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# INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON CAREER CHOICE DECISIONS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS: EXAMINING THE ROLE OF SELF-EFFICACY AND CAREER ETHICS

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## ABSTRACT

*The increasing integration of social media into students' academic and professional lives has reshaped how college students explore occupations, form work-related values, and make career decisions. This study investigates the relationship between social media use and career choice decisions among college students, with particular attention to the mediating role of self-efficacy and the moderating influence of career ethics. Guided by Social Learning Theory and social cognitive perspectives, this study applies a mixed-method sequential explanatory approach combining quantitative survey analysis with qualitative interview findings. Results suggest that social media use is positively associated with career decision confidence, while self-efficacy serves as an important psychological mechanism that strengthens students' decision-making capacity. Ethical orientation also plays a meaningful role by shaping how students evaluate online career information and interpret professional success narratives. The findings emphasize that social media can function as a valuable career development tool when combined with digital literacy training and ethical career guidance. Implications for career counselors, universities, and policy makers are discussed.*

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**KEYWORDS:** Social Media, Job Choice, Career Decision-Making, Self-Efficacy, Career Ethics, Work Values.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of internet-based communication technologies has made social media a central part of daily life, particularly among young adults and university students. Social media platforms provide interactive environments where individuals can access career-related information, observe professional role models, engage in networking opportunities, and exchange experiences regarding employment and workplace expectations. As a result, social media is increasingly recognized as a key factor shaping students' career decision-making processes (Nikitkov and Sainty, 2014; Ostic et al., 2021; Sultana et al., 2023, 2025). In contemporary labor markets, college students often rely on social media platforms to explore job opportunities, evaluate organizational culture, and obtain employer background information (Gershon, 2024). These platforms not only function as communication tools but also influence students' perceptions of career success and their preferences for employment attributes such as flexibility, salary, and work-life balance (Shi et al., 2023). In this context, social media has become a powerful informal learning space where students acquire career-related knowledge through observation and interaction.

Social Learning Theory provides a useful framework for understanding how social media may influence career decisions. Bandura and Walters (1977) proposed that individuals learn behaviors and values through observing others, imitating role models, and evaluating the consequences of observed behaviors. Social media enhances this process by providing students with constant exposure to career narratives, professional achievements, and workplace experiences shared by influencers, alumni, and peers (Rumjaun and Narod, 2020; Huang and Chang, 2020; Ozimek et al., 2023). Such exposure can influence career expectations and motivate students to pursue certain career paths. However, career decision-making is also strongly influenced by psychological factors such as self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their capability to accomplish tasks and achieve goals (Bandura, 2006). Students with higher self-efficacy demonstrate stronger motivation, persistence, and confidence when making career-related decisions (Hartman and Barber, 2020; Sultana, 2024a, 2024b). Previous research indicates that social media engagement can enhance self-efficacy by providing access to career-related knowledge, social support, and opportunities for professional identity building (Pekkala and van Zoonen, 2022; Huang and Zhang, 2020; Ruparel et al.,

2020; Ansari and Khan, 2020; Tess, 2013; Zhang et al., 2020; Sun and Zhang, 2021).

At the same time, career decision-making is not purely influenced by motivation and self-confidence. Ethical considerations are increasingly relevant, especially in digital environments where misinformation, exaggerated career success portrayals, and unethical self-branding may distort students' decision-making (Ozimek et al., 2023; Pekkala and van Zoonen, 2022; Huang and Zhang, 2020; Hosen et al., 2021; Sun and Zhang, 2021; Islam et al., 2024). Therefore, career ethics may play a moderating role by shaping students' ability to critically evaluate information and make responsible career decisions. Although prior studies have explored social media's influence on career development, there remains limited empirical research integrating self-efficacy and ethical orientation into a unified explanatory model. Therefore, this study examines how social media influences career choice decisions among college students by focusing on the mediating role of self-efficacy and the moderating role of career ethics.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Social Media Use and Career Development

Social media has become a major influence on how students explore professional opportunities and interpret labor market information. Unlike traditional career guidance systems such as university career centers or formal internships, social media offers continuous and real-time exposure to job advertisements, employer branding, and peer-based employment narratives. Consequently, students are no longer passive recipients of career advice but active participants in digital career ecosystems, where they construct professional identities and evaluate job opportunities through online interactions (Ruparel et al., 2020; Ozimek et al., 2023). However, although access to career-related information has expanded, the reliability and credibility of such information remain uncertain. Many platforms prioritize popularity-driven content rather than evidence-based career guidance, raising concerns that students may form biased job preferences based on incomplete or misleading representations of professional life (Nikitkov and Sainty, 2014; Gershon, 2024).

Research also suggests that social media influences students' perceptions of career success. Exposure to curated achievements and influencer-driven career narratives may increase the attractiveness of highly visible occupations while reducing interest in stable but less glamorous career

paths (Jue et al., 2009; Shi et al., 2023). As a result, social media may reshape career decisions by altering perceived career desirability rather than improving career realism. Although previous studies indicate that social media can enhance career awareness by exposing students to diverse job opportunities and professional role models (Ansari and Khan, 2020), this relationship is not always positive. Continuous exposure to competitive career content may lead to unrealistic expectations, social comparison, and dissatisfaction, particularly among students with low confidence or unclear career goals (Ostic et al., 2021; Xu, 2023). Such experiences may contribute to career indecision, delayed employment entry, and anxiety during the career transition process (Lent and Brown, 2020; Kossek et al., 2021). Furthermore, algorithmic personalization increasingly shapes social media experiences by reinforcing selective exposure to particular career narratives while filtering out alternative perspectives. This suggests that career decision-making may be influenced not only by individual exploration but also by platform-driven recommendations.

## 2.2. Social Learning Theory Perspective

Social Learning Theory proposes that individuals develop behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes through observing and imitating others, particularly when those behaviors appear rewarded or socially approved (Bandura and Walters, 1977). Social media significantly amplifies this process by providing constant access to professional role models, workplace experiences, and peer career narratives. Through these interactions, students can observe career pathways and workplace practices, making social media an influential environment for shaping work values and career aspirations (Rumjaun and Narod, 2020; Huang and Chang, 2020). However, applying Social Learning Theory to digital environments requires critical consideration. Social media content is often highly curated and tends to emphasize positive outcomes while minimizing challenges. Consequently, students may form expectations based on selective portrayals of professional success rather than realistic workplace experiences. This may encourage aspirational learning that prioritizes idealized outcomes instead of practical understanding of career development (Ostic et al., 2021; Gershon, 2024). Empirical research indicates that social media can also support learning through knowledge sharing and interactive engagement. Hosen et al. (2021) found that social media enhances student learning performance by encouraging motivation-driven knowledge

exchange, while Zhang et al. (2020) highlighted its role in facilitating collaborative learning and organizational knowledge creation. Although these findings support the role of social media as a learning environment, they do not fully address whether the career-related information shared online is accurate or beneficial for long-term career decisions. In addition, popularity indicators such as likes, shares, and comments may be interpreted as signals of credibility. This engagement-based validation may reinforce biased learning processes, suggesting that observational learning in social media environments may depend more on perceived popularity than on objective career guidance. Therefore, while Social Learning Theory provides a useful framework, its application in digital contexts should consider algorithmic reinforcement and the credibility challenges of online information.

## 2.3. Self-Efficacy and Career Decision-Making

Self-efficacy is widely recognized as a key psychological factor influencing career decision-making because it shapes individuals' confidence in their ability to overcome challenges and achieve professional goals (Bandura, 2006). Students with higher self-efficacy are more likely to engage in proactive career exploration, persist in job searching, and make confident occupational decisions (Falco and Summers, 2019; Jackson and Tomlinson, 2020; Wei et al., 2020; Huang and Zhang, 2020; Tajurrahim et al., 2020; Niu et al., 2021; Pekkala and van Zoonen, 2022). As a result, self-efficacy is frequently considered a critical determinant of employability development among young adults. Recent studies suggest that social media may strengthen self-efficacy by providing access to career information, professional networks, and role models. For example, Huang and Zhang (2020) found that social media engagement supports entrepreneurial intention by enhancing self-belief, while Pekkala and van Zoonen (2022) reported that work-related social media use improves communication self-efficacy. Similarly, Niu et al. (2021) demonstrated that self-efficacy mediates the relationship between social media use and information-seeking behavior. However, the influence of social media on self-efficacy is not uniformly positive. Exposure to others' achievements may inspire some students but may also create upward social comparison that reduces confidence among those who perceive themselves as less successful (Ostic et al., 2021; Xu, 2023). This suggests that social media can simultaneously strengthen or weaken self-efficacy depending on students' psychological resilience and interpretation

of online content. Furthermore, emerging research indicates that digital self-efficacy may differ from career decision self-efficacy. Students may feel confident navigating social media platforms but still lack confidence when making real-life career choices. In addition, the impact of social media may vary across platforms. Professional networking platforms may provide career-related learning opportunities, while entertainment-oriented platforms may influence career perceptions in different ways. These differences highlight the importance of distinguishing between types of social media when examining their influence on career decision-making.

#### **2.4. Career Ethics and Digital Career Exploration**

Career ethics has become increasingly important in digital career exploration due to the growing presence of misinformation, exaggerated success narratives, and promotional self-branding practices. Ethical orientation influences how individuals evaluate the credibility of professional content and make responsible career decisions. In social media environments, ethical awareness is particularly important because career information is often presented in persuasive or promotional forms rather than through objective and evidence-based sources (Sun and Zhang, 2021; Gershon, 2024). Although social media can facilitate career development through networking opportunities and professional visibility, it may also encourage distorted perceptions of success. Students may become influenced by superficial indicators such as luxury lifestyles or rapid promotion stories, leading them to prioritize status and financial rewards over personal interests, social responsibility, or long-term professional development (Shi et al., 2023; Xu, 2023). Sun and Zhang (2021) further noted that repeated exposure to social media environments can reinforce behavioral imitation and gradually shape personal values. Algorithmic recommendation systems may intensify these ethical risks by prioritizing attention-grabbing content, which may include unrealistic portrayals of workplace culture or career progression. Consequently, students may unknowingly consume biased information that shapes career decisions based on trends rather than informed evaluation. In this context, career ethics can serve as an important moderating factor that helps reduce the negative influence of misinformation and unrealistic expectations. Students with stronger ethical orientation are more likely to critically evaluate online content, verify sources, and align career decisions with long-term professional

integrity and responsibility (Sun and Zhang, 2021; Lent and Brown, 2020; Islam et al., 2016).

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to provide a comprehensive understanding of how social media influences career choice decisions among undergraduate students. Specifically, a sequential explanatory mixed-method approach was adopted, in which quantitative data were collected and analyzed first, followed by qualitative data collection to further interpret and enrich the quantitative findings. This design is particularly suitable for career development research because it integrates statistical patterns with deeper contextual explanations derived from participant experiences. The quantitative phase examined the relationships among social media use, self-efficacy, career ethics, and career decision-making, while the qualitative phase explored students' perceptions of how social media shaped their career awareness, confidence, and ethical considerations in employment-related decisions.

#### **3.2. Participants and Sampling Procedure**

The target population for this study consisted of undergraduate university students from diverse academic disciplines. A combination of random sampling and stratified sampling techniques was used to ensure adequate representation across key demographic characteristics, including gender, academic year, and field of study. Stratification was implemented to reduce sampling bias and enhance the generalizability of findings across the undergraduate student population.

To be eligible for participation, respondents were required to (1) be enrolled as undergraduate students at the time of the study and (2) actively use at least one social media platform, as the research focused on the career-related influence of social media engagement. Students from various programs, including business, social sciences, science and technology, and humanities, were included to ensure a diverse participant base. For the qualitative phase, participants were purposively selected from the survey respondents based on their willingness to participate in follow-up interviews. This purposive selection aimed to capture variation in social media use intensity and career decision confidence, thereby improving the depth and richness of qualitative insights.

### **3.3. Data Collection Procedure**

#### **3.3.1. Quantitative Data Collection**

Quantitative data was collected using a structured online questionnaire distributed through university communication channels. The survey link was shared through institutional mailing lists and student platforms to maximize accessibility. Participants completed the questionnaire voluntarily, and informed consent was obtained prior to survey participation.

To ensure ethical compliance, respondents were informed that participation was anonymous, responses would remain confidential, and the data would be used solely for academic purposes. No identifying personal information was collected. Participants were also notified that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty.

#### **3.3.2. Qualitative Data Collection**

After the quantitative analysis was completed, a qualitative follow-up phase was conducted using semi-structured interviews. This stage was designed to explore students' interpretations of career-related content on social media, their experiences with career exploration through digital platforms, and the ethical concerns they encountered when consuming online career information. The interview guide included open-ended questions focusing on (1) how social media influenced students' career expectations, (2) how online role models and peer comparison shaped their confidence, and (3) how they evaluated credibility and ethical considerations when making career decisions. Interviews were conducted until sufficient thematic saturation was achieved. Responses were recorded with participant permission and transcribed for analysis.

### **3.4. Measurement Instruments**

All survey measures were adapted from established and validated instruments to ensure reliability and content validity. Items were assessed using a Likert-type response format.

#### **3.4.1. Social Media Use**

Social media use was measured based on participants' frequency of engagement, duration of use, and level of interaction with career-related content. The measurement approach was aligned with the Social Media Activity Questionnaire framework, which captures both active and passive engagement patterns (Ozimek et al., 2023). Items assessed the extent to which students used social

media for career exploration, professional networking, and employment-related information seeking.

#### **3.4.2. Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy was assessed using items based on Bandura's (2006) self-efficacy scale construction framework. The instrument measured students' confidence in their ability to make effective career decisions, overcome employment-related challenges, and achieve desired professional outcomes. The scale reflected career-related capability beliefs and was consistent with social cognitive approaches in career development research.

#### **3.4.3. Career Decision-Making and Career Choice Orientation**

Career decision-making was measured using items adapted from established job choice and career value measurement frameworks. Specifically, the study drew on the motivators of career choice approach used in career development measurement studies (Nadarajah et al., 2022) and the Work Values Questionnaire framework (Avallone et al., 2010). Items focused on decision clarity, perceived readiness, and confidence in selecting a future career path.

#### **3.4.4. Career Ethics Orientation**

Career ethics orientation was measured using items designed to capture ethical sensitivity and responsible career decision-making. The scale included statements reflecting values such as integrity, responsibility, authenticity, and fairness in professional decision-making. Participants indicated the degree to which ethical considerations influenced their career preferences and job selection criteria.

### **3.5. Data Analysis Strategy**

#### **3.5.1. Quantitative Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were analyzed using statistical procedures to examine the proposed research hypotheses. Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize demographic characteristics and the overall patterns of social media use among participants. Correlation analysis was conducted to explore initial associations among key variables. Regression analysis was performed to test the direct effects of social media use on career decision-making. To examine the mediating role of self-efficacy, mediation analysis was conducted using a bootstrapping procedure, which is widely recommended due to its robustness in estimating

indirect effects without relying on normality assumptions. The moderating effect of career ethics was tested using interaction-based regression models. All statistical tests were conducted at a standard significance level, and effect sizes were reported to ensure interpretability of results in line with international publication standards.

### 3.5.2. Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns related to students' experiences with social media and career decision-making. The coding process involved three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. First, open coding was conducted to identify meaningful statements related to social media influence, career perceptions, self-confidence, and ethical considerations. Next, axial coding grouped related codes into broader categories, such as exposure to career success stories, influencer role models, and peer career comparisons. Finally, selective coding refined these categories into key themes explaining how social media influences students' career awareness, confidence, and ethical judgment. In addition, discourse and visual elements of social media content referenced by participants, particularly TikTok career-related videos, were considered. Discourse analysis focused on motivational language, success narratives, and persuasive career messages, while visual analysis examined presentation style, lifestyle imagery, and representations of professional success. To enhance rigor, themes were refined through repeated transcript review and comparison across participants. The qualitative findings were integrated with quantitative results to provide deeper explanations of the statistical relationships identified in the study.

## 4. RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the study using a sequential explanatory mixed-method approach. Quantitative results are reported first, followed by qualitative thematic findings that further explain and contextualize the statistical relationships.

### 4.1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among social media use, work values, self-efficacy, and employment choice. The results are summarized in Table 1. Overall, the findings indicate that college students who reported

higher social media engagement also demonstrated stronger work values and higher levels of self-efficacy, suggesting that digital exposure may contribute to both value development and psychological empowerment.

As shown in Table 1, social media use was significantly and positively associated with work values ( $r = 0.174$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and self-efficacy ( $r = 0.210$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This indicates that increased engagement with social media platforms is linked to stronger beliefs and priorities regarding career outcomes such as job stability, career advancement, and work-life balance, as well as higher confidence in personal capability. In addition, work values were significantly and positively related to self-efficacy ( $r = 0.288$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), suggesting that students who hold stronger work-related priorities are more likely to exhibit higher confidence and psychological readiness in career decision-making.

Furthermore, work values were significantly and positively correlated with employment choice ( $r = 0.321$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This suggests that students who prioritize meaningful work, career growth, and personal development are more likely to make employment decisions aligned with long-term career fulfilment. Collectively, the correlation findings provide preliminary evidence that social media use may influence employment choices through value orientation and self-belief.

**Table 1: Correlation Matrix of Study Variables.**

| Variables         | 1       | 2       | 3 | 4 |
|-------------------|---------|---------|---|---|
| Social Media Use  | 1       |         |   |   |
| Work Values       | 0.174** | 1       |   |   |
| Self-Efficacy     | 0.210** | 0.288** | 1 |   |
| Employment Choice | —       | 0.321** | — | 1 |

### 4.2. Regression Analysis: Social Media Use as a Predictor of Employment Choice

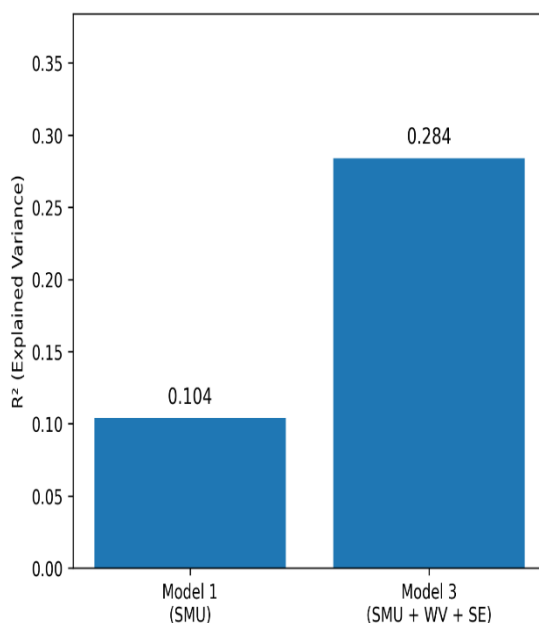
To further examine the influence of social media use on employment choice, hierarchical regression analysis was conducted. Employment choice was entered as the dependent variable, while social media use, work values, and self-efficacy were included as predictors. The results are presented in Table 2. In Model 1, social media use was entered as the sole predictor. The results revealed that social media use had a significant positive effect on employment choice ( $\beta = 0.321$ ,  $t = 5.111$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The model explained 10.4% of the variance in employment choice ( $R^2 = 0.104$ ), indicating that social media engagement plays an important role in shaping students' employment decision-making.

In the final model, after including the psychological factor of self-efficacy, self-efficacy showed a strong and significant positive association with employment choice ( $\beta = 0.371$ ,  $t = 7.511$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The overall explanatory power of the regression model increased substantially, with the final model explaining 28.4% of the total variance in employment choice ( $R^2 = 0.283$ ). Self-efficacy contributed an additional 11.9% of explained variance ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.118$ ), confirming that self-efficacy is a strong predictor of employment decision-making. These findings indicate that while social media use has a direct influence on employment choice, students' self-belief and perceived competence play a key role in strengthening career decision confidence.

**Table 2: Hierarchical Regression Results Predicting Employment Choice.**

| Variables        | Model 1 $\beta$ (t) | Model 2 $\beta$ (t) | Model 3 $\beta$ (t) |
|------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Social Media Use | 0.322** (5.112)     | —                   | —                   |
| Work Values      | —                   | —                   | —                   |
| Self-Efficacy    | —                   | —                   | 0.372** (7.512)     |
| $R^2$            | 0.104               | —                   | 0.284               |
| $\Delta R^2$     | 0.104**             | —                   | 0.119**             |

Figure 1 illustrates the explanatory power ( $R^2$ ) of the regression models predicting employment choice. Model 1 shows that social media use alone explains 10.4% of the variance in employment choice ( $R^2 = 0.104$ ). After including work values and self-efficacy in Model 3, the explained variance increases substantially to 28.4% ( $R^2 = 0.284$ ), indicating improved predictive strength of the full model.



**Figure 1: Regression model predicting employment choice.**

#### 4.3 Mediation Analysis: Indirect Effects of Work Values and Self-Efficacy

To examine the mechanism through which social media use influences employment choice, mediation analysis was performed following the procedure proposed by Zhonglin and Baojuan (2014). Bootstrap mediation testing was conducted using PROCESS Macro Model 6, with 5,000 bootstrap resamples and 95% confidence intervals.

The total effect of social media use on employment choice was significant ( $c = 0.322$ ,  $t = 5.112$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), confirming the suitability of conducting mediation testing. Path coefficient testing further showed that social media use significantly predicted work values ( $a_1 = 0.174$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and self-efficacy ( $a_2 = 0.210$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Additionally, both work values ( $b_1 = 0.288$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and self-efficacy ( $b_2 = 0.371$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) significantly predicted employment choice.

Bootstrap analysis indicated that all indirect effects were statistically significant. Specifically, the mediating effect through work values was 0.0151 (95% CI = [0.0100, 0.0203]), and the mediating effect through self-efficacy was 0.0345 (95% CI = [0.0220, 0.0471]). In addition, the sequential chain mediation effect through work values and self-efficacy was 0.0023 (95% CI = [0.0010, 0.0036]). Since none of the confidence intervals included zero, all three mediation pathways were confirmed to be statistically significant.

Effect decomposition results showed that the direct effect of social media use on employment choice was 0.0720, while the total indirect effect was 0.0231, resulting in a total effect of 0.0951. These findings suggest that social media influences employment choice both directly and indirectly through the development of stronger work values and enhanced self-efficacy. Comparative analysis of the mediation pathways further revealed that the mediating effect of self-efficacy was significantly stronger than that of work values ( $E = 0.0194$ ,  $LLCI = 0.0120$ ,  $ULCI = 0.0266$ ), indicating that self-efficacy represents the most influential psychological mechanism in explaining how social media use contributes to employment choice in table 3.

**Table 3: Bootstrap Mediation Effects of Work Values and Self-Efficacy.**

| Indirect Pathway                      | Effect | 95% CI (LLCI) | 95% CI (ULCI) | Result    |
|---------------------------------------|--------|---------------|---------------|-----------|
| SMU → Work Values → Employment Choice | 0.0151 | 0.0100        | 0.0204        | Supported |

|                                                       |        |        |        |           |
|-------------------------------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|-----------|
| SMU → Self-Efficacy → Employment Choice               | 0.0345 | 0.0220 | 0.0472 | Supported |
| SMU → Work Values → Self-Efficacy → Employment Choice | 0.0024 | 0.0010 | 0.0038 | Supported |
| Direct Effect                                         | 0.0720 | —      | —      | —         |
| Total Indirect Effect                                 | 0.0231 | —      | —      | —         |
| Total Effect                                          | 0.0951 | —      | —      | —         |

#### 4.4 Qualitative Findings: Thematic Analysis

To complement the quantitative findings and provide deeper insights into students' lived experiences, qualitative interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic coding revealed four major themes describing how students perceive the role of social media in shaping career values, self-efficacy, and employment decision-making. These themes strongly support the quantitative results by explaining why and how social media use influences employment choices.

##### Theme 1: Social Media as a Career Awareness and Opportunity Platform

Many participants described social media as a key tool for learning about career opportunities, job requirements, and industry expectations. Students reported that platforms such as LinkedIn, Instagram, and TikTok frequently expose them to career-related content, including job advertisements, recruitment posts, and career guidance materials. This exposure broadened students' career knowledge and helped them identify potential career directions that they had not previously considered. Participants emphasized that social media helped them develop awareness of professional pathways by providing access to real-world experiences shared by others. This aligns with the quantitative finding that social media use is positively associated with work values.

##### Theme 2: Value Formation Through Exposure to Professional Role Models

Another prominent theme was the influence of professional role models and peer success stories. Students reported that observing career achievements, workplace experiences, and lifestyle content on social media contributed to shaping their work values. Participants noted that they increasingly valued job flexibility, career growth, and work-life balance after observing professionals discussing burnout, satisfaction, and personal fulfilment. However, some participants also

expressed concerns that social media can create unrealistic expectations by highlighting only the positive aspects of careers. This theme provides deeper explanation for the statistical association between social media use and work values.

##### Theme 3: Enhanced Confidence and Motivation Through Informal Learning

Students frequently reported that social media increased their confidence by providing learning resources such as resume-writing tips, interview preparation videos, motivational content, and career coaching advice. Many participants stated that exposure to such information made them feel more prepared and capable of making employment decisions. This theme strongly supports the mediation results, which showed that self-efficacy plays a stronger mediating role than work values. Participants described that social media strengthened their belief in their own skills and improved their motivation to pursue employment opportunities.

##### Theme 4: Ethical Concerns and Misinformation in Career Content

A critical theme emerging from the interviews was the issue of credibility and ethics in social media career content. Several participants reported encountering misleading information, unrealistic success narratives, and promotional career advice aimed at selling training programs rather than providing genuine guidance. Students noted that they had to critically evaluate the authenticity of information, particularly regarding salary expectations, job requirements, and career success timelines. This theme supports the study's theoretical argument that ethical awareness influences how students interpret social media information when making career decisions.

**Table 4: Summary of Themes from Qualitative Analysis.**

| Theme   | Description                                                          | Supporting Link to Quantitative Findings   |
|---------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Theme 1 | Social media improves career awareness and access to job information | Explains SMU → Employment Choice           |
| Theme 2 | Role models shape students' work values                              | Explains SMU → Work Values                 |
| Theme 3 | Social media increases confidence and motivation                     | Explains SMU → Self-Efficacy               |
| Theme 4 | Ethical issues and misinformation affect career judgments            | Supports discussion of critical evaluation |

#### 4.5. *Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings*

The mixed-method findings provide consistent evidence that social media plays a meaningful role in shaping students' employment choices. Quantitative results demonstrated significant correlations and regression effects between social media use, work values, self-efficacy, and employment choice. Mediation analysis further confirmed that work values and self-efficacy serve as significant mediators, with self-efficacy representing the strongest mechanism. Qualitative findings reinforced these results by revealing that students use social media not only for career awareness and job searching but also as a motivational learning platform that strengthens their confidence. Additionally, qualitative themes highlighted the ethical and credibility challenges associated with online career information, which suggests the importance of digital literacy and ethical evaluation in career development. Overall, the integration of both datasets supports the conclusion that social media use contributes to employment decision-making through both value formation and psychological empowerment.

#### 4.6. *Discussion*

This study examined how social media influences college students' employment choices by exploring the mediating roles of work values and self-efficacy, as well as the importance of career ethics in the decision-making process. The findings indicate that social media has become an important environment through which students obtain career-related information, form employment preferences, and strengthen confidence in career decision-making. These results support previous research suggesting that social media platforms increasingly function as informal career development environments rather than simply communication or entertainment tools (Ruparel et al., 2020; Ansari and Khan, 2020). The quantitative results showed that social media use was significantly and positively associated with employment choice. This finding aligns with earlier studies indicating that social media expands students' access to employment-related resources such as job postings, recruitment information, professional networking opportunities, and insights into organizational culture (Jue et al., 2009; Ruparel et al., 2020). Such exposure may broaden students' awareness of available career opportunities and encourage them to engage more actively in career planning. By observing labor market trends and

professional expectations through social media, students may develop clearer career goals and greater motivation to prepare for future employment.

However, increased access to information does not necessarily guarantee better career decision-making. Social media content is often curated and may present idealized portrayals of professional success. As Xu (2023) noted, exposure to unrealistic career narratives may distort students' expectations and increase anxiety about career achievement. Therefore, although social media can facilitate career exploration, relying heavily on influencer-driven or promotional content may lead to inaccurate perceptions of professional life. The findings also support the relevance of Social Learning Theory in explaining how social media shapes students' career perceptions. According to Social Learning Theory, individuals learn attitudes and behaviors through observation and imitation of others (Bandura and Walters, 1977). Social media platforms allow students to observe peers, influencers, and professionals sharing career experiences and achievements. Through repeated exposure to such content, students may internalize certain career norms and adjust their expectations of professional success. Consistent with this perspective, the study found that social media use was positively associated with work values. This suggests that students' employment priorities may partly develop through digital observation and comparison. Previous studies similarly highlight that social media encourages knowledge sharing and social comparison, which can influence professional learning and career expectations (Rumjaun and Narod, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, the influence of social media on work values can produce both positive and negative effects. On one hand, exposure to professional role models may encourage ambition, career development, and work-life balance. On the other hand, social media may also promote unrealistic or materialistic career ideals, particularly when content emphasizes rapid success, high-status occupations, or luxury lifestyles. As a result, students may prioritize external recognition or financial rewards rather than intrinsic career satisfaction. This dual influence highlights the need for students to critically evaluate social media content when forming career-related values. Another important finding of this study is that self-efficacy plays a significant mediating role between social media use and employment choice. The mediation analysis showed that self-efficacy had a stronger mediating influence than work values. This supports Bandura's (2006)

argument that self-efficacy is a key psychological factor influencing motivation, persistence, and decision-making. Exposure to career-related content, professional role models, and peer achievements on social media may increase students' confidence in their ability to succeed in their chosen careers. Previous studies similarly suggest that social media engagement can strengthen career confidence and communication self-efficacy (Huang and Zhang, 2020; Pekkala and van Zoonen, 2022).

However, qualitative findings indicate that the self-efficacy developed through social media may not always reflect actual competence. Some students may develop confidence based on motivational content that oversimplifies career success. Therefore, while social media may strengthen students' confidence, it is important that this confidence is supported by real skills and career preparation. The study also highlights the role of career ethics in digital career exploration. Participants expressed concerns about misinformation, biased career narratives, and unrealistic portrayals of success on social media. These findings support previous research suggesting that social media environments may intensify social comparison and create unrealistic expectations about professional life (Sun and Zhang, 2021; Xu, 2023). Career ethics therefore becomes important in helping students critically evaluate career information and make responsible decisions. Overall, the findings suggest several practical implications. Universities should incorporate digital career literacy training into career development programs to help students critically assess social media content. Institutions should also strengthen students' career-related self-efficacy through mentoring, skill development, and employability workshops. In addition, integrating career ethics into career education may help students navigate digital career environments more responsibly and reduce the influence of unrealistic success narratives. Together, these strategies can help students benefit from the opportunities offered by social media while minimizing potential risks in career decision-making.

## 5. Conclusion

This study examined the influence of social media use on college students' employment choices by exploring the mediating roles of work values and self-efficacy, as well as the broader relevance of career ethics in digital career decision-making. The findings indicate that social media use has a significant positive relationship with employment choice, suggesting that social media has become a

meaningful career development platform for students by enhancing their exposure to employment information, professional role models, and career-related learning resources. The results further demonstrate that work values and self-efficacy act as significant mediators in this relationship. In particular, self-efficacy emerged as the strongest mediating mechanism, highlighting that social media influences career decision-making not only by providing access to career information, but also by strengthening students' confidence and psychological empowerment. Additionally, the chain mediation effect suggests that social media may shape employment choices through a sequential process in which work values contribute to the development of self-efficacy, which subsequently enhances employment decision-making.

Despite the positive contributions of social media, the study also emphasizes the importance of career ethics in ensuring responsible and realistic career exploration. Ethical awareness enables students to critically assess online career information, avoid misleading success portrayals, and maintain integrity in professional identity development. Therefore, the study concludes that social media can positively support career decision-making when students possess strong self-efficacy and ethical orientation. The findings provide practical implications for higher education institutions and career development professionals. Universities and career counselors should integrate structured training programs focused on digital career literacy, including the effective use of professional platforms, critical evaluation of online career information, and ethical career decision-making. In addition, interventions aimed at enhancing self-efficacy such as mentoring, career coaching, and employability skill development may strengthen students' confidence and improve employment outcomes.

This study has several limitations. First, the research adopted a cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships among social media use, work values, self-efficacy, and employment choice. Future studies should employ longitudinal designs to examine whether social media engagement predicts long-term career outcomes and employment success. Second, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias or inaccurate reporting of social media engagement. Future research could incorporate objective indicators such as digital usage tracking, behavioral analytics, or platform-based engagement measures. Third, future studies may explore additional mediating

mechanisms such as career adaptability, social support, career identity formation, and psychological well-being. Researchers may also examine differences across platform types, comparing

professional networking platforms (LinkedIn) with entertainment-based platforms (TikTok and Instagram), to better understand how platform characteristics shape career decision-making.

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