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Perceived Employability and Job Search Anxiety among College Students: A Systematic Review and Thematic Synthesis

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Abstract: The transition from higher education to employment has become an increasingly complex developmental milestone, requiring students to translate academic knowledge, technical competencies, and psychological capital into job opportunities within volatile and automated labor markets. This systematic review provides a comprehensive synthesis of 50 peer-reviewed empirical and conceptual studies, examining the interplay between perceived employability and job search anxiety among university students. Operating across five major synthesized themes, the literature reveals that perceived employability functions as a vital psychological resource—grounded in Conservation of Resources (COR) theory and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)—those buffers against career distress, enhances job search self-efficacy, and fosters flourishing. However, persistent labor-market uncertainties, intense recruitment competition, and the rapid emergence of Automated Employment Decision Tools (AEDTs) and generative AI significantly elevate job search anxiety. Despite extensive general research, a critical empirical gap exists regarding final-year Bachelor of Engineering (B.E.) Computer Science students—a population uniquely exposed to hyper-automated technical hiring filters, acute skill volatility, and live algorithmic evaluation. This review establishes a rigorous conceptual and empirical foundation to guide future targeted investigations within technical higher education.

Keywords: *Perceived employability, job search anxiety, career anxiety, college students, B.E. Computer Science, AI displacement, higher education*

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1. Introduction

1.1 *Background of the Study*

Transition from university into the professional workforce is a developmental period marked by identity formation, increased autonomy, and preparation for one's career roles (Savickas, 2005; Sui et al., 2026). During this school-to-work transition, emerging adults have to make important career choices under the pressures of academic demands, economic fluctuations, and changing labor-market expectations (Cifuentes-Faura & Faura-Martínez, 2023; Gunawan et al., 2021). In the fields of vocational psychology and higher education, perceived employability and job search anxiety are two psychological constructs of growing interest in exploring students' well-being under the stresses of entering a career.

Employability at the individual level is generally regarded as the ability to get, retain, and adapt to good work (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). Perceived employability is defined as an individual's perception of their own ability to acquire, maintain, and manage desirable employment in the labor market (Fugate et al., 2004; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007; Vanhercke et al., 2014). It is the student's primary internal resource. Students with high levels of perceived employability are confident about their human capital, adaptability, and social networks (Berntson et al., 2006; Tomlinson, 2017). Job search anxiety is a negative emotional state experienced by individuals in anticipation of or during the job search process that includes feelings of worry, apprehension, and physiological arousal (Chen & Zhou, 2022; Kwak et al., 2025; Saks & Ashforth, 2002). Given the growing uncertainty of the global job market, understanding how students can buffer job search anxiety by fostering positive beliefs about employability is an urgent concern for educators, career counselors, and researchers.

1.2 *Research Problem*

While the anxiety associated with the job search process is well-acknowledged across broad undergraduate populations, existing research has developed largely in parallel: employability studies often focus on the student's career self-efficacy, job search intensity, and placement outcomes, whereas anxiety studies examine academic stress, general well-being, or resilience. The direct, mechanism-driven relationship between employable students' perceptions of themselves and the specific job search anxiety they experience is poorly integrated.

Moreover, the current job market scenario is fraught with challenges. With advances in technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), generative code engines and Automated

Employment Decision Tools (AEDTs), the recruitment process has become exceedingly competitive (Armstrong & Metaxa, 2025; Wang & Zhang, 2025). Students graduating from institutions of higher learning are often deeply concerned about their skills becoming obsolete, the efficacy of automated resume screening, and cutthroat competition at the workplace (Ncube & Hlatywayo, 2022; Wu, 2025). While studies on general undergraduate populations are abundant, there is a need to review literature through a focused perspective in order to address the unique concerns of a specialized group of students - those specializing in Computer Science who are about to enter the hyper-automated technical recruitment space

1.3 *Rationale for the Review*

A systematic analysis of the existing literature is needed because:

1. It differentiates between objective employability skills and perceived employability by showing how the latter relates to distress instead of being an economic indicator.

2. It bridges the gap between vocational psychology and mental health by associating psychological capital and self-efficacy with employability beliefs and job search anxiety.

3. It highlights gaps in addressing high-risk technical fields like final year B.E. Computer Science students who are subjected to automation in job markets in emerging economies like India.

1.4 *Review Objectives*

- **i.** A need to collate and present empirical research findings on the correlation between perceived employability and job search anxiety amongst university students.
- **ii.** A need to identify the key individual, environmental and technological factors which cause employment anxiety during the transition from higher education to the workplace.
- **iii.** A need exists to understand the psychological, academic and behavioral impact of lengthened job search anxiety on graduating seniors.
- **iv.** An appreciation must be gained as to the influence of supportive institutions and career development modules on employability confidence and mitigating associated distress.
- **v.** A requirement to identify areas of ignorance within the literature concerning specific disciplines and automated labor markets, particularly final year B.E. Computer Science students.

1.5 *Review Questions*

RQ1: How is perceived employability conceptualized and measured, and how does it influence the trajectory of job search anxiety in undergraduate students?

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RQ2: What structural, technological (AI/AEDTs), and environmental factors exacerbate career distress among graduating cohorts?

RQ3: How do educational climate, institutional career services, and proactive individual behaviors act as protective buffers against job search anxiety?

RQ4: What specific empirical and contextual gaps exist regarding the employability perceptions and job search anxiety of final-year B.E. Computer Science students, particularly in India?

2. Methodology

2.1 *Review Design*

This study had employed a stringent systematic analysis design following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol, and the systematic review was conducted using the standardized systematic review template. The methodology involved a systematic search, screening, appraisal, and thematic analysis of peer-reviewed empirical literature to integrate and explore studies on perceived employability and job search anxiety.

2.2 *Search Strategy*

Comprehensive search strings were created by using Boolean logic that combined terms within three conceptual groups: (1) Employability constructs; (2) Psychological distress/anxiety constructs; and (3) Target student populations. Keyword combinations were performed across the titles, abstracts, and indexing keywords.

2.3 *Databases and Information Sources*

Literature searches were carried out in the following electronic bibliographic databases and academic search engines: PubMed/PMC, Web of Science, Scopus, IEEE Xplore, ACM Digital Library, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Wiley Online Library, SAGE Publications, Frontiers, and Google Scholar.

2.4 *Search Terms and Boolean Operators*

Representative search queries included:

- ("perceived employability" OR "self-perceived employability" OR "employability confidence" OR "career adaptability") AND ("job search anxiety" OR "career anxiety" OR "employment anxiety" OR "vocational distress")

- ("perceived employability" OR "employability confidence") AND ("job search self-efficacy" OR "job search behavior" OR "job search intensity")
- ("job search anxiety" OR "employment anxiety") AND ("college students" OR "undergraduates" OR "final-year students" OR "engineering students" OR "computer science students")

2.5 *Publication Period*

The systematic review targeted peer-reviewed empirical journal articles, meta-analyses, and indexed conference proceedings published between 2000 and 2026. Foundational theoretical works (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Hobfoll, 1989; Lent et al., 1994; Savickas, 2005) were retained to provide robust conceptual grounding.

2.6 *Inclusion Criteria*

a) Original empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods) or systematic conceptual reviews published in peer-reviewed journals or indexed proceedings.

b) Studies focusing on university/college undergraduate or postgraduate student cohorts undergoing or preparing for the school-to-work transition.

c) Studies utilizing validated instruments to measure perceived employability, job search self-efficacy, career adaptability, job search anxiety, or employment stress.

d) Studies published in the English language.

2.7 *Exclusion Criteria*

a) Non-peer-reviewed blog posts, trade magazines, news articles, or non-academic opinion editorials.

b) Studies exclusively examining tenured mid-career workers without direct relevance to emerging adults or higher education graduates.

c) Dissertations or studies lacking clear, validated measurement instruments or explicit methodological frameworks.

2.8 *Study Selection Process*

The initial search strategy of multiple databases identified 412 records. After eliminating duplicates (n = 124), 288 title and abstract records were selected to screen against inclusion criteria.

The final full-text articles (n = 115) were assessed for eligibility, and 50 distinct, highly relevant peer-reviewed studies were finally selected for systematic synthesis and analysis.

2.9 *Quality Assessment*

Included studies were critically appraised based on sample adequacy, construct operationalization, psychometric validity of measurement scales, appropriateness of statistical modeling (e.g., Structural Equation Modeling, serial mediation, multi-wave longitudinal tracking), and theoretical alignment. Priority was given to studies employing multi-wave or experimental designs.

2.10 *Data Extraction*

A standardized data extraction matrix was utilized to capture author(s) and publication year, geographical context, target population/academic major, methodology and design, key independent and dependent variables, mediating/moderating factors, and core empirical findings.

2.11 *Data Synthesis and Analysis*

A thematic narrative synthesis combined with evidence mapping was conducted. Extracted empirical findings were categorized into five overarching thematic domains, allowing for the integration of individual psychological mechanisms, environmental drivers, technological impacts, and institutional buffers.

3. Results

3.1 *Search and Study Selection Results*

The screening and selection process resulted in a final synthesis sample of 50 high-quality empirical and theoretical publications. The selected studies provided robust cross-national evidence spanning North America, Europe, Asia (notably China, India, Korea, Taiwan, and Malaysia), Africa, and Australia.

3.2 *Characteristics of Included Studies*

The studies in our corpus are heterogeneous in terms of students' categories; general, business or management, stem or engineering, or senior students about to graduate. In terms of methodologies, almost all these articles used quantitative research methods. Some of the studies collected data from their samples only once (e.g., Cifuentes-Faura & Faura-Martínez, 2023; Gerçek, 2024; Rothwell et al., 2008), while others implemented multi-wave repeated measures or longitudinal designs (e.g., Guan et al., 2013; Gunawan et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2017). Experimental

and interventional studies were also represented (e.g., Wu et al., 2024) as were studies exploring potential predictors or scales used in the measurement (e.g., Boğazlıyan & Avşaroğlu, 2024; Guan et al., 2014).

3.3 *Methodological Characteristics of Included Studies*

Although cross-sectional survey designs dominate career research, an emerging body of recent studies make use of advanced structural equation modeling analyses to unravel complex mediation and moderation processes. In particular, multi-wave longitudinal studies (e.g., Xie et al., 2017: 6 waves; Guan et al., 2013: 3 waves) provide evidence that perceived employability dynamics precede job search self-efficacy and behaviors over time. Meanwhile, recent 2024-2026 literature includes randomized controlled trials examining cognitive bias modification for employability anxiety (Wu et al., 2024) and serial mediation models investigating social support and strengths use (Kwak et al., 2025).

3.4 *Major Themes / Findings*

3.4.1 Theme 1: Conceptualization and Measurement of Perceived Employability

The concept of perceived employability is different from a simple summation of technical skills (Fugate et al., 2004; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). It is a multidimensional psychosocial construct underpinned by the conservation of resources perspective (Hobfoll, 1989) and the social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994). Perceived employability is students' cognitive evaluation of their career capital or fitness to meet the market requirements (Berntson et al., 2006; Rothwell et al., 2008; Vanhercke et al., 2014). The construct has been operationally measured by Rothwell et al. (2008) and Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006) using indicators such as engagement in studies and academic performance to reflect internal career-related competencies. On the other hand, external variables like university reputation and labor market competitiveness were used to predict student employability.

3.4.2 Theme 2: Individual, Educational, and Contextual Determinants of Employability

The synthesized literature identifies three distinct layers of determinants shaping student employability beliefs (Duggal et al., 2024):

a) Individual Level: Proactive personality (Li et al., 2020; Ma et al., 2021), psychological capital (Ayala Calvo & Manzano García, 2021), career adaptability (Guan et al., 2021), emotional intelligence (Udayar et al., 2018), and hardiness (Huang, 2015).

b) Educational Level: Work-integrated learning (WIL) and internships (Ebner et al., 2021; Ng et al., 2022), experiential learning (Pitan & Muller, 2019), academic performance and extracurricular participation (Pinto & Ramalheira, 2017), and career development modules (Jackson & Wilton, 2017).

c) Contextual Level: University brand/reputation (Pitan & Muller, 2019), social networking capital (Batistic & Tymon, 2017), faculty support (Veld et al., 2019), and perceived macroeconomic labor market opportunity (Berntson et al., 2006; Cifuentes-Faura & Faura-Martínez, 2023).

3.4.3 Theme 3: Employability, Career Self-Efficacy, and Job Search Behavior

A significant finding from various longitudinal and SEM studies is that students' perception of employability influences their intention to actively engage in job searching via the key mediating mechanism of job search self-efficacy (JSSE) (Guan et al., 2013; Peeters et al., 2019; Xie et al., 2017). Job seekers who hold a positive image regarding their abilities to land a position in the future feel confident about engaging in resume preparation, job hunting, and networking activities (Gomes et al., 2019; Harrison et al., 2021; Onyishi et al., 2015; Saks & Ashforth, 1999). As a result, they are more likely to demonstrate intense job search efforts and secure a positive job outcome than those with a negative perception. On the contrary, when individuals do not have a positive belief about their employability prospects, their engagement in job hunting activities is significantly lower.

3.4.4 Theme 4: Automated Hiring, AI Displacement, and Job Search Anxiety

A large number of research manuscripts published throughout the time range 2022-2026 explore the impact of modern recruitment practices and the ongoing situation of economic instability on the psyche (Armstrong & Metaxa, 2025; Wang & Zhang, 2025). The application of Automated Employment Decision Tools (AEDT), e.g., artificial intelligence resume scanners, coding automation, and video coding, creates a sense of unfairness and detachment for younger generations seeking jobs (Armstrong & Metaxa, 2025). In technical specialties, the use of artificial intelligence for code generation stimulates apprehension and fear of obsolescence and loss of entry-level opportunities (Wang & Zhang, 2025; Wu, 2025). Multiple job search attempts without success deplete individuals in terms of resources, engagement, self-esteem, provoke detachment

and withdrawal from society (Hobfoll, 1989; Kwak et al., 2025; Saks & Ashforth, 2002; Zhao & Zhou, 2023).

3.4.5 Theme 5: Institutional Climate, Career Services, and Protective Buffers

Higher education institutions constitute critical protective factors against graduate transition shock (Donald et al., 2020; Sui et al., 2026). Supportive learning environments that include adequate faculty mentoring, embedded enterprise education (Okolie et al., 2020), and career counseling services contribute to increased student career adaptability and decreased employment-related anxiety (Blustein et al., 2019; Sui et al., 2026; Veld et al., 2019). At the same time, individual factors such as trait resilience, career calling, social support, and strengths use, act as moderators and/or mediators of the association between hiring stress and psychological thriving (Kwak et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025).

Table 1: *Thematic cluster, Key frameworks, Synthesized core findings*

Thematic Cluster	**Key Theoretical Frameworks**	**Synthesized Core Findings**
1. Protective Role of Perceived Employability	Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory; Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)	Perceived employability acts as critical psychological capital. High employability confidence directly reduces career anxiety, enhances job search self-efficacy, and fosters flourishing (Gerçek, 2024; Kwak et al., 2025).
2. Environmental & Market Drivers of Anxiety	Career Construction Theory; Labor Insecurity Models	Macroeconomic volatility, intense recruitment competition, and perceived skill irrelevance significantly elevate job-seeking stress and vocational uncertainty (Cifuentes-Faura & Faura-Martínez, 2023).

3. Automated Hiring & AI Displacement	Technological Displacement Models; Procedural Justice Theory	Automated Employment Decision Tools (AEDTs) and generative AI threaten skill relevance, increasing perceptions of procedural unfairness and acute anxiety among engineering/tech cohorts (Armstrong & Metaxa, 2025; Wu, 2025).
4. Psychological & Academic Impacts	Burnout & Resource Depletion Models (Hobfoll, 1989)	Unmitigated job search anxiety leads to academic burnout, emotional exhaustion, lowered self-esteem, reduced academic engagement, and social alienation (Saks & Ashforth, 2002; Zhao & Zhou, 2023).
5. Institutional Climate & Career Support	Relational Developmental Systems Theory; Human Capital Models	Supportive campus climates, embedded career development modules, and proactive faculty mentorship enhance student career adaptability, mitigating transition distress (Jackson & Wilton, 2017; Sui et al., 2026).

3.5 Synthesis of Findings

Synthesizing evidence across all 50 studies yields five unified conclusions:

a) Perceived employability is an internal, subjective, multidimensional psychological resource rather than a simple reflect of objective academic marks or technical skill lists.

b) Employability perceptions are dynamically shaped by an interplay of individual agency (proactive personality, resilience), educational experiences (internships, career modules), and external labor market conditions.

c) Job search self-efficacy (JSSE) serves as the core behavioral bridge through which perceived employability translates into active job-seeking behavior.

d) Employment anxiety is a distinct, measurable psychological state that severely impacts student well-being, academic engagement, and mental health when unbuffered.

e) Modern technological shifts—specifically algorithmic screening (AEDTs) and generative AI—have introduced a novel dimension of technical job search anxiety, creating an urgent need for targeted empirical examination in technical student populations.

4. Discussion

4.1 *Interpretation of Major Findings*

The extracted literature reveals that perceived employability is generally associated with positive psychological outcomes related to the school-to-work transition. When students realize that most job offers require them to possess human, social, and material resources that they have at their disposal, it reduces the danger inherent in the transition process. It facilitates their self-confidence in the job search process and stimulates active job seeking and persistence in the face of rejections. On the other hand, a low perception of control increases the danger of school-to-work transition and can lead to chronic job search worries.

4.2 *Comparison with Existing Literature*

While earlier vocational literature treated employability and job search anxiety as isolated constructs—focusing either on placement rates or general psychological stress—this synthesis integrates both domains. It demonstrates that employability and anxiety operate in dynamic feedback loops: high employability perceptions reduce anxiety, whereas high employment anxiety depletes cognitive bandwidth, undermining perceived employability and job search effectiveness.

4.3 *Theoretical Implications*

This review integrates three prominent theoretical frameworks to explain student career transitions:

a) Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Lent et al., 1994): Highlights how self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals regulate job-seeking behavior and emotional states.

b) Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989): Frames perceived employability as an internal resource reservoir that buffers against resource loss cycles (anxiety, burnout) during stressful hiring cycles.

c) Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2005): Position career adaptability as a crucial self-regulatory capability that enables students to adapt to volatile, automated labor market environments.

4.4 *Methodological Observations*

A close examination of the existing literature indicates that most studies utilized cross-sectional and self-report designs, thus limiting the ability to infer causality. Although a few articles adopted longitudinal and multi-wave studies (e.g., Guan et al., 2013; Xie et al., 2017), future research could include more projects following a similar design in order to track down how employability and anxiety influence each other over time. Additionally, there is a need for more experimental and intervention studies (e.g., Wu et al., 2024). Most importantly, the measures of the constructs differ between the articles, which complicates the comparison and integration of results; therefore, it is recommended to rely on well-established scales to measure both variables.

4.5 *Implications for Policy and Practice*

Higher education institutions and university career centers must transition from passive placement offices to active psychological and career development hubs:

a) Holistic Curriculum Integration: Career self-management, interview preparation, and experiential learning should be embedded directly into academic curricula (Donald et al., 2020; Jackson & Wilton, 2017).

b) Algorithmic & AI Literacy: Career services must equip technical students with explicit training on how Automated Employment Decision Tools (AEDTs) operate, demystifying algorithmic filtering and reducing procedural anxiety (Armstrong & Metaxa, 2025).

c) Psychological Support & Anxiety Screening: Universities should implement routine screening for employment anxiety, providing cognitive-behavioral stress regulation workshops alongside technical placement prep (Wu et al., 2024).

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5. Research Gaps

Despite the rich body of literature synthesized across 50 studies, this systematic review highlights critical empirical, population, and contextual gaps:

1. Direct Relationship Gap: While the separate correlates of perceived employability and job search anxiety are well-documented, direct empirical testing of perceived employability against job search anxiety within a single structural equation model remains under-researched.
2. Population Gap (B.E. Computer Science Students): General undergraduate, business, and healthcare cohorts dominate existing studies. Graduating B.E. Computer Science engineering students—who face unique tech-sector disruptions—remain severely underexplored.
3. Disciplinary & Technological Gap (AI & AEDT Impact): Computer Science curricula face immediate disruption from generative AI tools (LLM code generators). Final-year B.E. CS students face hyper-automated recruitment pipelines (LeetCode/HackerRank coding filters, asynchronous AI video interviews) that induce acute technical job search anxiety.
4. Geographic & Contextual Gap (Indian Higher Education): India produces one of the world's largest engineering graduate cohorts, yet empirical literature examining perceived employability and job search anxiety among Indian computer science undergraduates remains sparse.
5. Methodological Gap: The field suffers from a scarcity of multi-wave longitudinal studies tracking technical students through pre-placement, active campus interviewing, and post-graduation transitions.

6. Future Research Directions

6.1 *Recommended Research Areas*

a) Investigating the direct predictive relationship between perceived employability and job search anxiety among final-year B.E. Computer Science students.

b) Evaluating the moderating role of internship quality, campus placement participation, and prior technical project experience.

c) Examining the impact of generative AI awareness and perceived technological job displacement on coding self-efficacy and career distress.

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6.2 *Recommended Methodological Approaches*

- **a)** Adopt multi-wave prospective longitudinal designs tracking students across their final academic year (e.g., semester start, active campus recruitment, post-graduation outcome).
- **b)** Utilize psychometrically validated instruments, such as Rothwell et al.'s (2008) Self-Perceived Employability Scale and specialized Job Search Anxiety Scales (Boğazlıyan & Avşaroğlu, 2024; Kwak et al., 2025).
- **c)** Apply structural equation modeling (SEM) and serial mediation analysis (testing JSSE, career adaptability, and social support as sequential mediators).

6.3 *Emerging Research Questions*

- **a) Emerging RQ1:** Does perceived employability significantly predict job search anxiety among final-year B.E. Computer Science students in India?
- **b) Emerging RQ2:** How does the perceived threat of generative AI automation moderate the relationship between coding self-efficacy and technical job search anxiety?
- **c) Emerging RQ3:** To what extent do job search self-efficacy and career adaptability mediate the buffer between high perceived employability and lower employment distress?
- **d) Emerging RQ4:** Do institutional interventions (e.g., algorithmic interview coaching, AI literacy workshops) effectively mitigate technical recruitment anxiety and academic burnout in graduating engineering cohorts?

7. Conclusion

This systematic review aimed to consolidate the results of 50 scientific articles and provide a conclusion on the effect of perceived employability on the levels of job search anxiety among college students. The two theories used in the research field, namely Social Cognitive Career Theory and Conservation of Resources theory, were found to effectively predict students' responses to the challenges of the modern work environment. Accordingly, students' perceptions of their employability levels contribute positively to their self-confidence and motivation to engage in a career search. Although the job market situation, competition, and automated hiring procedures are found to be significant contributors to employment-related anxiety, it was reported that student populations can benefit from the implementation of proper educational conditions and services provided by academic facilities.

The study in question is highly valuable due to its emphasis on final-year B.E. Computer Science students, who are highly unlikely to be represented in the general labor market of automated, AI-driven workplaces. Furthermore, addressing such a specific group of future professionals is one of the ways to conduct a piece of research that will bring a significant change to the future of vocational psychology and higher education in general.

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