

Examining the Relationship between Career Calling and Career Distress: The Mediating Role of Career Goal Discrepancy

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Abstract

Career development processes are a major developmental and economic concern, as problems in this domain are associated with distress and poor career outcomes among young adults. While career calling is recognized as a psychological resource linked to low career distress, the mechanisms that explain this association are not well understood. This study, based on Meaning Making Theory and Control Theory, investigates whether career goal discrepancy levels mediate the relationship between career calling and career distress among 437 future workforces in the emerging adulthood phase. Data were examined utilizing structural equation modeling in SPSS AMOS. The findings revealed that career calling is related to career distress indirectly via career goal discrepancy, indicating that perceptions of discrepancy serve as an important explanatory mechanism. These findings combine calling and discrepancy perspectives, emphasizing the significance of interventions aimed at increasing goal clarity in decision-making processes in the career domain.

Key words: Career Calling, Career Distress, Career Goal Discrepancy

JEL Code: M10, M54, J24

1. Introduction

The increased uncertainty and volatility in labor markets could result in numerous misalignment challenges between individuals and organizations

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regarding the engagement and integration of the future workforce. The primary causes leading to this imbalance include increasing job insecurity in developing economies, difficulties in utilizing human capital, and the continuously restricted access to meaningful employment (Inanc and Kalleberg, 2022; Spurk et al., 2022). Thus, motivating resources are essential for improving future work-related well-being, functioning as behavioral triggers that could influence both work-related and other personal outcomes. The concept of career calling (CC) refers to an individual's perception of significance in their professional life and acts as a driving force for career direction and work-related efforts (Dik and Duffy, 2009; Duffy et al., 2014a). CC is regarded as a construct that might differ among individuals based on specific personality traits, values, and psychological resources (Creed et al., 2016; Ulfa et al., 2021). Research indicates that among university students, CC positively affects school engagement (Ensher et al., 2022) and career outcome expectations (Domene, 2012), whereas among employees, it increases organizational commitment and citizenship behavior (Afsar et al., 2019). Longitudinal studies on CC have established that an individual's sense of meaning increases perceived meaningfulness in work, thus increasing job satisfaction (Duffy et al., 2014a). Furthermore, research involving undergraduates has shown that CC affects overall life meaning (Duffy et al., 2014b). In this context, CC might be considered a valuable resource that promotes individuals' psychological well-being and might be helpful while facing unexpected challenges (Guo et al., 2025).

A considerable obstacle to achieving positive employee outcomes is career distress (CD). CD refers to the adverse psychological situation, encompassing tension and anxiety, that people encounter concerning the circumstances they face during their career progression (Creed et al., 2016). In the contemporary, volatile work environment, CD could appear at various points of nearly every individual's career stage (Praskova et al., 2022). It is often triggered by factors such as low self-esteem (Thompson et al., 2019) and self-regulation (Akmal et al., 2025). Increased CD correlates with negative outcomes, such as challenges in career decision-making, decreased career satisfaction and decreased subjective well-being (Arslan and Bayraktar Uyar, 2020). In some studies, CD has also been considered as a well-being indicator (Creed and Gagliardi, 2015). Among undergraduates, CD has been found to decrease life satisfaction (Doğanülkü and Korkmaz, 2024). Therefore, CD has negative effects not only on career but also on broader life elements (Çarkıt, 2026).

Calling, as an essential intrinsic motivational resource, could be related to stress by improving the satisfaction of fundamental psychological needs and, hence, increasing the probability of self-actualization and well-being (Conway et al., 2015; Duffy et al., 2017). A sense of purpose in a career is negatively linked to the distress individuals might experience when entering the workforce. While CC has the potential to be associated with negative emotions and anxiety related to work and career, this relationship is closely linked to the alignment between individuals' professional expectations, goals, and the opportunities available in actual work settings. Career goal discrepancy (CDG) describes the extent of alignment between personal career goals and perceived possibilities and resources available within the

work environment (Akmal et al., 2025). The weaker this alignment, the greater the sense of not being able to achieve one's goals, which in turn increases strain and damages the individual's sense of control over their career.

Although extensive research exists on the motivational effects of calling, knowledge regarding the role of CDG in its relationship with CD is limited. This study, based on Meaning Making Theory (MMT, Park and Folkman, 1997) and Control Theory (CT, Carver and Scheier, 1982), aims to emphasize the significance of CC as a critical psychological resource for young people that has potential to be negatively associated with CDG and CD. The integration of MMT and CT is particularly relevant in the context of the present study. Since CC is not a static construct and may develop over time through individuals' experiences and interpretations (Bott & Duffy, 2015), MMT provides an important framework for understanding the motivational and meaning-oriented role of CC in shaping career-related perceptions. Also, CT offers a useful perspective for understanding how individuals evaluate their progress throughout the career process, particularly in relation to goal setting and goal attainment. In this respect, CGD reflects individuals' evaluations of the gap between their current career situation and their desired career goals, which may contribute to CD when such discrepancies are perceived as difficult to manage. Accordingly, rather than relying on a single theoretical perspective, integrating these two frameworks represents one of the distinctive contributions of the present study. While MMT helps explain the motivational role of CC, CT clarifies the self-regulatory nature of discrepancy-based processes. Moreover, based on the assumption that individuals prefer to discover meaning and compare their present conditions with their desired states, it is posited that CDG will positively affect CD. This study posits that calling serves as a motivational source while simultaneously decreasing stress by decreasing the disparity between aspirations and chances (Chen et al., 2025; Lu et al., 2025). The correlation between calling and distress might vary based on labor market conditions and organizational environments. Investigating this connection in several contexts could clarify the changing nature of calling. This study particularly focused on university students in the emerging adulthood stage, a period during which calling is particularly significant and distress levels might be high. Accordingly, this study analyzes data from 437 potential labor market participants from Kocaeli and Sakarya, two major workforce hubs in Turkey, to investigate the mediating role of CDG in the effect of CC on CD. This study enhances the literature by investigating CGD as a psychological mechanism that connects CC to CD, in contrast to prior research that mostly concentrated on the direct association between calling and work-related outcomes. Furthermore, by concentrating on emerging adults within a developing economic context, the study extends the scope of calling research outside Western and developed labor market environments. Moreover, this research, conducted in a developing economy with significant relationships among higher education institutions, industry, and labor supply, seeks to strengthen the literature by addressing the mechanism gap, offering insights on emerging professionals as the future workforce, and providing guidance for the development of human capital strategies.

2. Literature Review

Career Calling and Career Distress

In modern times, a primary problem encountered by young adults and individuals in the early phases of their careers is the capacity to identify career objectives and to initiate actions toward achieving those objectives. Comprehending the basic principles of the career development process provides significant pathways for interpreting how individuals make career decisions and navigate this process (Lent et al., 1994). In this process, numerous internal and external factors, including personal resources, work environment, and social support, are crucial. A significant internal resource that might impact individuals' career objectives is calling, which relates to meaning and a sense of purpose. Career calling (CC) is characterized as a multidimensional concept that includes the significance individuals assign to their careers, intrinsic motivation, and personal fulfillment (Dik and Duffy, 2009). A sense of calling encompasses an individual's drive to contribute to the greater good through their career choices (Dik and Duffy, 2013). Individuals receive a calling at any point in their lives (Duffy et al., 2012).

Emerging adulthood is the time frame commonly regarded as the passage from youth to adulthood, typically occurring between the ages of 18 and 25 (Arnett, 2000). This life stage signifies a pivotal period in which individuals establish career objectives and begin outlining their future trajectories (Rowland, 2004). In this sense, emerging adulthood is a stage during which career awareness begins to develop and short-term objectives are set as initial steps to attaining long-term aspirations (Rosa et al., 2024; Praskova et al., 2014). CC has been associated with academic satisfaction (Duffy et al., 2012), career decisiveness (Duffy and Sedlacek, 2007), and life satisfaction (Duffy et al., 2011) in undergraduates.

The early phase of career development might place significant strain on emerging people, as choices taken during this time might have permanent consequences for their future. Career distress (CD) indicates the challenges individuals face in making career decisions and their propensity to avoid work-related thinking, planning, and action (Creed and Gagliardi, 2015). The dynamism of work environments, heightened competitiveness in the labor supply due to increasing unemployment, and the evolution of occupations generate significant concern among applicants ready to enter the labor market (Pisarik, 2017). Meaning-Making Theory (MMT; Park and Folkman, 1997) posits that reappraisal is fundamental to meaning-making processes, indicating that individuals attain relief from stress not by altering reality, but by modifying their interpretation of it. From this viewpoint, reappraisal signifies the cognitive restructuring of one's present circumstances. Regarding career progression, MMT offers a valuable framework for clarifying how CC, understood as global meaning, could be negatively linked to distress by allowing individuals to perceive less threat. Empirical evidence demonstrates that, among young individuals, CC are negatively correlated with career distress (Park and Lee, 2020; Xu and Yu, 2025). Additionally, individuals

with higher levels of career calling tend to have higher levels of career optimism (Duffy and Raque-Bogdan, 2010). Individuals with vocational clarity, who are able to predict their life trajectory, feel a sense of purpose, and regard their careers as significant, might demonstrate greater resilience to uncertainty and thus experience decreased levels of distress. Consequently, based on theoretical and empirical evidence, the following hypothesis has been proposed:

H1. Career calling is negatively related to career distress.

The Mediating Role of Career Goal Discrepancy

Every individual establishes various goals to attain their envisioned future. In career development, goals are intrinsically linked to the conditions individuals aspire to achieve in both their private and professional lives, as career objectives impact both career progression and individuals' future quality of life and satisfaction (Pham et al., 2024; Su et al., 2024; Thomas et al., 2024). In certain instances, individuals may recognize that their stated goals do not correspond with their present circumstances or the methods employed to achieve them. A career goal discrepancy (CDG) refers to the perception that individual career goals for the future are incongruent with one's current situation (Creed and Hood, 2015). Factors contributing to the development of CDG include feedback from others (Creed et al., 2015), employability (Creed et al., 2017), and vocational identity (Creed et al., 2020). Therefore, the CDG includes not only the disparity between desired and actual objectives but also results from self-assessment. CDG is not exclusively determined by actual performance; instead, it is influenced by self-efficacy, identity clarity, and external feedback. From the perspective of MMT, CC, as a form of global meaning, carries the potential to contribute both to identity evaluation and to cognitive adjustment to situations through the sense of direction it provides to individuals. Research indicates a correlation between CC and CDG (Akmal et al., 2025), with CC serving as a significant moderating factor in the relationship between vocational identity and CDG among young adults (Creed et al., 2020). In other words, in processes of career development stemming from identity, CC functions as an important intervening element. Control Theory (CT; Carver and Scheier, 1982) asserts that individuals consistently assess the differences between their present condition and their objectives. According to CT, individuals compare their inputs and outputs and might try to make adjustments where necessary. In the career domain, from a CT perspective, individuals are more likely to take action by comparing their current career state with the career state they wish to attain. CC has the potential to be negatively related to CDG by increasing levels of vocational clarity and goal certainty as it provides direction to the individual and clarifies goals. Thus, it was hypothesized that:

H2. Career calling is negatively related to career goal discrepancy.

Among the antecedents of CD are future work-self and career decision self-efficacy (Li et al., 2023), career decision regret (Doğanülkü and Korkmaz, 2024),

career identity (Ma et al., 2020), and career-related indecision (Creed et al., 2020). Prior research indicates that CDG correlates positively with CD and adverse emotions among young adults (Widyowati et al., 2024). Furthermore, decreased perceived employability and career self-efficacy were identified as factors that increase CD (Gunawan et al., 2025). In contrast, positive assessments of career goal progress were associated with increased career satisfaction and optimism (Akmal et al., 2024). Based on previous empirical findings, it might be inferred that goals are also an antecedent of CD, given that career decisions are a dynamic process in which the alternatives that individuals evaluate within the employment ecosystem they focus on are linked with their personal goals. Thus, increased levels of CDG may cause individuals to perceive an inability to achieve their objectives, thus leading to feelings of inadequacy and a loss of control. From a CT perspective, when a disparity is identified between the current state and the goal state, this difference may be interpreted as an error signal that triggers negative emotional responses. Cognitive appraisals associated with CDG might cause anxiety, ultimately leading to CD. Individuals set career objectives, and when they assess these objectives against their current circumstances, perceived discrepancies may induce feelings of inadequacy and a low sense of control, ultimately leading to despair. Creed et al. (2017) discovered that CDG increased CD in a study conducted with university students, which provides empirical evidence supporting this relationship. Similarly, research conducted by Praskova and McPeake (2022) with a young adult sample indicated that elevated levels of CDG correlated with increased levels of CD. Also, it has been seen that CD is influenced by major incongruence among college students (Kim and Lee, 2019). When taken together, this evidence shows that different types of incongruences may have an impact on CD, emphasizing the larger significance that misalignment factors have in influencing career-related decision processes. Thus, it was hypothesized that:

H3. Career goal discrepancy is positively related to career distress.

Studies show that the link between CDG and CD is sensitive to CC levels among young adults. For instance, Praskova and McPeake (2022) found that CDG levels increase CD among young adults, and this relationship could differ depending on CC levels. Similarly, Xu and Yu (2025) stated that, among young adults, the impact of goal engagement on CD is stronger when CC is high. CT has been utilized to explain the impact of goal progression on career-related stress (Creed et al., 2015). From this perspective, perceived incongruence could trigger negative feelings and result in stress. In this setting, CGD might act as a mediating mechanism in the interaction between CC and CD. CC could serve as a protective resource that is associated with CGD and minimize mismatch, thus helping individuals maintain low levels of distress. Furthermore, since CGD represents the extent of disparity between an individual's desired career position and their present status, higher levels might cause individuals to believe they cannot achieve their objectives, that they are pursuing an inaccurate path, and that they misuse their time; therefore, it might directly result in CD. Thus, it was hypothesized that:

H4. Career goal discrepancy mediates the relationship between career calling and career distress.

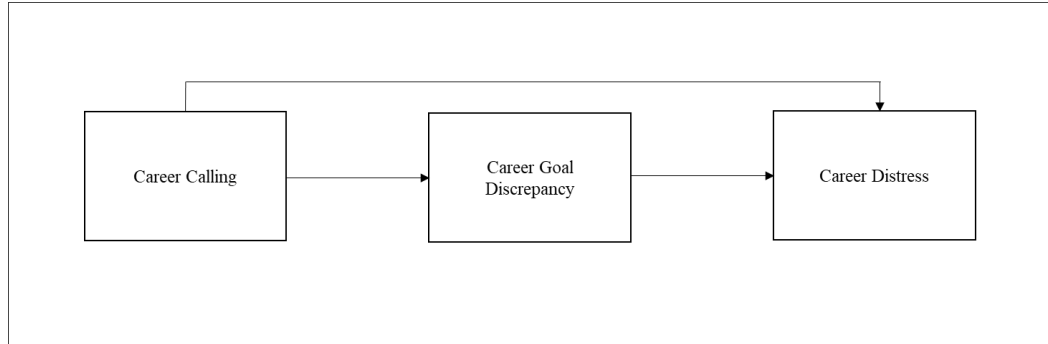


Figure 1. Research Model

Source: Figure by the authors.

3. Methodology

Procedure

Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, skewness, kurtosis, and bivariate correlations, were calculated utilizing SPSS. Measurement and structural models were evaluated utilizing SPSS and AMOS. Reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR), with values of 0.70 or higher indicating adequate internal consistency (Hair et al., 2019). Convergent validity was assessed by factor loadings and the average variance extracted (AVE). Factor loadings of 0.50 or above and AVE values approaching or exceeding 0.50 were considered acceptable (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2013). Discriminant validity was evaluated using the Fornell–Larcker criterion, which necessitates that the square root of the AVE for each construct exceed its correlations with other constructs. The proposed relationships were evaluated by structural equation modeling (SEM) utilizing maximum likelihood estimation in AMOS. The model fit was assessed by various goodness-of-fit indices, including the chi-square statistic (χ^2), the chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). χ^2/df values below 3, CFI values of 0.90 or greater, RMSEA values of 0.08 or less, and SRMR values of 0.08 or less have been considered as evidence of acceptable model fit (Hu and Bentler, 1999). The mediation effects were analyzed using standardized direct, indirect, and total effects within the SEM framework. The mediation analysis utilized bootstrapping with 5000 iterations (Williams & MacKinnon, 2008), a well-established and efficient technique for evaluating indirect effects.

Participants

Data was gathered from associate degree students attending two public higher education institutions in Kocaeli and Sakarya. These universities were chosen for their accessibility and proximity to significant industrial and business hubs, making them especially relevant for analyzing career-related activities within an applied economic and organizational framework. Concentrating on vocational higher education students is particularly significant, as this group is at a critical phase of career development and is vulnerable to increased career stress and goal-related struggles. Data was collected using a voluntarily administered online survey. Prior to participation, respondents were informed about the study's voluntary nature, and only those who provided consent were allowed to complete the questionnaire. The ethics committee of the organization the researcher is affiliated with granted ethical approval for the study. The sample included 437 university students. Regarding age, 47.6% of participants were aged 17 to 19 years ($n = 208$), 43.5% were aged 20 to 22 years ($n = 190$), and 8.9% were 23 years and above ($n = 39$). Considering academic disciplines, 47.6% of participants were enrolled in social sciences programs ($n = 208$), whereas 52.4% were enrolled in health sciences programs ($n = 229$). In terms of gender, 73.7% of participants were female ($n = 322$) and 26.3% were male ($n = 115$).

Measurement Instruments

All measurement instruments utilized in this study adopted a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

CC was measured using a brief form modified from Dik et al.'s (2012) "Brief Calling Scale", which Erhan et al. (2019) adapted into Turkish. In the adaptation study, the scale demonstrated acceptable reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$). Higher scores indicate a more significant feeling of career calling.

CD was assessed with the "Career Distress Scale", initially created by Creed et al. (2016) and afterwards adapted into Turkish by Şensoy and Siyez (2019). The Turkish adaptation of the scale comprises 9 items that evaluate individuals' emotional discomfort, tension, and negative emotions associated with career decision-making and career-related issues. Participants were requested to specify the degree to which each statement represented their experiences of career-related stress. In the adaptation study, the scale demonstrated acceptable reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$).

CDG was evaluated using the "Career Goal-Discrepancy Scale" initially created by Creed and Hood (2015) and adapted into Turkish by Yam et al. (2020). The scale consists of 12 items designed to assess individuals' perceived discrepancies between their present career advancement and their ideal career objectives. In the adaptation study, the scale demonstrated acceptable reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$). Higher scores indicate an increased sense of discrepancy between career goals and perceived achievements.

4. Findings

Descriptives, Validity and Reliability

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics and correlations of the study variables. The mean scores show that CC ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 0.76$) and CD ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 0.83$) are both at moderate levels. CGD, on the other hand, is at a lower level ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 0.72$). The skewness and kurtosis readings fell within acceptable limits. The diagonal values of the correlation matrix denote the square roots of the average variance extracted (\sqrt{AVE}). In each case, the \sqrt{AVE} values passed the associated inter-construct correlations, thus confirming discriminant validity in accordance with the Fornell–Larcker criterion. The relationship between variables indicated that CC had a moderate negative correlation with CGD ($r = -.41$, $p < .001$), indicating that students with a greater feeling of calling perceived fewer discrepancies between their present circumstances and their aspirational career objectives. CC had a negative correlation with career distress ($r = -.26$, $p < .001$), suggesting that a more clarified feeling of calling correlates with reduced emotional distress. On the other hand, CGD had a significant positive correlation with career distress ($r = .66$, $p < .001$), indicating that larger perceived disparities between career objectives and actual achievement are associated with increased levels of career-related stress.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	α	Skewness	Kurtosis
1. CC	.32	.757	<i>0.792</i>			.87	-0.577	0.381
2. CGD	.55	.715	-0.409***	<i>.661</i>		.90	0.031	-0.089
3. CD	.10	.832	-0.263***	<i>.658***</i>	<i>.699</i>	.82	-0.227	-0.242

Note. N= 437. CC: Career calling, CGD: Career goal discrepancy, CD: Career distress, α : Cronbach's Alpha, Values on the diagonal (in italics) represent the square root of the average variance extracted (\sqrt{AVE}) for each construct. Off-diagonal values indicate Pearson correlation coefficients. *** $p < .001$

Source: Authors' calculations

Table 2 displays the findings of the CFA. All items showed substantial loading on their corresponding latent constructs ($p < .001$), with standardized factor loadings between .53 and .84. The standardized factor loadings for CC were strong (.73–.84), and the construct showed adequate convergent validity, shown by an AVE value of .63 and a composite reliability (CR) of .87. For the variance in CDG, standardized loadings ranged from .53 to .75.

Table 2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results

Variables	p	Standardized Regression Weights	AVE	CR
Career Calling				
CC1	***	0.729	0.627	0.870
CC2	***	0.781		
CC3	***	0.838		
CC4	***	0.816		
Career Goal Discrepancy				
CDG1	***	0.643	0.437	0.902
CDG2	***	0.582		
CDG3	***	0.556		
CDG4	***	0.736		
CDG6	***	0.617		
CDG7	***	0.752		
CDG8	***	0.721		
CDG9	***	0.725		
CDG10	***	0.633		
CDG11	***	0.655		
CDG12	***	0.534		
Career Distress				
CS1	***	0.701	0.436	0.819
CS2	***	0.741		
CS3	***	0.790		
CS4	***	0.660		
CS5	***	0.584		
Model Fit Index: N= 437, $\chi^2 = 445.204$, $df = 184$, $\chi^2/df = 2.240$, $p = .000$, RMSEA = .057, SRMR = .054, CFI = .937				

Source: Authors' calculations

Although the AVE values for CDG (.437) and CD (.436) were slightly below the recommended threshold of .50, the composite reliability values for both constructs exceeded the acceptable threshold of .70 (Table 2), indicating satisfactory internal consistency and construct reliability. Previous studies have suggested that AVE may represent a relatively conservative criterion for convergent validity assessment and that convergent validity can still be considered adequate when composite reliability values are acceptable (Malhotra & Dash, 2011). Also, all standardized factor loadings were above the recommended minimum level and statistically significant (CDG: 0.534-0.762; CS: 0.584-0.790). Moreover, the fit indices showed an acceptable fit of the measurement model with the data ($\chi^2 = 445.20$, $df = 184$, $\chi^2/df = 2.24$, RMSEA = .057, SRMR = .054, CFI = .94). Thus, CR values and standardized factor loadings and satisfactory model fit indices indicate that the measurement model was acceptable. Additionally, Harman's

single-factor test was conducted to assess the potential risk of common method bias. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Results of Harman’s Single-Factor Test

Fit Index	Value
χ^2/df (CMIN/DF)	7.922
CFI	0.686
SRMR	0.131
RMSEA	0.126

As shown in Table 3, the single-factor model demonstrated poor model fit ($\chi^2/df = 7.922$, CFI = .686, SRMR = .131, RMSEA = .126), indicating that common method bias was not a serious concern in this study. Suggested cutoff values for model fit indices were based on the recommendations of Hu and Bentler (1999) and Kline (2015).

Hypothesis Testing

Table 4 displays the findings of the SEM investigating the mediating effect of CDG on the link between CC and CD. The findings indicated that career calling had a significant negative effect on CGD (DE = -0.408 , $p < .01$), suggesting that increased levels of CC correlated with decreased perceived disparities between career goals and present development. The direct impact of CC on CD was not significant (DE = 0.013 , $p > .05$), indicating that CC did not directly predict CD when CGD was incorporated into the model. On the other hand, CGD had a statistically significant positive direct influence on CD (DE = 0.675 , $p < .01$), indicating that increased perceptions of CDG correlated with elevated levels of CD. The indirect effect of career calling on CD via CDG was significant and negative (IE = -0.275 , $p < .01$). The total effect of CC on CDG was significant (TE = -0.263 , $p < .01$). These findings indicate that CDG fully mediates the relationship between CC and CD.

Table 4. Mediation analysis results

Path	DE	95% CI	IE	95% CI	TE	95% CI
CC→CGD	- 0.408**	[-0.500; - 0.303]			- 0.408* *	[-0.500; - 0.303]
CC→CD	0.013	[-0.094; 0.30]			- 0.263* *	[-0.370; - 0.144]
CDG→CD	0.675**	[0.579; 0.768]			0.675* *	[0.579; 0.768]
CC→CDG →CD			- 0.275**	[-0.360; - 0.192]		

Note. N= 437, CC: Career calling, CDG: Career goal discrepancy, CD: Career distress, DE = Direct effect; IE = Indirect effect; TE: Total effect; CI = confidence interval. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, $\chi^2 = 445.204$, $df = 184$, $\chi^2/df = 2.240$, CFI = 0.937, SRMR = .054, RMSEA = .057, $p = .000$

Source: Authors' calculations

5. Conclusions

This study adopts MMT (Park and Folkman, 1997) and CT (Carver and Scheier, 1990) to explain how a sense of meaning and purpose in the career domain influences the process of comparing a desired state and a current one regarding career goals and how this process determines distress levels among emerging adults. Thus, it was aimed to investigate the mediating role of CDG in the relationship between CC and CD. The findings supported the proposed mediation model. By focusing on the perceptions of university students who are at the phase of emerging adulthood, a particularly sensitive time in terms of career development, the findings show that CC is negatively correlated with CD and CDG. This finding indicates that, as predicted, a sense of meaning in the career domain acts as a psychological resource for overcoming goal discrepancies and distress. Considering the sample is from Kocaeli and Sakarya, two important industry centers of Turkey where labor markets are highly competitive, calling stands out as a critical factor for young adults.

Also, it was found that CDG negatively affects CD, indicating that any discrepancies between the desired career states and the current ones could increase CD levels. This finding is parallel to the previous empirical evidence (Creed et al., 2017; Praskova and McPeake, 2022). In accordance with CT, divergences between individuals' aspirational professional objectives and their present career conditions can result in psychological strain and increase distress levels. Consequently, individuals who recognize larger disparities in their career development might become more at risk for adverse emotional consequences during the phase of emerging adulthood.

Although current literature supports the idea that CC plays a role in decreasing distress or weakens the link between career resources and distress, little was known about the mediating role of CC. The findings showed that CC has no direct effect on CD, yet CC has a negative influence on CD via CDG. This finding suggests that the relationship between CC and CD may not occur directly, but rather through the proposed mediating mechanism. In other words, CC appears to be associated with CD indirectly through intermediary processes included in the model. Accordingly, the findings point to a full mediation structure and suggest that the relationship between CC and CD should be interpreted primarily in terms of indirect effects. A possible rationale is that having a sense of calling may not directly eliminate distress stemming from factors such as external career uncertainty and labor market constraints. Calling may primarily serve to influence how individuals assess their career progress and perceive the disparity between their present and aspirational career conditions. As assumed, the results showed

that although it is reasonable that CC is negatively related to distress levels, CC might affect CD through CDG, as it may influence how individuals perceive their goals and thus minimize the discrepancy between their goals and their current state.

There is still debate whether CC is a meaning, identity, or motivation (Shimizu et al., 2019). This study showed that CC could have the capacity to affect distress via the meaning-making process. These findings are aligned with previous research underlining that CC plays a significant role in the link between goals and distress levels among young individuals (Praskova and McPeake, 2021; Xu and Yu, 2025). The findings indicate that CC could negatively affect CD via CDG, and it could be a cognitive resource. In other words, CC could be related to meaning, identity, motivation, or cognitive processes depending on the career stage or cultural context.

These findings are worthy of being considered in the larger cultural and socioeconomic context of career development. Goal-setting is recognized to be culturally sensitive because personal beliefs influence how individuals establish and proceed toward their goals (Oishi and Diener, 2001). Also, it has been determined that CC shows racial differences in studies conducted with undergraduates from the United States of America (USA) (Dik and Duffy, 2013). Therefore, CC is a culture-sensitive construct. Thus, this study provides insights for cross-cultural perspectives by examining the role of CC in distress levels using data from Turkey, where undergraduate unemployment levels are considerably high (TÜİK, 2025). In this regard, the findings indicate that the psychological significance and impacts of calling may differ based on cultural expectations, labor market systems, and socioeconomic circumstances. More research might look into the role of CC as a trigger for minimizing negative career outcomes or promoting positive outcomes using longitudinal or cross-cultural studies.

Practical implications

This study demonstrates that CC has an indirect influence on CD through CDG. It suggests that solely concentrating on CC to be negatively associated with distress will be inadequate for emerging adults. Considering the critical significance of understanding career development process, it is essential to examine the processes of career exploration, planning, and goal-setting from the viewpoint of university students (Gerçek and Özveren, 2025). Efforts should focus on minimizing disparities among goals as well. Higher education institutions are encouraged to design CC development programs that include the identification of students' personal meanings, values, and goals. In Turkey, "Career Planning" courses are mandated across all academic disciplines nationwide and could start including CC, CDG, and CD components. Furthermore, career centers should frequently assess the existing and target states of students. Career counselors might offer self-evaluation tasks to students to enhance their awareness of the career development process. Helping students identify their authentic career goals and aspirations is one of the most important components of career support (Creed et al.,

2015). Career counselors could minimize present and future CGD levels by assisting students in finding a suitable fit between their future careers and themselves. Also, career counselors could assess the degrees of CD and investigate the underlying causes by collaborating with students. Collaboration is particularly critical since feedback is important for young adults for them to pursue their goals and stay persistent in their career journey (Fishbach and Finkelstein, 2012). In addition, higher education institutions could collaborate with private and public sector organizations to discover the career expectations of both labor market participants and develop programs, workshops, or seminars that connect the future workforce with industry professionals.

Limitations and future research directions

This study has several limitations. First, this study is limited to the sample, which consists of university students in Kocaeli and Sakarya. Although this geographical location represents highly competitive labor markets, its generalizability is only limited to similar areas. Students who participated in the survey enrolled in associate degree programs; thus, future research could be conducted with health, humanities, business, or engineering faculties as well. The data was based on a self-report questionnaire and could therefore include common method bias. Future research could eliminate bias through longitudinal research design and make it possible to infer causal results. CC is a multifaceted concept, and there is still a gap in the literature regarding CGD and CG among developing countries with high unemployment rates such as Turkey; thus, qualitative research patterns could be employed to discover these matters in detail. Additional research may involve students from other academic disciplines, as well as employed and unemployed young adults from a range of occupational categories and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, longitudinal and mixed-method research designs might clarify causal links and offer significant insights into the influence of socioeconomic position, perceived labor market instability, and psychological resilience on the association between CC and CD. Another neglected aspect in this study was the moderating effect of some possible individual qualities. Future research could investigate the moderating effect of age, gender, previous internship experiences, career counselling background and family career support. Also, different research variables could be investigated for exploring the mechanism between CC and CD such as negative emotions (Praskova and McPeake, 2022), future work-self (Xu and Yu, 2025), self-perceived employability (Li et al., 2023) or career adaptability (Ran et al., 2023).

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