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ABSTRACT

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Keywords

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undergraduates.

The changing employment context for graduates and the adjustment of China's preschool education sector have made future career choices more uncertain for students in this major. Taking students majoring in preschool education in Shandong Province, China, as the research sample, this study analyzed the links among neuroticism, negative coping style, and career decision, and examined whether negative coping style mediated the relationship between neuroticism and career decision. A quantitative research design was used, and data were collected from 312 students majoring in preschool education through structured questionnaires. Reliability and validity tests, correlation analysis, regression analysis, and bootstrap mediation analysis were conducted to examine the relationships among the variables. The results showed that neuroticism had a significant negative effect on career decision ($\beta = -0.589$, $p < 0.001$) and a significant positive effect on negative coping style ($\beta = 0.543$, $p < 0.001$). Negative coping style also had a significant negative effect on career decision ($\beta = -0.594$, $p < 0.001$). The bootstrap results further indicated that negative coping style played a significant partial mediating role between neuroticism and career decision-making. These findings suggest that students with higher levels of neuroticism are more likely to adopt negative coping responses, which may reduce their career certainty and satisfaction. Universities should identify and support students with emotional distress and negative coping tendencies at an earlier stage and provide targeted career guidance and psychological support to improve students' career decisions.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by exploring career decision-making among preschool education undergraduates in Shandong Province, China. It integrates neuroticism and negative coping styles into one framework, offering new insights into career-related research and enhancing understanding of career guidance and psychological support in preschool teacher education.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Research Background

As digital transformation continues, demographic patterns in the working-age population shift, and higher education expands, students encounter a less predictable transition from university to employment. Under these conditions, career choice has become more uncertain for many students (Salas-Velasco, 2024; Tee, Wong, Dada, Song, & Ng, 2024). The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2024b) reported that the number of graduates from regular higher education institutions was expected to reach 12.22 million in 2025, making graduate employment a continuing priority in employment-related work. At the same time, the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2025) showed that China recorded 9.54 million births in 2024 and experienced negative natural population

growth. This demographic trend is closely related to changes in labor supply and the demand for educational talent. In addition, national education development statistics released by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2024a) and the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2025) indicated decreases in the number of kindergartens, enrolled children, and full-time preschool teachers. These changes suggest that preschool education is moving into a period in which structural adjustment and quality improvement coexist. Therefore, the career choice and career decision of students majoring in preschool education deserve further attention.

Compared with college students in other majors, students majoring in preschool education have particular group characteristics in their career development (Zhang, Abdul, Abd Wahab, & Qiu, 2025), and their employment uncertainty goes beyond job competition, involving changes in industry demand, fluctuations in occupational attractiveness, and adjustments in expectations for future careers (Li & Fan, 2025). Whether preservice teachers choose to enter the teaching profession, are willing to remain in teaching for a long period, and maintain their willingness to teach is also influenced by multiple factors (Wu, Wu, Song, Zhang, & Song, 2025). Therefore, whether students majoring in preschool education are willing to take major-related positions and whether they can form a relatively clear and stable career decision during professional study have become practically significant issues (Wang et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2025). This also concerns the quality of cultivating reserve talent for preschool education and their career sustainability.

From the perspective of individual development, career decision-making reflects college students' judgment of future career directions, commitment to career goals, and level of preparation. It is shaped not only by the external employment environment but also by internal psychological characteristics (Dev & Arli, 2025; Li & Fan, 2025), and personality differences influence individuals' emotional experiences in career choice, their processing of career information, and their responses to uncertain situations, further influencing hesitation, anxiety, and uncertainty in career decision-making (Dev & Arli, 2025). For college students in the school-to-work transition stage, those with higher levels of neuroticism may be more likely to perceive employment issues as threatening and develop negative expectations, thereby influencing the formation of their career direction.

The coping styles adopted by college students under stressful conditions also influence the course of career development. Negative coping style refers to negative cognitive and behavioral responses used by individuals when they are under stress (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Jiang & Wang, 2022). A relatively stable connection exists between personality traits and coping styles (Guadalupe & DeShong, 2025), and students with higher levels of neuroticism are more likely to rely on negative coping styles, including avoidance, withdrawal, or ineffective regulation, in stressful situations (Fu, Mao, & Tian, 2024). Viewed through career development theory, Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) holds that individual career behavior is influenced by self-efficacy, outcome expectations, goals, behavioral strategies, and other factors (Lent & Brown, 2013), providing a basis for explaining the relationships among personality traits, coping styles, and career decisions.

Therefore, when employment pressure among college graduates coexists with structural changes in the preschool education sector, it is necessary to further examine the formation mechanism of career decisions among college students majoring in preschool education, thereby offering more specific empirical evidence for career guidance, psychological support, and employment preparation in preschool education programs.

1.2. Research Objectives

This study selected students majoring in preschool education in Shandong Province, China, as the research participants. It examined the relationships among neuroticism, negative coping style, and career decision while controlling for only-child status and place of origin (urban and rural) background. The research objectives were as follows:

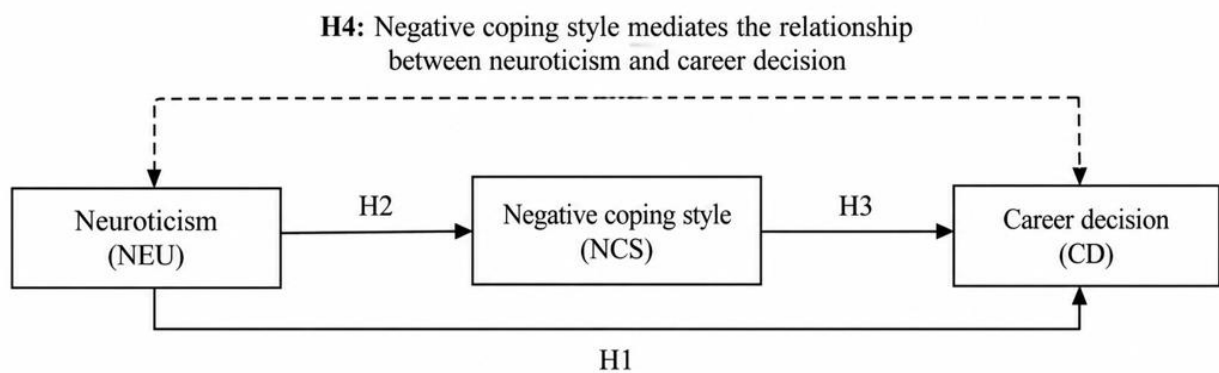
1. To determine whether neuroticism affects career decisions.
2. To determine whether neuroticism affects a negative coping style.

3. To determine whether a negative coping style affects career decisions.
4. To determine whether a negative coping style mediates the relationship between neuroticism and career decisions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Research Model

SCCT explains career development through the joint roles of individual characteristics, contextual conditions, and cognitive-behavioral processes. During career exploration, career decision-making, and career goal regulation, individuals' self-regulation may influence their career development outcomes (Lent & Brown, 2013; Lent, Ezeofor, Morrison, Penn, & Ireland, 2016). Drawing on SCCT, this study proposes that neuroticism influences the career decisions of students majoring in preschool education, with a negative coping style serving as a mediating mechanism. The research model developed in this study is shown in Figure 1. In the empirical analysis, only-child status and place of origin, classified as urban or rural, were treated as control variables.



Note: H1 represents the direct effect of neuroticism on career decision; H2 represents the effect of neuroticism on negative coping style; H3 represents the effect of negative coping style on career decision; and H4 represents the mediating role of negative coping style in the relationship between neuroticism and career decision.

Figure 1. Research model.

2.2. The Relationship Between Neuroticism and Career Decision

Neuroticism mainly describes a tendency toward low emotional stability and frequent experiences of negative emotions, such as anxiety, tension, worry, and sadness (Chmielewski & Morgan, 2020). In career development research, this trait has been regarded as closely connected with the career choice process and difficulties in making career decisions (Tokar, Fischer, & Subich, 1998). Individuals with higher neuroticism scores tend to show lower levels of career exploration and career involvement, as well as stronger hesitation in career choice (Germeijs & Verschueren, 2011; Lounsbury, Hutchens, & Loveland, 2005; Page, Bruch, & Haase, 2008; Reed, Bruch, & Haase, 2004; Tokar et al., 1998). Kleine, Schmitt, and Wisse (2021) found that neuroticism was negatively correlated with career exploration, while career exploration was positively correlated with career decision. Individuals with high neuroticism are more likely to experience uneasiness, hesitation, and decision-making difficulties during the career decision process (Dev & Arli, 2025; Penn & Lent, 2019), which may weaken college students' career choice commitment (Yang & Zalli, 2025). Therefore, this study proposes:

H₁: Neuroticism significantly and negatively affects career decision.

2.3. The Relationship Between Neuroticism and Negative Coping Style

Negative coping style refers to individuals' tendency to respond to stress or difficulties through avoidance, withdrawal, and emotional regulation rather than by actively analyzing and solving problems (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Xie, 1998). Individuals with higher levels of neuroticism tend to use less problem-focused coping (Connor-

Smith & Flachsbart, 2007; Robert R McCrae & Costa, 1986) and are more likely than individuals with lower neuroticism to adopt emotion-oriented and avoidant coping responses (Agbaria & Mokh, 2022; Boyes & French, 2010). After reviewing studies from 2010 to 2024, Guadalupe and DeShong (2025) reported a relatively stable association between neuroticism and avoidant coping. Research on personality and coping styles among college students has also shown a close connection between neuroticism and a negative coping style (Wang & Wang, 2003). From the opposite perspective, positive coping was found to be significantly and negatively related to neuroticism (Fu et al., 2024). Therefore, this study proposes.

H₂: Neuroticism has a significant positive effect on negative coping style.

2.4. The Relationship Between Negative Coping Style and Career Decision

In this study, career decision refers mainly to students' certainty about and satisfaction with their future career direction. During career development, a negative coping style may weaken students' willingness to address career-related problems in an active way. Perez and Gati (2017) reported that individuals with clearer career decision status tended to use a negative coping style less frequently. Career hesitation is linked to coping style (Boo & Kim, 2020), and individuals with stronger hesitation in career choice tend to rely less on problem-oriented coping strategies, which may interfere with the development of a clear career direction (Zhu, Zuo, Lai, Zhao, & Qu, 2021). Lipshits-Braziler, Braunstein-Bercovitz, and Kapach-Royf (2019) also indicated that a nonproductive coping style was associated with greater career decision-making distress, lower career choice satisfaction, and weaker coping efficacy. From the opposite perspective, Zhu et al. (2021) found a significant negative relationship between problem-focused coping and career indecision. Therefore, this study proposes:

H₃: Negative coping style has a significant negative effect on career decision.

2.5. The Relationships Among Neuroticism, Negative Coping Style, and Career Decision

For students majoring in preschool education, few studies have directly tested whether negative coping style mediates the link between neuroticism and career decision-making. According to SCCT, career development is influenced not only by personal traits but also by cognitive and behavioral responses in career-related contexts (Lent & Brown, 2013; Lent et al., 2016), offering a theoretical basis for understanding cognitive and behavioral mechanisms in career development (Wang, Liu, & Deng, 2022). Personality traits influence individuals' thinking styles and behavioral patterns (Greene, Cowan, & McAdams, 2020), and they also influence coping styles (Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010; Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007), while coping styles are related to career development outcomes such as career certainty and career decision-making difficulties (Russo, Zammitti, & Zarbo, 2023). From this perspective, students with higher levels of neuroticism may be more likely to form negative expectations when facing career uncertainty and adopt negative coping styles, thereby influencing career decision-making. Therefore, this study proposes:

H₄: Negative coping style mediates the relationship between neuroticism and career decision.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

3.1. Research Design

This study used a cross-sectional survey with structured questionnaires. It targeted students majoring in preschool education in Shandong Province, China, and analyzed the relationships among neuroticism, negative coping style, and career decision-making, with further attention to the mediating role of negative coping style. This method can collect standardized data from a large number of respondents within a specific period of time (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), which is useful for subsequent analysis of variable relationships and mediating effects.

3.2. Research Participants and Sampling Method

Data were collected through convenience sampling from three universities in Shandong Province, China, that offered preschool education programs. To protect institutional confidentiality, the universities were coded as University A, University B, and University C. Universities A and B were public institutions, whereas University C was a private institution. The participating universities were selected based on the following criteria: they were located in Shandong Province, offered preschool education programs, had a stable population of preschool education undergraduates, and were able to assist in questionnaire distribution through class-based channels. The online questionnaire was distributed to upper-year preschool education undergraduates through class representatives. Students participated voluntarily after reading the research information and providing informed consent. The questionnaire did not collect personally identifiable information, such as names or student ID numbers, and all data were used only for academic research. To reduce potential sampling bias, the questionnaire was distributed simultaneously across different classes in the three universities to reach upper-year students from different backgrounds.

Following Wu and Tu (2024) recommendation, questionnaire studies generally require a sample size of 5 to 10 times the number of measurement items, and this standard is usually treated as a minimum requirement rather than a maximum. Because this study included reliability and validity tests, confirmatory factor analysis, and mediation analysis, a larger target sample was used in the formal data collection. In total, 350 questionnaires were distributed, and 312 valid responses were obtained, yielding a valid response rate of 89.143%. The demographic characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample.

Background variables	Category	N	%
Only-child status	Yes	72	23.077%
	No	240	76.923%
Place of origin	Urban	107	34.295%
	Rural	205	65.705%

3.3. Research Instruments

The neuroticism dimension of the Chinese Big Five Personality Inventory Brief Version (CBF-PI-B) was adopted to assess individuals' emotional stability and anxiety tendency (Wang, Dai, & Yao, 2011). This dimension contains eight items, including reverse-scored items. Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 5 representing "strongly agree."

Career decision was measured using the Career Orientation Scale revised by Cai, Chen, Li, Lin, and Chuang (2025). In this study, career decision refers to the degree to which individuals are certain about their career goals and satisfied with their current career status. The scale consists of 15 items across two dimensions, including career certainty with eight items and career satisfaction with seven items, with reverse-scored items included. Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with scores ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree".

Negative coping style was measured using the negative coping subscale of the Simple Coping Style Questionnaire (SCSQ) (Xie, 1998). This subscale contains eight items and assesses individuals' tendency to use negative coping responses, including avoidance and withdrawal, when facing stressful situations. Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 = "never used" to 5 = "always used."

4. RESULTS

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS and AMOS. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, reliability analysis, and mediation analysis were performed in SPSS. Construct validity was examined through CFA in AMOS, and model fit was evaluated using χ^2/df , SRMR, RMSEA, GFI, CFI, TLI, IFI, and AGFI. Convergent validity was

tested using CR and AVE. The indirect effect was examined using the bootstrapping method with 5,000 resamples. When the 95% confidence interval did not include zero, the mediating effect was considered significant.

4.1. Reliability Analysis

The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for neuroticism, career decision, and negative coping style were 0.904, 0.939, and 0.903, respectively. All coefficients were above .700, indicating that the scales had good internal consistency and stability (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). The detailed results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Reliability analysis.

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha
Neuroticism	0.904
Career decision	0.939
Negative coping style	0.903

4.2. Model Fit Indices

To examine the fit of the measurement model, this study referred to commonly used criteria (Hu & Bentler, 1999): RMSEA and SRMR should be less than 0.080; GFI should be greater than 0.850; CFI, TLI, and IFI should be greater than 0.900; AGFI should be greater than 0.800; and χ^2/df should be less than 5. The CFA fit indices for neuroticism, negative coping style, and career decision are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Fit indices of the measurement model.

Model fit index	Reference criterion	Neuroticism	Career decision	Negative coping style
χ^2/df	<5	2.812	2.580	2.620
SRMR	<0.080	0.033	0.043	0.033
RMSEA	<0.080	0.076	0.071	0.072
GFI	>0.850	0.955	0.890	0.953
CFI	>0.900	0.971	0.945	0.974
TLI	>0.900	0.960	0.936	0.963
IFI	>0.900	0.971	0.945	0.974
AGFI	>0.800	0.919	0.853	0.916

4.3. Construct Reliability and Validity Analysis

In terms of descriptive statistics, the score for neuroticism was relatively low ($M = 3.331$, $SD = 0.705$), indicating that students, as a whole, showed a moderately low level of emotional instability and anxiety tendency. Negative coping style was at a moderate level ($M = 3.352$, $SD = 0.689$), suggesting that students had a certain tendency to use negative coping when facing stressful situations. Career decision had the highest score ($M = 3.435$, $SD = 0.702$), indicating that students generally had a relatively clear direction for career development.

This study conducted a validity analysis of the three core variables: neuroticism, career decision, and negative coping style. Based on the criteria proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981) ($CR \geq 0.700$, $AVE \geq 0.500$), the CR and AVE values for neuroticism were 0.904 and 0.543, respectively; the CR and AVE values for career decision were 0.926 and 0.457, respectively; and the CR and AVE for negative coping style were 0.902 and 0.536, respectively. Although the AVE value of the career decision scale was slightly below the recommended criterion, the scale still showed acceptable convergent validity overall when considered together with its high CR value and the fact that all standardized factor loadings were greater than 0.500. The remaining scales showed good internal consistency and convergent validity. The detailed results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Construct reliability and convergent validity.

Variables	M	SD	FL	CR	AVE
Neuroticism	3.331	0.705	0.680–0.822	0.904	0.543
Career decision	3.435	0.702	0.592–0.758	0.926	0.457
Negative coping style	3.352	0.689	0.689–0.799	0.902	0.536

4.4. Correlation Analysis

Neuroticism, career decision, and negative coping style showed significant Pearson correlations with one another ($p < 0.001$), and the absolute values of the correlation coefficients ranged from 0.548 to 0.598. For each construct, the square root of AVE was higher than its correlations with the other constructs, satisfying the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion and supporting the discriminant validity of the scales. Table 5 presents the detailed results.

Table 5. Correlation coefficients and square roots of AVE.

Variables	Neuroticism	Career decision	Negative coping style
Neuroticism	0.737		
Career decision	-0.588***	0.676	
Negative coping style	0.548***	-0.598***	0.732

Note: *** $p < 0.001$. Values on the diagonal are the square roots of AVE, while values below the diagonal indicate Pearson correlation coefficients.

4.5. Hypothesis Testing

This study used a sample of students majoring in preschool education in Shandong Province, China, and included place of origin (urban/rural) and only-child status as control variables in the regression models. The first three models in Table 6 tested the direct paths among neuroticism, negative coping style, and career decision. The results showed that neuroticism negatively predicted career decision ($\beta = -0.589$, $p < 0.001$) and positively predicted negative coping style ($\beta = 0.543$, $p < 0.001$). Negative coping style also negatively predicted career decision ($\beta = -0.594$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, H1, H2, and H3 were supported.

This study conducted hierarchical regression to test whether negative coping style mediated the relationship between neuroticism and career decision. In Model 4 of Table 6, neuroticism and negative coping style were entered into the regression equation at the same time. Neuroticism remained a significant negative predictor of career decision ($\beta = -0.378$, $p < 0.001$), but the absolute value of its coefficient decreased from 0.589 in Model 1 to 0.378. Negative coping style also negatively predicted career decision ($\beta = -0.387$, $p < 0.001$). These results suggest that negative coping style partially mediated the relationship between neuroticism and career decision. In other words, neuroticism may reduce career decision directly and may also further weaken career decision through increased negative coping style.

Table 6. Results of regression analysis.

Variables	Model 1 Career decision		Model 2 Negative coping style		Model 3 Career decision		Model 4 Career decision		VIF
	β	t	β	t	β	t	β	t	
Only-child status	0.008	0.168	0.049	1.010	0.015	0.315	0.027	0.620	1.050
Urban origin	0.005	0.106	0.038	0.772	0.022	0.458	0.020	0.450	1.058
Neuroticism	-0.589	-12.716***	0.543	11.377***			-0.378	-7.469***	1.432
Career decision					-0.594	-12.838***	-0.387	-7.629***	1.440
R ²	0.346		0.305		0.350		0.450		-
F	54.197***		45.125***		55.240***		62.744***		-

Note: *** $p < 0.001$. For the control variables, non-only-child students were used as the reference group, and rural origin was used as the reference group.

This study used bootstrapping to evaluate the mediating effect. With 5,000 bootstrap samples, the direct effect of neuroticism on career decision was -0.377 , 95% CI $[-0.476, -0.278]$. The indirect effect through negative coping style was -0.209 , 95% CI $[-0.273, -0.151]$, and the interval excluded zero, showing that the mediation effect was significant. The total effect was -0.586 , 95% CI $[-0.677, -0.495]$, with the interval also excluding zero. These findings indicate that negative coping style partially mediated the relationship between neuroticism and career decision. Thus, H4 was supported, and the detailed results are reported in Table 7.

Table 7. Bootstrap estimates of direct, indirect, and total effects.

Path Relationship	Estimate	95% CI	
		Lower	Upper
Direct Effect	-0.377	-0.476	-0.278
Indirect Effect	-0.209	-0.273	-0.151
Total Effect	-0.586	-0.677	-0.495

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Relationship Between Neuroticism and Career Decision

The results showed that neuroticism had a significant negative effect on career decisions, suggesting that students with higher levels of neuroticism tended to have less clarity in their career decisions. For students majoring in preschool education, future career development involves not only professional learning but also education internships, teacher qualification examinations, and employment choices. Students with higher neuroticism are generally more likely to experience anxiety, worry, and emotional instability (McCrae & John, 1992), and they are more prone to worry, tension, and negative expectations when facing these requirements. Previous studies also support this result: Lounsbury, Tatum, Chambers, Owens, and Gibson (1999) and Uthayakumar, Schimmack, Hartung, and Rogers (2010) both found a significant negative relationship between career certainty and neuroticism, indicating that emotional instability is associated with lower career clarity. Gunkel, Schlaegel, Langella, and Peluchette (2010) also reported, in a cross-cultural study, that neuroticism had a significant negative effect on career decision-making. Therefore, when students have higher levels of neuroticism, this can affect their perceptions and judgments of the current employment environment and weaken the clarity and satisfaction of their future career direction.

5.2. Relationship Between Neuroticism and Negative Coping Style

The results showed that neuroticism positively predicted negative coping styles, suggesting that students with higher neuroticism tended to rely more on negative coping responses. For college students majoring in preschool education, professional learning, educational practice, and employment preparation may create sustained pressure, and students with higher neuroticism may be more inclined to respond to these tasks through avoidance, fantasy, or emotional reactions rather than active analysis and problem-solving. This pattern is consistent with earlier research, as Connor-Smith and Flachsbart (2007) noted that neuroticism could predict problematic coping strategies such as withdrawal and emotion-focused coping. When individuals are exposed to stressful events, neuroticism is positively correlated with avoidant behavior (Gashi, Galloopeni, Imeri, Shahini, & Bahtiri, 2023; Leandro & Castillo, 2010; Leszko, Iwański, & Jarzębińska, 2020; Wang & Miao, 2009) and is also related to more negative coping styles (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010). These characteristics can lead individuals to adopt emotion-centered coping and avoid threats (Lengua, Sandler, West, Wolchik, & Curran, 1999).

5.3. Relationship Between Negative Coping Style and Career Decision

The results showed that a negative coping style had a significant negative effect on career decision-making, suggesting that students who relied more on negative coping tended to have less clarity in their career decisions. The

development of career decision-making requires students to gradually engage with career information (Kleine et al., 2021; Stumpf, Colarelli, & Hartman, 1983), understand the value of their major, form a professional identity (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021), and confirm their personal goals (Lent & Brown, 2013). If students tend to respond through avoidance, withdrawal, or emotional reactions, the quality and outcomes of their decisions may be negatively affected (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Previous studies also noted that negative or nonproductive coping can increase difficulties in career decision-making and hinder individuals from moving toward clearer career decisions (Lipshits-Braziler, Gati, & Tatar, 2016; Perez & Gati, 2017). When students use negative coping more frequently, they may avoid collecting career information and reduce career-related discussions with teachers, peers, or family members (Dietrich & Kracke, 2009; Kleine et al., 2021; Wong, Yuen, & Chen, 2021; Zhang & Huang, 2018), making it harder for college students to develop a clearer and more satisfying career decision.

5.4. Negative Coping Style as a Mediating Variable

The results indicated that negative coping style partially mediated the relationship between neuroticism and career decision-making. This suggests that neuroticism not only directly weakens students' career decision-making but also makes students more likely to adopt a negative coping style, thereby further influencing their career decision-making. From the perspective of SCCT (Lent & Brown, 2013; Lent et al., 2016), career development is not shaped by a single personality trait alone but emerges from the combined roles of personal factors, cognitive appraisal, behavioral responses, and environmental conditions. Personality traits are considered to influence career adaptation by facilitating or hindering behavioral performance or by activating emotional coping tendencies (Lent & Brown, 2013). Individuals with higher conscientiousness may be more likely to collect and evaluate career-related and self-related information in an organized and persistent way before making career decisions (Lent et al., 2016), whereas neuroticism may work in the opposite direction.

Previous studies are consistent with the results of this study. Negative emotion-focused coping has been found to mediate the relationships between neuroticism and depression, anxiety, stress, and well-being (Fokas & Soysa, 2017). Coping style has also been identified as an important mediator between psychological capital and employment anxiety (Belle, Antwi, Ntim, Affum-Osei, & Ren, 2022). In addition, defensive pessimism and avoidant coping have been shown to form a chain mediation between pessimism and career hesitation (Duru, 2024). Taken together, these studies suggest that coping style is not only an outward response to stress, but may also serve as an important mechanism linking personality traits with career development outcomes. In the context of this study, the unfavorable effect of neuroticism on career decisions does not appear to occur only through a direct path. Students with higher levels of neuroticism may be more likely to develop worries and negative expectations, adopt a negative coping style, and weaken their ability to collect career information, analyze career problems, and identify career goals, which is not conducive to forming a clear career decision.

6. CONCLUSION

Based on SCCT, this study examined the relationships among neuroticism, negative coping style, and career decision-making using a sample of undergraduates majoring in preschool education in Shandong Province, China. The results showed that students with higher levels of neuroticism had relatively lower career decision-making ability and were also more likely to adopt a negative coping style. The more obvious the negative coping style was, the lower the level of students' career decision-making ability.

The bootstrap mediation test further showed that negative coping style played a partial mediating role between neuroticism and career decision-making ability. The unique contribution of this study is that the career decision-making ability of undergraduates majoring in preschool education is not only directly influenced by neuroticism, but may also be further reflected through the negative coping style they adopt when facing career pressure and uncertainty.

This provides empirical reference for universities to improve career guidance and psychological support from the perspective of coping style. Therefore, when providing career guidance, universities should not only offer employment information and job introductions, but also pay attention to students' emotional states and coping styles. Through low-pressure and staged task training, universities can help students reduce or avoid negative coping and gradually improve the certainty and satisfaction of their career decision-making.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Career guidance courses in universities should not be carried out only intensively before graduation. For preschool education majors, students' professional interests, career expectations, and emotional distress can be understood through entrance education, introductory courses for the major, and class-based mental health education. For students with unclear career directions, higher anxiety, or withdrawal tendencies, small-scale, non-labeling individualized counseling can be provided. University psychological counseling centers can also work together with career development courses to help students form a basic understanding of the preschool education profession and its development direction in a more targeted way.

When universities offer career guidance courses for related majors, coping style training can be included as a key module in the course to help students identify negative reactions such as procrastination, avoidance, complaining, and passive waiting. At the same time, teachers can set tasks related to career information collection, job interviews, and group discussions, guiding students to replace negative coping with methods such as active problem analysis, information seeking, communication, and help-seeking, thereby enhancing their career certainty and behavioral initiative.

Preschool education programs can combine career guidance courses with professional practice. For example, in the lower grades, students can be assigned tasks such as observation records of preschool children, interviews with preschool teachers, and reports on professional role cognition. In the middle grades, microteaching, activity design presentations, and simulated home-kindergarten communication can be used to improve students' teaching competence and preparation for home-kindergarten communication.

In the higher grades, educational internships can be combined with guidance to help students prepare for employment. Through these low-pressure and staged concrete tasks, students can gradually understand the content, requirements, and value of kindergarten teachers' work in real professional contexts, and form a clear and stable career decision through this continuous process.

8. RESEARCH LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study has certain limitations. It adopted a cross-sectional design and used convenience sampling. The sample mainly consisted of undergraduates majoring in preschool education from universities in Shandong Province, China. Whether the findings can be applied to other regions, other majors, or different types of institutions still needs further verification. Therefore, caution is needed when generalizing the findings.

Future studies are recommended to adopt longitudinal designs to verify causal relationships, expand sample sources, and use interviews, follow-up studies, or mixed research methods to address the limitations of a single quantitative approach.

Future research may further develop or revise measurement tools that better fit undergraduates majoring in preschool education, with attention to career certainty, career satisfaction, and the intention to continue teaching. In addition, future studies may design practical intervention measures based on the existing conditions of career guidance and psychological support in universities and examine their actual effects through continuous follow-up.

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