

Constructing a Qualitative Model of Psychological Readiness for the Transition From School to an AI-Transformed Labor Market Among Youth

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to construct a qualitative model explaining the psychological readiness of youth for the transition from school to an AI-transformed labor market.

Methods and Materials: A qualitative grounded theory design was employed among 24 young people aged 18–25 years in Turkey who were in the final stages of formal education, recent graduates seeking employment, or early-career employees. Participants were selected using purposeful maximum-variation sampling followed by theoretical sampling until theoretical saturation was achieved. Data were collected through individual semi-structured in-depth interviews focusing on perceptions of AI-related labor-market change, career uncertainty, employability, emotional responses, adaptability, continuous learning, professional identity, and contextual support. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed concurrently with data collection through open, axial, and selective coding using.

Findings: Analysis generated 112 initial open codes, which were consolidated into 18 subcategories and seven major categories. Selective coding identified adaptive psychological readiness for AI-mediated career transition as the core phenomenon. The resulting model showed that readiness emerged through the interaction of perceived AI-related labor-market disruption, cognitive appraisal of opportunity and threat, emotional regulation and tolerance of uncertainty, career agency and adaptive self-efficacy, continuous learning and AI-oriented adaptability, contextual readiness resources, and flexible professional identity. Greater understanding of AI-related occupational change, stronger career self-efficacy, higher tolerance of uncertainty, continuous learning orientation, educational and social support, and active engagement with AI were associated with more adaptive career responses. Weak readiness was characterized by AI-related career anxiety, avoidance of career decisions, perceived helplessness, rigid occupational identity, and fear of skill obsolescence.

Conclusion: Psychological readiness for entering an AI-transformed labor market is a dynamic, multidimensional capacity that depends on the integration of cognitive, emotional, behavioral, identity-related, and contextual resources rather than technological competence alone.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence; psychological readiness; school-to-work transition; youth; career adaptability; career self-efficacy; labor market.

1. Introduction

The transition from school to work has historically represented a major developmental and socioeconomic turning point for young people, requiring them to convert educational experiences, competencies, aspirations, and personal resources into meaningful participation in the labor market. In contemporary societies, however, this transition is becoming substantially more complex because entry into employment now occurs within a context characterized by rapid technological change, shifting occupational structures, increasing uncertainty, and the widespread diffusion of artificial intelligence (AI) across sectors. Whereas conventional models of school-to-work transition have often emphasized educational attainment, occupational choice, employability skills, and labor-market information, the emergence of generative AI, intelligent automation, machine learning, algorithmic decision systems, and increasingly autonomous digital infrastructures has altered the nature of what young people are preparing for. AI is not merely introducing a new category of technical tools; it is modifying the organization of work, redistributing tasks between humans and machines, changing employer expectations, affecting the relative value of different forms of knowledge, and challenging assumptions about the stability of entry-level jobs. Recent research has therefore increasingly framed career readiness as a dynamic capacity rather than a fixed endpoint achieved at graduation. In the generative-AI era, students must anticipate that occupations may evolve faster than formal curricula and that entry-level positions may themselves be reconfigured by automation, task augmentation, or changes in organizational demand (Stylianou, 2026). Broader analyses of labor-market transformation similarly indicate that unemployment dynamics, workforce mobility, sectoral restructuring, and changing patterns of human-capital utilization are becoming interconnected with technological transformation and regional resilience (Khoo, 2026; Lim et al., 2026). These developments suggest that young people entering employment are confronted not only with the challenge of obtaining work but also with the challenge of maintaining psychological and occupational adaptability in a labor market where the content, boundaries, and perceived security of work may be continuously renegotiated.

Artificial intelligence contributes to this complexity by reshaping both the technical and psychosocial dimensions of employment. Studies of AI and automation increasingly show that technological transformation affects job design,

employee roles, competency development, decision-making processes, productivity expectations, and organizational structures (Ifitri et al., 2024; Rani et al., 2026). The movement toward more autonomous AI systems in digital and networked infrastructures further illustrates the speed at which human oversight, operational responsibility, and skill requirements may change in technologically intensive environments (Malik, 2026). At the organizational level, workforce strategies are consequently shifting toward models in which humans and intelligent systems are expected to work collaboratively rather than through a simple replacement logic (Tenakwah & Watson, 2024). Nevertheless, for young people preparing to enter the labor market, the distinction between augmentation and displacement is not always psychologically clear. Secondary students and university students may encounter public narratives emphasizing automation, job loss, technological disruption, or the declining relevance of established professions, while simultaneously being encouraged to view AI as an opportunity for innovation, entrepreneurship, and productivity enhancement. Research on secondary students' career development has shown that AI-related job automation creates substantial challenges for career planning because young people are required to make educational and occupational decisions under conditions in which the future structure of work is difficult to predict (Wong, 2024). Similar concerns are evident among management graduates, who may experience both apprehension and excitement regarding the future of work, reflecting an ambivalent psychological response in which anticipated opportunities coexist with concerns about uncertainty and employability (Mohandas et al., 2023). Accordingly, the psychological consequences of AI transformation cannot be reduced to either technological optimism or fear of automation. They involve a more complex appraisal process through which youth attempt to determine whether technological change is controllable, whether their competencies will remain relevant, whether they can adapt sufficiently quickly, and whether their intended career identity can remain viable in a changing occupational environment.

The growing importance of psychological readiness is particularly evident when career preparation is understood as more than technical skill acquisition. Readiness in complex performance environments generally involves the coordinated availability of cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and adaptive resources rather than a single competency or state (Thompson et al., 2025). Applied to school-to-work

transition, psychological readiness can therefore be conceptualized as a multidimensional capacity through which young people understand changing career conditions, regulate uncertainty, maintain self-efficacy, adapt career expectations, engage in continuous learning, and preserve purposeful action despite incomplete information about future employment. Youth perspectives on college and career readiness have already demonstrated that young people evaluate readiness not merely in relation to academic achievement but also through access to supportive environments, meaningful education, personal agency, opportunity, and perceived preparation for adult working life (Kenny et al., 2023). The Fourth Industrial Revolution has further intensified these requirements, as graduate readiness increasingly depends on adaptability, digital capabilities, applied problem solving, communication, and the ability to function effectively in technologically transformed workplaces (Kasule et al., 2023). Expert perspectives on career competencies similarly suggest that future-oriented career development requires combinations of adaptive, interpersonal, cognitive, technological, and self-management capacities rather than narrow occupational specialization (Mtshali & Dhanpat, 2026). This broader framing is especially relevant to AI because the competencies required for successful transition are likely to change recursively: young people must not only possess skills at the moment of graduation but also develop confidence in their ability to acquire new competencies after graduation. Consequently, psychological readiness includes the expectation that career development will involve repeated adaptation rather than a one-time transition from education into a stable professional trajectory.

AI literacy and AI-related self-efficacy are important components of this process, but they do not exhaust the concept of readiness. Higher education students who understand AI and feel capable of using it may demonstrate stronger intentions to engage in digitally oriented career and entrepreneurial activities, suggesting that AI self-efficacy can influence how technological change is translated into future-oriented behavior (Duong, 2025). Research on students' readiness to learn AI likewise shows that preparedness for AI engagement is influenced by cognitive, motivational, and contextual factors rather than by simple access to technology (Thi, 2025). Educational initiatives increasingly recognize this challenge and are attempting to integrate AI into career-development systems in responsible ways. For example, AI-supported career platforms and educational interventions have been proposed as scalable

mechanisms for helping students explore STEM pathways, identify opportunities, and receive personalized career-development support while also addressing ethical concerns associated with algorithmic systems (Chawla et al., 2026). AI has also been proposed as a tool for improving future-ready practical skills in secondary education by helping teachers connect disciplinary learning to real-life competencies and contemporary work contexts (Levitt & Grubaugh, 2024). However, the presence of AI in education introduces a dual challenge: schools must prepare students to use AI productively while simultaneously helping them understand the consequences of AI for the labor market they are preparing to enter. This challenge becomes particularly important because unequal access to digital infrastructure, training, institutional support, and high-quality AI education may produce unequal levels of readiness. Concerns regarding readiness, equity, and ethics in AI adoption indicate that technological integration can reproduce or intensify disparities when individuals and institutions differ in access, literacy, trust, and capacity to use AI responsibly (Aidoo-Frimpong et al., 2026). Thus, psychological readiness cannot be understood independently of the educational and social environments in which young people encounter technological change.

The role of schools, universities, counselors, and transition-support systems is therefore becoming increasingly important. Career guidance developed under assumptions of relatively stable occupational categories may be insufficient when young people must prepare for careers shaped by automation, volatility, platformization, and continuous technological adaptation. School counselors have been identified as especially important actors in helping students interpret labor-market uncertainty, develop career-management competencies, and prepare for future work under conditions shaped by AI and broader economic instability (Falco, 2026). Career construction approaches are similarly relevant because they emphasize the active development of personal meaning, narrative identity, and career adaptability rather than passive matching between individuals and fixed occupations. Work with gifted and talented students, for example, shows the value of enabling young people to construct ownership over their career narratives and integrate personal identity with evolving educational and occupational choices (Briddick & Briddick, 2024). This perspective is particularly useful in an AI-transformed labor market because rigid attachment to a single occupational identity may increase psychological vulnerability when tasks or professions change, whereas a

more flexible career identity can support adaptation. The transition needs of neurodivergent youth further demonstrate that AI-related career preparation should not be approached as a uniform process. AI may offer new possibilities for personalized pre-employment transition services, skill development, communication, and employment support, but such opportunities must be designed around the needs and agency of young people rather than technological assumptions alone (Hurford et al., 2025). These findings collectively suggest that readiness is relational and context-dependent: psychological capacities develop within systems of educational support, career guidance, social opportunity, technological access, and institutional responsiveness.

The labor-market implications of AI also need to be situated within broader debates about decent work, employment quality, and the social consequences of technological transformation. The objective of preparing youth for an AI-transformed labor market should not be reduced to making individuals more adaptable to any form of employment, because labor-market readiness also concerns whether young people can access secure, meaningful, equitable, and developmentally sustainable work. Policy discussions concerning full employment and decent work emphasize persistent gaps between economic growth, labor-market opportunities, job quality, inclusion, and institutional support (Pawar & Babacan, 2025). Scientific and policy frameworks for resilient development similarly stress that technological progress should be integrated with social sustainability, institutional capacity, and equitable access to opportunities (Popovici et al., 2024). Industry 4.0 and the emerging transition toward Industry 5.0 further reinforce the importance of combining technological innovation with human-centered organizational models that recognize human judgment, creativity, resilience, and collaboration as central components of future production systems (George, 2024). Within this context, AI-related career readiness should not imply adaptation through technological compliance alone. Rather, it should involve the ability to identify and strengthen specifically human forms of value, critically assess technology, collaborate effectively with intelligent systems, and make career decisions that remain psychologically sustainable. The transformation of highly specialized sectors, including transportation and other safety-critical industries, illustrates how AI may produce not only technical but also regulatory, ethical, and societal uncertainty, particularly when autonomous systems begin to assume roles previously associated with human judgment and responsibility

(Elbasyouny & Dababneh, 2025). For young people entering the workforce, such developments may shape perceptions of occupational legitimacy, future professional control, accountability, and the durability of traditional career roles.

The future of work is therefore likely to require a form of readiness that integrates technological literacy with psychological adaptability, career agency, ethical awareness, and tolerance of uncertainty. Although existing research has examined AI literacy, employability, career competencies, automation, student perceptions, workforce adaptation, and future-oriented education, these strands of literature are often treated separately. Studies may identify competencies required for Industry 4.0, document concerns about AI-related job automation, examine readiness to learn AI, or evaluate institutional approaches to career preparation, but comparatively less attention has been paid to how young people themselves psychologically organize these experiences into a coherent readiness process. This gap is important because two individuals with similar levels of technological competence may respond very differently to the same labor-market conditions. One may perceive AI-driven change as manageable and respond through learning, experimentation, and career exploration, while another may interpret the same developments as uncontrollable threats, resulting in avoidance, indecision, or reduced confidence. Sustainable career readiness in the GenAI era therefore depends not only on whether students understand automation but also on whether they perceive meaningful pedagogical support and believe they can remain adaptive under changing employment conditions (Stylianou, 2026). Similarly, responsible educational integration of AI must consider not only technical adoption but also how students understand opportunity, risk, fairness, future professional identity, and their own capacity to act within changing systems (Aidoo-Frimpong et al., 2026; Chawla et al., 2026). Workforce research also increasingly suggests that competency development must be continuous because AI and automation alter skill requirements after labor-market entry as well as before it (Rani et al., 2026; Tenakwah & Watson, 2024). This makes the transition from school to work less a discrete passage and more the beginning of an ongoing adaptive cycle.

The Turkish context provides a particularly relevant setting in which to investigate this phenomenon because youth entering the labor market are simultaneously exposed to expanding digitalization, changing employer expectations, economic uncertainty, and global narratives concerning AI-driven occupational transformation. In such

an environment, formal education may provide essential disciplinary knowledge while still leaving students uncertain about how to translate that knowledge into sustainable career trajectories under rapidly changing technological conditions. The challenge is therefore not simply whether young people possess AI skills but whether they feel capable of learning continuously, revising career plans, tolerating ambiguity, interpreting technological risks realistically, and maintaining a sense of agency. Psychological readiness in this sense may be strengthened by practical exposure to AI, career guidance, supportive educational experiences, mentoring, social support, and opportunities for skill development, while being weakened by perceived lack of control, inequitable access to learning, rigid professional expectations, or fear of obsolescence. Existing research on digital transformation and competency development, youth career readiness, AI-supported transition services, future employment, and changing labor-market structures provides strong evidence that these factors are increasingly important, yet a theoretically integrated explanation of how they interact from the perspective of youth remains underdeveloped (Dewi et al., 2024; Hurford et al., 2025; Ifitri et al., 2024; Kenny et al., 2023). Moreover, the evolving relationship between education and employment requires attention to both individual adaptation and structural context: young people must be prepared to respond proactively to technological change, but the responsibility for readiness cannot be placed exclusively on individuals when institutional resources, labor-market opportunities, and educational responsiveness substantially condition their capacity to adapt (Pawar & Babacan, 2025; Popovici et al., 2024). A qualitative approach is therefore particularly appropriate because it allows psychological readiness to be examined as an experienced and interpreted process rather than as a predetermined set of variables. By exploring how young people describe AI-related opportunities, fears, coping strategies, learning behaviors, support systems, professional identities, and perceptions of employability, it becomes possible to construct a conceptual model that reflects the interplay between personal and contextual dimensions of transition.

Accordingly, the aim of this study was to construct a qualitative model of psychological readiness for the transition from school to an AI-transformed labor market among youth in Turkey.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design based on the grounded theory approach to construct an explanatory model of psychological readiness for the transition from school to an artificial intelligence (AI)-transformed labor market among youth. Grounded theory was selected because psychological readiness for entering a rapidly changing labor market is a multidimensional and context-dependent phenomenon that involves the interaction of individual perceptions, emotional responses, career expectations, adaptive capacities, technological competencies, educational experiences, and anticipated employment conditions. Rather than examining these dimensions through predetermined variables or testing an existing theoretical framework, the study sought to generate a conceptual model directly from the experiences and interpretations of young people approaching or undergoing the transition from formal education to employment. The study population consisted of young people in Turkey who were in the final stages of secondary or tertiary education or had recently completed their education and were preparing to enter, or had recently entered, the labor market. A total of 24 participants were included in the final sample. Participants were between 18 and 25 years of age and were recruited from different educational backgrounds and fields of study to ensure variation in their experiences of technological change and career preparation. The sample included students in the final year of upper-secondary education, undergraduate students approaching graduation, recent university graduates seeking employment, and young employees who had entered the labor market within the preceding two years. Participants represented fields with different levels of anticipated exposure to AI-driven transformation, including social sciences, business and economics, education, engineering, information technologies, health-related disciplines, and humanities. Purposeful maximum-variation sampling was initially used to capture diverse experiences according to age, gender, educational level, academic discipline, employment status, and perceived exposure to AI-related changes. As data collection and analysis progressed, theoretical sampling was applied so that subsequent participants could be selected according to emerging concepts and conceptual gaps identified during the analysis. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, defined as the point at which additional interviews no longer generated substantively new categories,

properties, or relationships relevant to the developing model. Eligibility criteria included being between 18 and 25 years of age, currently studying in the final phase of formal education or having completed formal education within the previous two years, living in Turkey, anticipating entry into or having recently entered the labor market, and being willing to discuss perceptions of AI, employment, career uncertainty, adaptability, and psychological preparation for work. Individuals who were not currently considering education-to-work transition issues or whose employment experience extended substantially beyond the early career period were excluded because their experiences did not directly correspond to the phenomenon under investigation. Participation was voluntary, and all participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, confidentiality of their information, their right to decline individual questions, and their right to withdraw from the study without consequence. Informed consent was obtained prior to each interview, and identifying information was removed during transcription and analysis to protect participant confidentiality.

2.2. Measures

Data were collected using individual semi-structured in-depth interviews developed specifically for the objectives of the study. A semi-structured interview format was selected because it provided sufficient consistency across participants while allowing the interviewer to explore unexpected experiences, meanings, and psychological processes in depth. The interview guide was developed following a review of the conceptual literature on school-to-work transition, career adaptability, employability, occupational uncertainty, psychological readiness, digital transformation, artificial intelligence, and emerging changes in skill demands. The guide was subsequently reviewed for clarity, relevance, and conceptual coverage before formal data collection, and preliminary interviews were used to refine the wording and sequencing of the questions. Interviews began with broad questions concerning participants' educational and career backgrounds and their perceptions of changes occurring in the labor market as a result of AI. Subsequent questions explored how participants understood the effects of AI on occupations, employment opportunities, required competencies, job security, professional identity, and future career trajectories. Particular attention was given to participants' emotional and cognitive reactions to these developments, including

optimism, anxiety, uncertainty, perceived control, self-confidence, perceived employability, willingness to learn, adaptability, resilience, and readiness to revise career plans. Participants were also asked to describe the competencies they believed would be necessary for successful entry into an AI-transformed labor market, the extent to which their schools or universities had prepared them for these changes, the resources and forms of support available to them, and the barriers that might limit their readiness. Additional questions examined experiences with AI applications and digital technologies, perceptions of human-AI collaboration, willingness to engage in reskilling and continuous learning, and strategies used to cope with uncertainty regarding future employment. Examples of broad prompts included questions about what being psychologically prepared for the future labor market meant to participants, how the growing use of AI influenced their expectations regarding employment, what made them feel prepared or unprepared for entering the labor market, how they responded when they believed that technologies might alter or replace tasks associated with their intended occupations, and what personal, educational, family, social, and institutional factors strengthened or weakened their readiness. Follow-up probes such as "Can you explain that further?", "What made you feel that way?", "Can you describe a specific experience?", and "How did this affect your career decisions?" were used to obtain richer descriptions and clarify emerging concepts. Interviews were conducted individually in a private setting or through a secure online video-conferencing platform when face-to-face participation was not feasible. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 75 minutes. With participants' permission, interviews were digitally audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also prepared immediately after each interview to document contextual observations, initial analytical impressions, recurring concepts, contradictions, and possible relationships among emerging categories. Data collection and analysis were conducted concurrently, allowing the content of later interviews to be modified in response to concepts identified in earlier interviews. As the analysis progressed, questions became increasingly focused on clarifying relationships among emerging categories, identifying conditions associated with different levels of psychological readiness, examining participants' responses to AI-related occupational uncertainty, and determining the individual and contextual processes through which readiness was strengthened or weakened. This iterative procedure

continued until the conceptual categories were sufficiently developed and theoretical saturation had been reached.

2.3. Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed according to the constant comparative procedures of grounded theory through the sequential processes of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Analysis began immediately after the first interviews and proceeded simultaneously with subsequent data collection so that emerging findings could inform theoretical sampling and the refinement of later interview questions. During open coding, interview transcripts were read repeatedly and examined line by line to identify meaningful units reflecting participants' perceptions, experiences, emotions, behaviors, coping strategies, career expectations, technological attitudes, and interpretations of readiness for an AI-transformed labor market. Codes were kept close to participants' accounts during the initial stage in order to minimize premature theoretical abstraction. Conceptually similar codes were then compared across interviews, merged where appropriate, differentiated when they represented distinct experiences, and gradually organized into preliminary categories and subcategories. Constant comparison was used throughout the analysis by comparing incidents with incidents, codes with codes, codes with categories, and categories across participants with different educational and employment characteristics. During axial coding, relationships among the preliminary categories were systematically examined to determine the conditions under which psychological readiness developed, the contextual and intervening factors influencing it, the actions and strategies adopted by young people in response to AI-related labor-market change, and the psychological and career-related consequences of these responses. Particular analytical attention was devoted to distinguishing factors that promoted adaptive readiness from those contributing to avoidance, helplessness, anxiety, rigid career expectations, or perceived lack of control. The analysis also examined how perceived AI disruption interacted with career self-efficacy, learning orientation, adaptability, tolerance of uncertainty, digital confidence, future orientation, perceived employability, educational support, social support, and access to opportunities for skill development. In the selective coding stage, the major categories were integrated around a central phenomenon representing psychological readiness for the transition from education to an AI-transformed labor market. Relationships

among causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, the central phenomenon, adaptive strategies, and resulting outcomes were continually reviewed against the original interview data to ensure that the proposed model remained empirically grounded. Analytical memos were written throughout the coding process to record conceptual decisions, emerging propositions, relationships between categories, alternative interpretations, and modifications to the developing theoretical framework. Negative and contrasting cases were deliberately examined to refine the boundaries of the categories and prevent the model from representing only the dominant pattern of participant experiences. Theoretical saturation was considered achieved when continued analysis produced no substantively new properties of the principal categories and the relationships among the major components of the model were adequately supported by multiple participant accounts. To strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings, credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with the interview material, continuous comparison across cases, examination of discrepant experiences, and participant confirmation of selected interpretations where clarification was necessary. Dependability and confirmability were enhanced by maintaining an analytical audit trail containing coding decisions, category revisions, interview notes, methodological decisions, and theoretical memos. Peer review of selected transcripts and coding decisions was also used to evaluate the conceptual consistency of the analysis. Transferability was facilitated by documenting the characteristics of the participants, educational contexts, transition circumstances, and labor-market perceptions in sufficient detail to enable readers to evaluate the applicability of the findings to comparable populations. The final outcome of the analytical process was an integrated qualitative model explaining how psychological readiness for transition into an AI-transformed labor market is formed among youth, which personal and contextual factors facilitate or inhibit this readiness, what adaptive strategies young people employ in response to technological and occupational uncertainty, and how these processes shape their perceived capacity to enter, navigate, and develop within a rapidly changing world of work.

3. Findings and Results

The final sample consisted of 24 young people from Turkey who were either approaching the completion of formal education, actively preparing to enter the labor

market, or had recently entered employment. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 25 years, with a mean age of 22.08 years. Thirteen participants (54.17%) were female and 11 (45.83%) were male. Regarding their educational and transition status, five participants (20.83%) were final-year upper-secondary students, nine (37.50%) were undergraduate students in the final stages of their degree programs, six (25.00%) were recent university graduates who were actively seeking employment, and four (16.67%) had entered their first substantial employment position within the previous two years. Participants represented a deliberately heterogeneous range of academic fields, including engineering and information technologies, business and economics, social sciences, education, health-related fields, and humanities, thereby allowing the analysis to capture differences in perceived exposure to AI-related occupational transformation. Fourteen participants (58.33%) reported regular use of generative AI or other AI-supported applications for educational, career-related, or work purposes, seven (29.17%) reported occasional use, and three (12.50%) indicated limited direct use despite being familiar with AI developments. Most participants perceived artificial

intelligence as likely to substantially affect their future occupation, although the character of this expectation differed considerably: some interpreted AI as an opportunity for productivity, learning, and occupational mobility, whereas others associated it with job displacement, declining professional value, heightened competition, and uncertainty regarding the relevance of currently acquired qualifications. Analysis of the 24 interviews generated 112 initial open codes. Through continuous comparison, conceptual consolidation, and axial analysis, these codes were organized into 18 subcategories and subsequently into seven major categories. Selective coding identified adaptive psychological readiness for AI-mediated career transition as the core phenomenon integrating the emerging categories. The findings indicated that psychological readiness was not simply a function of technological competence; rather, it represented a dynamic configuration of cognitive understanding, emotional regulation, perceived agency, career adaptability, learning orientation, contextual support, and the capacity to maintain a coherent but flexible professional identity under conditions of rapid technological change.

Table 1

Major Categories, Subcategories, Representative Codes, and Participant Coverage Emerging From the Qualitative Analysis

Major category	Subcategories	Representative open codes	Participants referring to category, n (%)
Perceived AI-related labor-market disruption	Awareness of occupational transformation; perceived task substitution; changing skill requirements	Jobs will change rather than simply disappear; routine tasks are becoming automated; degrees alone will no longer guarantee employment; new occupations are emerging; traditional skills may lose value	23 (95.83)
Career-related cognitive appraisal	Opportunity appraisal; threat appraisal; perceived controllability of transition	AI can improve career opportunities; fear of professional redundancy; uncertainty about which skills will remain valuable; belief that preparation can reduce risk; difficulty predicting future occupations	24 (100.00)
Emotional readiness and uncertainty tolerance	Regulation of AI-related anxiety; tolerance of ambiguity; resilience under career uncertainty	Anxiety about replacement; fear of falling behind; remaining calm despite unclear career paths; accepting continuous change; recovering from unsuccessful applications or skill gaps	21 (87.50)
Career agency and adaptive self-efficacy	Career self-efficacy; perceived employability; proactive career control	Confidence in learning new technologies; belief in ability to remain employable; willingness to change career direction; active exploration of alternative occupations; taking responsibility for personal development	22 (91.67)
Continuous learning and AI-oriented adaptability	Reskilling orientation; AI literacy; experimentation and flexible learning	Learning AI tools independently; taking online courses; updating technical and nontechnical skills; combining disciplinary knowledge with AI competence; viewing learning as continuous rather than completed at graduation	24 (100.00)
Contextual readiness resources	Educational preparation; career guidance; family and peer support; access to technological resources	University courses not keeping pace with change; importance of mentors; family encouragement; peer learning; unequal access to training; need for practical AI-related career guidance	20 (83.33)
Flexible professional identity and future orientation	Human–AI complementarity; identity flexibility; realistic future planning	Identifying uniquely human strengths; willingness to redefine professional role; seeing AI as a collaborator; avoiding attachment to a single job title; planning several possible career paths	19 (79.17)

As shown in Table 1, the analysis demonstrated that psychological readiness for transition into an AI-transformed labor market was composed of several interdependent psychological and contextual dimensions rather than a single attitude toward technology. The most pervasive categories were career-related cognitive appraisal and continuous learning and AI-oriented adaptability, both of which were identified in all 24 interviews. Participants consistently evaluated AI through a dual interpretive frame involving both opportunity and threat. Even participants who expressed strong optimism about AI acknowledged that occupational entry would become more demanding because young workers would be expected to learn rapidly, update skills continuously, and demonstrate competencies beyond formal academic qualifications. Perceived AI-related labor-market disruption was also nearly universal, being represented in 23 participants (95.83%), indicating that the participants generally regarded technological transformation as an immediate career issue rather than an abstract future development. However, awareness of disruption alone did not constitute readiness. The accounts of participants who appeared most psychologically prepared combined awareness of potential disruption with a strong sense of career agency, a willingness to acquire new competencies, and an ability to tolerate uncertainty without becoming behaviorally immobilized. Career agency and adaptive self-efficacy were evident in 22 participants (91.67%), although

their strength varied markedly. Participants displaying higher readiness described themselves as capable of responding to technological changes through learning, career experimentation, networking, and modification of occupational plans, whereas participants with lower readiness tended to interpret technological developments as external forces over which they had little personal influence. Emotional readiness and uncertainty tolerance appeared in 21 interviews (87.50%) and represented an especially important distinction between knowledge about AI and preparedness for its consequences. Several participants possessed substantial knowledge of AI tools but nevertheless experienced pronounced anxiety regarding job replacement, competition, or the future value of their field. Contextual readiness resources were mentioned by 20 participants (83.33%), with repeated emphasis on the discrepancy between rapid technological development and the perceived slowness of formal curricula and career-guidance structures. Finally, flexible professional identity and future orientation, identified in 19 participants (79.17%), reflected the capacity to define one's future professional value in terms broader than a fixed occupational title. Participants who viewed AI as potentially complementary to human capabilities and who were willing to revise their professional identities demonstrated greater readiness than those who equated career success with preserving an unchanged occupational role.

Table 2

Paradigm Model of Psychological Readiness for the School-to-Work Transition in an AI-Transformed Labor Market

Paradigm component	Main categories and subcategories	Analytical interpretation
Causal conditions	Perceived acceleration of AI adoption; anticipated occupational restructuring; task automation; changing employer expectations; uncertainty regarding future skill value	Technological change initiates the readiness process by requiring young people to reconsider assumptions about occupations, qualifications, and career security
Contextual conditions	Quality of educational preparation; disciplinary background; exposure to AI; labor-market information; availability of career guidance; socioeconomic access to learning opportunities	These conditions determine the environment within which young people interpret and respond to AI-related career change
Intervening conditions	Family and peer support; access to mentors; prior success with technology; perceived employability; financial constraints; confidence in learning; perceived pace of technological change	These factors strengthen or weaken the translation of awareness into adaptive psychological and behavioral responses
Core phenomenon	Adaptive psychological readiness for AI-mediated career transition	A dynamic capacity to understand technological change, regulate uncertainty, preserve perceived agency, adapt career identity, and undertake continuous learning while entering the labor market
Action and interaction strategies	Proactive reskilling; experimentation with AI tools; career exploration; diversification of career options; development of complementary human skills; networking; information seeking; reframing AI as a collaborative resource	Young people actively manage uncertainty by expanding competencies and career alternatives rather than relying solely on their existing educational credentials
Positive consequences	Greater career confidence; stronger perceived employability; reduced paralysis under uncertainty; flexible career planning; willingness to pursue emerging opportunities; stronger human–AI complementarity	Adaptive readiness supports constructive engagement with technological change and increases confidence in navigating occupational transitions

Negative consequences when readiness is weak	AI-related career anxiety; avoidance of career decisions; perceived helplessness; rigid occupational identity; fear of skill obsolescence; passive dependence on formal education	Low readiness converts technological uncertainty into psychological threat and may inhibit learning, exploration, and labor-market engagement
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Table 2 presents the axial organization of the findings and demonstrates how the identified categories were integrated into a grounded theoretical explanation of psychological readiness. The analysis suggested that readiness begins with exposure to or awareness of causal conditions associated with AI-driven labor-market change. Participants repeatedly described observing rapid developments in generative AI, automation, algorithmic decision-making, and AI-assisted professional tools, which prompted them to reconsider assumptions about the stability of occupations and the long-term value of existing skills. These perceptions did not lead uniformly to either confidence or anxiety because their psychological effects depended on contextual and intervening conditions. Educational preparation was one of the most frequently discussed contextual influences. Participants who had encountered AI applications through coursework, practical projects, internships, or independent learning tended to describe technological change in more specific and manageable terms, whereas participants whose knowledge remained largely based on media narratives frequently interpreted AI in broader and more threatening ways. The presence of career guidance, access to reliable labor-market information, disciplinary relevance, and opportunities for skills development further shaped the interpretation of technological change. Intervening conditions such as supportive family relationships, peer learning, mentoring, previous successful adaptation to technology, and confidence in one's ability to learn

strengthened readiness, while financial limitations, lack of access to advanced training, uncertainty regarding appropriate skills, and perceptions of uncontrollable technological acceleration weakened it. Within this configuration, the core phenomenon of adaptive psychological readiness represented the capacity to remain agentic while acknowledging uncertainty. Readiness was therefore not conceptualized as the absence of fear or concern. Several highly prepared participants reported substantial concern about automation and competition but simultaneously described concrete strategies for maintaining employability. The distinguishing factor was their ability to convert concern into adaptive action. The main action and interaction strategies included proactive reskilling, experimenting with AI tools, monitoring occupational trends, maintaining several possible career trajectories, strengthening communication and other human-centered competencies, seeking professional networks, and reframing AI from a purely substitutive technology to a potential collaborative resource. When these strategies were successfully employed, participants described greater confidence, perceived employability, flexibility, and willingness to engage with emerging opportunities. In contrast, when psychological and contextual resources were insufficient, AI-related uncertainty was more likely to produce avoidance, helplessness, indecision, dependence on existing qualifications, and fear that professional identity would become obsolete.

Table 3

Selective Coding Relationships Supporting the Final Qualitative Model

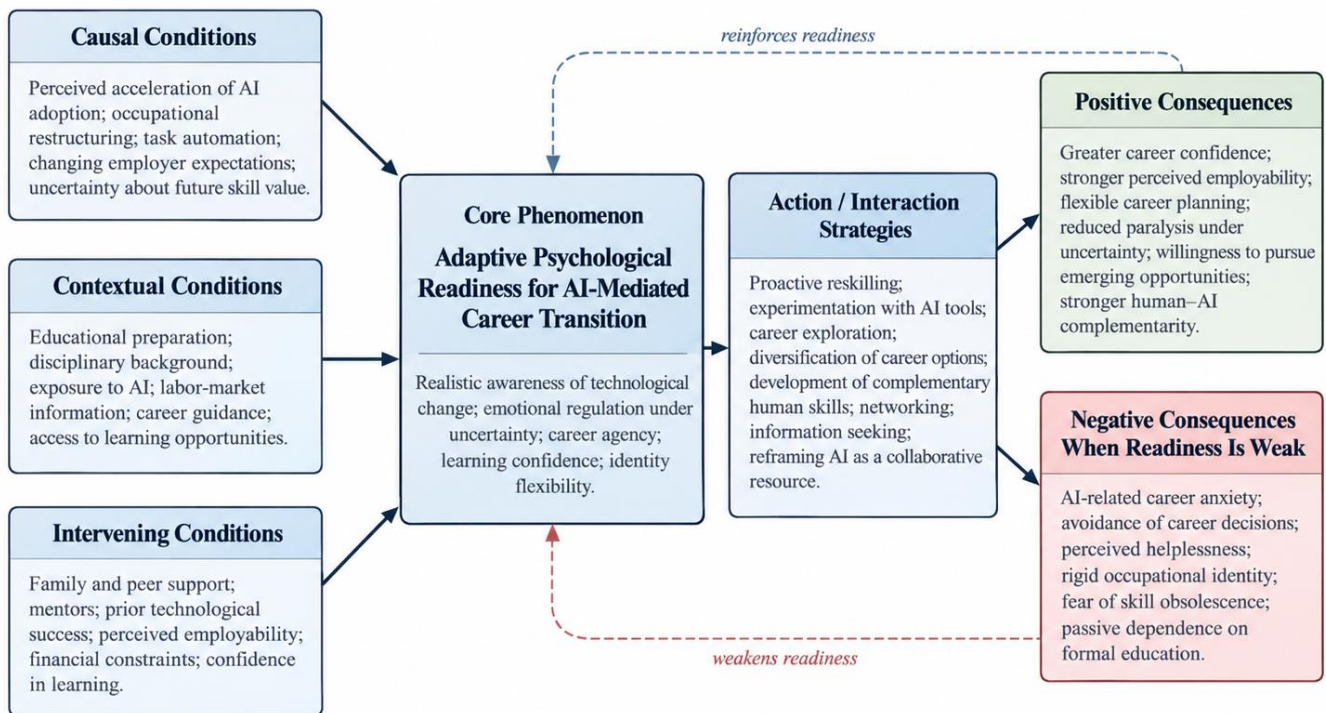
Theoretical relationship	Empirical pattern identified in interviews	Supporting participants, n (%)
Greater understanding of AI-related occupational change was associated with more realistic career appraisal	Participants with direct experience of AI distinguished task transformation from complete occupational replacement and described more differentiated future expectations	20 (83.33)
Career self-efficacy transformed perceived technological threat into proactive adaptation	Participants who believed they could learn new skills were more likely to interpret AI-related disruption as manageable	21 (87.50)
Tolerance of uncertainty supported continued action despite unclear occupational futures	Participants capable of accepting ambiguity continued exploring careers and acquiring skills without requiring certainty about specific future jobs	18 (75.00)
Continuous learning orientation was central to sustained psychological readiness	Participants repeatedly described future employability as dependent on ongoing learning after graduation rather than completion of formal education	24 (100.00)
Flexible professional identity reduced perceived threat from task automation	Participants who defined professional value through transferable capabilities rather than fixed tasks were less threatened by technological substitution	19 (79.17)

Educational and social support strengthened adaptive responses	Participants with access to practical guidance, mentors, supportive peers, or relevant courses reported clearer preparation strategies	18 (75.00)
Perceived lack of control intensified AI-related career anxiety	Participants who viewed technological change as uncontrollable and themselves as unable to influence employability reported greater fear and indecision	16 (66.67)
Active engagement with AI increased perceived human–AI complementarity	Regular users of AI were more likely to discuss augmentation, productivity, and collaboration rather than only replacement	17 (70.83)
Readiness emerged from interaction among cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and contextual resources	No single skill or attitude consistently distinguished highly prepared participants; readiness reflected an integrated configuration of capabilities and supports	24 (100.00)

The selective coding results presented in Table 3 clarified the relationships among the major categories and provided the basis for constructing the final theoretical model. Continuous learning orientation was the most universal relationship identified in the data, appearing in all 24 interviews. Regardless of academic field or current level of AI competence, participants generally believed that the traditional assumption that education precedes employment as a largely completed phase of skill acquisition was becoming increasingly unrealistic. Instead, participants characterized employability in an AI-transformed economy as requiring repeated cycles of learning, unlearning, and reskilling. Career self-efficacy represented another central mechanism, with 21 participants (87.50%) providing accounts indicating that confidence in their own capacity to learn influenced whether technological disruption was perceived primarily as an opportunity or as a threat. Importantly, technological knowledge alone was insufficient to generate readiness. Participants who understood AI but doubted their own ability to respond to occupational change sometimes reported greater anxiety because awareness of potential disruption was not accompanied by a sense of control. Conversely, participants possessing moderate technological competence but strong learning confidence frequently expressed greater readiness because they expected to acquire missing skills when needed. The findings also demonstrated a close relationship between uncertainty tolerance and behavioral continuity. Eighteen participants (75.00%) described continuing to make

educational and career decisions despite acknowledging that future occupational structures could not be predicted with confidence. Flexible professional identity similarly reduced perceived vulnerability to automation because participants who defined themselves through transferable competencies, values, problem-solving abilities, interpersonal capabilities, or domain expertise were better able to imagine multiple future professional roles. Social and educational supports functioned as amplifying conditions rather than substitutes for personal agency: mentors, instructors, peers, family members, and accessible training opportunities helped participants interpret technological developments and identify practical responses, but participants still needed to perceive themselves as active agents in the transition process. Another notable pattern was that active experience with AI tended to promote a more complementary understanding of human–AI relations. Seventeen participants (70.83%) described direct engagement with AI as helping them identify both the capabilities and limitations of such systems, thereby replacing generalized fears with more concrete assessments of which tasks might be automated and which forms of human contribution would remain valuable. Taken together, these relationships demonstrated that psychological readiness emerged from the integration of cognitive appraisal, emotional regulation, career self-efficacy, learning orientation, behavioral adaptability, professional identity flexibility, and contextual resources rather than from any isolated characteristic.

Figure 1

Grounded Theory Model of Psychological Readiness for the Transition From School to an AI-Transformed Labor Market Among Youth

The final grounded theory model conceptualized psychological readiness as a dynamic and recursive adaptation process initiated by young people's recognition of AI-driven changes in occupations, work tasks, competency requirements, and employment structures. At the beginning of this process, perceived technological disruption is cognitively appraised as some combination of opportunity, threat, and uncertainty. This appraisal is shaped by contextual conditions such as educational preparation, disciplinary background, access to AI-related learning, quality of career guidance, socioeconomic resources, and exposure to reliable information about labor-market change. It is simultaneously moderated by intervening psychological and social conditions, particularly career self-efficacy, tolerance of uncertainty, prior experience with technological adaptation, perceived employability, family and peer support, and access to mentors. When these conditions promote a sense of agency, young people are more likely to develop adaptive psychological readiness characterized by realistic awareness of technological change, emotional regulation, confidence in the ability to learn, willingness to revise career assumptions, and acceptance that occupational development will involve continuing adaptation. Adaptive readiness then activates behavioral strategies including

continuous reskilling, active experimentation with AI tools, career exploration, development of transferable human capabilities, monitoring of labor-market developments, networking, and diversification of possible career pathways. These strategies reinforce readiness by providing mastery experiences, reducing uncertainty, increasing perceived employability, and allowing young people to construct a professional identity that is compatible with human-AI collaboration rather than dependent on the preservation of specific tasks. The model is therefore recursive rather than linear: successful engagement with new technologies strengthens self-efficacy and perceived control, which in turn encourages further learning and exploration. The opposite cycle was also identified. When technological disruption was appraised primarily as uncontrollable threat and participants lacked confidence, guidance, learning access, or uncertainty tolerance, the resulting pattern involved anxiety, avoidance, career indecision, rigid attachment to existing occupational identities, and passive reliance on formal qualifications. Such reactions reduced active learning and exploration, which further weakened perceived preparedness and reinforced concerns about obsolescence. Accordingly, the model indicates that psychological readiness should not be understood as a stable

personality characteristic or as simple technological optimism. It is an evolving capacity produced through interaction between the young person's psychological resources and the educational, social, and technological environment. The central theoretical proposition emerging from the findings is that youth are psychologically prepared for an AI-transformed labor market when they are able to interpret technological uncertainty without losing perceived agency, regulate the emotional consequences of occupational ambiguity, continuously reconstruct their skills and career expectations, and maintain a flexible professional identity while actively engaging with emerging forms of human–AI work.

Overall, the findings showed that the transition from school to an AI-transformed labor market involves a qualitatively different form of psychological preparation from conventional school-to-work transition. Participants did not describe readiness simply in terms of obtaining qualifications, selecting an occupation, preparing a résumé, or acquiring initial workplace skills. Instead, readiness involved preparing psychologically for the possibility that job descriptions, valued competencies, work processes, and even occupational identities could change repeatedly after labor-market entry. The central phenomenon of adaptive psychological readiness therefore incorporated five closely interconnected capacities: understanding technological change realistically, maintaining emotional functioning under uncertainty, believing in one's capacity to remain employable through learning, taking proactive adaptive action, and sustaining a sufficiently flexible professional identity to accommodate evolving relationships between human and artificial intelligence. The interviews further showed that optimism and readiness were not synonymous. Some participants were optimistic about AI while demonstrating limited concrete preparation, whereas others expressed concern about potential displacement yet exhibited substantial readiness through active reskilling, career diversification, and realistic planning. Similarly, frequent AI use alone did not guarantee psychological preparedness, although direct experience often contributed to more differentiated and less catastrophic perceptions of technological change. The most psychologically ready participants were those who combined informed awareness of disruption with a sense of personal agency, acceptance of uncertainty, continuous learning behavior, and the ability to conceptualize AI as a changing feature of professional practice rather than as an external event that would simply determine their occupational future. These findings formed

the empirical basis for the qualitative model and suggest that psychological readiness for the emerging labor market is best conceptualized as an adaptive developmental process in which cognitive, emotional, behavioral, identity-related, and contextual resources interact to enable young people to navigate technological uncertainty while preserving purposeful career action.

4. Discussion

The present study developed a qualitative model of psychological readiness for the transition from school to an AI-transformed labor market among youth in Turkey. The findings showed that psychological readiness is not reducible to digital competence, AI literacy, or confidence in obtaining employment. Rather, it emerged as a multidimensional and dynamic configuration involving realistic understanding of technological change, emotional regulation under uncertainty, career agency, adaptive self-efficacy, continuous learning orientation, contextual support, and flexibility of professional identity. The central phenomenon identified in the model, adaptive psychological readiness for AI-mediated career transition, was shaped by causal conditions such as perceived acceleration of AI adoption, occupational restructuring, task automation, changing employer expectations, and uncertainty regarding the future value of skills. These conditions were filtered through contextual factors including educational preparation, disciplinary background, exposure to AI, labor-market information, career guidance, and access to learning opportunities, as well as intervening factors such as family and peer support, mentoring, prior technological success, perceived employability, financial constraints, and confidence in learning. The model further indicated that readiness was expressed through proactive strategies such as reskilling, experimentation with AI tools, career exploration, diversification of occupational options, development of complementary human capabilities, networking, and information seeking. These strategies were associated with greater career confidence, stronger perceived employability, and more flexible future planning, whereas weak readiness was associated with anxiety, avoidance, helplessness, rigid occupational identity, and fear of skill obsolescence. This broad pattern is consistent with recent literature arguing that sustainable career readiness in the generative AI era requires more than technical familiarity with automation and depends on how students interpret technological disruption, perceive

pedagogical support, and assess their capacity to adapt to changing employment conditions (Stylianou, 2026).

One of the most important findings was that participants did not perceive AI exclusively as either a threat or an opportunity. Instead, they simultaneously recognized the possibilities of increased productivity, new occupations, and improved learning while also expressing concern about job displacement, competition, skill obsolescence, and uncertainty regarding the durability of existing career paths. This dual appraisal is consistent with previous findings showing that graduates often experience both apprehension and excitement when anticipating the future of work (Mohandas et al., 2023). The present findings extend this pattern by showing that psychological readiness depends less on whether AI is evaluated positively or negatively and more on whether the individual believes that its consequences can be navigated through learning and adaptive action. This distinction is important because generalized optimism may coexist with poor preparation, while concern about automation may coexist with high readiness when individuals respond by updating skills, exploring career alternatives, and strengthening perceived control. The results are also aligned with evidence that AI and automation are changing work roles, competency requirements, and organizational expectations in ways that require continuous adaptation rather than one-time preparation (Ifitri et al., 2024; Rani et al., 2026). In this sense, the present model supports a view of readiness as an active regulatory process through which youth interpret external disruption and convert it into either adaptive or maladaptive responses.

A second major finding concerned the central role of career self-efficacy and perceived agency. Participants who believed that they could learn new technologies, revise their plans, and remain employable were more likely to treat AI-related change as manageable, even when they acknowledged substantial uncertainty. By contrast, participants who perceived technological transformation as uncontrollable were more likely to report fear, indecision, and psychological withdrawal. This finding corresponds with research showing that AI self-efficacy can shape how students translate AI literacy into digitally oriented intentions and future behavior (Duong, 2025). It is also consistent with work emphasizing that readiness to engage with AI depends not only on knowledge but also on motivational and confidence-related factors (Thi, 2025). The present study adds to this literature by indicating that self-efficacy operates as a mechanism connecting awareness of

AI-related change with adaptive career behavior. Knowledge of AI may increase awareness of risk, but without perceived agency it may not improve readiness and may even heighten anxiety. Conversely, moderate technical competence combined with strong confidence in learning may support a more resilient transition. This interpretation is also compatible with broader research on Fourth Industrial Revolution competencies, which emphasizes the importance of adaptability, problem solving, self-management, and continued development in addition to technical expertise (Kasule et al., 2023; Mtshali & Dhanpat, 2026).

The findings also demonstrated that tolerance of uncertainty and emotional regulation are central to psychological readiness. Participants who could continue making decisions despite ambiguity about future occupations appeared better able to maintain forward movement in their education-to-work transition. This suggests that readiness is not equivalent to certainty and that psychologically prepared youth do not necessarily possess clear predictions about the labor market. Instead, they appear able to function constructively despite not knowing which jobs, technologies, or skills will become most important. Such a finding is especially relevant in an environment where AI-related transformation is rapid, uneven, and difficult to forecast. Research on labor-market transformation has similarly emphasized multidimensional uncertainty in employment structures and human-capital utilization (Khoo, 2026), while analyses of regional resilience underscore the importance of adaptive human capital in contexts of structural change (Lim et al., 2026). From this perspective, uncertainty tolerance may function as a psychological resource that enables youth to remain engaged in exploration and learning while labor-market conditions evolve. The present findings therefore suggest that career-readiness interventions should address emotional responses to uncertainty directly rather than assuming that better information alone will resolve career anxiety.

Another central result was the universal importance of continuous learning orientation. All participants referred in some form to the need for ongoing reskilling, updating knowledge, or learning to work with new technologies. This supports the argument that the conventional model in which education is completed before labor-market entry is becoming increasingly inadequate. In AI-intensive contexts, the transition from education to work is better conceptualized as the beginning of a recurring cycle of learning and adaptation. This finding aligns with research showing that AI and automation are transforming

competency development inside organizations and requiring employees to update skills continuously (Ifitri et al., 2024). It is also compatible with educational studies emphasizing the need to integrate AI and future-ready competencies into school curricula and practical learning environments (Chawla et al., 2026; Levitt & Grubaugh, 2024). The findings further suggest that educational systems should not focus solely on teaching specific AI tools, because particular applications may become obsolete quickly. More durable readiness may depend on cultivating confidence in learning, transferable problem-solving skills, digital adaptability, and the expectation that professional development will remain continuous across the career course.

The study also highlighted the importance of flexible professional identity. Participants who defined their future value through transferable competencies, human strengths, and broader professional purposes appeared less threatened by the automation of particular tasks. In contrast, those who strongly identified with a fixed job title or narrowly defined task set appeared more vulnerable to fears of replacement. This finding is consistent with career construction perspectives, which emphasize the active development of career narratives and adaptive identity rather than rigid matching between individuals and static occupations (Briddick & Briddick, 2024). It also supports arguments associated with Industry 5.0 that future work will increasingly depend on forms of human-machine complementarity rather than simple substitution (George, 2024; Tenakwah & Watson, 2024). In the present study, readiness was strengthened when participants could imagine themselves collaborating with AI, changing roles, or applying their competencies in new occupational configurations. The finding therefore indicates that psychological preparation for the future of work should include identity flexibility and not merely technical adaptation. Young people may need support in learning to define themselves through capabilities, values, and contribution rather than through the presumed permanence of a particular occupational title.

The results further showed that contextual and social supports significantly shaped readiness. Educational preparation, access to career guidance, exposure to AI, mentoring, peer learning, and family support influenced whether participants were able to translate awareness of technological change into adaptive action. This is consistent with research emphasizing the role of school counselors in helping students prepare for AI-driven technological and economic volatility (Falco, 2026). It is also aligned with

youth-centered research indicating that career readiness develops within educational and social environments that provide opportunity, support, and meaningful preparation (Kenny et al., 2023). The current findings suggest that individual responsibility alone cannot adequately explain readiness. Even highly motivated students may struggle when they lack access to relevant training, realistic labor-market information, or supportive guidance. This concern also echoes work on equity and ethical readiness for AI adoption, which shows that differences in access, institutional capacity, and support can shape the benefits individuals receive from technological transformation (Aidoo-Frimpong et al., 2026). Likewise, AI-assisted transition services may offer important opportunities for personalized support, including for neurodivergent youth, but their value depends on careful implementation and attention to the needs of diverse learners (Hurford et al., 2025). These findings support a relational view of readiness in which personal agency and institutional opportunity are mutually reinforcing.

The model also indicated that direct engagement with AI was associated with more differentiated and less catastrophic interpretations of automation. Participants with practical experience using AI tools were more likely to distinguish between task substitution and whole-job replacement and to identify areas in which human judgment, creativity, communication, and contextual understanding remained important. This finding is consistent with perspectives that advocate preparing workforces for collaboration between humans and intelligent systems rather than framing AI purely as a replacement technology (Tenakwah & Watson, 2024). It also corresponds with the educational logic underlying responsible AI career-development initiatives, which aim to provide students with structured exposure to AI while simultaneously strengthening career exploration and informed decision-making (Chawla et al., 2026). The result suggests that experiential contact with AI may reduce vague technological anxiety by making capabilities and limitations more concrete. However, such exposure should be accompanied by ethical and critical literacy, because familiarity without reflective understanding may encourage overconfidence or uncritical dependence.

5. Conclusion

At a broader level, the findings should also be interpreted within the social and policy context of future employment. Readiness for an AI-transformed labor market cannot be

defined solely as the ability to adjust to employer demands. Questions of employment quality, decent work, inclusion, and fair access remain essential. Previous research has emphasized that full employment and decent work require structural and policy responses rather than merely individual adaptation (Pawar & Babacan, 2025). Similarly, sustainable and resilient development depends on connecting technological innovation with social and institutional capacity (Popovici et al., 2024). The current findings are consistent with this broader perspective because participants' readiness was shaped by access to education, guidance, training, and opportunity, not merely by personal motivation. The model therefore suggests that psychological readiness should be understood as both an individual and systemic outcome. Young people can develop agency, adaptability, and learning orientation, but these capacities are more likely to translate into successful transitions when educational and labor-market institutions provide credible pathways for skill development and meaningful employment. The challenges identified in highly automated and safety-critical sectors further reinforce the need to consider regulatory, ethical, and social dimensions of technological change rather than treating AI as a purely technical phenomenon (Elbasyouny & Dababneh, 2025). Taken together, the study contributes to the literature by integrating psychological, educational, technological, and contextual dimensions into a single qualitative model of school-to-work readiness in the AI era.

6. Limitations & Suggestions

The present study has several limitations. First, the sample consisted of 24 young people from Turkey, and although maximum-variation sampling was used to include participants from different educational backgrounds and transition statuses, the findings should not be interpreted as statistically representative of all Turkish youth or of young people in other national contexts. Second, the study relied on self-reported perceptions and experiences, which may have been influenced by participants' current exposure to AI-related media narratives, labor-market uncertainty, or individual differences in technological confidence. Third, because the study was qualitative and cross-sectional, it captured participants' interpretations at a particular stage of technological and occupational change and could not determine how psychological readiness develops longitudinally as individuals move from education into sustained employment. Fourth, some categories, particularly

those related to AI experience and professional identity, may evolve rapidly as technologies and employer expectations change. Finally, although theoretical saturation was achieved within the scope of the study, other relevant factors may emerge in different occupational sectors, socioeconomic groups, or regional contexts.

Future research should examine the proposed model using longitudinal, mixed-method, and quantitative designs. Longitudinal studies could follow students from the final stages of education through early employment to determine how psychological readiness changes before and after direct labor-market exposure. Quantitative studies could operationalize the major categories identified in this study and test the relationships among AI-related threat appraisal, career self-efficacy, uncertainty tolerance, continuous learning orientation, professional identity flexibility, contextual support, and employment outcomes. Future work should also compare different groups, including vocational students, university students, unemployed graduates, youth from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, and those entering occupations with different levels of automation exposure. Cross-national research would be useful for determining which components of the model are culturally stable and which depend on national education systems and labor-market structures. Intervention studies could also examine whether targeted programs in AI literacy, career adaptability, uncertainty management, and human-AI collaboration improve psychological readiness over time.

In practice, schools, universities, career services, and employers should treat psychological readiness for AI-related labor-market transition as a multidimensional developmental objective. Educational programs should combine AI literacy with career adaptability, self-efficacy, emotional regulation, uncertainty tolerance, and flexible professional identity. Career guidance should help young people understand how tasks and roles are changing, identify transferable skills, and develop multiple possible career pathways rather than preparing for a single fixed occupation. Students should also receive structured opportunities to experiment with AI tools in realistic academic and workplace contexts so that they can develop informed judgments about both the capabilities and limitations of these technologies. Mentoring, peer learning, and access to practical labor-market information should be strengthened, particularly for young people with limited access to technological resources or professional networks. Employers can contribute by offering early-career placements, internships, and transition programs that

emphasize learning and adaptation rather than expecting graduates to arrive fully prepared for rapidly changing work environments. Across these settings, the objective should be to help youth maintain agency and purposeful career action while learning to function constructively in conditions of technological uncertainty.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this article.

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