

Internal Factors Affecting High School Students' Career Choices: A Literature Review

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Abstract:

This study conducts a systematic literature review to systematize and deeply analyze the theoretical models and concepts of core internal factors influencing high school students' career choices. Driven by the recognized limitations in career guidance and the fragmented theoretical analysis of intrinsic variables, the systematic literature review methodology was used to synthesize reputable academic literature from 1980 onwards. The review focused on eight key internal factors: personality, interests, ability perception, vocational values, self-awareness, self-efficacy, career goals, and life and learning experiences. The analysis confirmed the central and determining role of these factors in vocational identity and decision-making. Key findings highlight that the alignment between internal traits and occupational demands is critical for job satisfaction and commitment. Specifically, self-awareness acts as the crucial meta-factor regulating accurate self-assessment, while self-efficacy and career goals serve as powerful motivators for proactive exploration and persistence. This research contributes an integrated theoretical framework clarifying the complex interplay of these factors. The findings imply that career guidance must prioritize self-awareness development and self-efficacy enhancement, coupled with real-world experiences. This framework provides a solid scientific foundation for future empirical studies and the design of more effective intervention programs for high school students.

Keywords: Career choice, internal factors, high school students, personality, self-awareness, self-efficacy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Career plays a vital role in the development of both individuals and society, not only ensuring stable income but also serving as a means for people to express their values, capabilities, and achieve satisfaction in life (Holland, 1959; Super, 1957, 1990). Especially for high school students, career choice is a strategic decision that directly impacts their study motivation, skill development, and future success opportunities (Creed et al., 2007; Germeijs & Verschueren, 2006). A sound decision at this stage not only helps the individual maximize their strengths but also contributes to enhancing the quality of human resources and fostering sustainable social development (Super, 1990; Watson & McMahon, 2005). Therefore, career guidance education at the high school level is always determined to be pivotal in helping students make choices that align with their abilities, interests, and overall development trends.

The core goal of career guidance is to help students understand themselves well to select suitable occupations (Holland, 1959; Super, 1990). However, in reality, the effectiveness of career guidance for high school students hasn't met expectations. Many studies indicate that students remain vague, anxious, or passive in choosing majors, leading to selecting the wrong career path, wasting time and effort, and facing difficulties in their later career development. The causes of this situation are diverse, including limitations in resources, the competence of career guidance teachers, and the influence of various factors on students' decisions (Lent et al., 2002; Lent & Brown, 2019). This highlights the urgent need to deeply research and systematize the influencing factors to improve the effectiveness of career guidance.

The career choice process of high school students is affected by numerous factors, broadly categorized into two groups: internal (internal) factors and environmental (external) factors. Among these, internal factors such as individual personality, interests, ability perception, vocational values, self-awareness, and self-efficacy are affirmed by leading career theories (like Holland's, Super's, Social Cognitive Career Theory) as the core and determining factors in forming vocational identity and guiding choices. The alignment between these internal factors and occupational requirements is key to achieving long-term job satisfaction and career commitment. Therefore, focusing in-depth research on this group of factors is exceptionally necessary.

Although some empirical studies have surveyed the influencing factors, the comprehensive literature review and systematization of concepts and theoretical models regarding the internal factor group in the context of high school students are still very limited and fragmented. Existing studies often stop at simple quantitative surveys or focus on external factors. This results in a lack of a robust theoretical framework to explain and guide subsequent empirical research, as well as to provide a foundation for developing career intervention programs that focus on developing students' self-awareness.

This study aims to systematically review, organize, and conduct a deep analysis of existing concepts and theoretical models pertaining to the internal factors that influence career choice. The research outcome will help clarify the role and mechanism of action of each factor, thereby proposing a comprehensive and solid theoretical framework that serves as a scientific foundation for enhancing the quality of research and the effectiveness of career guidance for high school students.

2. METHODS

This study is conducted using the systematic literature review method. This approach ensures transparency, objectivity, and replicability in the process of identifying, selecting, and analyzing academic literature (O'Brien & McGuckin, 2016; Višić, 2022). The goal is to systematize and conduct a deep analysis of theoretical models concerning the internal factors influencing the career choice of high school students, rather than collecting empirical data.

The search strategy was designed to collect high-quality academic literature from major databases, including ScienceDirect, ProQuest, and ERIC. Search terms were combined using Boolean operators (AND/OR) to optimize the scope. Key search terms encompassed related variables ("career choice", "vocational choice", "career decision-making"), the study

population (“high school students”, “adolescents”), and the internal factors (“internal factors”, “personality”, “interest”, “ability perception”, “self-awareness”, “self-efficacy”, “vocational values”).

The literature screening process was conducted in two stages (title/abstract review and full-text review) based on strict selection criteria. Inclusion criteria required the material to focus on internal/internal factors and their connection to career choice, while studies focusing only on environmental factors were excluded. Acceptable document types primarily included theoretical research articles, empirical studies, literature reviews, and monographs from original theorists. The language scope was limited to English, with a preferred timeframe from 1980 to the present to encompass modern foundational theories.

Once the documents were selected, the data analyzed was not statistical data but rather concepts, definitions, theoretical models, and relationships between variables. The analysis process included the following steps: Core data extraction (author, main theory, definition, mechanism of action); Classification and coding of internal factors into major thematic groups; Theoretical synthesis/comparison to analyze the similarities, differences, and evolution of the models. Finally, based on this synthesis and deep analysis, the study will construct an integrated Theoretical framework to clarify the overall role and interplay of internal factors in the career decision-making of high school students.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Individual Personality

Individual personality is a set of stable psychological characteristics expressed through a person’s way of thinking, feeling, and behaving, which strongly influences how an individual perceives, evaluates, and selects a suitable career (Holland, 1997; Kidd, 2006). Holland’s (1959, 1997) theory of vocational personality connects personality with career orientation, suggesting that choosing a career that aligns with one’s personality type leads to higher job satisfaction and a lower likelihood of changing jobs. Each personality type tends to develop interests in certain types of occupations (Rounds & Tracey, 1996).

The compatibility between personality and occupation contributes to enhanced adaptability, helping students integrate more easily into the future vocational learning environment, and reducing the risk of changing majors or dropping out (Haenggli & Hirschi, 2023; Wille & De Fruyt, 2014). This not only helps students develop comprehensively but also improves learning effectiveness and future success opportunities (Watson & McMahon, 2005). Furthermore, personality impacts emotions and beliefs during the decision-making process. For instance, introverted students tend to be cautious and consider carefully before choosing a major, whereas extroverted students may decide quickly but are more susceptible to external factors (Lee et al., 2023). Additionally, the fit between personality and career helps students maximize their individual strengths. For example, students with an outgoing and communicative personality will thrive in professions like teaching, psychology, or counseling; while those who prefer analysis and logical reasoning are suitable for careers in engineering, research, or programming (Bullock-Yowell & Reardon, 2024; Holland, 2006).

If students do not clearly understand or choose a career that does not match their personality, they are prone to encountering difficulties in their studies and vocational integration. Selecting a career contrary to individual personality trends can lead to boredom, loss of motivation, or failure in the learning and working environment (Gati et al., 1996). Moreover, pressure from parents, friends, or media leading students to choose a career that does not truly reflect their personality can cause psychological instability and result in frequent changes in choices (Kracke, 2002). This situation not only wastes time and money but also negatively impacts long-term career development. In addition to influencing career interests and emotions during decision-making, personality also determines compatibility with the future learning and working environment (Hirschi, 2012; Rounds & Leuty, 2020).

3.2. Individual Interests

According to the Vocational Personality Theory (Holland, 1997), individuals tend to choose careers that align with their personality type, and interests are the specific expressions of these personality traits. For example, people with an artistic tendency often prefer working in creative, flexible environments, while those belonging to the technical group usually love logic and practical tasks. Individual interests guide students toward occupational fields that they find meaningful, thereby promoting exploratory behavior, experience, and preparation for their future career path. Creed & Hughes (2012) also assert that interests not only influence the orientation stage but also affect later career outcomes through career development strategies. This mechanism occurs when interests generate intrinsic motivation, helping students actively learn, persistently overcome challenges, and form a long-term career commitment.

The positive influence of individual interests is most clearly demonstrated by helping students choose careers that match their abilities and personal values. When doing work they love, individuals tend to work with a positive spirit, easily achieve high performance, and develop sustainably. According to Blustein (2006), the harmony between interests and work helps students feel that the work is meaningful, thereby fostering a sense of attachment and a clearer sense of career identity. Furthermore, interests help students maintain stability in their career choices. Porfeli & Skorikov (2009) showed that students with clear interests are less influenced by external impacts and are more likely to develop a strong career orientation during adolescence. As a result, they are more consistent in their choices, reducing fluctuations and confusion in the face of societal or family pressures.

However, individual interests can also lead to negative influences if not properly guided. Hirschi (2011) emphasizes that without combining interests with self-awareness and objective self-assessment, students may make inaccurate decisions and be prone to career failure. In some cases, students may confuse temporary hobbies with sustainable passion, leading to rushed career decisions lacking a factual basis. This is particularly common during adolescence, when their personality and vocational values are not yet stable. Additionally, interest does not equate to ability. A student might love the arts but lack the competence to pursue it professionally, leading to disappointment, abandoning goals, or even a future career crisis. Moreover, students are easily influenced by the glamorous images of certain professions promoted by the media, thereby developing “led interests” instead of those stemming from genuine personal need.

3.3. Perception of Individual Ability

According to Super (1957), ability is part of the system of internal factors that constitute an individual's vocational identity, thereby influencing decision-making during the career choice process. Academic ability, thinking skills, communication skills, or special aptitudes (music, sports, logic, language, etc.) help students identify suitable occupational fields. The influence of individual ability is explained through the Expectancy-Value Theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002), in which individuals tend to choose activities that they believe they have the capability to perform successfully and highly value the outcome of those activities. Thus, students often choose careers aligned with the fields where they feel most confident, have accumulated experience, or have previously achieved high results (Creed & Hughes, 2012). When students recognize their strengths, they can easily visualize themselves in corresponding professional roles.

The positive impact of individual ability on career choice is demonstrated by helping students make decisions that are more aligned with their actual capability, thereby increasing their confidence and potential for future success. Lent et al. (1994, 2002) suggest that ability, particularly self-efficacy perception, plays a central role in the Social Cognitive Career Theory model, consequently influencing the formation of interests, career goals, and career preparatory behavior. Students with strong academic ability, robust logical analysis skills, or flexible communication capabilities tend to choose professions that demand high performance in these aspects, such as medicine, information technology, or multimedia communication.

However, individual ability can also bring negative impacts if students misjudge or are pressured by unrealistic expectations regarding their capabilities. Some students might choose a major or career path that exceeds their actual capacity, leading to psychological stress, academic failure, and even dropping out midway. Conversely, some students, despite having the ability, lack self-confidence or directional support, leading them to choose careers below their ability level, thus limiting their development opportunities. Lent et al. (1994, 2002) emphasize that a distorted perception of ability can hinder the formation of appropriate career goals and may create avoidant behaviors in career exploration.

3.4. Perception of Vocational Values

Super (1990) and Savickas (2005) suggest that vocational values act as a “compass” in forming career goals, building vocational identity, and maintaining long-term career commitment. Vocational values can be understood as the beliefs, orientations, or personal standards that an individual uses to assess the level of meaning, importance, and suitability of an occupation for their life. This is a subjective factor, yet it is strongly influenced by social, cultural, and educational elements. Vocational values impact students' career choice decisions by shaping their perception of the meaning of an occupation for themselves. According to Holland (1997), individuals will feel more satisfied with a career if their vocational values align with the characteristics of that profession.

When students clearly recognize their system of vocational values, they will have a clear and highly personalized career direction. For example, students who prioritize the value of “helping others” often gravitate towards fields such as healthcare, education, or social work. Meanwhile,

students who emphasize “financial stability” or “social status” tend to favor professions like finance, banking, information technology, or law. This helps reduce the tendency to choose a career based on impulse or being overly influenced by external factors. Clear vocational values also help students develop study and training plans consistent with their chosen career path, thereby increasing the likelihood of achieving satisfaction in their future work. Creed & Hughes (2012) and Lent & Brown (2006) also point out that identifying and developing vocational values enables students to adjust better when facing difficulties in the career decision-making process, especially when compromising between personal ideals and labor market realities.

However, vocational values can also create obstacles if not properly guided and adjusted to reality. If students over-idealize vocational values, such as “creative freedom” or “professional autonomy”, but lack the corresponding abilities or development conditions, they may easily become disappointed or abandon their goals when confronted with practical challenges (Gottfredson, 1981). Furthermore, conflict between personal vocational values and expectations from family or society can cause students stress during the career selection process. For instance, a student whose vocational values lean towards artistic creativity but is steered by their family toward “safe” fields like banking or medicine may result in a career decision lacking motivation and being less effective.

3.5. Self-awareness

Self-awareness is an individual’s capacity to understand their own characteristics, values, interests, abilities, strengths, and weaknesses, which helps students shape their vocational identity and build clear, realistic career goals (Hirschi, 2012; Watson & McMahon, 2005). According to Super (1990) and Holland (1997), self-understanding is a prerequisite for individuals to choose a career that aligns with their personality and competence, thereby achieving satisfaction and success in their future work.

The impact of self-awareness on career choice can be analyzed through two main aspects: value awareness and ability awareness. Students with clear awareness of their personal values will easily choose careers that match their life orientation and long-term goals (Leuty & Hansen, 2011). Awareness of individual ability helps students accurately assess their potential for learning and adapting to specific professions, eliminating unsuitable options and focusing on those with long-term development prospects, thus minimizing the risk of mistaken choices (Gati et al., 1996; Nauta & Kahn, 2007).

High self-awareness offers numerous benefits in the career choice process. First, it helps students clarify personal priorities, leading to the selection of careers consistent with their life values and passions. This alignment is proven to positively influence the level of career commitment and job satisfaction later on (Hirschi, 2011; Leal-Muniz & Constantine, 2005). Furthermore, good self-awareness helps students enhance their career self-efficacy - a key factor determining their ability to make confident and sound decisions (Bandura et al., 2001; Wang et al., 2023). When students understand themselves well, they can more easily overcome social pressure, peer influence, or family wishes that are inconsistent with their own needs (Turner & Lapan, 2002).

Conversely, a lack of self-awareness often leads students into a state of career ambiguity, feeling confused or hesitant during the process of selecting a major and future career (Gati & Saka, 2001). This situation can easily result in consequences such as choosing the wrong major, studying something that doesn't match their ability, dropping out, or post-graduation unemployment (Mohammed et al., 2021). Additionally, students lacking self-awareness are often easily swayed by herd mentality, parental pressure, or unrealistic expectations, which can lead them to choose careers that are a poor personal fit, resulting in boredom, stress, and disappointment (Chen et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2023).

3.6. Self-efficacy

This concept, developed by Bandura (1986), refers to an individual's level of belief in their ability to execute actions or achieve specific goals. In the vocational guidance field, this concept is often understood as "students' belief in their capacity to make sound and appropriate career decisions" (Lent et al., 1994). Social Cognitive Career Theory emphasizes that belief in one's competence is a central element in the career decision-making model (Lent & Brown, 2013). The impact of this factor on the career choice process is demonstrated through: 1) Influence on the level of active career exploration and investigation (Gu et al., 2020; Pham et al., 2024); 2) Regulation of the ability to cope with difficulties during the career selection process, helping students overcome psychological barriers when making career decisions (Bandura et al., 2001); 3) Reinforcement of persistence in one's own choices (Nota et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2023).

A high belief in one's own capability is closely linked to many positive career guidance outcomes. Firstly, students with self-efficacy often feel more satisfied and confident when making decisions, thereby reducing anxiety and increasing the effectiveness of their career choices (Betz, 2004; Lee et al., 2022). Furthermore, they tend to proactively guide their careers, not passively follow adults or be carried away by peers. Another benefit is the promotion of a sense of vocational independence, as students believe they can independently build plans and overcome obstacles on their path to professional development (Sheu et al., 2018). This factor is especially crucial in the context of a rapidly changing labor market that demands high adaptability.

Conversely, a low level of belief in one's capability can lead to career ambiguity, anxiety when choosing a career, and a lack of commitment to the choice made (Gati et al., 1996; Mohammed et al., 2021). Students who lack confidence in their abilities often feel fearful when making a choice, resulting in procrastination or choosing a career under external pressure. This not only affects academic and guidance outcomes in the short term but also has long-term consequences such as job dissatisfaction, unemployment, or changing majors multiple times (Chen et al., 2021; Lent & Brown, 2019).

3.7. Perception of Career Goals

Career goals are specific, measurable, and achievable orientations that an individual wishes to attain in their professional journey. Career goals are not only the product of internal factors like self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations but are also a determinant of career choice behavior and persistence in pursuing an occupation (Lent et al., 1994, 2013). For high school

students, setting career goals plays a particularly crucial role, helping them establish clear direction and creating motivation for learning (Hirschi, 2011; Lent & Brown, 2006). When students have clear career goals, they tend to: 1) Plan their studies, research specific occupations, and actively engage in relevant career guidance activities (Creed et al., 2007); 2) Maintain persistence in their studies, even when facing difficulties or environmental pressure (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002); 3) Commit to their career choice, reducing the risk of continuous changes (Chen et al., 2021).

Thus, career goals help students clearly identify their future direction, thereby guiding the selection of majors, examination subjects, universities, or appropriate training programs. Students with clear career goals often proactively participate in career exploration activities, internships, or guidance counseling, thereby enhancing the quality of their career decisions (Chen et al., 2021). Furthermore, career goals help students strengthen their sense of responsibility for the future, generating motivation for learning and personal competence development. Research by Marcionetti & Rossier (2019) indicates that students with clear career goals often report higher levels of self-assessment and life satisfaction.

Conversely, students who lack career goals or have vague, unrealistic goals are prone to being directionless in their studies, feeling anxious, or being passive in choosing an occupation. This situation leads to instability in career choice, making them easily change their orientation when encountering obstacles or when influenced by peers, media, or parents (Gati et al., 1996). Additionally, the lack of career goals reduces learning motivation, causing feelings of frustration, especially among final-year high school students who are making critical decisions for their future (Chen et al., 2021; Germeijs & Verschueren, 2006). They are likely to choose careers based on impulse or market trends without considering personal fit, thereby increasing the risk of unemployment, dropping out, or future job dissatisfaction (Blustein, 1997).

3.8. Life and Learning Experiences

Life and learning experiences are the practical exposures that students accumulate through academic activities, extracurriculars, social interaction, volunteer work, or personal life events, all of which significantly influence the career decision-making process during the high school stage (Blustein, 1997; Watson & McMahon, 2005). According to the Happenstance Learning Theory (Krumboltz, 2009; Krumboltz et al., 2013), even random, unplanned experiences can positively affect career choice if individuals observe, reflect, and learn from them. Furthermore, modern career development theories also emphasize the role of practical experience as a factor in shaping interests, values, and career orientation (Lent & Brown, 2013; Savickas, 2012).

Life and learning experiences impact career choice through three main mechanisms: 1) Expanding career knowledge and interests: Practical experience allows students to be exposed to a diverse range of professions, thereby forming interests and identifying fields that align with their personal characteristics (e.g., through an extracurricular programming club, a student might discover a passion for technology and decide to pursue information technology) (Pham et al., 2024); 2) Shaping vocational values and attitudes toward work: Such as stability, creativity, social responsibility, etc., helping students establish criteria for career selection that match their personal worldview (Falco & Steen, 2018; Perry et al., 2010); 3) Developing soft

skills for students and reinforcing self-confidence and proactiveness in the decision-making process (Bandura et al., 2001; Lee et al., 2022).

4. CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review successfully achieved its stated goal of systematizing and deeply analyzing the concepts and theoretical models regarding the internal factors influencing the career choice of high school students. The analysis affirms the central and determining role of these internal attributes (including personality, interests, ability perception, vocational values, self-awareness, self-efficacy, career goals, and life and learning experiences) as the core foundation for forming vocational identity and making effective choices. The alignment between these internal factors and the requirements of an occupation is the key to achieving long-term job satisfaction and career commitment.

In terms of theoretical contribution, the study addressed the documented gap regarding the fragmentation of internal factor analysis by providing an integrated theoretical framework. This framework clarifies the mechanism through which internal factors interact and influence each other, demonstrating, for instance, how self-awareness acts as a meta-cognitive factor, regulating the assessment of ability and values, which in turn influences the formation of clear career goals and self-efficacy. These factors, particularly self-efficacy and goals, operate as powerful motivators, driving proactive career exploration and sustaining persistence in studies and training.

The research yields significant practical implications for career guidance practice at the high school level. Intervention programs must shift their focus from merely providing occupational information to activities that develop students' self-awareness and self-efficacy. Specifically, there is a need to prioritize the use of in-depth assessment tools to help students accurately define their core personality, interests, and values. Furthermore, integrating life and learning experiences (e.g., internships, real-world exposure) into the curriculum is essential for students to test their internal factors against practical demands, enabling them to make well-informed career decisions and avoid being swayed by social pressure or market trends.

However, this study has limitations inherent to a literature review, as it cannot quantitatively measure the degree of influence of each factor or analyze the complex interplay between internal factors and external, environmental factors (e.g., family influence, economics, and the labor market). Therefore, future empirical studies should utilize the integrated theoretical framework proposed by this review to: 1) Quantitatively measure the relative impact of each internal factor on the career decision-making clarity of high school students; 2) Develop and test career intervention models based on improving self-awareness and self-efficacy, thereby validating the practical applicability of this theoretical synthesis.

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