

The Impact of Employment Anxiety on Career Decision-Making Difficulties Among Foreign Language Graduates in the AI Era: The Moderating Role of Lack of External Support

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ABSTRACT: Generative AI tools have changed what employers expect from foreign language (FL) graduates in China, and anxiety about employment has risen with them. How that anxiety relates to students' ability to settle on a career, and whether support from schools and families changes the relationship, is still unclear. Drawing on the transactional theory of stress and coping and the social support buffering model, this study examined two forms of employment anxiety, general employment psychological pressure and AI-era professional anxiety, as predictors of career decision-making difficulties, and tested lack of external support as a moderator. Data came from 110 employment-bound FL graduates at a local public university in southwestern China, collected with Likert-scale items and one open-ended question. Hierarchical multiple regression showed that employment psychological pressure predicted career decision-making difficulties ($\beta = 0.37, p < .001$; H1 supported), while AI-era professional anxiety was only marginally significant ($\beta = 0.21, p = .053$; H2 partially supported). Lack of external support did not moderate either relationship; it predicted decision difficulties on its own ($\beta = 0.26-0.34, p < .01$). Simple slope analyses found the positive effect of employment psychological pressure to be significant at low, mean, and high support, and slightly flatter rather than steeper as support increased. Substituting job-seeking skill difficulties as the outcome and adding information acquisition difficulties as a control produced the same pattern. Among the open-ended responses, career decision confusion (32.1%), lack of internship experience (22.6%), and job-seeking skill deficits (18.9%) were the concerns students reported most often. The results indicate that lack of external support acts as a direct stressor in this setting rather than a buffer, which limits how far the buffering hypothesis extends to FL graduates. For local universities, the practical priorities are direct employment guidance, AI-related skill building, and targeted psychological support.

KEYWORDS: employment anxiety; career decision-making difficulties; external support; foreign language graduates; artificial intelligence; moderating analysis; Chinese higher education

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I. INTRODUCTION

Generative AI tools such as large language models and machine translation systems (DeepL, ChatGPT, Google Translate) now carry out much of the routine translation and drafting that employers once assigned to language graduates [1], [2]. For foreign language (FL) majors in China, one of the largest undergraduate groups in the humanities and social sciences, this shift has arrived alongside a record number of college graduates, more than 11.7 million in 2024, and fewer entry-level jobs that require language skills. Official figures put the employment rate of FL graduates at 76.8% in 2023, about 5.6 percentage points below the average across all undergraduate majors [1].

Career decision-making difficulties refer to a person's inability or reluctance to commit to a career choice, or the obstacles met while trying to decide [3]. These difficulties have become common among FL students. Employment anxiety, understood as the tension and worry that accompanies job search and thoughts about the future, is one of the more consistent predictors of such difficulties in the literature. Most studies, however, treat employment anxiety as a single construct. FL graduates today may face two versions of it: general pressure from labor-market competition, and anxiety tied specifically to the possibility that AI will make their language skills less valuable [2]. The conditions under which either version is more likely to turn into

stalled decision making remain unclear, particularly at local, non-elite universities, where career guidance and alumni networks are thinner than at flagship institutions.

The social support buffering model holds that support from schools, families, and social networks can soften the effect of stress on psychological outcomes [6]. The model is well supported for mental-health outcomes in general and clinical samples. Whether it applies to career decision-making among FL graduates, though, has not been tested. One reading is that graduates who lack adequate support are not only more anxious but also more likely to let that anxiety harden into decision difficulties. Another reading, drawn from the main-effects model of social support, is that lack of support is itself a stressor, so it should predict decision difficulties directly rather than change the link between anxiety and difficulty.

This study therefore asks three questions: (a) How much employment psychological pressure and AI-era professional anxiety do employment-bound FL graduates at a local Chinese university report? (b) Do the two dimensions of employment anxiety predict career decision-making difficulties? (c) Does lack of external support moderate the link between anxiety and decision difficulties, such that the association is stronger when support is scarcer? Quantitative hierarchical regression and qualitative open-ended responses are combined to address both the theory and the practical design of employment support for FL students at local institutions.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

A. Employment Anxiety and Career Decision-Making Difficulties

Employment anxiety covers the cognitive, affective, and physiological responses that appear when people anticipate or take part in a job search [4]. In the transactional theory of stress and coping, anxiety arises when a person appraises a situation as threatening (primary appraisal) and judges their coping resources insufficient (secondary appraisal) [5]. During career decision making, these threat appraisals can slow information processing, narrow attention, and encourage avoidance, all of which add to decision difficulties.

Gati et al. [3] describe career decision-making difficulties as a multifaceted construct made up of lack of readiness, lack of information, and inconsistent information. This study takes one component of it, career decision confusion, as the outcome: the uncertainty a person feels about personal fit, about the options open to them, and about whether their choice is right. Confusion is the affective-cognitive state through which anxiety is most likely to show up as impaired decision making, which is why it is the focus here.

General employment anxiety and career decision-making difficulties are consistently related. For FL graduates, the two dimensions of anxiety need separate treatment. General employment psychological pressure is the familiar form, tied to competitive labor markets, high applicant-to-position ratios, and worries about pay and job security. It should predict decision difficulties because it triggers threat appraisals that consume the cognitive resources deliberate career planning requires. AI-era professional anxiety is newer and domain-specific, tied to the belief that AI translation and content-generation tools will erode the advantage FL majors once held. Wang [2] found AI anxiety to be a construct distinct from general employment pressure among English majors, and that career adaptability can buffer its effects. Accordingly:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Employment psychological pressure has a significant positive effect on career decision-making difficulties.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): AI-era professional anxiety has a significant positive effect on career decision-making difficulties.

B. The Moderating Role of Lack of External Support

External support in this context covers career guidance from universities, advice and encouragement from family and friends, access to industry networks, and alumni resources. The buffering model proposes that support protects people from stress by sitting between the stressful event and the stress response, either by strengthening perceived coping resources or by helping the person reappraise the threat [6]. Studies of employment stress have generally found that higher support weakens its adverse effects on psychological outcomes [7].

Two considerations complicate a simple buffering prediction here. The debate between the buffering model and the main-effects model of social support is unresolved; the main-effects model holds that support helps at any stress level, and that its absence is a stressor rather than an amplifier. FL graduates at local universities also face structurally constrained opportunities, and in the AI era even supportive relationships may not offset a sense that their skills are losing value or that demand is thin. Whether support moderates the link between anxiety and difficulty is therefore an empirical question, not a settled one.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Lack of external support moderates the positive relationship between employment anxiety (employment psychological pressure and AI-era professional anxiety) and career decision-making difficulties, such that the positive effect is stronger when external support is more deficient.

Figure 1. Proposed Research Model

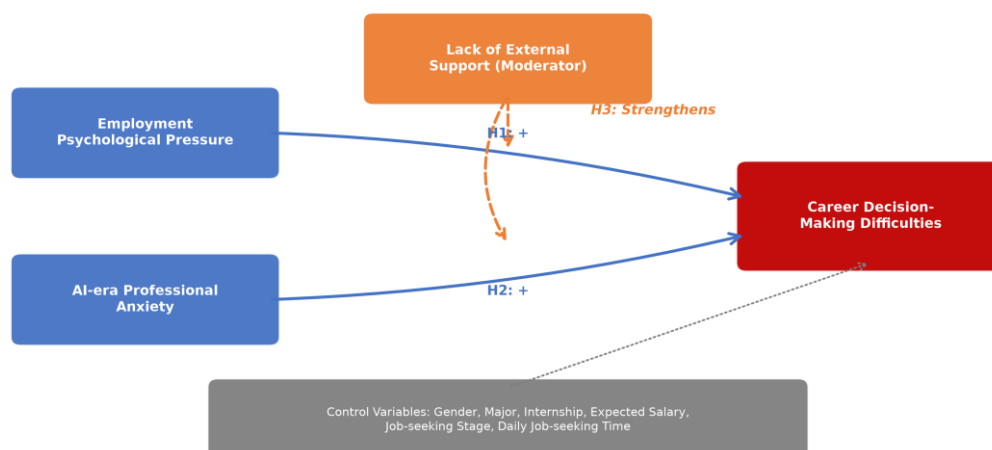


Fig.1. Proposed research model linking the two employment anxiety dimensions and lack of external support to career decision-making difficulties.

III. METHOD

A. Participants and Procedure

A convenience sample of 110 employment-bound FL graduates from a local public university in Sichuan Province, southwestern China, took part in the study. They were recruited through face-to-face invitations during final-year classes and completed a paper-and-pencil questionnaire in March 2025, about three months before graduation. The sample had 18 males (16.4%) and 92 females (83.6%), a distribution in line with the FL-major population in Chinese universities. Three majors were represented: English ($n = 53$, 48.2%), Translation ($n = 30$, 27.3%), and Business English ($n = 27$, 24.5%). Only 9 participants (8.2%) had internship experience. Practical training of this kind is uncommon at local institutions.

Participants averaged about 22 years of age. Most were at an early stage of job preparation ($M = 1.77$ on a 6-point scale, $SD = 0.86$) and spent less than one hour a day on job search ($M = 1.29$, $SD = 0.49$). Mean completion time was 433 seconds ($SD = 614$). Questionnaires finished in under 120 seconds were checked for straight-lining; none showed 15 or more consecutive identical answers, so all 110 were kept.

B. Measures

Career decision-making difficulties. Five self-developed items (Q15–Q19) measured career decision confusion: “I don’t know what kind of job suits me,” “I am unclear about which industries and positions FL graduates can enter,” “I find it difficult to choose among multiple career directions,” “I worry that my choice will be wrong,” and “I lack sufficient understanding of my own career interests and strengths.” Responses used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), and a mean score was computed, with higher scores indicating greater difficulty. Cronbach’s α was .83.

Employment psychological pressure. Six items (Q29–Q34) covered general job-search anxiety, including worry about employment prospects, competition, and an uncertain future. Responses used the same 5-point scale and were averaged. Cronbach’s α was .89.

AI-era professional anxiety. Four items (Q35–Q38) targeted anxiety about AI threatening the value of FL skills, including worries about AI replacing translation jobs and reducing demand for human language professionals. Cronbach’s α was .85.

Lack of external support. Four items (Q39–Q42) assessed the perceived inadequacy of school employment guidance, advice from family and friends, accessible industry networks, and knowledge of how to use alumni resources. Cronbach’s α was .79.

Control variables. Gender (1 = male, 2 = female), major (1 = English, 2 = Translation, 3 = Business English), internship experience (1 = yes, 2 = no), expected monthly salary (1 = below 3,000 to 5 = above 12,000 RMB), job-seeking preparation stage (1 = not started to 6 = already signed), and daily time spent on job seeking (1 = less than 1 hour to 4 = more than 5 hours) were included to account for possible confounding.

Qualitative data. One open-ended question (Q47) asked participants to describe their main employment concerns. Fifty-three participants responded, and their answers were thematically coded.

C. Data Analysis Strategy

Analysis used SPSS 26.0 and Python, in seven steps. First, responses were screened for invalid patterns using completion time and straight-lining. Second, Cronbach's α was computed for each scale. Third, common method bias was assessed with Harman's single-factor test using principal axis factoring without rotation. Fourth, descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations were computed for the key variables. Fifth, hierarchical multiple regression tested the main and moderation effects. Continuous predictors and the moderator were standardized (Z-scored) before interaction terms were formed, following Aiken and West [8], and variance inflation factors (VIF) were checked for multicollinearity. Two hierarchical models were run, one with employment psychological pressure as the focal predictor and one with AI-era professional anxiety; each entered controls in Block 1, main effects in Block 2, and the interaction term in Block 3. Sixth, simple slope analyses at the mean and at ± 1 SD of the moderator described the form of any interaction. Seventh, robustness checks (a) replaced the dependent variable with job-seeking skill difficulties (Q20–Q24), (b) added information acquisition difficulties (Q25–Q28) as an extra predictor, and (c) ran a power analysis to assess how detectable interaction effects were.

IV. RESULTS

A. Preliminary Analyses: Reliability and Common Method Bias

All six scales reached acceptable to excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's α from .79 to .89 (Table 1). Harman's single-factor test on the 28 Likert items (Q15–Q42) produced six factors with eigenvalues above 1. The first unrotated factor accounted for 44.55% of the total variance, above the conservative 40% threshold but below the 50% level that would suggest serious common method bias [9]. The first three factors explained 57.62% cumulatively. Common method variance cannot be ruled out entirely, but it does not appear to threaten the findings.

B. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 1 gives descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations. Employment psychological pressure ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 0.83$) and AI-era professional anxiety ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 0.76$) both sat above the scale midpoint of 3, so participants reported moderate-to-high levels of each. Lack of external support had the highest mean of any variable ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.63$), and career decision-making difficulties were closer to the midpoint ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 0.73$). All key variables correlated positively ($r_s = .45-.72$, all $p_s < .001$). VIF values in the regression models ranged from 1.07 to 1.75, well below the threshold of 5, so multicollinearity was not a concern.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Reliabilities, and Correlations Among Key Variables

Variable	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5
1. Career decision-making difficulties	2.83	0.73	.83	—				
2. Employment psychological pressure	3.37	0.83	.89	.51***	—			
3. AI-era professional anxiety	3.35	0.76	.85	.45***	.62***	—		
4. Lack of external support	3.48	0.63	.79	.49***	.58***	.60***	—	
5. Job-seeking skill difficulties	3.50	0.71	.86	.67***	.69***	.59***	.55***	—
6. Information acquisition difficulties	3.32	0.69	.83	.61***	.66***	.61***	.72***	.66***

Note. $N = 110$. M = mean; SD = standard deviation; α = Cronbach's alpha. Correlations are Pearson coefficients. The diagonal (—) is not applicable. *** $p < .001$.

Figure 4. Correlation Heatmap Among Key Variables

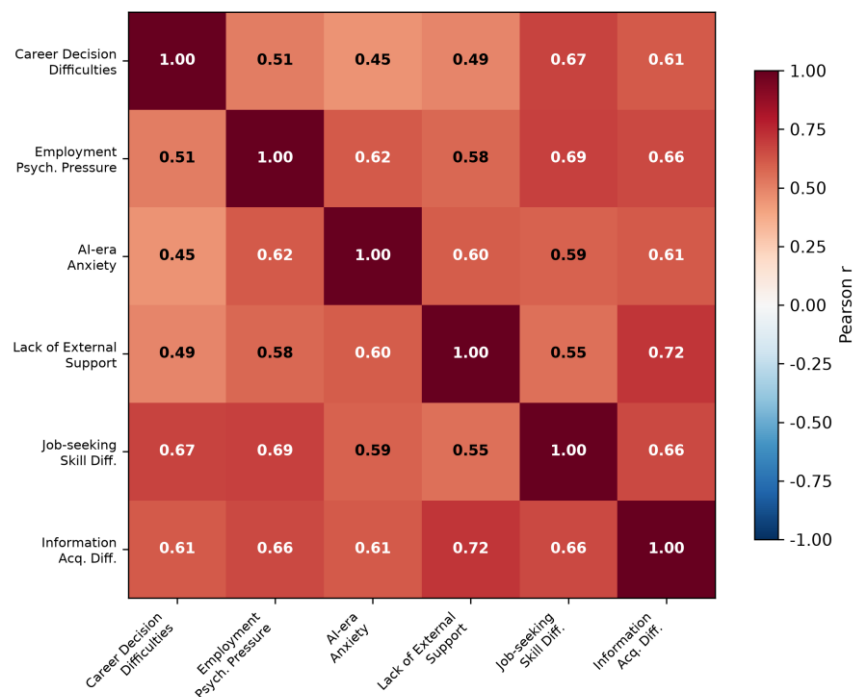


Fig.2. Correlation heatmap of bivariate Pearson correlations among the six key variables. CDD = career decision-making difficulties; EPP = employment psychological pressure; AIA = AI-era professional anxiety; LES = lack of external support; JSD = job-seeking skill difficulties; IAD = information acquisition difficulties.

Figure 2. Distributions of Key Study Variables

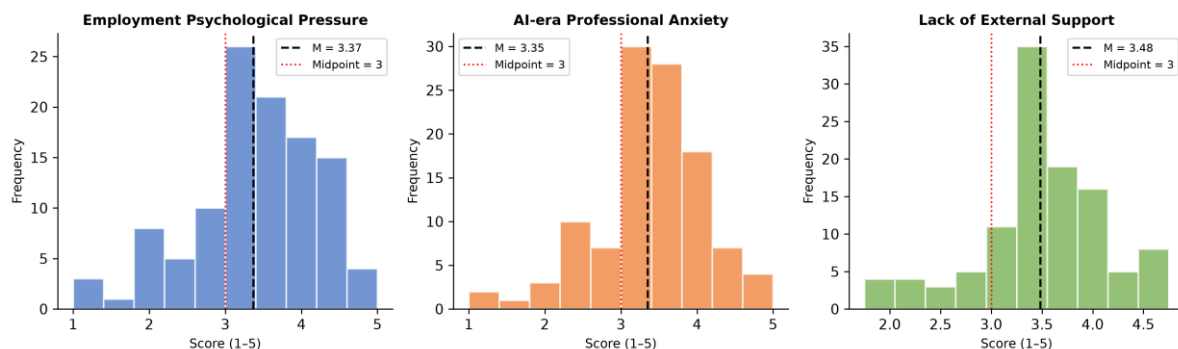


Fig.3. Distributions of the three key predictors (employment psychological pressure, AI-era professional anxiety, and lack of external support), with the mean (dashed line) and the scale midpoint (dotted line).

C. Hierarchical Regression Analyses

1. Model A: Employment Psychological Pressure

Table 2 reports the hierarchical regression with employment psychological pressure as the focal predictor. Block 1 controls explained 8.3% of the variance in career decision-making difficulties, which was not significant, $F(6, 103) = 1.55$, $p = .17$. Adding employment psychological pressure and lack of external support in Block 2 raised the explained variance by 28.0%, $\Delta F(2, 101) = 22.23$, $p < .001$, and the full model accounted for 36.3% of the variance. In Block 2, employment psychological pressure positively predicted career decision-making difficulties ($B = 0.27$, $\beta = 0.37$, $SE = 0.08$, $t = 3.53$, $p < .001$), and lack of external support was also a positive predictor ($B = 0.19$, $\beta = 0.26$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 2.61$, $p = .01$). The interaction term in Block 3 did not improve the model, $\Delta R^2 = .006$, $\Delta F(1, 100) = 0.98$, $p = .33$, and was not significant ($B = -0.05$, $\beta = -0.08$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = -0.99$, $p = .33$). H1 was supported; H3a was rejected.

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Results Predicting Career Decision-Making Difficulties: Employment Psychological Pressure as Focal Predictor

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Block 1: Control variables					
Major	-0.04	0.09	-0.05	-0.50	.62
Gender	-0.19	0.19	-0.09	-0.95	.34
Internship	0.18	0.28	0.07	0.66	.51
Expected salary	-0.02	0.11	-0.02	-0.22	.83
Job-seeking stage	-0.16	0.09	-0.19	-1.81	.07†
Daily job-seeking time	-0.13	0.15	-0.09	-0.91	.37
Block 2: Main effects					
Major	-0.02	0.07	-0.02	-0.25	.80
Gender	-0.27	0.16	-0.14	-1.67	.10†
Internship	-0.15	0.24	-0.06	-0.63	.53
Expected salary	0.01	0.09	0.01	0.06	.95
Job-seeking stage	-0.10	0.08	-0.11	-1.26	.21
Daily job-seeking time	-0.06	0.13	-0.04	-0.50	.62
Employment psychological pressure (Z)	0.27	0.08	0.37	3.53	<.001***
Lack of external support (Z)	0.19	0.07	0.26	2.61	.01*
Block 3: Interaction					
Employment psychological pressure (Z)	0.27	0.08	0.37	3.53	<.001***
Lack of external support (Z)	0.19	0.07	0.26	2.56	.01*
EPP $\times$ LES interaction	-0.05	0.06	-0.08	-0.99	.33
R ²	0.08		0.36		0.37
ΔR^2	—		0.28***		0.01
F for change	1.55		22.23***		0.98

Note. N = 110. B = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error; β = standardized coefficient. Continuous predictors were mean-centered and standardized. VIF values for all predictors were < 1.80. †p < .10. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

2. Model B: AI-Era Professional Anxiety

Table 3 reports the parallel analysis with AI-era professional anxiety as the focal predictor. Adding AI anxiety and lack of external support in Block 2 raised explained variance by 22.8%, $\Delta F(2, 101) = 16.71$, $p < .001$, and the model accounted for 31.1% of the variance. AI-era professional anxiety had a marginally significant positive effect on career decision-making difficulties ($B = 0.16$, $\beta = 0.21$, $SE = 0.08$, $t = 1.96$, $p = .053$), and lack of external support was again significant ($B = 0.25$, $\beta = 0.35$, $SE = 0.08$, $t = 3.31$, $p = .001$). The interaction term was not significant ($B = -0.01$, $\beta = -0.02$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = -0.19$, $p = .85$) and did not improve fit, $\Delta R^2 < .001$, $\Delta F(1, 100) = 0.04$, $p = .85$. H2 received marginal support; H3b was rejected.

Table 3. Hierarchical Regression Results Predicting Career Decision-Making Difficulties: AI-Era Professional Anxiety as Focal Predictor

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Block 1: Control variables					
Major	-0.04	0.09	-0.05	-0.50	.62
Gender	-0.19	0.19	-0.09	-0.95	.34
Internship	0.18	0.28	0.07	0.66	.51
Expected salary	-0.02	0.11	-0.02	-0.22	.83
Job-seeking stage	-0.16	0.09	-0.19	-1.81	.07†
Daily job-seeking time	-0.13	0.15	-0.09	-0.91	.37
Block 2: Main effects					
Major	0.01	0.08	0.01	0.13	.90
Gender	-0.24	0.17	-0.12	-1.38	.17
Internship	-0.01	0.24	-0.01	-0.06	.95
Expected salary	-0.01	0.10	-0.01	-0.15	.88

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Job-seeking stage	-0.05	0.08	-0.06	-0.69	.49
Daily job-seeking time	-0.10	0.13	-0.07	-0.79	.43
AI-era professional anxiety (Z)	0.16	0.08	0.21	1.96	.05†
Lack of external support (Z)	0.25	0.08	0.35	3.31	.001**
Block 3: Interaction					
AI-era professional anxiety (Z)	0.16	0.08	0.21	1.96	.05†
Lack of external support (Z)	0.25	0.08	0.34	3.23	.002**
AIA $\times$ LES interaction	-0.01	0.06	-0.02	-0.19	.85
R ²	0.08		0.31		0.31
ΔR^2	—		0.23***		0.00
F for change	1.55		16.71***		0.04

Note. N = 110. B = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error; β = standardized coefficient. Continuous predictors were mean-centered and standardized. VIF values for all predictors were < 1.75. †p < .10. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

D. Simple Slope Analyses

The interaction terms were not significant, but simple slope analyses were run to describe the direction of the effects (Table 4; Figure 4). For employment psychological pressure the simple slope was positive and significant at all three support levels: low support (-1 SD: B = 0.32, SE = 0.09, t = 3.44, p < .001), mean support (B = 0.27, SE = 0.08, t = 3.53, p < .001), and high support (+1 SD: B = 0.21, SE = 0.09, t = 2.30, p = .02). The slope grew slightly flatter, not steeper, as support rose, which is the reverse of the hypothesized amplification. For AI-era professional anxiety the simple slope was marginally significant at mean support (B = 0.16, SE = 0.08, t = 1.96, p = .05) and not significant at low or high support.

Table 4. Simple Slope Analyses of Employment Anxiety on Career Decision-Making Difficulties at Different Levels of Lack of External Support

Predictor and support level	B	SE	t	p	95% CI
Employment psychological pressure					
Low support (-1 SD)	0.32	0.09	3.44	.001***	[0.14, 0.51]
Mean support	0.27	0.08	3.53	.001***	[0.12, 0.42]
High support (+1 SD)	0.21	0.09	2.30	.02*	[0.03, 0.40]
AI-era professional anxiety					
Low support (-1 SD)	0.17	0.10	1.68	.10	[-0.03, 0.37]
Mean support	0.16	0.08	1.96	.05†	[0.00, 0.32]
High support (+1 SD)	0.15	0.10	1.54	.13	[-0.04, 0.33]

Note. B = unstandardized simple slope; SE = standard error; CI = confidence interval. †p < .10. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Figure 3. Simple Slopes for the Moderating Role of Lack of External Support

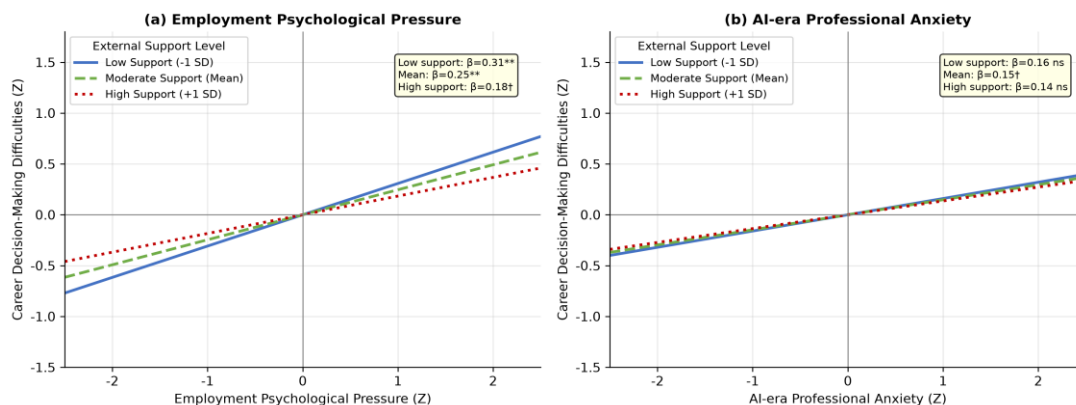


Fig.4. Simple slopes for the relationships between the employment anxiety dimensions and career decision-making difficulties at three levels of lack of external support. Panel (a) shows employment psychological pressure; panel (b) shows AI-era professional anxiety.

E. Robustness Checks

Three sets of robustness checks were run. Replacing the dependent variable with job-seeking skill difficulties gave a similar pattern: employment psychological pressure remained a strong positive predictor ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < .001$), AI-era professional anxiety was significant ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < .001$), lack of external support was significant ($\beta = 0.21$ – 0.30 , $p < .05$), and interaction terms were not significant ($ps = .07$ and $.35$). Adding information acquisition difficulties as an extra control left the main effect of employment psychological pressure significant ($\beta = 0.23$, $p = .04$) but rendered the effect of AI-era professional anxiety non-significant ($\beta = 0.10$, $p = .37$), which points to a possible indirect route through information-related deficits. A post-hoc power analysis (G*Power; [10]) showed that with $N = 110$ and $\alpha = .05$ the study had power of about .72 to detect a medium interaction ($f^2 = .15$) but only about .18 for a small one ($f^2 = .02$). The observed interaction effect sizes were $f^2 = .01$ for Model A and $f^2 < .001$ for Model B, both negligible to small by conventional benchmarks [11].

F. Qualitative Findings

Fifty-three of the 110 participants answered the open-ended question. Coding identified 11 themes, reported in Table 5 with illustrative quotes. Career decision confusion was mentioned most often (32.1%; e.g., “I don’t know what jobs I can apply for,” “I’m lost between going into teaching, translation, or switching to other industries”), which matches the quantitative finding that decision difficulties are salient. Lack of internship and practical experience came next (22.6%; e.g., “I have no internship experience and don’t know what real work is like”), followed by perceived deficits in job-seeking skills (18.9%; e.g., “I don’t know how to write a good resume or perform well in interviews”). No respondent mentioned AI replacement threat in the open-ended question, even though AI anxiety was above the midpoint on the Likert scales. AI concerns may be present but less salient than the immediate practical barriers students face.

Table 5. Frequency of Qualitative Themes Identified from Open-Ended Responses (N = 53)

Theme	Frequency	%	Illustrative quote
Career decision confusion	17	32.1	“I don’t know what jobs suit me.”
Lack of internship/practical experience	12	22.6	“I have no internship experience.”
Job-seeking skill deficits	10	18.9	“I don’t know how to write a resume.”
Professional competence concerns	8	15.1	“My spoken English is not good enough.”
Information acquisition difficulties	6	11.3	“I don’t know where to find recruitment info.”
Employment anxiety and pressure	5	9.4	“I feel very anxious about job hunting.”
Insufficient school career guidance	5	9.4	“School provides little useful guidance.”
Lack of networks and resources	3	5.7	“I have no connections in the industry.”
Insufficient family support	1	1.9	“My parents can’t help me much.”
Salary expectation gap	1	1.9	“The pay for English jobs is too low.”
AI replacement threat	0	0.0	— (not spontaneously mentioned)

Note. Themes are not mutually exclusive; percentages are based on the number of respondents mentioning each theme out of 53 valid responses.

V. DISCUSSION

A. Summary of Main Findings

Three results stand out. Employment psychological pressure was a strong positive predictor of career decision-making difficulties (H1 supported), and the effect held when the dependent variable was replaced and when extra controls were added, with a large effect size ($f^2 = 0.44$ for the main-effects block). AI-era professional anxiety was only marginally significant (H2 partially supported) and became non-significant once information acquisition difficulties were controlled, which suggests its influence on decision making runs largely through information-related pathways. Lack of external support did not moderate the link between anxiety and difficulty (H3 rejected). It predicted decision difficulties on its own with moderate-to-large effects ($\beta = 0.26$ – 0.35 , $p < .01$), so support deficits are tied to greater difficulty whatever the anxiety level.

B. Theoretical Implications

That external support failed to moderate the anxiety-difficulty link, and instead acted as a direct predictor, is the more interesting result. The buffering hypothesis holds that support mainly weakens stress-outcome relationships when stress is high [6]. Here, lack of external support behaved more like a main-effects stressor. A few explanations fit the data.

Lack of external support correlated strongly with both anxiety dimensions ($r = .58$ and $.60$ for employment pressure and AI anxiety). Support deficits and employment anxiety overlap heavily, and that

overlap limits the power to isolate a unique interaction even though the bivariate pattern hints at a slight weakening of the anxiety slope at higher support. The boundary conditions of the buffering model may also differ by outcome. Buffering is detected more easily for mental-health outcomes such as depression or somatic symptoms than for career decisions, which are shaped by instrumental barriers like missing information or thin access to opportunities, and those barriers create difficulty regardless of anxiety. The cross-sectional design, finally, cannot speak to timing; support may moderate the longer-run effect of anxiety on decision making without moderating the concurrent association.

The fragile effect of AI-era professional anxiety is also worth noting. Once information acquisition difficulties were controlled, AI anxiety no longer predicted decision difficulties, which suggests AI-specific concerns work mainly through perceived information deficits, such as uncertainty about what AI-related career paths exist and how to prepare for them, rather than through a direct emotional route. This fits Jiang and Li [1], who found cognitive appraisals of AI shaped informal digital learning, and Wang [2], who identified career adaptability as protective against AI anxiety. The qualitative result that no respondent spontaneously raised AI replacement threat, despite above-midpoint AI anxiety scores, points the same way: AI concern may be diffuse and poorly articulated rather than a concrete driver of a decision stall.

C. Practical Implications

Several practical steps follow. Because employment psychological pressure is the strongest predictor of decision difficulties, local universities should offer group counselling, cognitive restructuring, and stress-management workshops aimed at final-year FL students. The independent effect of lack of external support means that strengthening support services matters on its own, not just as a buffer. Universities could invest in specialized career guidance that maps FL-specific paths beyond teaching and translation, in alumni networking and mentorship that connects students to graduates working in AI-related and other emerging fields, and in family communication that helps parents give informed advice.

The AI anxiety result, non-significant but not trivial, together with the absence of spontaneous AI talk, suggests that many FL students lack a clear framework for understanding how AI is changing their options. Instead of waiting for AI anxiety to build, universities could fold AI literacy and “FL + AI” or “FL + X” interdisciplinary training into the curriculum, so that AI reads as a skill to add rather than a threat. The near-total absence of internship experience (91.8% without one) also argues for partnerships with local industry, translation companies, and AI-language firms that give students structured practical experience before graduation.

D. Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations qualify these results. The sample ($N = 110$) is modest for moderation analysis, and the power analysis showed limited ability to detect small interactions. The observed interaction sizes were negligible in any case, but larger samples are needed to rule out small moderation effects and to test gender differences; the current data hinted at a marginally significant interaction in the female subsample, yet the male subsample was too small for a reliable comparison. The cross-sectional design rules out causal inference, and students with greater decision difficulties may also perceive less support, producing reciprocal effects. The self-developed scales were internally consistent but were not submitted to confirmatory factor analysis because of the sample size; future work should validate the factor structure in larger samples and use established instruments such as the Career Decision-Making Difficulties Questionnaire [3] and the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support [12]. Harman’s single-factor test pointed to some common method variance (44.55% first factor), which could inflate bivariate associations, and multi-source or time-lagged designs would help. The external support measure was context-specific rather than a standardized social support instrument, which limits comparison with the wider social support literature.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study adds to work on FL graduate employment in the AI era. Employment psychological pressure was a robust predictor of career decision-making difficulties, AI-era professional anxiety had a weaker and less stable effect, and lack of external support worked as an independent risk factor rather than a buffer. The pattern argues against a simple application of the social support buffering model to career decision-making outcomes. For universities that serve mostly FL students, direct investment in employment guidance, psychological support, AI literacy, and practical experience is likely to do more than trying to buffer anxiety through general support. Reducing employment anxiety and strengthening external support are both necessary, and both call for direct intervention.

Declarations

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Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethics Statement: The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Panzhihua University. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

Data Availability Statement: The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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