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Moderated Mediating Effect of Career Values in the Impact of Self-Efficacy on Career Preparation Behavior Through Career Maturity: Focused on Airline Service Major Students

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. Self-efficacy significantly influences the career maturity of students majoring in airline service. Furthermore, career maturity exerts a positive effect on their career preparation behavior. Notably, career values play a critical role in moderating the mediating path of career maturity between self-efficacy and career preparation behavior. This study empirically verified the moderated mediation effect of career values, demonstrating that the mediating influence of career maturity within the link between self-efficacy and career preparation behavior varies depending on the level of career values.

Methods. The participants in this study consisted of 254 students majoring in airline service in an university. The sample included freshmen (33.1%), sophomores (24.3.0%), juniors (21.3%), and seniors (21.3%). Data were analyzed using SPSS Win version 21.0 to perform frequency analyses, reliability testing, and correlation analysis. For the moderated mediation analysis, Model 14 of the PROCESS macro version 4.3 was employed as the primary statistical method.

Results. First, self-efficacy exerted a significant positive influence on both career maturity ($\beta = .210$, $p < .001$) and career preparation behavior ($\beta = .193$, $p < .01$). Career maturity was also found to have a significant positive impact on career preparation behavior ($\beta = 1.277$, $p < .001$). Notably, the interaction between career maturity and career values yielded a significant effect on career preparation behavior ($\beta = -.221$, $p < .05$), suggesting a moderation effect. Second, the conditional indirect effects of self-efficacy on career preparation behavior via career maturity were statistically significant across all levels—low, middle, and high—of career values ($p < .001$). Consequently, these results empirically support the moderated mediation effect of career values within the hypothesized model.

Conclusions. This study empirically confirmed that self-efficacy exerts a significant positive influence on career preparation behavior, specifically through the mediating mechanism of career maturity. These findings underscore the necessity of fostering and reinforcing students' career values as a strategic approach to enhancing both career maturity and career preparation behavior among airline service majors.

KEYWORDS

self-efficacy, career maturity, career values, career preparation behavior, airline service major students

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INTRODUCTION

UNESCO-International Bureau of Education focused on the assessment of socio-emotional skills in students. Within this framework, self-efficacy is addressed through constructs such as: confidence in one's abilities, positive self-perception, and beliefs about one's capacity to complete tasks and overcome challenges. The report emphasizes that students' socio-emotional skills—including self-efficacy beliefs—play a significant role in academic achievement, career related behavior, and long-term development [1]. Students often begin thinking about their careers from the moment they enter university and continue preparing even after graduation. As a result, the overall duration of career preparation has steadily increased. In today's career environment, students must maintain sustained interest in their professional goals and engage in continuous efforts toward achieving them [2]. Self-efficacy, as a core psychological belief, has gained increasing importance in helping students cope with various challenges encountered during the process of preparing for their future careers [3].

Career preparation behavior refers to the range of actions undertaken to facilitate rational and appropriate career decision-making, as well as the behaviors required to implement decisions once they have been made. It encompasses self-assessment processes, including the evaluation of one's abilities, aptitudes, interests, and personality traits; the collection of information related to the world of work; and preparatory activities necessary for entry into a desired occupation. Such activities include acquiring relevant equipment, materials, and instructional resources, as well as investing time and effort in utilizing essential tools and resources needed to achieve career goals [4]. Previous studies found self-efficacy is one of key variables influencing the level of career preparation behavior. Higher levels of self-efficacy among university students enhance expectations regarding successful behavioral outcomes and increase motivation to engage in proactive career-related actions [5].

Based on the above studies and their applicability to practical matters, it is necessary to continue exploring the link between self-efficacy and career preparation behavior. Thus, in this study, career maturity was applied as a mediating variable whereas career values was used as the moderating variable to elucidate the elaborate mechanism between self-efficacy and career preparation behavior. Career maturity can be defined as the extent to which an individual is psychologically prepared to successfully navigate developmental tasks related to career progression. It represents one's capacity for effective career decision-making, encompassing the knowledge base, attitudinal orientation, and competencies required for career choice and planning, as well as the individual's level of self-understanding [6]. However, few studies have verified the mediating effect of career maturity between self-efficacy and career preparation behavior in the airline service major. Seo [7] found that career maturity were increased by self-efficacy, which increased career preparation behavior. In other words, career maturity can serve as a mediator between self-efficacy and career preparation behavior. It can therefore be inferred that career maturity is a positive variable that links the two variables in this study.

Career values refer to an individual's beliefs, perceptions, and evaluative standards regarding career and work. Among university students, career values are formed and continuously reshaped through the process of selecting a major and engaging in academic experiences within higher education. Through learning and socialization, students develop preferences for careers in which they perceive opportunities to utilize their abilities, exert social influence, or pursue work they consider meaningful and valuable [8]. Accordingly, examining career values as a factor influencing career maturity—an indicator of students' level of understanding and preparedness regarding their career development—holds significant implications [9]. Such research can contribute to a deeper understanding of university students' career maturity processes and may provide practical insights into promoting more effective career preparation behavior. Career values could be a more fundamental belief in airline service major students, and that it moderates the degree or direction of the causal relationship between career maturity and career preparation behavior. Thus, students with high career values would reenforce the effect of more career maturity that results in their high career preparation behavior [10].

The purpose of the current study is to identify the moderated mediation effect of career values on the relationship between self-efficacy and career preparation behavior, specifically focusing on the mediating role of career maturity. Given the results of the studies referenced above, this study is expected to provide a model wherein career values can be used to improve the relationship between airline service major students' career maturity and career preparation behavior.

THEORECTICAL BACKGROUND

1. Relationship between self-efficacy and career preparation behavior

Self-efficacy, originally introduced by psychologist Albert Bandura, refers to an individual's conviction in their capacity to organize and carry out the actions required to manage situations effectively and attain specific goals [11]. Individuals who possess high levels of self-efficacy tend to believe that they can accomplish challenging objectives when they commit sufficient effort and determination. Because self-efficacy is task-specific in nature, it directly influences corresponding behaviors and performance outcomes [2]. Building on this perspective, prior research conceptualized self-efficacy as undergraduates' confidence in their capacity to carry out behaviors related to career development. Students with high self-efficacy demonstrate stronger confidence in managing career-related tasks and believe in their ability to achieve favorable outcomes in the career domain [12].

Career preparation behavior encompasses the concrete and goal-directed activities individuals undertake to attain their desired careers, including the systematic exploration and acquisition of information relevant to their vocational objectives. Over the extended course of engaging in these preparatory efforts, students who possess high levels of self-efficacy are more likely to exhibit persistent effort and sustained commitment toward the realization of their career goals [13]. Prior research has consistently identified self-efficacy as a significant determinant of career preparation behavior, demonstrating its positive influence on students' proactive engagement in career-related activities. Min [14] examined that self-efficacy has a positive impact on the career preparation behavior using data of 230 students in majoring in hotel & tourism. Choi & Cho [15] also investigated that self-efficacy have a significant effect on improving 240 female university students' career preparation behavior. In other words, higher self-efficacy was associated with higher career preparation behavior. Thus, it can be assumed that airline service student's self-efficacy will increase their career preparation behavior in this study.

2. The mediating effect of career maturity

Career maturity can be conceptualized as an indicator of an individual's level of career development and readiness to make informed career decisions [16]. A central component of career maturity involves the establishment of clear, rational, and well-structured career goals, along with systematic and realistic career planning [17]. To understand career maturity, it is necessary to examine individuals' underlying beliefs. Empirical research indicates that self-efficacy accounts for approximately 40% of the variance in career maturity, identifying it as a significant predictor. This suggests that the attitudes and behaviors individuals adopt in pursuit of career achievement are largely influenced by their level of self-efficacy. [18]. The study conducted by Moon [19] identified a significant correlation between self-efficacy and career maturity among college students.

Although there have been few studies showing that career maturity mediates self-efficacy and career preparation behavior, previous research on the relationship between career maturity and student' career preparation has suggested that career maturity is regarded as a critical indicator in assessing students' potential for career success. Empirical findings suggest that career maturity significantly predicts the likelihood of effective career preparation [20]. Collectively, prior research demonstrates that airline service major students with the higher levels of self-efficacy tend to explore career planning and to develop the attitudes and competencies necessary, which leads them to actively engage in career preparation behaviors.

Based on these prior results, it can be predicted in this study that self-efficacy may increase career preparation behavior through career maturity in addition to the direct impact between self-efficacy and career preparation behavior.

3. Moderating effect of career values

Students majoring in airline service as the target population of this study, typically enter university with a clearly established career goal of becoming flight attendant in the airlines. This

career aspiration reflects not merely an academic choice but a decision grounded in their personal career values and vocational beliefs. The airline service profession requires direct customer interaction, global competence, and professional expertise in safety and service performance; these characteristics exert a substantial influence on the formation of students' career values [21]. Considering these attributes, airline service majors are likely to develop well-defined career value systems based on a firm awareness of their career goals, which, in turn, is expected to function as a contributing factor in enhancing their career preparation behavior.

Previous studies have indicated that career values of university students majoring in nursing has a positive effect on career preparation behavior. The study [22] examined the impact of career values on career preparation behavior among nursing students. The findings confirmed that higher levels of career values are associated with increased levels of career preparation behavior. A study examining the relationship between career values and career maturity reported that both extrinsic and intrinsic career values significantly influence the level of career maturity. Specifically, extrinsic values such as achievement, creativity, and intellectual stimulation, as well as intrinsic values including collegial relationships, economic rewards, job stability, and work environment, were found to exert significant effects on career maturity [21].

There have been few studies verifying the moderating effect of career values in the relationship between career maturity and career preparation behavior. Thus, based on the literature review above, this study aims to verify the moderating effect of career values between career maturity and career preparation behavior. It also aims to identify whether career values moderates the mediating effects of career maturity in the link between self-efficacy and career preparation behavior.

RESEARCH METHODS

1. Research model

The research model, presented in Figure 1, was developed to examine the moderated mediating effect (conditional indirect effect) wherein career values moderated the path of self-efficacy → career maturity → career preparation behavior.

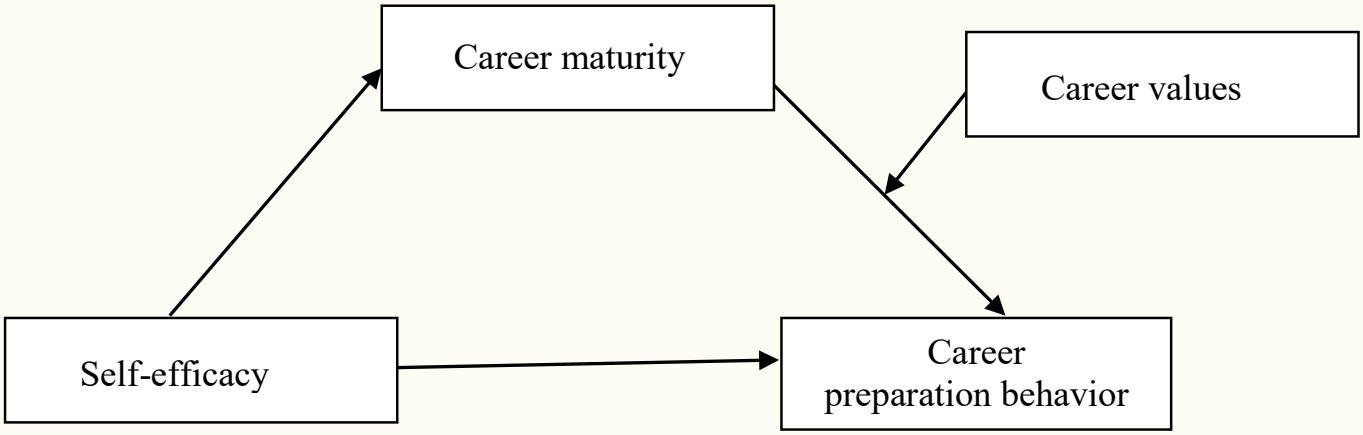


Figure 1 Conceptualized research model

2. Data Collection and Samples

Data were collected through an online survey between April 12 and May 9, 2026. Upon obtaining informed consent, a total of 254 airline service majors completed the survey. Following data collection, frequency analyses were conducted to summarize the demographic characteristics of the sample. The gender distribution was 92.1% female and 7.9% male, closely reflecting the actual gender ratio of flight attendants in South Korea [23]. The participants were freshmen (33.1%), sophomores (24.3.0%), juniors (21.3%), and seniors (21.3%).

3. Research tools

3.1. Self-efficacy

This study employed the unidimensional self-efficacy measure adapted from Jeon [2], comprising three items that assess students' belief in their ability to act in ways necessary to achieve their goals. Participants completed a self-report questionnaire in which each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Higher total scores indicated greater levels of self-efficacy. The internal consistency of the self-efficacy scale, as assessed by Cronbach's α, was .867.

3.2. Career maturity

Recent studies have utilized a self-rated career maturity scale among airline service students [18]. Accordingly, this study adopted a unidimensional, five-item measure from Park [21]. Participants rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater career maturity. The scale demonstrated strong internal consistency (Cronbach's α = .808).

3.3. Career values

Career values was measured using Park's instrument [21] which was modified for students majoring in airline service. The scale consists of two dimensions: (1)intrinsic values, which relate to the inherent satisfaction derived from the career itself, and (2)extrinsic values, which focus on the external rewards gained through the career, including financial stability and working conditions. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all; 5 = very much). Cronbach's α for career values was .735.

3.4. Career preparation behavior

Recent research has assessed career preparation behaviors among students majoring in airline service using a standardized measurement instrument [23]. The present study utilized a five-item, single-factor scale adapted from Park & Jeon [24]. Responses were collected through a self-administered questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale, with options ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicate greater engagement in activities related to career preparation. The internal consistency reliability of the scale in this study, as measured by Cronbach's α, was .749.

4. Data analysis

Data were analyzed using two primary statistical software packages. First, SPSS for Windows (version 21.0) was used for the frequency analyses, reliability testing, and Pearson's correlation coefficients. Second, mediation and moderation analyses were performed using Hayes' PROCESS macro (version 4.3). Moderated mediation effects were tested employing a bias-corrected bootstrap method (5,000 resamples) with a 95% confidence interval, estimating conditional effects at the mean and at one standard deviation above and below the mean (M, M ± SD) [25].

RESULTS

1. Correlation analysis

Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted as shown in Table 1. Self-efficacy was positively correlated with career maturity ($r = .337$, $p<.01$), and it was positively associated with career preparation behavior ($r = .529$, $p < .01$). There was a positive correlation between self-efficacy and

career values (r = .519, p < .01). Career maturity had a positive correlation with career preparation behavior (r = .600, p<.01), and it had a positive correlation with career values (r = .360, p<.01). There was a positive correlation between career values and career preparation behavior (r = .436, p < .01). Career maturity had an average value of 4.5701, which was the highest among the variables.

Table 1 Correlations and descriptive statistics

	Self-efficacy	Career maturity	Career values	Career preparation behavior	M	SD
Self-efficacy	1				3.9134	.83323
Career maturity	.337**	1			4.5701	.46307
Career values	.519**	.360**	1		3.7244	.65700
Career preparation behavior	.529**	.600**	.436**	1	4.3984	.54024

**p < .01

2. Moderated mediating effect of career values

The procedure of Model 14 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS created by Hayes [25] was adapted to analyze whether career values moderates the mediating effect of career maturity on the link between career maturity and career preparation behavior.

As shown in Table 2, self-efficacy had a significant positive effect on career maturity (β= .2096, p= .0000), and career maturity had a significant positive effect on career preparation behavior (β= 1.2771, p = .0001), thus showing that career maturity played a mediating role in the link between self-efficacy and career preparation behavior. The interaction term between career maturity and career values had a significant effect on career preparation behavior (β= -.2255, p = .0145), and the increase in R^2 (ΔR^2 = .0124, p = .0145) according to the interaction term was also significant; therefore, it was found that career values moderated the relationship between career maturity and career preparation behavior.

Table 2 Analysis of the moderated mediation effect of career values on the relationship among self-efficacy, career maturity, and career preparation behavior

Mediating variable model (DV: Career Maturity)						
Variables	B	SE	t value	p	LLCI*	ULCI**
Constant	3.7500	.1297	28.9071	.0000	3.4945	4.0055
Self-efficacy	.2096	.0324	6.4627	.0000	.1457	.2734
Dependent variable model (DV: Career preparation behavior)						
Variables	B	SE	t value	p	LLCI*	ULCI**
Constant	-2.6698	1.4723	-1.8133	.0710	-5.5695	.2300
Self-efficacy	.1931	.0354	5.4597	.0000	.1234	.2628
Career maturity	1.2771	.3139	4.0686	.0001	.6589	1.8953
Career values	1.1463	.4274	2.6822	.0078	.3046	1.9880
Career maturity × career values	-.2214	.0900	-2.4615	.0145	-.3986	-.0443
Test of highest order unconditional interaction						

1. Interaction term	R^2	F	p
Career maturity × Career values	.0124	6.0588	.0145
Conditional effects of career maturity at values of career values			

Career values	Effect	se	t	p	LLCI*	ULCI**
30674	.5979	.0667	8.9591	.0000	.4664	.7293
3.7244	.4524	.0641	7.0605	.0000	.3262	.5786
4.3814	.3069	.1037	2.9610	.0034	.1028	.5111
Conditional effects of career maturity at values of career values						
Career values	Effect	se	t	p	LLCI*	ULCI**
3.0500	.6017	.0675	8.9132	.0000	.4688	.7347
3.2125	.5657	.0614	9.2073	.0000	.4447	.6868
			..			
4.6566	.2460	.1249	1.9695	.0500	.0000	.4920
4.6750	.2419	.1264	1.9144	.0567	-.0070	.4908

Figure 2 illustrates the visualization of the conditional effect of career maturity, categorized into low, middle, and high levels of career values. The results indicate that career preparation behavior increases in direct proportion to the enhancement of career maturity. Specifically, the positive impact of career maturity on career preparation behavior was most pronounced in the group with low career values (3.0674). This upward trend was relatively less steep for the groups with middle (3.7244) and high (4.3814) career values. These findings suggest that for students with lower career values, there is substantial potential for educational intervention to effectively enhance both their career maturity and subsequent career preparation behavior.

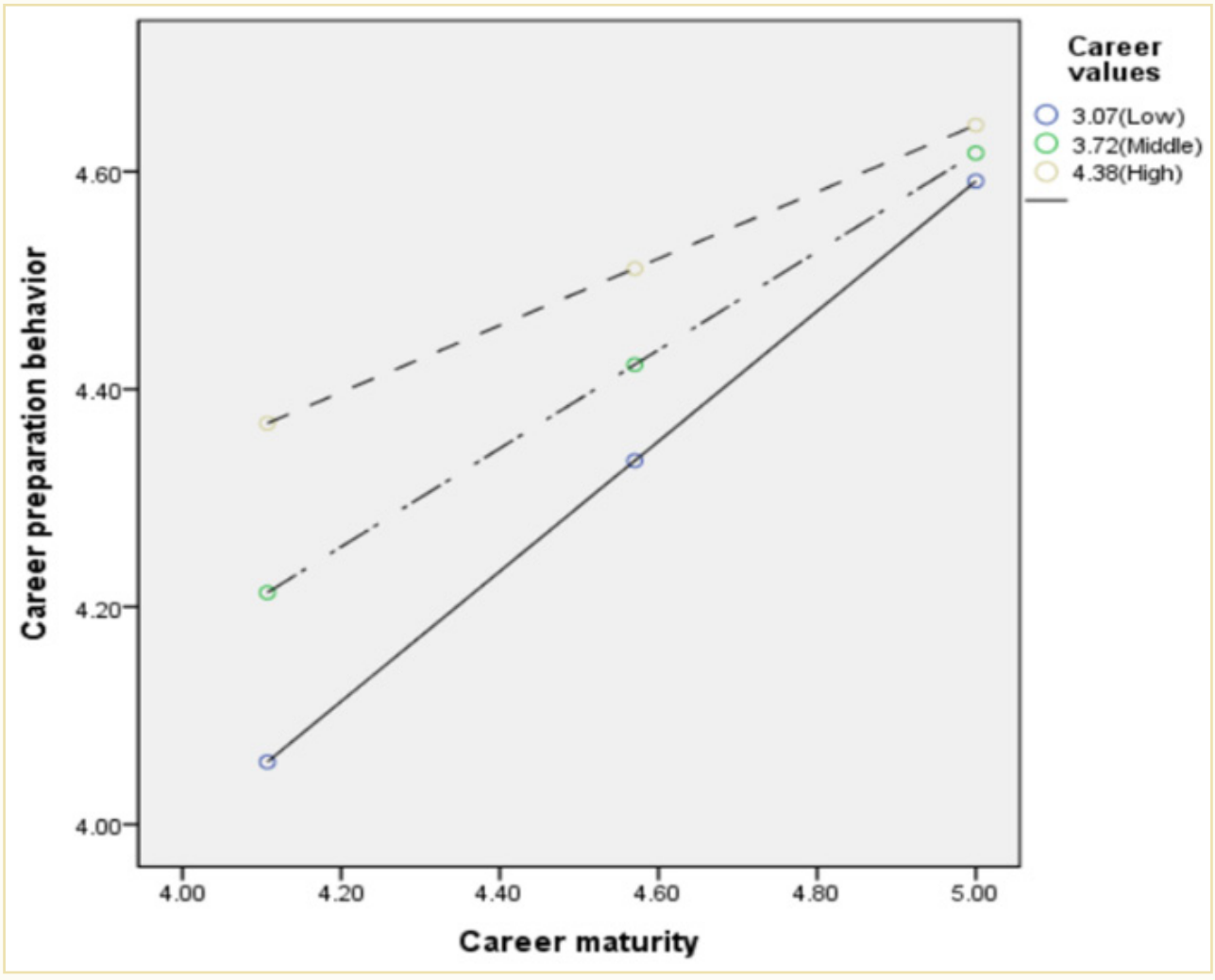


Figure 2 The moderating effect of career values on the relationship between career maturity and career preparation behavior

Table 3 shows the results of analyzing the direct effect and conditional indirect effect on the path from self-efficacy to career preparation behavior. The direct effect between self-efficacy and career preparation behavior was .1931 (.1234 ~ .2628), which was significant because 0 was not included between the bootstrap lower limit (BootLLCI) and the upper limit (BootULCI) within the 95% confidence interval. The conditional indirect effect was significant because 0 was not included between the lower and upper bounds of bootstrap within the 95% confidence interval at 3.0674 (.1253, .0643~ .1984), 3.7244 (.0948, .0529 ~.1466) and 4.3814 (.0643, .0298 ~.1082) when career values were in the low, middle and high group. Therefore, the moderated mediating effect was verified. Also, the moderated mediating index was -.0464 (-.0923 ~ -.0085), which was significant. Based on the results, the moderated mediating effect of career values on the path from self-efficacy to career preparation behavior is verified.

Table 3 Direct effect and conditional effects of analysis

Direct effect (self-efficacy → career preparation behavior)					
Effect	se	t	p	BootLLCI*	BootULCI**
.1931	.0354	5.4597	.0000	.1234	.2628
Conditional indirect effects (self-efficacy → career maturity → career preparation behavior)					
Career values	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI*	BootULCI**	
3.0674	.1253	.0337	.0643	.1984	
3.7244	.0948	.0239	.0529	.1466	
4.3814	.0643	.0198	.0298	.1082	
Index of moderated mediation					
Career values	Index	BootSE	BootLLCI*	BootULCI**	
	-.0464	.0212	-.0923	-.0085	

*LLCI = The lower bound of the indirect effect within the 95% confidence interval

**ULCI = The upper bound of the indirect effect within the 95% confidence interval

DISCUSSION

The results of this study yield important implications for both academic and practical application. From a theoretical standpoint, earlier research has tended to emphasize the direct association between self-efficacy and career preparation behaviors among students, frequently analyzing mediating or moderating variables separately. This study employed a comprehensive analytical framework that integrates moderated mediation, enabling a more nuanced examination of the underlying processes connecting these constructs. By adopting this integrative approach, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how these factors interact and offers meaningful guidance for educational practice, particularly in the development of targeted programs aimed at strengthening career preparation behavior through the enhancement of self-efficacy, career maturity, and career-related values.

From a practical perspective, students with career values are more likely to establish specific career goals by developing a thorough understanding of the profession of flight attendant and by considering their own aptitudes and interests. Therefore, in order to promote proactive career preparation behavior among airline service major students, it is important to foster career values that enables them to set realistic and purposeful career goals [26]. Cho & Park [27] suggested that it would be effective to provide a structured career development roadmap that reflects key career characteristics of the aviation industry—such as competitive compensation, opportunities for promotion, and an international working environment to enhance students' career values. Additionally, implementing programs that analyze successful career cases in global airlines and examine specific job roles and competencies would further support students' career preparation behavior.

These findings suggest that career values functions as a key mechanism in the context of career education. Since, the establishment of career values represents a significant developmental task across the human lifespan, the clarification of career values is a prerequisite for individuals to make career decisions, develop confidence in their choices, and engage in behaviors aimed at preparing for their future careers [29]. According to Moon & Park's study [30], career preparation behavior tends to increase significantly as students advance from lower to upper academic years due to the growing immediacy of graduation and employment, postponing preparation until the senior year may result in insufficient readiness for career entry. Therefore, career guidance at the university level should aim to promote career preparation behaviors beginning in the early years of undergraduate education.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this study is to explore the conditional indirect effect of self-efficacy on career preparation behavior via career maturity, contingent on levels of career values. Informed by prior research, the proposed model posits that career values amplifies the positive relationship between career maturity and career preparation behavior among students in airline service major. The results of the study are as follows.

First, the results of the correlation analysis among the key variables revealed that self-efficacy was positively associated with both career maturity and career preparation behavior. Additionally, a significant positive correlation was observed between career maturity and career preparation behavior. Career values also demonstrated positive correlations with self-efficacy, career maturity, and career preparation behavior. Second, career maturity was found to mediate the relationship between self-efficacy and career preparation behavior.

Third, career values was found to moderate the relationship between career maturity and career preparation behavior. Specifically, while higher levels of career maturity among airline service majors were generally associated with stronger career preparation behavior, this relationship was contingent upon the level of career values. Their findings indicated that enhancing students' carer maturity through self-efficacy requires more than the provision of conventional career education; rather, it necessitates educational approaches designed to cultivate and strengthen well-defined career value programs to pursue their aptitude, interest, and the sense of fulfillment derived from the profession itself [28].

Fourth, the study confirmed a moderated mediation effect of career values in the indirect relationship between self-efficacy and career preparation behavior via career maturity. That is, the strength of the indirect effect of self-efficacy on career preparation behavior through career maturity varied according to the degree of career values. As career values increased, the positive influence of career on career preparation behavior became more pronounced.

Despite its contributions, this research has some limitations that point to avenues for further investigation. First, because the study relied on a quantitative design using self-administered online surveys, the findings may have been influenced by common method bias. In particular, issues such as inattentive responding or the tendency to provide socially desirable answers cannot be entirely ruled out. Future research would benefit from incorporating qualitative methodologies—such as in-depth interviews with participants and relevant individuals in their contexts—to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships among the key variables.

Second, the participants were drawn from a single four-year university, which may limit the extent to which the results can be generalized to broader populations. Replication studies involving more diverse institutions and demographic groups are needed to enhance external validity.

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Aeeun Jeon: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing, Visualization, Funding acquisition

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