

The Impact of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) on Career Choice Decisions: The Mediating Roles of Perceived Trending Majors and Career Anxiety among Vietnamese Students

Authors: Phan Thi Qunh Nhu ; Nguyen Thi Ha Phuong; Pham Thi Nhu Quynh; Nguyen Thi Phuong Lan; Vu Duc Minh; Vu Thi Yen

Affiliation : Banking Academy of Vietnam

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Abstract: In the digital era, the decision-making process for choosing a major among students is increasingly complex, influenced by psychological factors and social media trends. This study investigates the impact of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) on career choice decisions among Vietnamese students, specifically examining the mediating roles of perceived trending majors and career anxiety. Using a quantitative approach with data from 342 students and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), the findings reveal that FOMO significantly increases both career anxiety and the perception of trending majors. Interestingly, while FOMO has a weak direct effect on career decisions, its influence is primarily channeled through career anxiety. These results provide critical insights for educational institutions and families in guiding students toward sustainable career paths.

Keywords: FOMO, Career Choice, Career Anxiety, Trending Majors

1. Introduction

Selecting a major is a pivotal decision that shapes a student's future career trajectory and personal development. Traditionally, this choice was dictated by personal interest, academic ability, and family orientation. However, the proliferation of social media has introduced new psychological stressors. Recent surveys indicate that while 33% of Vietnamese students choose majors based on personal dreams, a significant 53% are still heavily influenced by social recognition and family expectations.

Central to this modern decision-making landscape is the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)—a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent. In the context of education, FOMO manifests as the pressure to pursue "hot" or "trending" majors to avoid being left behind in a competitive labor market. Despite its relevance, there is a research gap regarding how FOMO interacts with cognitive perceptions and emotional states like career anxiety to influence final choices. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the mechanism through which FOMO drives the career decisions of high school and university students in Vietnam.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Comparison Theory (SCT)

This study utilizes Social Comparison Theory as its primary theoretical lens. Festinger (1954) argued that individuals have an innate drive to evaluate themselves by comparing their status with others, especially during periods of uncertainty. For students, seeing the "glamorous" portrayal of certain trending majors on social media creates a psychological gap between their reality and an idealized benchmark, triggering FOMO.

2.2. Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and Perceived Trending Majors

From the perspective of Social Information Processing Theory, FOMO is not merely a transient psychological state but functions as a cognitive filter that shapes an individual's perception of reality. In the modern educational landscape, students with high levels of FOMO maintain a state of continuous "social monitoring" on digital

platforms to seek signals of success and social validation. When algorithms on platforms like TikTok or Facebook prioritize content regarding "thousand-dollar salary" majors or "careers of the future," these individuals are highly susceptible to "informational cascades." In such scenarios, they tend to adopt prevailing public sentiments as objective truths without critical verification. This occurs because of the underlying apprehension that ignoring these trends equates to self-exclusion from lucrative opportunities that their peers are supposedly seizing. Consequently, FOMO acts as a catalyst for hyper-sensitivity to market signals, causing "trendy" majors to become psychologically salient and overshadow intrinsic values such as personal interest or actual aptitude.

Furthermore, the relationship between FOMO and the perception of trending majors is reinforced by "cognitive heuristics" under conditions of information overload. For Vietnamese students—a demographic deeply influenced by collective mentalities and peer pressure—FOMO creates an invisible compulsion to align their perceptions with what the majority deems "prestigious" or "fashionable." Constantly witnessing the exaggerated success stories of "hot" majors on social media constructs a digital reality where career viability is measured by online engagement and visibility rather than empirical economic data. Thus, FOMO serves as a psychological driver that intensifies the priority and credibility assigned to trending disciplines, fostering a belief that following the crowd is the safest strategy to mitigate the risk of falling behind. Based on these arguments, this study proposes

H1: FOMO has a positive impact on the perception of trending majors.

2.3. FOMO and Career Anxiety

Drawing from the Cognitive Theory of Anxiety, career-related distress often emerges from the perceived discrepancy between an individual's current state and an uncertain vocational future. FOMO significantly intensifies this distress by introducing a "loss-aversion" framework into the student's decision-making process. Unlike traditional career indecision, which stems from a lack of information, FOMO-induced anxiety is driven by an abundance of social comparison. When students observe the curated successes of others on social media, it triggers a cognitive bias where any choice made is viewed through the lens of potential regret. This psychological pressure creates a state of "decisional paralysis" or chronic apprehension, as the individual becomes preoccupied with the hypothetical benefits of the paths not taken. In this context, FOMO acts as a stress multiplier, transforming the natural uncertainty of career selection into a profound sense of emotional vulnerability and professional inadequacy.

Furthermore, the impact of FOMO on career anxiety is exacerbated by the "perfectionism" culture prevalent in digital social networks. For Vietnamese students, the cultural emphasis on social prestige means that a "wrong" career choice is perceived not just as a personal failure, but as a permanent exclusion from a high-status peer group. FOMO fuels this anxiety by constantly highlighting the "ideal" career trajectories of others, making the student's own career planning feel inadequate or outdated. This continuous exposure to high-achievement signals generates a persistent fear of making a suboptimal commitment, leading to increased levels of psychological strain and irrational beliefs regarding employment stability. The fear of missing out on a "better" or "more prestigious" opportunity thus manifests as a tangible state of career-related anxiety, characterized by nervousness about future employment environments and professional competence. Consequently, this study proposes

H2: FOMO has a positive impact on the level of career anxiety.

2.4. The Mediators and Career Choice Decision

The decision-making process regarding one's career trajectory is a sophisticated cognitive operation, often influenced by the interplay between external environmental signals and internal emotional states. Perceived trending majors serve as a significant cognitive mediator, acting as a "social safety net" for students navigating the volatility of the modern labor market. According to the Theory of Planned Behavior, an individual's perception of social norms and "popular" choices can significantly dictate their intentions and final actions. When a major is perceived as "trending," it carries a halo effect of job security and social prestige, which simplifies the complex decision-making process by providing a pre-validated path. Students may opt for these disciplines not necessarily out of intrinsic passion, but as a strategic maneuver to align themselves with perceived economic stability and

social approval. Therefore, the cognitive evaluation of what is "hot" in the market directly shapes the finality of their academic commitments.

H3: *Perception of trending majors has a significant influence on career choice decisions.*

Simultaneously, career anxiety functions as a potent emotional mediator that can disrupt rational career planning. High levels of anxiety, often catalyzed by the overwhelming pressure of choosing the "perfect" path, can lead to maladaptive decision-making behaviors such as impulsivity or over-conformity. When students experience heightened vocational dread, their cognitive resources are depleted, making them more likely to succumb to external pressures or choose a path simply to alleviate the immediate discomfort of uncertainty. This "avoidance-based" decision-making often results in a flight toward conformity, where the student chooses a major to satisfy parental expectations or social trends rather than personal fit. Furthermore, while FOMO might initiate the process, its direct link to the final decision can be nuanced; it often requires the presence of psychological discomfort or a clear social benchmark to translate into a concrete choice. This suggests that while FOMO provides the initial drive, the actual decision is a byproduct of the tension between perceived opportunities and the emotional urge to mitigate anxiety.

H4: *Career anxiety significantly impacts career choice decisions.*

H5: *Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) has a direct impact on career choice decisions.*

3. Methodology

3.1. Sampling and Data Collection

The study employed a convenience sampling method, focusing on grade 12 students and first/second-year university students in Hanoi, Da Nang, and Ho Chi Minh City. A total of 342 valid online surveys were collected between February and March 2026. This period was chosen as it aligns with the peak of university admissions pressure.

3.2. Measurement Scales

Variables were measured using Likert scales adapted from established literature:

- FOMO: Adapted from Przybylski et al. (2013) .
- Career Anxiety: Measured through four dimensions: Personal competence, irrational beliefs, employment environment, and professional training.
- Career Decision: Self-developed based on Holland’s model and social factors.

3.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SmartPLS 4. The evaluation involved two steps: (1) Assessing the measurement model (reliability and validity) and (2) Evaluating the structural model (path coefficients and R²) using Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples.

4. Results

Among the respondents, there were 64.1% female, 35.9% male; 83.5% aged 18-20. Notably, 72.6% stated they made their own major choices regarding their field of study, but 21.4% consulted with their peers.

Table 1: Cronback’s Alpha and Composite reliability

	Cronbach’s Alpha	Composite reliability (rho_c)
FOMO	0,932	0,942

NHANTHUC	0,96	0,965
LOAU	0,933	0,942
QUYETDINH	0,864	0,899

The composite reliability CR of FOMO is 0.942 (> 0.7), indicating a very high reliability of the scale. The overall Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of the variable is 0.932 ($0.7 < \alpha < 0.95$), reaching the minimum reliability level. Thus, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of the variable "FOMO" is at a reliable level.

The composite reliability CR of LOAU is 0.965 (> 0.7), and the overall Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of the variable is 0.96 ($\alpha > 0.95$), reaching a high reliability level, but the value exceeds the recommended threshold, suggesting potential duplication.

The composite reliability CR is 0.965 (> 0.7), and the overall Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of the variable is 0.933 ($0.7 < \alpha < 0.95$), reaching a high reliability level. Thus, the variable "LOAU" is at a reliable level.

The composite reliability CR of QUYETDINH is 0.899 (> 0.7) and the overall Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of the variable is 0.864 ($0.7 < \alpha < 0.95$), reaching a high reliability level. Thus, the variable "QUYETDINH" has a high reliability level.

Overall, the test results show that all scales in the model achieve high reliability (Cronbach's Alpha and CR are both > 0.7). Although some values exceeding 0.95 imply potential overlap between observed variables, the scales are still accepted and used for further analysis.

4.1. Measurement Model Evaluation

The scales demonstrated high internal consistency, with Cronbach's Alpha values for FOMO, Perception (NHANTHUC), Anxiety (LOAU), and Decision (QUYETDINH) all meeting the required threshold. Convergent validity was confirmed as the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for all constructs exceeded 0.5. Discriminant validity was established via the HTMT ratio, with all values below 0.85.

4.2. Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

Table 2: Structural Model

R-square		
	R-square	R-square adjusted
LOAU	0.497	0.495
NHANTHUC	0.514	0.513
QUYETDINH	0.683	0.679

The R^2 coefficient of the variable "DECISION" is 0.679, meaning that the independent variables affecting the variable "Career Choice Decision" explain 67.9% of the variation in the variable "Career Choice Decision".

The R^2 coefficient of the variable "ANXIETY" is 0.495, meaning that the independent variables affecting the variable "Level of Occupational Anxiety" explain 49.5% of the variation in the variable "Level of Occupational Anxiety".

The R² coefficient of the variable “AWARENESS” is 0.513, meaning that the independent variables affecting the variable “Perception of Trending Fields of Study” explain 51.3% of the variation in the variable “Perception of Trending Fields of Study”.

Table 3: Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Validation

Path coefficients- matrix				
	FOMO	LOAU	NHANTHUC	QUYETDINH
FOMO		0.705	0.717	0.180
LOAU				0.653
NHANTHUC				0.050
QUYETDINH				

FOMO has a strong impact on the variable “LOAU” with a path coefficient of 0.705. This indicates that as students' fear of missing out increases, their anxiety also increases significantly.

FOMO has a strong impact on the variable “NHANTHUC” with a path coefficient of 0.717. This result reflects that FOMO plays a dominant role in influencing the variable “Perception of trending fields of study”. FOMO has a weak impact on the variable “QUYETDINH”. This means that FOMO mainly influences the variable “Decision on choosing a field of study” through mediating variables rather than the research itself.

NHANTHUC has a weak impact on the variable “QUYETDINH” with a path coefficient of 0.050. This coefficient is very low, indicating that “Perception of trending fields of study” has a very weak or negligible impact on “Decision on choosing a field of study” in this context.

LOAU has a weak impact on the variable "QUYETDINH" with a path coefficient of 0.653. This coefficient is the second largest in the model, indicating that "Level of occupational anxiety" plays a crucial role, directly influencing students' career choice decisions.

5. Discussion and Recommendations

5.1. Discussion

The empirical results of this study provide a nuanced understanding of how digital-age psychological phenomena influence educational transitions. The findings decisively corroborate Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), suggesting that career choice among Vietnamese students has evolved from an individualistic reflection of aptitude into a "socialized" process heavily mediated by digital platforms. In the contemporary Vietnamese context, social media does not merely provide information; it creates a competitive arena where students constantly evaluate their potential future against the curated successes of their peers.

A critical revelation of the structural model is the discrepancy between direct and indirect pathways. The relatively weak direct link between FOMO and Career Choice Decision contrasted with the high path coefficient toward Career Anxiety, indicates that FOMO functions primarily as an emotional destabilizer. This suggests that the "fear of missing out" does not immediately dictate a choice; instead, it erodes the student’s psychological security, creating a state of vocational dread. It is this secondary emotional state—career anxiety—that eventually drives the biased decision-making process. The student is not simply "choosing a major" but is effectively "managing an emotional crisis" triggered by the fear of suboptimal social positioning.

Furthermore, contrary to initial expectations, the perception of trending majors (H3) did not yield a statistically significant direct impact on career decisions. This is a sophisticated finding for the Vietnamese market: it suggests

that while students are highly cognizant of what constitutes a "hot" or "prestigious" major due to FOMO, mere recognition of a trend is insufficient to compel action. Students in Vietnam appear to be "rational observers" of trends who only become "conformist actors" when their anxiety levels reach a threshold that compromises their autonomous judgment. In other words, a student might acknowledge that Data Science or Digital Marketing is trending, but they will only feel compelled to choose it if their FOMO has successfully converted into a high degree of career-related anxiety. This highlights that the "push" factor of emotional distress is more influential than the "pull" factor of market trends in the current psychological climate of Vietnamese youth.

5.2. Practical Implications

The empirical findings of this study offer critical insights for various stakeholders, including students, educational institutions, and policy makers, in navigating the complexities of career orientation in the digital age.

For Students: Developing Cognitive Resilience and Psychological Filters The significant correlation between FOMO and biased career perceptions suggests that students must transition from "passive information consumers" to "critical career evaluators." It is imperative for individuals to develop "psychological filters"—a set of metacognitive skills designed to distinguish between ephemeral social media hype and the structural realities of the labor market. Rather than succumbing to the "halo effect" of trending majors, students should engage in "long-term career suitability mapping," which prioritizes intrinsic values, personal aptitude, and sustainable skill acquisition over the immediate social validation provided by "hot" sectors. Strengthening emotional intelligence and self-regulation can also mitigate the career anxiety triggered by constant social comparison, allowing for more rational and autonomous decision-making.

For University: Integrating Psychological Counseling with Career Orientation The results underscore that career guidance must evolve beyond the mere dissemination of admission data and vocational statistics. Educational institutions should implement holistic support systems that address the "affective" dimension of career choice. This involves integrating psychological counseling into the career orientation curriculum to specifically tackle "choice anxiety" and the FOMO phenomenon. Educators should create "reflective spaces" where students can deconstruct social media narratives and evaluate their career paths without the pressure of peer comparison. By fostering a counseling environment that validates students' anxieties while providing evidence-based career projections, schools can assist students in overcoming decisional paralysis and avoiding conformist choices that lead to long-term professional dissatisfaction.

For Government: Harmonizing Labor Market Communication At the macro level, there is a pressing need for government and educational authorities to harmonize career communication strategies to prevent structural imbalances in the labor market. The current digital ecosystem often creates "informational cascades" that lead to a "labor surplus" in high-visibility, trending fields, while essential but less "trendy" sectors suffer from critical "labor shortages." Policy makers should promote balanced career narratives through official channels, highlighting the strategic importance and long-term viability of diverse economic sectors. By implementing data-driven career forecasting tools and public awareness campaigns that counteract digital hype, authorities can ensure a more equitable distribution of human capital, aligning student aspirations with the actual strategic needs of the national economy.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

The study is limited by its convenience sampling and cross-sectional design, which captures a "snapshot" rather than long-term causal effects. Future research should employ longitudinal methods to track students' satisfaction after they have entered their chosen majors to see if FOMO-driven choices lead to higher regret.

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