

The Relationship Between Emotional Intelligence and Career Decision-Making Difficulties: Mediation Role of Career Adaptability of University Students

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Abstract

Rapid changes in the global marketplace and invisible pressures have made career decision-making challenging for students. This article explores the relationship between emotional intelligence and career decision difficulties, as well as the mediating role of career adaptability, in a cross-sectional study conducted among students. A total of 265 students from Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam ($M_{age} = 19.99$; $SD = 1.46$) were randomly selected and participated through an online questionnaire. The study employed the Career Decision-making Difficulties Questionnaire, which includes 34 questions to assess career decision-making difficulties; the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale, comprising 16 items to measure emotional intelligence; and the Career Adapt-Abilities Scale - Short Form with 12 items to evaluate career adaptability. The findings reveal two primary outcomes: (1) emotional intelligence significantly negatively impacts career decision difficulties (effect = -0.15 , $p < .05$, 95% CI = $[-0.29, -0.01]$), and (2) career adaptability significantly mediates this relationship (effect = -0.11 , 95% CI = $[-0.20, -0.02]$). These results suggest that enhancing emotional intelligence and career adaptability may facilitate improved career decision-making among students.

Keywords: career decision-making difficulty, emotional intelligence, career adaptability, university students

1. Introduction

Students, as the future workforce, draw considerable attention to their career development, especially given the impact of global uncertainties. However, with the constant changing and volatility of the world, this “youth labor” is heavily effected, the consequence is show through the rise in youth unemployment rates in the Asia-Pacific region (ILO, 2022). This scenario is further complicated by shifts in industry trends in Vietnam, driven by the prolonged effects of the pandemic and evolving technological landscapes (GSO, 2022). Businesses now seek individuals capable of swiftly adapting to dynamic changes and effectively addressing emerging tasks (Carter, 2019; van Vianen et al., 2012). However, there exists a disparity between university education, which often focuses on specialized knowledge, and the evolving demands of the job market. As a result, graduates may enter the workforce without the essential skills required by employers (Ibn-Mohammed et al., 2021). Beyond academic knowledge, students must invest resources in honing complementary skills to enhance their employability and seize diverse career opportunities upon entering the job market.

University students encounter complexity in preparing for their careers, requiring significant effort, time, and financial investment. Career development, influenced by factors such as career exploration and decision-making (Super, 1953), demands practicality and specificity (Lee et al., 2022). The inability to identify or choose careers aligned with the

constant changing of the labor market leads to prolonged searches and decisions, impacting students' time, effort, and peer comparisons (Lee et al., 2022). Pressure from family and society intensifies, contributing to negative emotions and challenges in navigating the career decision process (Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018). These difficulties hinder students' focus on career preparation, resulting in obstacles during the transition from academic to the workforce (Yuen & Yau, 2015). Consequences include job search failures, severe effects on mental health (Shi et al., 2018; Song, 2018), heightened anxiety, procrastination, and feelings of inferiority (Lee et al., 2022; Vahedi et al., 2012). Such challenges prompt irrational decisions, leading to future regrets (Gati et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2022). This contemporary phenomenon is increasingly prevalent among students transitioning from education to the professional realm (GSO, 2022; Lee et al., 2022). Addressing this requires a focus on understanding and researching the coping resources students employ to navigate challenges within the career decision process (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

Two increasingly acknowledged personal resources among researchers are emotional intelligence and career adaptability (Karacan-Ozdemir, 2019; Maggiori et al., 2017). These resources are recognized for their role in fostering success in career exploration and decision-making (Gati & Kulcsar, 2021; Jiang, 2014; Savickas, 2013). Numerous studies highlight that students with high emotional intelligence encounter fewer challenges in learning and navigating their career paths (Ran et al., 2022). Additionally, high emotional intelligence contributes to enhanced career adaptability, allowing students to develop crucial skills, exhibit initiative, and engage in exploratory behaviors during uncertain times in the career decision-making process (Rudolph et al., 2017; Savickas, 2013). Career adaptability serves as a vital personal resource, guiding students in forming their professional identity (Mittal, 2021). The synergy between emotional intelligence and adaptability underscores their complementary roles in facilitating students' successful navigation of career changes, ultimately supporting the development of sustainable careers.

1.1 Career Decision-making Difficulties

The decision regarding one's career is a pivotal aspect of personal development, as it intricately ties into psychological, physical, economic, and social dimensions (Bubić & Ivanišević, 2016; Robertson, 2014). Confronted with this significant choice, students often grapple with various challenges stemming from personal factors such as motivation (Bland & Roberts-Pittman, 2014; Bubic, 2014), limited exposure to societal experiences (Li & Fan, 2017), insufficient understanding of professions, and a lack of essential information and skills for establishing career goals (Thiry et al., 2015). These difficulties can contribute to diminished levels of engagement in learning and satisfaction with their academic pursuits (Handoyo & Sulistiani, 2018), potentially extending to impact their future career trajectories. Recognizing the intricacies of this process can assist decision-makers in addressing pertinent issues. Accordingly, Gati et al. (1996) drawing from decision theory, proposed categorizing career decision difficulties into three major groups: (1) lack of readiness and commitment (LOR - Lack of Readiness); (2) lack of information about oneself and/or the profession, along with an absence of knowledge on accessing relevant information (LOI - Lack of Information); and (3) internal and external conflicts and inadequate support resources (II - Inconsistent Information) (Gati et al., 1996). Facing the fluctuations and challenges of the career decision-making process, university students need to be aware of and utilize the resources around and from themselves, such as emotional intelligence (Sollarová & Kaliská, 2019) and their career adaptability (Savickas, 2013). We found that some studies have found a close relationship between emotional intelligence and career adaptability in the decision-making process (Gati & Kulcsar, 2021; Santos et al., 2018; Savickas, 2013). Which contribute to our research hypotheses.

1.2 Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence, outlined by Davies et al. (1998), comprised of four dimensions: (1) evaluating and expressing one's emotions; (2) appraising and recognizing emotions in others; (3) regulating one's own emotions; and (4) utilizing emotions to drive actions. Subsequently, Wong and Law (2017) formulated a theory and scale based on the definition of emotional intelligence, considering it the capacity to perceive and comprehend both one's own emotions and those of others and to employ and manage them effectively in guiding actions toward desired outcomes. According to Law et al. (2008), and later supported by Santos et al. (2018), individuals with high emotional intelligence possess the ability to understand emotions, both their own and others, thereby enhancing their behavior and attitudes to achieve desired outcomes while concurrently improving performance and capacity. Moreover, Farnia et al. (2018) asserted that in decision-making processes, particularly in career choices, reason, calculation, and emotions are pivotal factors that contribute to shaping cognitive abilities, individual decision-making, and actions in general. Considering this, the strategies employed during the career choice process are likely to proceed more effectively when individuals can adeptly manage emotions related to uncertainty and ambiguity (Sollarová & Kaliská, 2019). Therefore, it is plausible to hypothesize a negative correlation between emotional intelligence and the career decision-making process.

1.3 Career Adapt-Abilities

Career adaptability manifests as an individual's readiness to make apt responses in dealing with tasks encountered during career development, transitions, and challenges (Savickas, 2020). This involves the process of adjusting to the impacts of uncertainty by either altering oneself or modifying the context (Leung et al., 2021; Savickas, 2020). Concretely, career adaptability is delineated through four facets or stages, encompassing (1) fostering concern in career planning for the future, (2) maintaining control over future career preparation, (3) nurturing curiosity to explore personal attributes and career trajectories, and (4) instilling confidence in pursuing career aspirations (Savickas, 2005, 2013). Consequently, career adaptability emerges as a reservoir that enables individuals to strategize for an unpredictable future, confront career setbacks (Wehmeyer et al., 2019), and adjust to changes (Xu et al., 2020). When students possess elevated career adaptability, they can more swiftly acclimate to new career roles and tasks, navigate transitions, and effectively manage unforeseen career scenarios (Savickas et al., 2009; Xu et al., 2020). Thus, within the framework of this study, the concept of career adaptability signifies the resources and capabilities that an individual can mobilize throughout the process of shaping their career (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012), encapsulated by the aforementioned four dimensions of this competency. From this, we want to look into the relationship between emotions and adaptability in coping with the difficulties in the career decision-making process.

1.4 The Relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Career Adaptability

Prior research has consistently highlighted the correlation between emotional intelligence and career adaptability (Celik & Storme, 2018; Merino-Tejedor et al., 2018). To be specific, individuals with high emotional intelligence exhibit enhanced adaptability (Schutte et al., 2008). This connection stems from the fact that successful adaptation requires individuals to hold appropriate attitudes and beliefs when addressing stressors associated with career challenges and situations (Johnston et al., 2013; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). When students possess a heightened awareness of their emotions during significant life events, they are better positioned to motivate and deploy adaptability when faced with career-related issues (Savickas, 2005). This stems from their enhanced ability to integrate emotional experiences into their cognitive processes and behaviors (Brown et al., 2003; Emmerling & Cherniss, 2003). Consequently, students can more effectively strategize their career goals, adapt to situational changes, and navigate career transitions (Mittal, 2021; Potgieter, 2014). Thus, emotional intelligence significantly influences career adaptability, empowering students to better equip themselves for their professional journeys. This synergy proves instrumental in assisting students in overcoming challenges encountered during the exploration and decision-making phases of their careers. After synthesized the concepts and theories of these two factor, we hypothesise that career adaptability positively correlate to emotional intelligence.

1.5 The Relationship between Emotional Intelligence, Career Adaptability, and Difficulties in Career Decision-Making

Career decision-making is a nuanced process that revolves around identifying suitable options and making choices amid ambiguity and uncertainty. Other research indicates that this process is intricately linked to the capacity to adapt to change (Maggiore et al., 2013; Shin & Kelly, 2015; Vashisht et al., 2023) and regulate emotions (Parmentier et al., 2022). Consequently, personal resources like emotional intelligence (Harry, 2017) and career adaptability have been identified as pivotal factors influencing career exploration (Li et al., 2012) and career motivation (Fang et al., 2018). Hence, these resources may exert an indirect influence on the ability to make informed career decisions. This connection can be elucidated through the lens of the career construction model (Savickas, 2005). This model underscores the psychosocial resources essential for individuals to navigate ambiguity and uncertainty during the career decision-making process (Johnston, 2018; Rudolph et al., 2017; Savickas, 2013). Emotional intelligence and career adaptability emerge as crucial components within this model (Parmentier et al., 2022). Specifically, emotional intelligence is deemed a predictor of outcomes in the realm of careers (Parmentier et al., 2022), including aspects such as understanding career choices, fostering career adaptability, and enhancing decision-making (Parmentier et al., 2022). Several studies found that emotional intelligence is negatively related to career decision-making difficulty and goal-oriented behavior (Farnia et al., 2018; Santos et al., 2018; Sollarová & Kaliská, 2019), consistent with Gati et al. (1996) theoretical model of career decisions. Additionally, when individuals confront stressful and uncertain situations, the ability to regulate emotions is thought to bolster perseverance and problem-solving skills in the face of difficulties (Salovey et al., 2000). Consequently, this factor equips students with increased adaptability during pivotal life events, such as the transition from school to professional environments, thereby enhancing their ability to navigate career-related challenges (Savickas, 2013). Because of this, we hypothesized that career adaptability could mediate the relationship between emotional intelligence and career decision-making difficulty.

The career decision-making process could impact many aspects of a student's life, like planning a future career, job

satisfaction and commitment (Gati et al., 2012), well-being, and quality of life. Especially for university students, who are on the verge of transitioning to the world of work, they need the ability to make major decisions that could leave a permanent or significant effect on their life. Along with this, in the Vietnamese context, there are very few studies about vocational guidance for this group (Nguyen, 2023), and their main concerns are usually about high schoolers, relationships, teamwork skills (Siem, 2023), or have been outdated (Nguyen, 2011; P., 2008). Notably, there have been studies about emotional intelligence (Farnia et al., 2018; Santos et al., 2018) and career adaptability (Chen et al., 2022; Hirschi & Valero, 2015) in the vocational field, yet most of them are done separately. There is a lack of study on the career pursuit and growth of university students. Hence, the primary objective of this research is to investigate and underscore the importance of emotional intelligence and career flexibility in aiding students in proficiently navigating job changes and establishing enduring career trajectories. This complete investigation of the pathway provides a significant resource for students who are facing hurdles and obstacles in their career decision-making process. It assists them in acquiring the necessary skills to navigate the competitive labour market and fosters a sense of dedication.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

The study examined students from various disciplines at universities in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, garnering responses from 428 participants. Criteria for sample selection included an average survey completion time of less than five minutes and coherent, reasonable demographic responses. The validity of participants' answers was assessed using questions 7 ("I like to do things my own way") and 12 ("I always do what I am told to do, even if it goes against my will.") from the Career Decision-Making Difficulties Questionnaire (Osipow & Gati, 1998). Specifically, respondents needed to score above 3 on question 7 and below 7 on question 12. Answers not adhering to these criteria were discarded, resulting in a final sample size of 265.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics

Characteristics of respondent		N	%
Age	18 - 22	253	95.5
	23 - 28	12	4.5
Gender	Female	159	60
	Male	106	40
Department	Social Sciences	62	23.4
	Natural Sciences	72	27.2
	Health	52	19.6
	Arts	25	9.4
	Management - Economics	54	20.4
Academic year	First-year	116	43.8
	Second-year	54	20.4
	Third-year	47	17.7
	Fourth-year or higher	48	18.1
Total		265	100

Note. N = The number of university students who participated; % = The percent of university students who participated.

As a result, the study retained 265 suitable samples (62%), while 163 samples (38%) were deemed invalid. Table 1 provides an overview of subject demographics. The age of participants ranges from 18 to 28, with a mean age of 19.99 (SD = 1.46). In terms of gender distribution, there are 159 females (60%) and 106 males (40%). The target group is categorized into five fields of study: Health (n = 52 or 19.6%), Management - Economics (n = 54 or 20.4%), Social Sciences (n = 62 or 23.4%), Natural Sciences (n = 72 or 27.2%), and Arts (n = 25 or 9.4%). Regarding school years, there are 116 first-year students (43.8%), 54 second-year students (20.4%), 47 third-year students (17.7%), and 48 fourth-year students or higher (18.1%).

2.2 Procedures

The study employed non-probability convenience sampling, executed at various universities in Vietnam. This method allowed for the efficient collection of a sizable sample while facilitating the clarification of participants' inquiries, thereby reducing the likelihood of irrelevant data. Data collection was conducted through an online survey implemented via Microsoft Forms. The questionnaire provided an overview of the study's topic, objectives,

methodology, anticipated benefits, and ethical considerations for participants. Anonymity was guaranteed to subjects, who were also required to give their consent prior to participation. The information collected included demographic details and responses to three scales: the Career Decision-Making Difficulties Questionnaire (CDDQ), the Career Adapt-Ability Scale (CAAS), and the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS). On average, participants completed the survey within 8 to 10 minutes.

2.3 Measurements

2.3.1 The Career Decision-making Difficulties Questionnaire (CDDQ)

The Career Decision-making Difficulties Questionnaire was developed based on a taxonomy derived from the decision-career choice theory, by Gati et al. (1996). Comprising 34 items, the CDDQ measures three dimensions, which also serve as three sub-scales: lack of readiness (LOR), lack of information (LOI), and inconsistent information (LII). Within these three aspects, there are further divisions into 10 distinct difficulty classifications. Responses on the CDDQ are scored on a 9-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Doesn't describe me at all) to 9 (Describes me well). The scale computes average scores for the sub-scales and the total score. Higher scores indicate greater difficulties in the individual's career decision-making process. Testing of the CDDQ scale in various studies has demonstrated indices ranging from acceptable to high levels of reliability. Cronbach's α coefficient for the LOR subscale ranges from $\alpha = 0.50-0.74$, and the remaining two subscales have $\alpha = 0.80-0.95$ (Gati & Saka, 2001; Leung et al., 2021; Levin et al., 2020; Nauta, 2012; Xu et al., 2020). Currently, the CDDQ scale has been used and adapted for the Vietnamese context. Scale validation indices showed high positivity, with reliability ranging from $\alpha = 0.67-0.90$ and no index had to be removed. Our Cronbach's α index on 43 test samples is $\alpha = 0.96$, showing high reliability.

2.3.2 The Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS)

Wong and Law's Emotional Intelligence Scale (Wong & Law, 2017) was developed based on Thorndike (1920) concept of social intelligence and major theories by Salovey and Sluyter (1997) along with (Davies et al., 1998). The WLEIS is a self-report scale comprising 16 items, organized into four dimensions and sub-scales: (1) Self's Emotions Appraisal (SEA); (2) Others's Emotions Appraisal (OEA); (3) Use of Emotions (UOE); and (4) Regulation of Emotions (Savickas et al.). WLEIS employs a Likert-7, from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). The scale calculates total scores and subscale scores, with higher scores indicating elevated levels of emotional intelligence. The WLEIS scale has been implemented in the Vietnamese context, the scale test indicators show high positivity, Cronbach's α coefficient is greater than $\alpha = 0.80$ and the convergent validity between sub-scales is above $\alpha = 0.70$ (Nguyen, 2020; Siem, 2023). This study conducted a test run for 45 students at Hoa Sen University, and the results showed high reliability at $\alpha = 0.9$.

2.3.3 The Career Adapt-Abilities Scale - Short Form (CAAS)

The Career Adapt-Ability Scale – short form was derived from the original scale by Maggiori et al. (2017). This abbreviated version comprises 12 items organized into four sub-scales: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. Each sub-scale consists of three subsections, all rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (least developed) to 5 (most developed). It is a self-report scale that yields a total score, with higher scores indicating greater levels of career adaptability. The internal reliability of the scale has a good index in the range of $0.76-0.90$ (Maggiori et al., 2017). The CAAS scale has been adapted in Vietnam. Scale testing indicators show high reliability, Cronbach's α coefficient is greater than $\alpha = 0.89$ (Luu, 2021). This study conducted a test run for 45 students at Hoa Sen University, and the results showed high reliability at the WLEIS scale $\alpha = 0.97$.

2.4 Hypotheses

This research adopts a quantitative approach, employing a cross-sectional design with a correlational framework involving three variables: Emotional Intelligence, Career Adaptability, and Difficulty in Career Decision-making. The study aims to test a mediation model where adaptability mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and career difficulties.

Hypothesis 01: Emotional intelligence exhibits a negative correlation with career decision difficulty.

Hypothesis 02: Career adaptability is negatively correlated with career decision difficulty.

Hypothesis 03: Emotional intelligence demonstrates a positive correlation with career adaptability.

Hypothesis 04: Adaptability serves as a mediator in the relationship between emotional intelligence and career decision difficulties.

2.5 Data Analysis

The collected data were transferred to Microsoft Excel and encrypted within the software. Subsequently, the research team conducted Cronbach's α coefficient tests, descriptive statistical analyses, and Pearson correlation analyses for demographic variables and the three scales (WLEIS, CAAS, and CDDQ) using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26.0. For testing the mediation model, the research team employed the PROCESS macro 4.1 software, following the approach proposed by Hayes (2017), to examine the mediating role of adaptability in the relationship between the independent variable (emotional intelligence) and the dependent variable (difficulty in deciding and choosing a career). Additionally, the team assessed the sample size for the intermediate model using the Bootstrap method. This involved repeatedly conducting the sampling process to achieve a representative sample size of 1000 with 95% confidence, as suggested by Preacher and Hayes (2004). Finally, the research team utilized the Harman one-factor test to examine common method bias (CMB), following the procedure outlined by Podsakoff et al. (2003).

2.6 Ethics Aspect

The research adheres to the ethical guidelines for scientific research set forth by the American Psychological Association (LaPalme et al., 2016). All survey data will be securely stored at the Department of Applied Psychology at Hoa Sen University and will be appropriately disposed of after 2 years from the conclusion of the study, per established regulations. Participants expressed their consent to participate in the study by selecting the option "Agree" after reviewing the information provided about the research in the survey.

3. Results

Examination of the WLEIS, CAAS, and CDDQ scales indicates that the reliability indices fall within a favorable range. Specifically, the Cronbach's α for the WLEIS is $\alpha = 0.92$. Regarding career adaptability, the CAAS scale demonstrates a reliability of $\alpha = 0.91$. Lastly, the variable measuring difficulty in career decisions exhibits a high overall reliability with $\alpha = 0.94$ on the CDDQ scale. These findings affirm that the internal consistency and reliability of the three scales are satisfactory.

The correlation analysis results and descriptive statistics for the research variables are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3
WLEIS	79.90	14.61	-	-0.26 **	0.57 **
CDDQ	4.74	1.31		-	-0.28**
CAAS	48.42	7.21			-

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$, two-tailed.

WLEIS = Wong and Law's Emotional Intelligence Scale; CDDQ = Career Decision-making Difficulties Questionnaire; CAAS = Career Adapt-Ability Scale.

The data presented in Table 2 reveal a negative correlation between difficulty in making career decisions and both emotional intelligence ($r = -0.26$, $p < .01$) and career adaptability ($r = -0.28$, $p < .01$). Furthermore, a relatively good positive correlation is observed between emotional intelligence and career adaptability ($r = 0.57$, $p < .01$). These results support the validity of hypotheses 1, 2, and 3. Additionally, the descriptive statistics for the three variables indicated that our data is not normally distributed: emotional intelligence ($M = 79.90$; $SD = 14.61$), difficulty in career decision-making ($M = 4.74$; $SD = 1.31$), and career adaptability ($M = 48.42$; $SD = 7.21$).

Mediation Analysis

Mediation analysis based on 1000 bootstrapped samples using bias-corrected and accelerated 95% confidence intervals to examine the mediating role of career adaptability in the relationship between emotional intelligence and career decision difficulties. The analysis results, as presented in Table 3, demonstrate the total effect of emotional intelligence and career decision difficulties with career adaptability is significant ($c = -0.26$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI = [-0.38, -0.15]$). Simultaneously, the indirect path through 3 factors ($0.57(a) * -0.19(b) = -0.11$, 95% $CI = [-0.20, -0.04]$); and the direct path from emotional intelligence to career decision difficulty ($c' = -0.15$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = 0.03$, 95% $CI = [-0.29, -0.01]$) is also found to be significant. Consequently, all three impact paths are statistically significant, establishing a partial mediation model, which supports our hypothesis 4. The effect as shown in Figure 01 illustrates the influence of emotional intelligence, via career adaptability, on difficulty in career decisions, alongside the direct

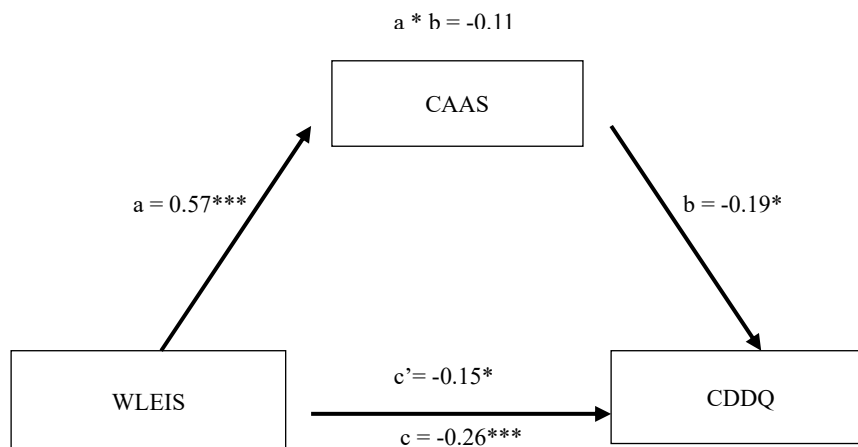
impact of emotional intelligence on students' difficulties.

At the same time, we conducted a check for common method bias (CMB) utilizing the Harman one-factor test (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The findings indicate that the total variance explained by a single factor is 26.83%, which is below the threshold of 50%. This result suggests that the current study is not significantly influenced by common biases stemming from methodological factors.

Table 3. Results of Mediation Analysis

Variable	Coef.	SE	T-value	p	95% CI
<i>Direct path</i>					
WLEIS → CDDQ	-0.15*	0.07	-2.15	.03	[-0.29, -0.01]
<i>Indirect path</i>					
WLEIS → CAAS	0.57***	0.05	11.18	<.0001	[0.47, 0.67]
CAAS → CDDQ	-0.19*	0.07	-2.73	.0067	[-0.34, -0.05]
WLEIS → CAAS → CDDQ	-0.11	0.41			[-0.20, -0.04]
<i>Total effect</i>	-0.26***	.06	-4.45	<.0001	[-0.38, -0.15]

Note: * p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001; LLCI = lower level confidence interval (95%); ULCI = upper level confidence interval (95%).



WLEIS = Wong and Law's Emotional Intelligence Scale; CDDQ = Career Decision-making Difficulties Questionnaire; CAAS-SF=Career Adapt-Ability Scale;

Figure 1. Mediating Model of Career Adaptability in the Relationship from Emotional Intelligence to Career Decision Difficulties

Note. * p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.

WLEIS = Wong and Law's Emotional Intelligence Scale; CDDQ = Career Decision-making Difficulties Questionnaire; CAAS = Career Adapt-Ability Scale

4. Discussion

The findings of the research indicate that emotional intelligence can influence career decision difficulties, mediated by the role of career adaptability. Additionally, there is a negative correlation between emotional intelligence and students' difficulties. As a result, both the direct and indirect paths have been examined, leading to the determination of the overall relationship among these three variables.

4.1 Emotional Intelligence on Career Decision-making Difficulties

To explore this association, this study will initially examine the direct pathway from emotional intelligence to

challenges in the career decision-making process.

This study inferred that students possessing strong abilities in perceiving and utilizing emotions tend to exhibit greater willingness and confidence in navigating career-related decisions. This aligns with Santos et al. (2018) research, emphasizing that students equipped with emotions-assessment capabilities, can better recognize and understand themselves and thereby understand their competency and show more interest in their career path. Consequently, they demonstrate more purposeful information exploration, and engage in persistent career-seeking behaviors (Parmentier et al., 2022). At the same time, proficient emotional regulation allows students to anticipate emotional consequences amid tasks and career transitions, fostering the establishment and maintenance of their adaptability aids in navigating challenges encountered during the career exploration process (Mittal, 2021; Potgieter, 2014; Wong & Law, 2017).

By arming themselves with emotional resources, students are better prepared for their future career path, enhancing adaptability in coping with decision-making difficulties (Ran et al., 2022). The ability to make career decisions is influenced by various factors, including information about the profession, personal values, passions, and external influences (Ran et al., 2022). The resulting conflicts and disagreements can elevate pressure and anxiety as students grapple with optimal choices. However, emotional intelligence involves adept emotional regulation, emphasizing effort, resilience, and goal-setting (Wong & Law, 2017). Consequently, students are inclined to motivate themselves for better performance, personal development, and enhanced mental well-being (Di et al., 2021). This, in turn, contributes to positive career orientation and smoother decision-making processes (Santos et al., 2018). Moreover, it fosters effective interpersonal relationships and equips students with the skills to navigate pressure effectively (Kirdök & Korkmaz, 2018).

Hence, emotional intelligence serves as an intrinsic resource, empowering students to leverage their emotions for goal-directed actions throughout the career decision-making process. It aids them in adapting more effectively to the challenges inherent in this transitional phase. This is evident in research that identifies the mediating role of adaptability in the connection between emotional intelligence and challenges in the career decision-making process. Specifically, emotionally intelligent students tend to cultivate career adaptability, which, in turn, assists them in navigating challenges during the career choice and decision-making journey.

4.2 The Relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Career Decision Difficulties with the Mediation of Career Adapt-Ability

The findings of the study indicate a positive correlation between emotional intelligence and career adaptability. In essence, higher levels of emotional intelligence among students are associated with an increased capacity for enhancing career adaptability. This aligns with prior research, including the observations made by Coetzee and Harry (2014). The study underscores the role of emotional intelligence in fostering and amplifying this adaptive capability.

When students possess effective emotional management skills, they can navigate and utilize emotions strategically to confront challenges in their career development journey (Schutte et al., 2008). Moreover, emotional intelligence is linked to the ability to establish clear goals, formulate plans, and exhibit internal motivation toward achieving objectives (Mandell & Pherwani, 2003). Salovey and Mayer (1990) noted that individuals adept at emotion regulation tend to be more flexible in decision-making, persistent in task completion, and well-prepared for their chosen profession. Consequently, students with heightened emotional intelligence are better equipped for career readiness, fostering confidence in handling tasks and navigating challenges within the career development process (Brown et al., 2003; Coetzee & Beukes, 2010; Schutte et al., 2008). Additionally, individuals with elevated emotional intelligence exhibit improved communication skills within group settings, displaying openness to both their own emotions and those of others (Brown et al., 2003; Raelin et al., 2011). This heightened interpersonal effectiveness allows them to actively engage in group activities, expanding opportunities for exploring the professional landscape and discovering career options aligned with their interests, values, and aspirations (Brown et al., 2003; Parmentier et al., 2022). Therefore, it is evident that emotional intelligence plays a role in fostering the growth and cultivation of career adaptability, facilitating better adjustment within the dynamic career landscape (Çizel, 2018; Parmentier et al., 2022). In today's global economy, perpetual change is a constant. Demonstrating the ability to regulate emotions and adapt within one's career equips students to navigate complexity and stress (Orth & Volmer, 2017), ultimately leading to more informed career decisions (Savickas, 2005, 2013).

Subsequently, the research findings revealed a negative correlation between career adaptability and the challenges associated with making career decisions. This implies that proficient career adaptability in students can mitigate or constrain difficulties encountered in the career decision-making process. Consistent with these findings, several studies highlight an inverse relationship between career adaptability and the challenges associated with making career decisions. In the contemporary complex career landscape, students may find themselves perplexed by new, intricate,

inconsistent, and unpredictable information (Xu et al., 2020). This confusion may result in a lack of preparedness and planning (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010), or a tendency to rely on external influences when making career choices (Lease, 2004), leading to suboptimal and inappropriate decisions. In contrast, career adaptability reflects an individual's capacity to prepare for and engage in future occupational roles while adjusting to unforeseeable employment factors (Salovey & Sluyter, 1997), particularly those arising from economic fluctuations (Glavin, 2013). Students with high career adaptability tend to set more informed goals, invest additional time in planning, and actively seek growth opportunities to enhance skills and resources for effective career management (Savickas et al., 2009). Consequently, individuals with high career adaptability experience less difficulty in decision-making and engage in more extensive career exploration (Hirschi & Valero, 2015). Conversely, those lacking career adaptability may exhibit indifference, indecision, unrealistic expectations, and challenges in achieving career success (Savickas, 2013). In the process of nurturing career adaptability, students develop profound insights into themselves and their careers through experiential learning (Savickas, 2013). For instance, as students explore the professional landscape, they gain valuable insights into job specifics, related career responsibilities, and details about the organizations that pique their interest. On a personal level, they must construct a conceptual understanding of themselves and their envisioned career paths. Consequently, elevated career adaptability empowers students with comprehensive self-awareness and a nuanced grasp of the career context, facilitating informed decision-making. This enhanced readiness enables students to acquire essential knowledge and skills, fostering adaptability in career selection and adeptly navigating career challenges (Hui et al., 2018). Therefore, students armed with in-depth self-knowledge and contextual career insights are better poised to make decisive, well-informed, and personally resonant career decisions.

4.3 The Total Effect between Emotional Intelligence, Career Adapt-Ability, and Career Decision Difficulties

By examining both direct and indirect relationships, the authors conducted tests on a partial mediation model, where career adaptability serves as a mediator in the connection between emotional intelligence and career choice difficulties among university students in Vietnam. This aligns with findings from studies (Akbarzadeh et al., 2020; Nilforooshan & Salimi, 2016). Notably, emotional intelligence emerges as a crucial factor contributing to the enhancement of students' career adaptability (Vashisht et al., 2023). This augmentation equips them with the capacity to confront challenges encountered in the process of making career choices and decisions. The dynamic interplay between emotional intelligence and career adaptability is evident, elucidating their collaborative role in the landscape of career decision-making (Udayar et al., 2018). Consequently, students with heightened emotional intelligence exhibit proactive behaviors in seeking career-related information, reinforcing their commitment, and, in turn, elevating their career adaptability (Coetzee & Harry, 2014; Guan et al., 2015). Conversely, this adaptability assumes a complementary function for students with advanced emotional intelligence, facilitating adept adjustment to changes, steadfastness, and challenges inherent in self-directed career decisions (Mittal, 2021). This symbiotic relationship aids in their preparation, adaptation, and effective coping with the complexities and challenges associated with career orientation (Autin et al., 2017; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). As a result, both these variables play a pivotal role in the interplay between personal resources and the environment (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). This sheds light on the mechanisms students employ to navigate the myriad challenges encountered in the career decision-making process. This establishes a mediating model wherein adaptability bridges the relationship between emotional intelligence and the difficulties associated with career decision-making.

5. Implication

This research investigates the interplay between emotional intelligence and career decision difficulties, with a focus on the mediating role of career adaptability among university students in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The findings contribute to both research and practical applications within the Vietnamese context. Firstly, the research team has introduced, adapted, and applied the tools and scales to Vietnam culture, offering valuable resources for future investigations into the intricate realm of career guidance. Aside from this, our study has bridged the gap by exploring the complexity of factors influencing students in their career-seeking process, since comprehending the underlying mechanisms is crucial for developing pertinent plans and strategies. Especially when the intricacies of the career choice-decision-making process, particularly among students, hold significant importance as it is an integral part of the developmental journey; and can have lasting implications well into their career (Priyashantha et al., 2023). Therefore, for research in this domain, precise identification of supportive elements such as emotional intelligence and career adaptability becomes paramount, laying the groundwork for more targeted approaches.

Along with this is a shift towards an educational model that affords students increased exposure to a diverse range of careers before committing to a specific path is imperative. The research team proposed the establishment and

advancement of a Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) program (ACEN, 2022; Billett, 2020; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021). Promoting the opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge gained in classrooms to real-world scenarios, bridging the gap between theory and practice, and honing critical skills (Briant et al., 2023). By facilitating hands-on experiences in actual career settings and fostering an understanding of the constraints and aspirations associated with their desired career paths, students can cultivate adaptability and self-assurance.

6. Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. Firstly, the scales employed in the study lack standardization within the Vietnamese context, resulting in potential instability and a lack of complete alignment with the cultural backdrop. Secondly, the research's descriptive cross-sectional design impedes the establishment of clear cause-and-effect relationships or precise predictions. Thirdly the timing of the study, conducted at the end of the semester and summer break for many universities in Vietnam, posed challenges in accessing and recruiting subjects. For future improvements, we plan on standardizing the scales and designing our research to include the environment, students' social support and relationships, and socioeconomic status.

7. Conclusion

The focal point of this study is to delve into and analyze the correlation between emotional intelligence and career decision difficulties among university students in Vietnam, with a specific emphasis on the mediating role of career adaptability. The findings highlight that emotional intelligence equips students with the capacity to comprehend and regulate their emotions, guiding their actions toward desired outcomes. Consequently, it fosters a proactive engagement with industry information, bolsters confidence, and cultivates adaptability. This, in turn, shapes how individuals navigate career situations, effectively surmounting challenges associated with making career choices and decisions.

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Authors contributions

NKN, HYPL, and VHAN were in charge of study design. NKN, HYPL, and VHAN were in charge of data collecting. NKN, HYPL, and VHAN were responsible for the analysis and interpretation of the results. The manuscript was drafted by NKN, HYPL, and VHAN, with revisions by DTTB, VLTC, and BTND. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript. In this paragraph, clarify any unusual authorship arrangements, such as whether all authors participated equally to the study.

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