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A Systematic Literature Review of Psychological Factors Influencing Future Anxiety Among Emerging Adults

Harvi Wahyu Putriadi¹, Siti Maimunah²

¹Master of Psychology, Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, Malang, Indonesia, harviwahyu@webmail.umm.ac.id

²Master of Psychology, Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, Malang, Indonesia, maimunah@umm.ac.id

Corresponding Author: harviwahyu@webmail.umm.ac.id¹

Abstract: Future anxiety is an emotional condition characterized by fear, doubt, and worry regarding the possibility of negative events occurring in the future. This condition is commonly experienced by emerging adults, particularly those aged 20–29 years, as they encounter various developmental demands and uncertainties related to education, career, and social roles. Given its substantial impact on mental well-being, identifying the psychological factors that influence future anxiety is essential. This study aims to identify, classify, and synthesize the psychological factors associated with future anxiety among emerging adults. The study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method following the PRISMA guidelines. Literature searches were conducted through reputable international databases, namely ScienceDirect, MDPI, Frontiers, and Springer, with inclusion criteria limited to original research articles published between 2021 and 2026. A total of 20 articles were analyzed using thematic mapping techniques. The findings indicate that future anxiety is influenced by both cognitive-dispositional factors and macro-environmental factors. Risk factors include intolerance of uncertainty, pessimism, depressive symptoms, career-related stress, social isolation, low sense of belonging, helicopter parenting, and concerns regarding global crises. In contrast, protective factors include resilience, self-efficacy, and adaptive emotion regulation. These findings highlight the importance of strengthening internal psychological resources through interventions focused on emotion regulation, enhancement of self-efficacy, and support for career transition processes.

Keywords: Emerging Adulthood, Self-Efficacy, Future Anxiety, Intolerance of Uncertainty, Emotion Regulation, Resilience.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary world is marked by significant uncertainty, where social changes and economic volatility occur at an unprecedented pace (Jung et al., 2025). Current global conditions, characterized by post-pandemic recovery, climate crises, and geopolitical conflicts, have created an environment that has drastically deteriorated the mental health of

younger generations (Haag et al., 2026). Epidemiological studies indicate that emerging adulthood represents a critical developmental period with the highest onset of mental disorders, during which the majority of clinical diagnoses begin to emerge around the age of 24 years (Rice et al., 2021).

This uncertainty regarding the future manifests in a psychological phenomenon known as future anxiety. Future anxiety is defined as an emotional state dominated by fear, doubt, and worry concerning potential negative changes or unfavorable outcomes in one's distant personal future (Zaleski, 1996). Cognitively, future anxiety involves anticipatory processes centered on worst-case scenarios, in which negative thoughts outweigh hope and positive expectations (Dalmış et al., 2025). This psychological distress is often exacerbated by feelings of helplessness and the perceived loss of control over one's life trajectory (Sarac & Yıldız, 2025).

Among emerging adults, uncertainty frequently culminates in heightened future anxiety. This condition is characterized by fear, hesitation, and pessimistic perspectives, in which negative expectations predominate over optimism (Dalmış et al., 2025). From a cognitive perspective, future anxiety entails the anticipation of adverse scenarios across various domains of life, including career, health, and economic stability (Sarac & Yıldız, 2025).

Internal psychological factors play a significant role in determining the level of future anxiety experienced by individuals. Theoretically, internal psychological conditions such as internalizing symptoms, including depression and stress, are positively associated with future anxiety. Individuals experiencing depression tend to exhibit a negative cognitive triad, encompassing unfavorable views of the self, the world, and the future, which further intensifies anxiety (Beck et al., 1987). Previous studies have shown that future anxiety often increases substantially during the final years of university education, when students begin to worry about employment opportunities and their future prospects (Rabei et al., 2020).

One of the primary psychological predictors that may mitigate future anxiety is self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to individuals' beliefs in their capabilities to control events affecting their lives (Bandura, 2012). Such beliefs provide individuals with confidence in dealing with difficulties, thereby reducing perceived threats related to the future. Conversely, low self-efficacy is hypothesized to increase fear of the future, which may subsequently trigger depressive symptoms.

In addition to self-efficacy, personality traits such as optimism and pessimism also influence how emerging adults perceive the future. Optimism refers to positive expectations regarding future outcomes, whereas pessimism involves predominantly negative expectations (Scheier & Carver, 1985). Optimistic individuals have been found to possess higher levels of psychological well-being and are better able to cope with the adverse effects of future anxiety through persistence in pursuing goals (Öztekin, 2025). In contrast, elevated future anxiety may reinforce pessimistic thinking patterns that hinder individuals' ability to focus and establish healthy social relationships (Öztekin, 2025).

Emotion regulation abilities and psychological flexibility also constitute key components in maintaining the mental health of emerging adults. Psychological flexibility enables individuals to remain open to present experiences and to act in accordance with personal values despite challenging circumstances (Gloster et al., 2021). University students with greater psychological flexibility tend to manage academic stress and career-related anxiety more effectively (Öztekin et al., 2025). Furthermore, the use of adaptive emotion regulation strategies, such as cognitive reappraisal, has been shown to reduce the relationship between future anxiety and clinical stress symptoms (Öztekin et al., 2025).

Intolerance of uncertainty represents another dispositional factor strongly associated with the emergence of future anxiety. It is conceptualized as an individual's tendency to perceive uncertain or ambiguous situations as distressing and uncomfortable (Freeston et al., 2020).

Intolerance of uncertainty functions as a cognitive bias that promotes maladaptive representations of the future and increases unproductive worry (Regnoli et al., 2024). Within the context of emerging adulthood, the inability to tolerate uncertainty may inhibit identity exploration and exacerbate psychological distress (Regnoli et al., 2024).

Sense of belonging and social support also contribute significantly to individuals' emotional stability. Sense of belonging is considered a fundamental psychological need which, when fulfilled, serves as a strong foundation for mental health (Sarac & Yıldız, 2025). The absence of belongingness may intensify feelings of isolation and alienation, thereby triggering anxiety concerning future life circumstances (Sarac & Yıldız, 2025). In addition, psychological resilience enables emerging adults to perceive stressors not as obstacles, but as challenges that provide opportunities for personal growth (Dalmış et al., 2025).

Global conditions and systemic issues further impose additional pressure on today's emerging adults. Concerns regarding climate change, geopolitical conflicts such as war, and the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have generated persistent uncertainty (Haag et al., 2026). Fear of war, for example, has been found to indirectly affect the mental health of emerging adults through increased future anxiety (Regnoli et al., 2024). When combined with educational and career-related pressures, these systemic stressors create complex psychological burdens for individuals transitioning into adulthood (Sun, 2026).

Career stress, in particular, has become a primary domain in which future anxiety manifests intensely among emerging adults pursuing higher education. Uncertainty regarding employability, self-competence, and the transition into professional life frequently creates substantial psychological strain (Sun, 2026). Failure to achieve independence and developmental goals in career domains may give rise to chronic stress (Arnett, 2014). Research has demonstrated that individuals experiencing high levels of career anxiety are more likely to report lower subjective well-being (Sun, 2026).

Considering the complexity of interactions among these psychological factors, a systematic literature review is necessary to map the primary predictors of future anxiety. Understanding these determinants is essential for assisting mental health practitioners and policymakers in designing developmentally sensitive interventions (Jung et al., 2025). Therefore, this study aims to synthesize the existing literature in order to provide a holistic understanding of the psychological factors influencing future anxiety (Jung et al., 2025). By identifying appropriate intervention targets, it is expected that the psychological burden experienced by emerging adults can be minimized, thereby contributing to a healthier and more prosperous society (Szota et al., 2024).

METHOD

Research Method

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines. This approach was selected to ensure that the process of collecting and analyzing literature regarding the psychological factors influencing future anxiety among emerging adults was conducted in a transparent, systematic, and accountable manner. The systematic approach aimed to synthesize scientific findings concerning how internal variables, such as self-efficacy, psychological resilience, and emotion regulation, interact with external factors, including career pressure and global conditions, in shaping individuals' future expectations. Through this procedure, the study sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying mental distress during the transition to adulthood.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature search process was conducted comprehensively across several reputable international scientific databases, including ScienceDirect, MDPI, Frontiers, Springer, and other academic journal portals, in order to identify relevant key studies. The search focused on articles discussing psychosocial predictors and structural models that explain the relationship between mental health and individuals' perceptions of the future. A total of 20 articles were ultimately selected for review, encompassing various research methodologies, including quantitative studies employing Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), data-driven analyses, and the application of Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques to analyze open-text data.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

1. Inclusion Criteria

To ensure the quality of the analyzed data, this study applied the following strict selection criteria:

- 1) The article focused on psychological factors influencing future anxiety or future expectations among emerging adults or university students.
- 2) The article presented clear psychological variables or indicators.
- 3) The article was an original research study published in a peer-reviewed journal.
- 4) The article employed a robust methodological framework, including multilevel analysis, regression analysis, or path modeling.
- 5) The article was published within the recent time frame of 2021–2026 in order to provide an overview of mental health trends in the contemporary era.

2. Exclusion Criteria

The exclusion criteria were applied to eliminate studies that did not meet the required standards or lacked relevance to the research objectives. Articles were excluded if:

- 1) The article did not specifically examine the relationship between psychological variables and indicators of future anxiety among emerging adults.
- 2) The article was merely descriptive or opinion-based without presenting empirical data or a clearly defined research methodology.
- 3) The article consisted of short news reports, non-scientific technical reports, or publications that had not undergone a rigorous peer-review process.
- 4) The article did not provide sufficient information regarding the measurement instruments used, such as the Dark Future Scale (DFS) or the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS).
- 5) The article primarily focused on child or older adult populations without providing relevant comparisons to emerging adults.

PRISMA Procedure Stages

This study applied the PRISMA framework to ensure a systematic flow of information through three main stages:

1. Identification

This stage involved collecting search results from various databases and removing duplicate records to ensure the uniqueness of the data.

2. Screening

Initial screening was conducted by reviewing article titles and abstracts to determine their relevance to the topic of psychological factors and future anxiety among university students or emerging adults.

3. Eligibility

Full-text reviews were conducted on articles that passed the screening stage to verify the adequacy of statistical data, methodological quality, and the relevance of the findings to the objectives of this literature synthesis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

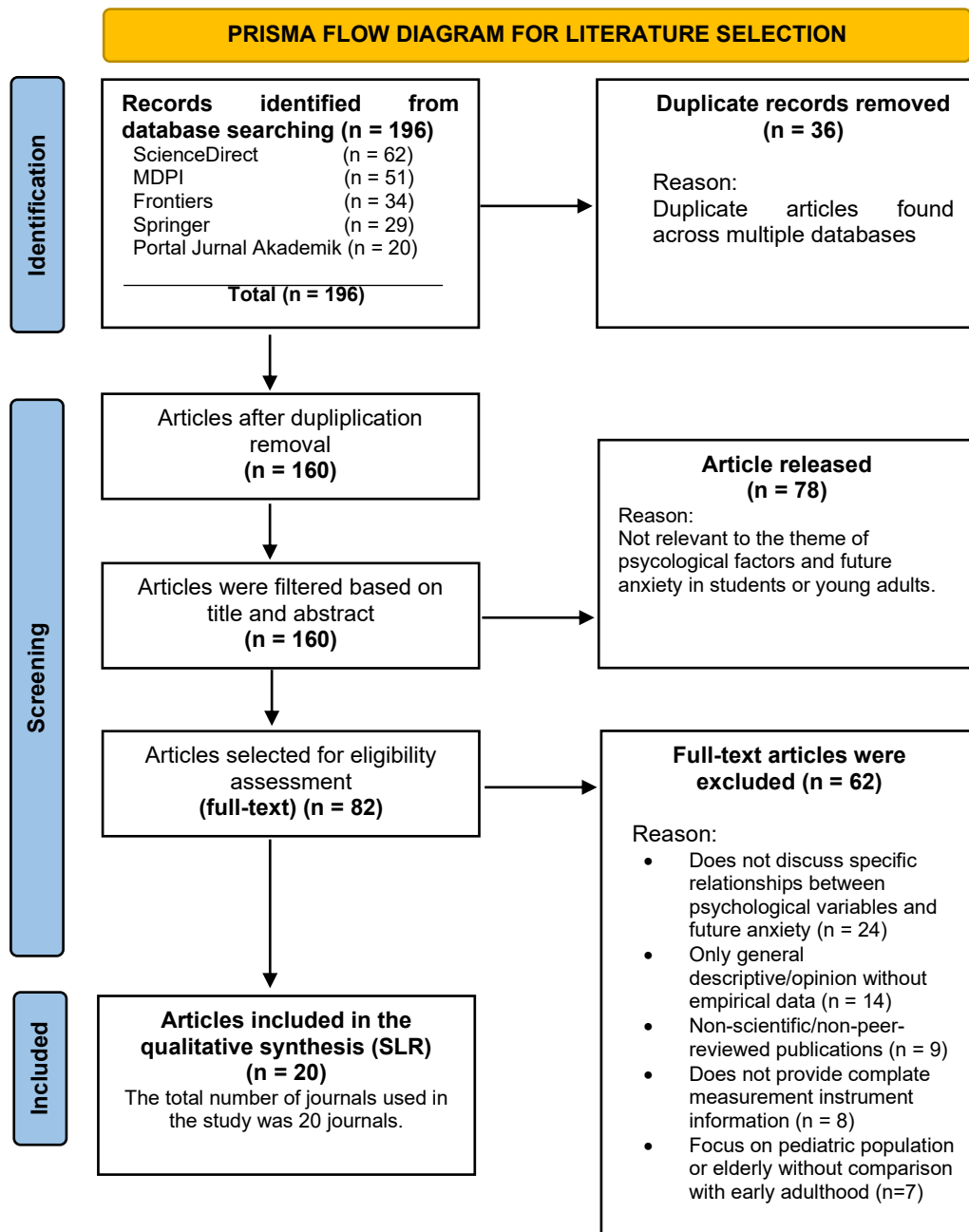


Table 1. Results of Article Data Mapping

No.	Author(s) & Year	Participants	Psychological Factors
1	Regnoli et al. (2024)	302 Italian emerging adults (aged 18–30 years)	1) Intolerance of uncertainty 2) Non-pathological worry 3) Psychological distress (stress, anxiety, depression)
2	Haag et al. (2026)	1,113 emerging adults (mean age: 24 years)	1) Internalizing symptoms (depression and stress) 2) Financial concerns 3) Concerns regarding interpersonal relationships

3	Jung et al. (2025)	12,694 individuals (including participants aged ≤29 years)	1) Subjective health status 2) Depression 3) Physical and mental stress 4) Frustrating life experiences
4	Dalmış et al. (2025)	483 university students (280 females, 203 males)	1) Psychological resilience 2) Subjective well-being
5	An & Suh (2025)	371 young adults (aged 20–39 years)	1) Commitment 2) Gratitude 3) Self-directedness 4) Depression and stress
6	Öztekin et al. (2025)	528 undergraduate students	1) Psychological flexibility 2) Emotion regulation (cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression) 3) Depression and stress
7	Sun (2026)	260 undergraduate students in China	1) Career stress 2) Identity exploration 3) Rural normative pressure
8	Szota et al. (2024)	284 adults (including 157 emerging adults aged 18–28 years)	1) Self-efficacy 2) Depressive symptoms
9	Awad et al. (2024)	684 Lebanese adults	1) Affective temperament (depressive, cyclothymic, irritable, and anxious types) 2) Psychological distress
10	Öztekin et al. (2025)	1,024 undergraduate students	1) Optimism 2) Pessimism 3) PERMA well-being (positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment)
11	Sarac & Yıldız (2025)	404 adults (including emerging adults)	1) Sense of belonging 2) Income status 3) Participation in social activities
12	Brailovskaia et al. (2021)	501 German adults and 951 Italian adults	1) Stress symptoms 2) Social media use as a source of COVID-19 information 3) Psychological burden
13	Rice et al. (2021)	304 Australian TAFE students (aged 18–70 years)	1) Psychological distress (depression, anxiety, stress) 2) Emotion-focused coping styles
14	Regnoli et al. (2024b)	283 Italian emerging adults (aged 18–25 years)	1) Climate change worry 2) Intolerance of uncertainty
15	Regnoli et al. (2024c)	310 Italian emerging adults (aged 18–30 years)	1) Fear of war 2) Intolerance of uncertainty 3) Psychological distress (stress, anxiety, depression)
16	Cruciani et al. (2024)	913 Italian emerging adults (aged 18–29 years)	1) Mentalized affectivity 2) Helicopter parenting 3) Symptoms of depression, anxiety, and somatization
17	Dodd et al. (2021)	787 Australian university students	1) Sense of coherence 2) Psychological well-being 3) Subjective social status
18	Ahmad et al. (2021)	828 respondents from Pakistan	1) Self-efficacy 2) Peer group beliefs 3) Pandemic knowledge and perceived risk
19	Liu et al. (2021)	3,973 Australian university students	1) Social isolation 2) Resilience 3) Concerns regarding mental health 4) Emotional support
20	Nguyen et al. (2024)	National adult sample (aged 18+)	1) Social isolation (subjective, interpersonal, and structural dimensions) 2) Interpersonal relationships

DISCUSSION

This section presents an in-depth analysis of the 20 articles selected through the systematic review process regarding the psychological factors influencing future anxiety among emerging adults. The findings indicate that cognitive vulnerabilities, mental health conditions, and interpersonal dynamics interact in shaping emerging adults' perceptions of the future amid global uncertainty. Emerging adulthood represents a transitional period characterized by substantial pressure, in which developmental tasks such as career exploration and identity formation frequently trigger profound anxiety (Sawyer et al., 2018; Sun, 2026).

Based on the data mapping presented in the research table, one of the most dominant psychological factors identified was Intolerance of Uncertainty (IU). IU functions as a cognitive bias in which individuals perceive ambiguous future situations as threatening and unbearable (Freeston et al., 2020; Regnoli et al., 2024a). Studies have demonstrated that high levels of IU directly increase future anxiety by triggering anticipatory processes centered on worst-case scenarios, which subsequently intensify overall psychological distress (Regnoli et al., 2024b; Carleton, 2016).

In contrast, self-efficacy emerged as a crucial protective cognitive factor among emerging adults. Self-efficacy refers to individuals' beliefs in their ability to control events affecting their lives, thereby providing a sense of security when confronting challenges (Bandura, 2012; Szota et al., 2024). Individuals with low self-efficacy were found to exhibit significantly higher levels of future anxiety because they perceived themselves as incapable of navigating potential life difficulties (Szota et al., 2024; Rabei et al., 2020).

Internal mental health conditions, particularly depression and stress, were found to have a strong positive correlation with future anxiety. These internalizing symptoms create what is known as a "negative cognitive triad," in which negative views of the self and the world extend into pessimism regarding the future (Beck et al., 1987; Haag et al., 2026). Research involving final-year university students demonstrated that the accumulation of academic stress and fear of failure often results in conditions where negative thoughts dominate over hope (Haag et al., 2026; Jung et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the psychological distress experienced by emerging adults is often exacerbated by frustrating life experiences. The inability to achieve socially defined standards of success may generate feelings of hopelessness that further reinforce future anxiety (Jung et al., 2025; An & Suh, 2025). In this context, future anxiety should not merely be understood as a temporary emotional response, but rather as a manifestation of depressive conditions requiring appropriate psychological intervention (Szota et al., 2024; Awad et al., 2024).

Personality traits such as optimism and pessimism also play significant mediating roles in the relationship between anxiety and well-being. Optimism promotes positive expectations regarding future outcomes, whereas pessimism strengthens negative expectations that hinder individuals' adaptive functioning (Scheier & Carver, 1985; Öztekin, 2025). Individuals with pessimistic tendencies were found to exhibit lower levels of subjective well-being because they focus more on potential losses than opportunities (Öztekin, 2025; An & Suh, 2025).

Psychological flexibility was also identified as a key variable determining how individuals manage future-related stress. Psychological flexibility enables individuals to remain open to present experiences and to act in accordance with personal values despite difficult circumstances (Gloster et al., 2021; Öztekin et al., 2025). Students with low psychological flexibility tend to employ maladaptive emotion regulation strategies, such as expressive suppression, which have been shown to exacerbate symptoms of depression and future anxiety (Öztekin et al., 2025; Gross, 1998).

Sense of belonging emerged as one of the most important interpersonal predictors in mitigating future anxiety. Sense of belonging constitutes a fundamental psychological need which, when fulfilled, provides emotional stability during life transitions (Sarac & Yıldız, 2025; Malone et al., 2012). Conversely, the absence of belongingness, often manifested through social isolation, significantly increases feelings of alienation and anxiety regarding the future (Sarac & Yıldız, 2025; Nguyen et al., 2024).

Parenting dynamics, particularly helicopter parenting, were also found to negatively affect the psychological development of emerging adults. Overly controlling parenting styles inhibit the development of independence and self-efficacy, thereby fostering detrimental psychological dependency (Cruciani et al., 2024; Pistella et al., 2020). As a result,

individuals raised under excessive parental control often feel unprepared to face the external world independently, ultimately leading to elevated levels of future anxiety and somatization symptoms (Cruciani et al., 2024; Schiffrin et al., 2014).

Career stress represents a specific domain in which future anxiety manifests most intensely among emerging adults. Labor market uncertainty and high competency demands create substantial psychological burdens, particularly for individuals approaching the completion of higher education (Sun, 2026; Arnett, 2014). Career identity exploration, which should ideally function as an adaptive developmental process, may instead become a ruminative and exhausting experience when individuals feel incapable of meeting social expectations (Sun, 2026; Luyckx et al., 2008).

Intolerance of career-related uncertainty often interacts with normative pressures, such as expectations to achieve financial independence or marry at an early age. These external pressures amplify individuals' mental burden, transforming uncertainty into chronic fear of life failure (Sun, 2026; Arnett, 2023). Therefore, the capacity for identity integration and meaning-making becomes critically important for maintaining mental well-being during this developmental stage (Nelson, 2020; An & Suh, 2025).

Today's emerging adults also face unique challenges associated with fears of global crises, including geopolitical conflicts and climate change. Fear of war has been shown to indirectly affect mental health by increasing levels of future anxiety and intolerance of uncertainty (Regnoli et al., 2024c; Ahmad et al., 2021). Such insecurity fosters perceptions of the future world as dangerous and unstable (Regnoli et al., 2024c; Hajek et al., 2022).

Similarly, climate change worry has emerged as a significant systemic stressor among younger generations. Fear regarding unpredictable environmental consequences contributes to existential anxiety and reinforces pessimistic views of the future (Regnoli et al., 2024b; Hickman et al., 2021). This pattern demonstrates that individual psychological factors cannot be separated from the broader macro-global context in which individuals are situated (Regnoli et al., 2024b; Bronfenbrenner, 1974).

The use of appropriate emotion regulation strategies significantly influences the severity of future anxiety. Cognitive reappraisal was identified as an adaptive strategy capable of reducing the relationship between future anxiety and clinical stress symptoms (Öztekin et al., 2025; Lazarus, 1964). In contrast, emotion-focused coping strategies without problem-solving components often prolong psychological suffering (Rice et al., 2021; Öztekin et al., 2025).

Resilience, or psychological hardiness, functions as a major protective factor that enables individuals to recover from adversity. Resilient individuals tend to perceive future uncertainty not as a threat, but as a challenge that offers opportunities for growth (Dalmış et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2021). Subjective well-being acts as a mediator in this relationship, whereby positive emotions help individuals build the psychological resources necessary to approach the future with greater optimism (Dalmış et al., 2025; Diener, 2000).

Overall, the findings from these 20 articles confirm that future anxiety among emerging adults is a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by interactions between internal vulnerabilities and external pressures. Cognitive factors such as intolerance of uncertainty and low self-efficacy serve as major risk factors, whereas social support and resilience function as protective balancing factors (Regnoli et al., 2024a; Dalmış et al., 2025; Szota et al., 2024). Understanding these dynamics is essential for mental health practitioners in designing interventions that focus not only on symptom reduction, but also on strengthening individuals' internal psychological resources (Jung et al., 2025; Öztekin, 2025).

Future interventions should prioritize emotion regulation training, enhancement of self-efficacy, and the development of inclusive social environments that foster a sense of

belonging (Sarac & Yıldız, 2025; Öztekin et al., 2025). By helping emerging adults navigate uncertainty through more flexible and optimistic mindsets, the psychological burden associated with future anxiety may be effectively minimized, thereby contributing to the development of a healthier and more prosperous generation (Szota et al., 2024; Dalmış et al., 2025; An & Suh, 2025). Awareness of the influence of global conditions should also be integrated into public policy to provide stronger social security and support for individuals transitioning into adulthood (Regnoli et al., 2024c; Sun, 2026).

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the systematic review of 20 research articles, it can be concluded that the psychological factors influencing future anxiety among emerging adults can be broadly categorized into risk factors (such as intolerance of uncertainty, pessimism, and depressive symptoms) and protective factors (such as resilience, self-efficacy, and adaptive emotion regulation), which interact dynamically with one another. These findings directly address the objective of this study, namely to identify and synthesize the psychological factors influencing future anxiety among emerging adults.

This phenomenon is multidimensional in nature and arises from the complex interaction between individuals' internal characteristics and external environmental pressures. As a critical transitional phase, emerging adulthood represents a period during which individuals are highly vulnerable to cognitive and emotional pressures associated with the demands of independence, career development, and the establishment of a stable identity amid an uncertain global environment.

The primary psychological factors identified as exacerbating future anxiety include intolerance of uncertainty, depressive symptoms, and high levels of stress. Cognitive characteristics characterized by pessimism and low self-efficacy also emerged as significant contributors, leading individuals to perceive the future as a threat rather than an opportunity. Furthermore, global stressors such as climate change, fear of war, and systemic barriers related to employment and housing have been shown to intensify the psychological burden experienced by this generation.

On the other hand, the review also revealed the presence of protective factors capable of mitigating the adverse effects of future anxiety. Psychological resilience, cognitive flexibility, and adaptive emotion regulation abilities, such as cognitive reappraisal, serve as essential resources that enable individuals to cope effectively with uncertainty. A strong sense of belonging within social environments and healthy family support were also found to enhance subjective well-being, which subsequently reduces anxiety regarding the future.

As a practical implication, more targeted mental health interventions aimed at strengthening the internal psychological resources of emerging adults are needed. Programs focusing on emotion regulation training, sustainable career guidance, and the development of inclusive social environments are particularly important to implement. More broadly, public policies capable of providing greater social and economic security would substantially help reduce systemic uncertainty, enabling emerging adults to navigate their future with greater confidence, hope, and optimism.

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