to prepare for and engage in job search activities.

Behavioral intention was also found to be a strong predictor of job search behavior. This finding supports the central assumption of the Theory of Planned Behavior, which emphasizes intention as a proximal predictor of actual behavior. The mediation result further suggests that behavioral intention plays an important role in explaining how career anxiety may influence job search behavior. In this sense, career anxiety may affect job search behavior indirectly by first shaping students' intention to seek employment. Theoretically, this study extends the application of the Theory of Planned Behavior in the context of career development by positioning career anxiety as a psychological antecedent of behavioral intention. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of career development programs in higher education. Universities and career

support centers should not only help students manage career-related anxiety but also assist them in transforming such concerns into clear career plans, job search intentions, and practical employability preparation.

This study has several limitations. The use of convenience sampling in Hanoi limits the generalizability of the findings. The cross-sectional design also prevents causal conclusions from being drawn. In addition, the use of self-reported data may introduce response bias, and career anxiety was treated as a unidimensional construct. Future research should involve students from different regions, universities, and academic fields to improve generalizability. Further studies may also examine additional mediating or moderating variables, such as career self-efficacy, social support, employability skills, or career decision-making readiness. Longitudinal research is also recommended to better understand how career anxiety, intention, and job search behavior develop over time during students' transition from university to the labor market.

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