Influence of Career Learning Experiences on Perceived Employability: A Social Cognitive Career Perspective

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.101100207

Received: 07 November 2026; Accepted: 12 November 2026; Published: 24 November 2026

ABSTRACT

Perceived employability is a pivotal determinant of graduates' labor-market outcomes, yet the role of learning experiences in shaping it remains insufficiently theorized. Drawing on Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), this conceptual paper proposes a framework in which career exploration and decision learning experiences shape perceived employability indirectly through career decision-making self-efficacy (CDSE). Specifically, the model positions five learning experiences as distal sources that cultivate CDSE, which in turn translates into stronger perceived employability. The framework further clarifies the conceptual boundary between perceived employability and SCCT's outcome expectations, situating perceived employability as a subjective outcome rather than a proximal cognitive antecedent. This paper provides a theoretical lens for career education interventions that seek to enhance high quality employment.

Keywords: career learning experiences, career decision-making self-efficacy, perceived employability, social cognitive career theory, employability

INTRODUCTION

Perceived employability refers to an individual's subjective evaluation of the likelihood of obtaining and maintaining employment, either in the current organization or in the broader labor market (Rothwell & Arnold, 2007; Vanhercke et al., 2014). It is distinct from objective employability, which reflects actual employment status and job quality, and it is increasingly recognized as a proximal psychological resource that shapes career outcomes. Longitudinal evidence indicates that graduates with higher perceived employability subsequently achieve better person–job fit, experience lower career distress, and attain greater subjective career success during their transition to work (Ho et al., 2026). Likewise, optimistic employability perceptions are associated with stronger career self-efficacy and more favorable career outcomes among young adults (Gunawan et al., 2024). In an uncertain and competitive labor market, understanding how employability beliefs are formed is central to career development research and higher education practice (Jung & Li, 2024).

Despite this significance, the antecedents of perceived employability remain under-theorized. Previous research has conceptualized employability as a constellation of skills, competencies, or attributes that students hold (Vanhercke et al., 2014). While other studies have examined proximal cognitive predictors such as self-efficacy and outcome expectations without tracing them back to their origins (Tan, Li, & Yi, 2025). Although learning experiences (e.g., internships) are frequently assumed to enhance employability, few studies have specified the psychological mechanism through which such experiences are translated into employability beliefs. In particular, research on master's students shows that approaches to learning and institutional career support shape perceived employability, but the mediating processes remain largely unspecified (Jung & Li, 2024).

Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) offers a framework to explain these questions. SCCT posits that career-relevant beliefs are formed through four sources: personal mastery, vicarious learning, verbal persuasion, and physiological and affective states (Bandura, 1986; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). Applied to the domain of career exploration and decision-making, these sources are operationalized as career exploration and decision learning experiences (CEDLE), which predict career decision-making self-efficacy (CDSE) and outcome expectations (Lent, Ireland, Penn, Morris, & Sappington, 2017; Ireland & Lent, 2018). However, this learning-experience pathway has rarely been extended to perceived employability.

The present paper addresses two interrelated gaps. First, this study explicates how career learning experiences function as distal antecedents of perceived employability. Second, it identifies CDSE as the central cognitive mediator that bridges these learning experiences and employability beliefs. In doing so, we contribute to the literature in two ways. First, we extend the SCCT career self-management model by linking its learning-experience component to a key employability outcome. Second, we clarify the conceptual positioning of perceived employability within SCCT, distinguishing it from outcome expectations and thereby advancing construct precision. Ultimately, the framework offers educators and policymakers a theoretically grounded rationale for designing career education interventions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework is grounded in SCCT, which extends Bandura's social cognitive theory to the career domain (Bandura, 1986; Lent et al., 1994). SCCT holds that career-related beliefs and behaviors are shaped jointly by self-efficacy (beliefs about one's capability to perform specific tasks) and outcome expectations (beliefs about the consequences of those behaviors). A central tenet of the theory is that these cognitive variables develop from accumulated learning experiences (Lent et al., 1994). Social contextual factors, such as perceived social support, also condition the operation of self-efficacy and outcome expectations on career choices (Lam et al., 2025). The social cognitive model of career self-management further applies this logic to adaptive career behaviors, treating self-efficacy and outcome expectations as proximal predictors of goals, actions, and developmental outcomes (Lent & Brown, 2013).

Within the domain of career exploration and decision-making, learning experiences comprise five sources: personal mastery experience, verbal persuasion, vicarious learning, positive affective states, and negative affective states (Lent et al., 2017; Ireland & Lent, 2018). Personal mastery refers to successful prior attempts at exploring careers and making decisions; verbal persuasion refers to encouragement and feedback from significant others; vicarious learning refers to observations of role models who navigate career choices; and affective states refer to the positive and negative emotions experienced during career activities. Together, these experiences constitute the informational foundation from which career decision-making self-efficacy is constructed.

Career decision-making self-efficacy (CDSE) is defined as individuals' confidence in their ability to successfully perform career decision-making tasks such as self-appraisal, gathering occupational information, goal selection, planning, and problem solving, and has been a cornerstone construct in vocational psychology since its introduction (Taylor & Betz, 1983; Betz, Klein, & Taylor, 1996). Perceived employability, by contrast, is a broader, non-behavior-specific appraisal of one's labor-market prospects (Rothwell & Arnold, 2007; Vanhercke et al., 2014). Consistent with prior applications of the career self-management model, which treat subjective outcomes such as career decidedness as related variables (Lent & Brown, 2013), we conceptualize perceived employability as a subjective outcome situated downstream of self-efficacy rather than as an outcome expectation. This positioning avoids conflating a global employability appraisal with the behavior-specific, conditional consequences beliefs that define outcome expectations in SCCT.

Career Learning Experiences and Perceived Employability

Career learning experiences represent the cumulative information that students acquire through direct practice, social feedback, observation, and emotional engagement with career-related activities (Lent et al., 2017). These experiences are important because they provide students with realistic self-knowledge, labor-market information, and a sense of competence regarding their vocational future. For instance, students who engage in

successful career exploration accumulate mastery experiences that enhance their confidence and clarify their occupational direction, while exposure to role models and constructive feedback broadens their awareness of achievable career paths (Ireland & Lent, 2018). Recent empirical work demonstrates that career learning experiences positively predict learning engagement and academic self-efficacy among Chinese high school students, with self-efficacy and outcome expectations serving as explanatory mechanisms (Liu et al., 2026; Pang et al., 2025). Similarly, work placement learning (an authentic form of career learning experience) is positively associated with perceived employability skills among vocational undergraduates, operating through career decision self-efficacy (Chukwuedo & Ementa, 2022).

In addition, when students accumulate favorable career learning experiences, they gain richer knowledge about their capabilities and the labor market. They also acquire more self-referential information. Together, these resources should lead to more optimistic appraisals of their ability to secure and retain employment. For instance, Jung and Li (2024) demonstrated that students' learning experiences during their programs shape their perceived employability, with institutional career support playing a complementary role. Consistent with SCCT, we therefore propose that:

Proposition 1: Career learning experiences are positively associated with perceived employability.

The Mediating Role of Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy

Although career learning experiences may relate to perceived employability, SCCT suggests that their influence should operates through self-efficacy indirectly. Because learning experiences are distal sources of the cognitive variables that proximally regulate career behavior (Lent & Brown, 2013; Lent et al., 2017). We posit that CDSE is the key psychological bridge in this process.

The linkage between learning experiences and CDSE has been well established in the literature. For example, the five experiential sources jointly account for substantial variance in CDSE, with personal mastery and positive affect showing the strongest relations and negative affect showing an inverse relation (Lent et al., 2017; Ireland & Lent, 2018). These findings are reinforced by recent research demonstrating that career learning experiences promote self-efficacy-related outcomes across Chinese student samples (Liu et al., 2026; Pang et al., 2025). Moreover, domain-specific self-efficacy has been shown to mediate the relations of the five experiential sources to career adaptability (Liu et al., 2024).

Additionally, previous study also supported the relationship between CDSE and perceived employability. Students who are confident in their career decision-making are more likely to regard themselves as employable. The core tasks of self-appraisal, information gathering, and planning are central to pursuing and securing employment. For example, Mahdi and Armalita (2025) reported positive associations between CDSE and self-perceived employability among vocational students. CDSE has been shown to transmit the effects of learning engagement, psychological resilience, and other antecedents to employability among Chinese college students (Zhou et al., 2025; Xiong & Wu, 2025). Moreover, Zhou et al. (2024) reported that CDSE mediate the relation of social support to career decision-making difficulties. Furthermore, general self-efficacy enhances employability through motivational mediators such as achievement motivation and occupational aspiration (Tan et al., 2025), and domain-specific self-efficacy has been argued to be more predictive than general self-efficacy in career contexts (Milledzi et al., 2024). Although some studies report that general self-efficacy does not always directly predict perceived employability (Salisu et al., 2025), this inconsistency highlights the need to conceptualize self-efficacy in domain-specific terms (e.g., CDSE).

Taken together, career learning experiences cultivate CDSE, and CDSE in turn fosters perceived employability. This mediation logic is consistent with the SCCT career self-management model, in which experiential sources predict self-efficacy, and self-efficacy predicts developmental outcomes (Lent & Brown, 2013). It is further echoed by longitudinal study that CDSE mediates the relation between facilitating conditions and career decidedness (Sartori et al., 2024) and that CDSE drives proactive career behaviors over time (Doğanülkü et al., 2026). Therefore, we propose that:

Proposition 2: Career decision-making self-efficacy mediates the positive relationship between career learning experiences and perceived employability.

Conceptual Framework

Based on SCCT (Lent et al., 1994), this study proposes a conceptual framework, as shown in Figure 1. Career learning experiences constitute the independent variable, encompassing five experiential sources: personal mastery, verbal persuasion, vicarious learning, positive affective states, and negative affective states. Perceived employability constitutes the dependent variable. Career decision-making self-efficacy is positioned as the mediator that explains the mechanism through which learning experiences are translated into employability beliefs.

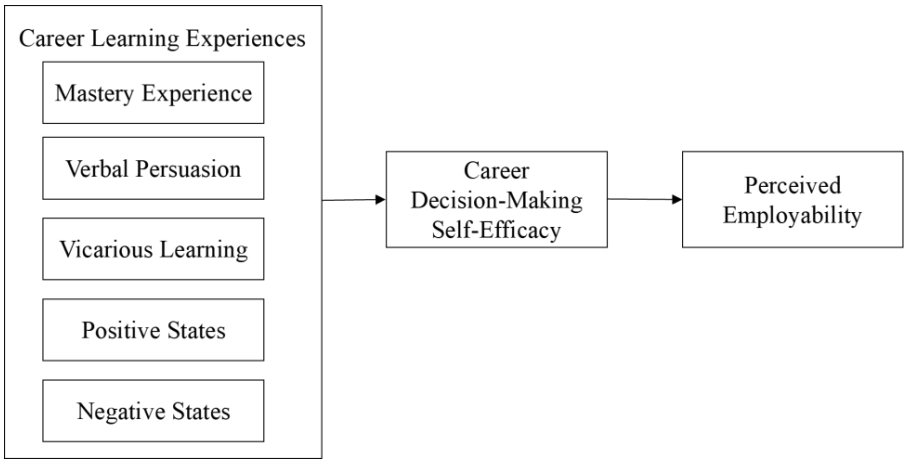


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

CONCLUSION

This conceptual paper addresses the need to understand how students' career learning experiences are translated into perceived employability within the uncertain labor market. Grounded in Social Cognitive Career Theory, the proposed framework illuminates the pathway from experiential sources to employability beliefs by identifying career decision-making self-efficacy as the central cognitive bridge. In doing so, it extends the SCCT career self-management model beyond traditional decisional outcomes to employability, and it clarifies the conceptual positioning of perceived employability as a subjective outcome rather than an outcome expectation.

The framework carries practical implications for higher education and career services. If perceived employability is cultivated through domain-specific self-efficacy, which in turn derives from concrete learning experiences, then interventions should prioritize the deliberate design of mastery opportunities, credible role models, constructive feedback, and emotionally supportive career activities. Educators should embed authentic career exploration and decision-making experiences into curricula so that students accumulate the efficacy information that underpins durable employability.

Future research should test the proposed model empirically using longitudinal designs. That can disentangle the temporal ordering of learning experiences, CDSE, and perceived employability. Subsequent work may also examine boundary conditions, such as labor-market conditions, socioeconomic background, and institutional career support, that moderate the translation of self-efficacy into employability beliefs. Such efforts would further refine the framework and strengthen its utility for evidence-based career education policy.

Funding

The work was supported by Guangdong University of Foreign Studies South China Business College (26-001B).

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