

Social Determinants of Career Choice Among High School Students: A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT:

Career choice during adolescence is a critical developmental task that has long-term implications for educational attainment, employability, and personal well-being. Although numerous studies have examined factors influencing students' career decisions, evidence concerning the role of social influences remains fragmented across different theoretical perspectives and research contexts. This study aims to systematically review and synthesize the existing literature on the social factors affecting career choice among high school students. A systematic literature review was conducted using publications retrieved from major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and ERIC. Eligible studies were identified through predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria and subsequently analyzed using thematic synthesis. The review identified multiple interconnected social influences, including family, school, peers, media and social media, labor market conditions, national educational policies, cultural environments, technological development, and social role models. The findings indicate that these factors shape adolescents' career decisions by influencing career aspirations, occupational values, access to career information, and perceptions of future opportunities. Rather than acting independently, social influences interact dynamically throughout the career decision-making process. This review contributes to the literature by providing an integrated understanding of the multidimensional nature of social influences on career choice and offers practical implications for educators, career counselors, and policymakers seeking to strengthen career guidance for secondary school students.

KEYWORDS: career decision-making, career guidance, adolescence, educational policy, social support

1. INTRODUCTION

Career choice is one of the most important developmental tasks during adolescence, shaping not only individuals' educational trajectories but also their future employment opportunities, socioeconomic mobility, and overall well-being. For high school students, decisions regarding future occupations or academic pathways often represent the first major life choices that require

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balancing personal aspirations with external expectations. Appropriate career decisions contribute to academic motivation, career adaptability, and long-term job satisfaction, whereas inappropriate choices may lead to educational mismatch, career instability, and psychological distress (Creed et al., 2007; Germeijs & Verschueren, 2006; Super, 1990). Consequently, supporting adolescents in making informed career decisions has become a major objective of career education and guidance systems worldwide.

Although career choice is frequently viewed as an individual decision, extensive theoretical and empirical research suggests that it is fundamentally embedded within a broader social context. Adolescents rarely make career decisions independently; instead, their choices are continuously shaped by interactions with parents, teachers, peers, schools, communities, and the broader sociocultural environment. Career development theories, including Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 1994, 2002), the Systems Theory Framework (Patton & McMahon, 2014), and the Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making (Krumboltz, 1979), consistently emphasize that environmental and social factors influence career development by shaping students' self-efficacy, outcome expectations, career aspirations, and decision-making processes. Beyond immediate interpersonal relationships, broader contextual factors such as socioeconomic status, cultural norms, educational opportunities, and labor market conditions also contribute substantially to adolescents' career choices.

Over the past two decades, research has examined numerous social influences on students' career choices. Family-related variables, including parental expectations, educational background, socioeconomic status, and parental support, have been identified as important determinants of career aspirations. School-related factors, such as teacher encouragement, career education programs, and school climate, have also received considerable attention. Meanwhile, peer relationships, community environments, social media, and cultural values have increasingly emerged as influential factors in shaping occupational preferences and educational decisions. However, these studies have generally investigated individual factors in isolation, often within specific national or cultural contexts, resulting in fragmented and sometimes inconsistent findings regarding the relative importance and mechanisms of different social influences.

Despite the growing body of literature, a comprehensive synthesis of the social factors influencing career choice among high school students remains limited. Existing review studies typically focus on a single determinant, such as parental influence or career self-efficacy, or examine career choice across broad age groups without distinguishing adolescents in secondary education. Furthermore, relatively little attention has been paid to integrating diverse theoretical perspectives to explain how multiple social environments interact throughout the career decision-making process. This fragmentation makes it difficult for researchers, educators, and policymakers to establish a coherent evidence base for designing effective career guidance interventions, particularly in rapidly changing educational and labor market contexts.

To address this gap, the present study provides a review of the literature on social factors influencing career choice among high school students. Specifically, this review aims to identify the major categories of social factors associated with adolescents' career choice. By integrating findings across diverse contexts and theoretical traditions, this review seeks to provide a

comprehensive conceptual framework that can inform future research and contribute to the development of evidence-based career guidance practices for secondary education.

2. METHODS

2.1. Study Design

This study employed the systematic literature review method to identify, organize, and synthesize previous research on the social factors influencing career choice among high school students. This method provides a transparent and structured approach for reviewing existing literature and enables the integration of findings from different studies into a coherent theoretical framework (O'Brien & McGuckin, 2016; Višić, 2022). Rather than collecting empirical data, the study focuses on analyzing and synthesizing existing theories and research findings related to social influences on adolescents' career choice.

2.2. Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across four major academic databases: ScienceDirect, ProQuest, and ERIC. These databases were selected because they provide extensive coverage of educational research, psychology, sociology, and career development literature.

The search strategy combined keywords related to career choice, secondary education, and social influences using Boolean operators (AND/OR). The principal search syntax included combinations of the following terms: ("career choice" OR "career decision-making" OR "career aspiration" OR "occupational choice") AND ("high school students" OR "adolescents") AND ("social factors" OR "teacher" OR "peer" OR "school" OR "community" OR "social support" OR "social influence" OR "culture" OR "social media").

Reference lists of eligible studies were also manually screened to identify additional relevant publications that were not captured during the database search.

2.3. Study Selection

The study selection process consisted of four stages following the PRISMA framework. First, duplicate records were removed after importing search results into the reference management software. Second, titles and abstracts were screened against the eligibility criteria. Third, the full texts of potentially relevant articles were independently reviewed to determine final eligibility. Finally, studies meeting all inclusion criteria were retained for data extraction and synthesis. Any disagreement during the screening process was resolved through repeated evaluation of the eligibility criteria until consensus was achieved.

2.4. Data Extraction and Synthesis

A standardized data extraction form was developed to collect key information from each eligible study, including author(s), publication year, country, research design, sample characteristics, theoretical framework, investigated social factors, principal findings, and reported mechanisms explaining the influence of social factors on career choice. The extracted evidence was synthesized using thematic synthesis. Similar social variables were grouped into broader

conceptual categories, including family influences, school influences, peer influences, community factors, cultural influences, and media-related influences. Subsequently, similarities and differences across studies were compared to identify recurring patterns, inconsistencies, and emerging trends. Particular attention was given to the theoretical mechanisms through which different social environments shape adolescents' career decision-making processes. Finally, the synthesized evidence was integrated to propose a comprehensive conceptual framework illustrating the multidimensional social influences on career choice among high school students.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Media and Social Media

The rapid expansion of digital media and social networking platforms has transformed the way high school students obtain career-related information. Compared with traditional career guidance channels, social media provides immediate access to diverse occupational information through videos, career-sharing blogs, online communities, and personal experiences, enabling students to gain a more realistic understanding of job characteristics, required competencies, and emerging occupations (Nguyen et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2023). These platforms also introduce students to non-traditional career paths, such as digital content creation, game design, and other technology-driven professions that have become increasingly attractive in the digital economy (Perry et al., 2010).

However, the reviewed studies consistently highlight the risks associated with uncritical use of social media. Career-related content often emphasizes financial success, popularity, and glamorous lifestyles while overlooking the challenges, qualifications, and long-term commitments required for particular occupations (Chen et al., 2021). In addition, misleading, commercially driven, or insufficiently verified information may distort students' perceptions of different professions, particularly when promotional content is disguised as career advice or university guidance (Pham, 2011; Tran, 2024; Zhou et al., 2023). These findings suggest that media literacy has become an essential competency for informed career decision-making.

3.2. Labor Market Trends and Employment Opportunities

Labor market conditions and employment prospects have become increasingly influential in students' career decisions, particularly in rapidly changing economies. Many adolescents consider future employability, income potential, and occupational demand when selecting academic majors and career pathways (Lent & Brown, 2013; Nguyen et al., 2023). Awareness of labor market trends enables students to identify expanding industries, avoid oversaturated occupations, and prepare for emerging skill requirements, thereby improving their career readiness (Chen et al., 2021; Lent et al., 2002; Nguyen et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, the review indicates that labor market information may also contribute to inappropriate career choices when interpreted without sufficient self-understanding. Many students are inclined to pursue "high-demand" or "popular" occupations primarily because of perceived employment opportunities, despite limited alignment with their interests or abilities (Gati et al., 1996). Furthermore, because labor markets continuously evolve in response to technological, economic, and demographic changes, decisions based solely on current

employment trends may become obsolete over time (Blustein, 2004). Consequently, labor market information should be integrated with personal characteristics rather than serving as the sole basis for career choice.

3.3. National Educational Policies and Career Guidance Systems

National educational policies constitute an important macro-level influence on students' career choices by shaping admission regulations, career guidance programs, and vocational education policies (Falco & Steen, 2018; Ministry of Education and Training, 2018, 2022). Effective policy frameworks provide strategic direction for career guidance, improve access to career information, and encourage students to consider diverse educational and occupational pathways. Admission policies and government incentives for priority sectors, such as teacher education and public health, may also influence students' educational preferences and career intentions (Lee et al., 2023).

Despite these positive contributions, several studies identify persistent policy-related challenges. Frequent changes in university admission regulations may create uncertainty and complicate students' long-term educational planning (Tran, 2024). In many countries, vocational education policies continue to receive lower social recognition than university education, limiting their effectiveness in diversifying students' career pathways (Nguyen et al., 2023). Moreover, disparities in policy implementation across regions often result in unequal access to career guidance services, particularly in schools with limited educational resources (Falco & Steen, 2018).

3.4. Cultural Environment and Occupational Stereotypes

The review demonstrates that cultural values and occupational stereotypes exert substantial influence on adolescents' career choices. In societies where occupational prestige, financial security, and social status are highly valued, students often experience pressure to pursue careers perceived as prestigious or economically rewarding, even when these occupations do not correspond to their personal interests or competencies (Hou & Leung, 2011; Leuty & Hansen, 2011; Perry et al., 2010).

Conversely, cultural environments that promote social responsibility, personal fulfillment, and respect for occupational diversity encourage students to explore a broader range of career options and develop career aspirations aligned with their individual values (Falco & Steen, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2024). The reviewed literature also identifies occupational stereotypes as a significant barrier to informed career decision-making. Persistent distinctions between "high-status" and "low-status" occupations, together with gender-based stereotypes regarding appropriate careers for males and females, continue to restrict students' occupational aspirations (Chen et al., 2021; Gati et al., 1996; Zhou et al., 2023). These cultural influences appear particularly pronounced in communities where traditional values strongly shape educational and occupational expectations.

3.5. Technological Development and the Digital Transformation of Occupations

Advances in digital technology, artificial intelligence, automation, and big data are reshaping the structure of the labor market and creating new occupational opportunities. The reviewed

studies indicate that technological development has shifted students' career preferences from emphasizing employment stability toward careers characterized by innovation, flexibility, and global competitiveness (Falco & Steen, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2023). Emerging professions in software engineering, digital communication, data science, and other technology-related fields have become increasingly attractive to younger generations.

At the same time, the accelerating pace of technological change presents considerable uncertainty for career planning. Students often struggle to anticipate future labor market demands because occupations evolve rapidly and new jobs continually emerge while others disappear (Gati et al., 1996). Furthermore, unequal access to digital technologies and career information may widen educational and occupational inequalities, particularly among students from socioeconomically disadvantaged or rural communities (Nguyen, 2019). These findings emphasize the importance of developing students' adaptability and lifelong learning competencies in addition to occupation-specific knowledge.

3.6. Social Role Models and Public Figures

Social role models, including professionals, entrepreneurs, community leaders, and public figures, represent another important source of career influence. According to the reviewed literature, adolescents frequently construct career aspirations by observing individuals whom they admire and perceive as successful (Bandura, 1986; Falco & Steen, 2018). Positive role models can inspire students by demonstrating perseverance, professional competence, and meaningful contributions to society, thereby strengthening career motivation and occupational aspirations (Nguyen et al., 2024).

However, role models may also contribute to unrealistic career expectations. Students sometimes idealize celebrities or online influencers and choose occupations primarily because of their popularity, wealth, or public recognition rather than genuine personal interests or abilities (Chen et al., 2021; Gati et al., 1996). The growing popularity of careers associated with social media, such as YouTubers, streamers, or influencers, illustrates how adolescents may overlook the complexity and uncertainty of these professions. Therefore, while role models can effectively motivate career exploration, career guidance should encourage students to critically evaluate occupational information and align external inspiration with their own competencies, values, and long-term goals.

4. DISCUSSION

This review synthesized the existing literature on the social factors influencing career choice among high school students and revealed that career decision-making is shaped by a complex interaction of multiple social environments rather than by any single factor. Family, school, peers, media, labor market conditions, national educational policies, cultural values, technological development, and social role models all contribute to students' career aspirations and decisions. Rather than operating independently, these factors interact continuously throughout adolescents' career development, creating both opportunities and constraints that influence how students perceive occupations, evaluate alternatives, and make career decisions.

One important finding of this review is that social factors rarely determine career choice directly. Instead, they influence students through several psychological and behavioral mechanisms. Family support and teacher guidance enhance students' confidence and career self-efficacy, while peers, media, and role models shape occupational values, aspirations, and perceptions of desirable careers. Similarly, labor market information and educational policies provide contextual information that influences students' expectations regarding future employment opportunities. These findings are highly consistent with Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 1994, 2002), which proposes that contextual supports and barriers affect career decisions primarily through self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations rather than through direct environmental pressure alone. Likewise, the Systems Theory Framework emphasizes that career development results from the dynamic interaction between individuals and multiple environmental systems throughout their developmental journey.

Another notable finding is that the influence of social factors is both supportive and restrictive. Positive family communication, effective school-based career guidance, accurate labor market information, and diverse occupational role models can broaden students' career exploration and strengthen informed decision-making. Conversely, excessive parental expectations, occupational stereotypes, misleading social media content, rapidly changing labor markets, and unequal educational opportunities may constrain students' career choices and contribute to unrealistic aspirations or inappropriate educational decisions. This dual influence suggests that career guidance should not seek to eliminate social influences but rather help students critically evaluate external information while maintaining awareness of their own interests, abilities, and career goals.

The findings also highlight important implications for career education. Effective career guidance should move beyond providing occupational information and instead develop students' career decision-making competence through collaboration among families, schools, communities, and policymakers. Schools should strengthen career education by integrating labor market information, digital literacy, and critical evaluation of online career resources into career guidance programs. Parents and teachers should be encouraged to provide supportive rather than directive guidance, enabling students to explore career options independently while receiving appropriate emotional and informational support. In addition, policymakers should ensure equitable access to career guidance services, particularly for students from disadvantaged or rural communities where career information and educational opportunities remain limited.

Despite providing a comprehensive synthesis of the literature, this review has several limitations. First, only English-language publications were included, which may have excluded relevant studies published in other languages. Second, the review focused specifically on high school students; therefore, the findings may not be directly applicable to other educational levels. Finally, because this study synthesized existing literature rather than conducting a meta-analysis, the relative strength of different social factors could not be quantitatively compared. Future research should examine the interactions among multiple social influences using longitudinal and cross-cultural designs, while also exploring the growing impact of artificial intelligence, digital career guidance, and emerging labor market transformations on adolescents' career decision-making.

5. CONCLUSION

This review provides a comprehensive synthesis of the social factors influencing career choice among high school students. The findings demonstrate that career choice is not solely an individual decision but rather the result of continuous interactions between adolescents and their social environments. Family, school, peers, media, labor market conditions, national educational policies, cultural values, technological development, and social role models collectively shape students' career aspirations, occupational perceptions, and decision-making processes. These factors may either facilitate or constrain career development depending on the nature of the social support, the quality of available information, and students' capacity to critically evaluate external influences.

Beyond identifying these social factors, this review contributes to the literature by integrating evidence from diverse theoretical perspectives into a coherent understanding of how multiple social environments influence adolescents' career development. The synthesis highlights that social influences operate through interconnected mechanisms rather than in isolation, emphasizing the importance of considering career choice as a multidimensional and context-dependent process. This integrated perspective provides a stronger theoretical foundation for future empirical research and supports the development of more comprehensive models of career decision-making among high school students.

The findings also have important practical implications for career guidance. Schools should adopt a collaborative approach that actively engages families, teachers, communities, and policymakers in supporting students' career development. Career education should extend beyond providing occupational information by strengthening students' career exploration skills, critical evaluation of digital information, and informed decision-making competencies. At the policy level, improving equitable access to career guidance services and ensuring that educational policies respond to changing labor market demands will be essential for helping students make sustainable career choices.

Future research should move beyond examining individual social factors independently and instead investigate how multiple social influences interact across different cultural and educational contexts. Longitudinal studies, cross-cultural comparisons, and research on emerging issues such as artificial intelligence, digital career guidance, and the future of work will further enhance understanding of adolescents' career decision-making. Such research will contribute to the development of evidence-based career guidance programs that better prepare high school students for an increasingly dynamic and complex world of work.

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