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Teaching in the Age of AI: Faculty Anxiety, Coping Strategies, and Psychological Well-Being

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Abstract

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into higher education has generated unprecedented psychological challenges for college faculty, manifesting as anxiety and stress that affect teaching performance, professional well-being, and institutional effectiveness. While existing research has examined AI adoption and faculty mental health separately, there is a notable absence of a comprehensive conceptual framework that explains the dynamic relationships between AI-induced anxiety, stress, and coping strategies among college faculty. This conceptual paper proposes an integrated theoretical framework that synthesizes the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) with the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989) and the Job Demands-Resources Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) to explain how faculty perceive, experience, and cope with AI-related occupational stress. The framework posits that AI-induced anxiety and stress are mediated by cognitive appraisal processes, moderated by institutional support and individual characteristics, and result in either adaptive or maladaptive coping outcomes. The proposed framework offers a structured approach for researchers and practitioners to understand faculty responses to AI integration and provides a basis for designing targeted interventions to enhance faculty well-being in the AI era. The paper concludes with implications for educational policy, institutional practice, and future research directions.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, anxiety, stress, coping strategies, college faculty, conceptual framework, higher education

Introduction

The integration of artificial intelligence into higher education has accelerated at an unprecedented pace, fundamentally transforming teaching, research, and administrative processes (Alam, 2022). From intelligent tutoring systems and automated grading platforms to AI-assisted research tools and administrative chatbots, these technologies are reshaping the academic landscape and demanding new competencies from college faculty (Cheng & Liang, 2023). While AI offers substantial opportunities for enhancing educational efficiency and pedagogical innovation, its rapid adoption has generated significant psychological challenges for faculty who must navigate unfamiliar technological terrain while maintaining their professional identity and academic standards (Renz & Hilbig, 2020).

The psychological consequences of AI integration have emerged as a critical concern in higher education. Anxiety is derived from the Latin *anxietas* (to choke, trouble, and upset) and

encompasses behavioural, affective, and cognitive responses to the perception of danger (Zeidner & Matthews, 2011). Anxiety is a normal human emotion, but it is considered excessive or pathological when it is out of proportion to the challenge or stress in the duration or severity of the threat, resulting in psychological, social, occupational, biological, and other impairments (Öhman, 2008). Anxiety is associated with substantial negative effects on individuals' social, emotional, and academic success (Spielberger, 1983). Anxiety is a basic human emotion that consists of fear and uncertainty and usually occurs when an individual believes that the event is a threat to the self or self-esteem (Hooda & Saini, 2017). Anxiety can also be a state or trait depending on its duration (Good, 1973). Anxiety blocks normal thought processes. Anxiety is a human emotion experienced by everyone. Faculty members experience problems during their teaching and feel anxious while adopting new technologies or making significant pedagogical decisions (Alam, 2022). Anxiety is a psychological and physical response to a self-concept characterised by subjectively and consciously perceived feelings of tension (Kozub et al., 2025).

Research has found that there are many obstacles to anxiety while teaching and learning processes, such as technological anxiety, AI-related anxiety, pedagogical anxiety, social anxiety, and career anxiety (Renz & Hilbig, 2020). Anxiety during teaching is a major predictor of faculty performance (Vitasari et al., 2010). The psychological symptoms of anxiety among faculty include feeling nervous before a class, panicking, going blank during a lecture, feeling helpless while adopting new tools, or a lack of interest in difficult technological subjects, whereas the physiological symptoms include sweaty palms, a racing heartbeat, or an upset stomach (Ajmal & Ahmad, 2019). Many external factors may contribute to anxiety. These include stress from institutional expectations, stress in personal relationships, stress at work, financial stress, stress that results from an emotional trauma such as the loss of a loved one, victimisation by crime, a natural disaster, or side effects of medication (Deb, 2010). In lecture 25 of the *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Freud (1949), the noted founder of psychoanalysis, wrote: "I do not need to introduce anxiety to you. Everyone of us has experienced that sensation, or to speak more correctly, that affective state, at one time or another on our account." Indeed, anxiety is one of the most pervasive and ubiquitous human behaviours.

Globally, anxiety has become a major public health concern among college faculty, and its rising prevalence rates are made worse by social pressures, academic demands, and international crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, among many others (World Health Organization, 2023). Nearly 35% of college faculty report clinically significant major anxiety symptoms, up 50% from the previous ten years (2015–2025), according to various institutional surveys (Renz & Hilbig, 2020).

This increase has significant effects on long-term mental health outcomes, emotional stability, and academic performance (Trivedi & Gupta, 2010). Despite increased awareness, the literature currently in publication frequently analyses faculty anxiety in fragmented contexts in the present era, concentrating on technological factors, academic stress, or pandemic-related effects, without combining these aspects or assessing how well coping mechanisms work for various faculty populations (Ajmal & Ahmad, 2019).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this conceptual paper is to propose an integrated theoretical framework that explains the relationships between AI-induced anxiety, stress, and coping strategies among college faculty. By synthesizing existing theories of stress and coping with technology acceptance and job demands-resources perspectives, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how faculty perceive, experience, and respond to AI-related occupational stress. The framework seeks to inform institutional interventions and guide future empirical research in this emerging field.

This conceptual paper addresses the following objectives:

1. To critically examine the psychological mechanisms underlying AI-induced anxiety and stress among college faculty.
2. To integrate the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping with the Technology Acceptance Model and the Job Demands-Resources Model into a coherent framework.
3. To propose a conceptual model that explains the relationships between AI-related stressors, cognitive appraisal, coping strategies, and outcomes.
4. To derive implications for institutional practice, policy, and future research.

Research Questions

1. What are the primary mechanisms through which AI integration induces anxiety and stress among college faculty?
2. What role do cognitive appraisal and coping strategies play in mediating the relationship between AI-related stressors and faculty outcomes?
3. How can an integrated theoretical framework explain the dynamic relationships between AI-induced anxiety, stress, and coping among college faculty?

Conceptual Foundation

1. Defining Anxiety and Stress

Anxiety can be defined as unresolved fear or as a state of undirected arousal following the perception of threat (Öhman, 2008). Spielberger (1983) defined anxiety as the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system. According to Good (1973), anxiety means apprehension, tension, or uneasiness characterised by fear, dread, or uncertainty about something, the source of which is largely unknown or unrecognised by the individual; it may consist in persistent apprehensions of future events as well as in generalised emotional reactions to any choice point or decision.

Anxiety is a subjective feeling of unease, discomfort, apprehension, or fearful concern accompanied by a host of autonomic and somatic manifestations. Anxiety is a normal, emotional, reasonable, and expected response to real or potential danger. However, if the symptoms of anxiety are prolonged, irrational, disproportionate, and/or severe, occur in the absence of stressful events or stimuli, or interfere with everyday activities, then these are called anxiety disorders (Kozub et al., 2025). The experience of anxiety is one that often involves both the body and the mind. Indeed, the way that we use our minds to interpret a physically arousing situation can have a strong influence on how we perform in that situation (Gupta & Singh, 2024).

Stress, in contrast, refers to the physiological and psychological response to external demands that exceed an individual's perceived ability to cope (Freud, 1949). Stress is a broader construct than anxiety, encompassing both the stressors themselves and the individual's response to them. In the context of AI integration, stress may arise from the need to acquire new skills, adapt to changing pedagogical paradigms, and navigate uncertain professional terrain (Renz & Hilbig, 2020).

2. AI-Induced Anxiety and Stress Among College Faculty

The integration of AI in higher education creates multiple stressors for college faculty. These include concerns about job displacement and role erosion, fears of technological obsolescence, ethical and pedagogical concerns, and the pressure to adapt to rapidly changing technological environments (Cheng & Liang, 2023). Faculty may experience anxiety about their ability to master AI tools, stress related to increased workload and performance expectations, and apprehension about the erosion of humanistic dimensions of teaching (Alam, 2022).

Research has documented that AI-related anxiety can manifest in both psychological and physiological symptoms. Psychological symptoms include feeling nervous before adopting new tools, panicking when encountering technical difficulties, feeling helpless while learning new technologies, and a lack of interest in difficult technological subjects (Mutawa, 2024). Physiological symptoms include sweaty palms, a racing heartbeat, or an upset stomach (Renz & Hilbig, 2020). These symptoms can impair faculty performance, reduce motivation, and contribute to long-term mental health concerns (Kozub et al., 2025).

3. Coping Strategies

Coping strategies refer to the cognitive and behavioural efforts individuals use to manage the internal and external demands of stressful situations (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping strategies may be either adaptive, such as time management, mindfulness, physical exercise, and seeking social or emotional support, or maladaptive, such as avoidance, procrastination, or substance use (Ajmal & Ahmad, 2019). In the context of AI-induced stress, faculty may employ problem-focused coping strategies, such as seeking training and professional development, or emotion-focused coping strategies, such as seeking social support or engaging in relaxation techniques (Renz & Hilbig, 2020).

Research has shown that adaptive coping strategies can reduce anxiety and stress among faculty (Vitasari et al., 2010). Techniques such as yoga, mindfulness, and physical activity have shown positive results in reducing anxiety (Ravada et al., 2023). Structured interventions such as biofeedback training and peer support networks also demonstrate benefits (Rashmi et al., 2023). However, a significant concern is the stigma associated with mental health help-seeking, which limits faculty access to available support systems (Aryal et al., 2023).

Theoretical Foundations

The proposed framework integrates three complementary theoretical perspectives:

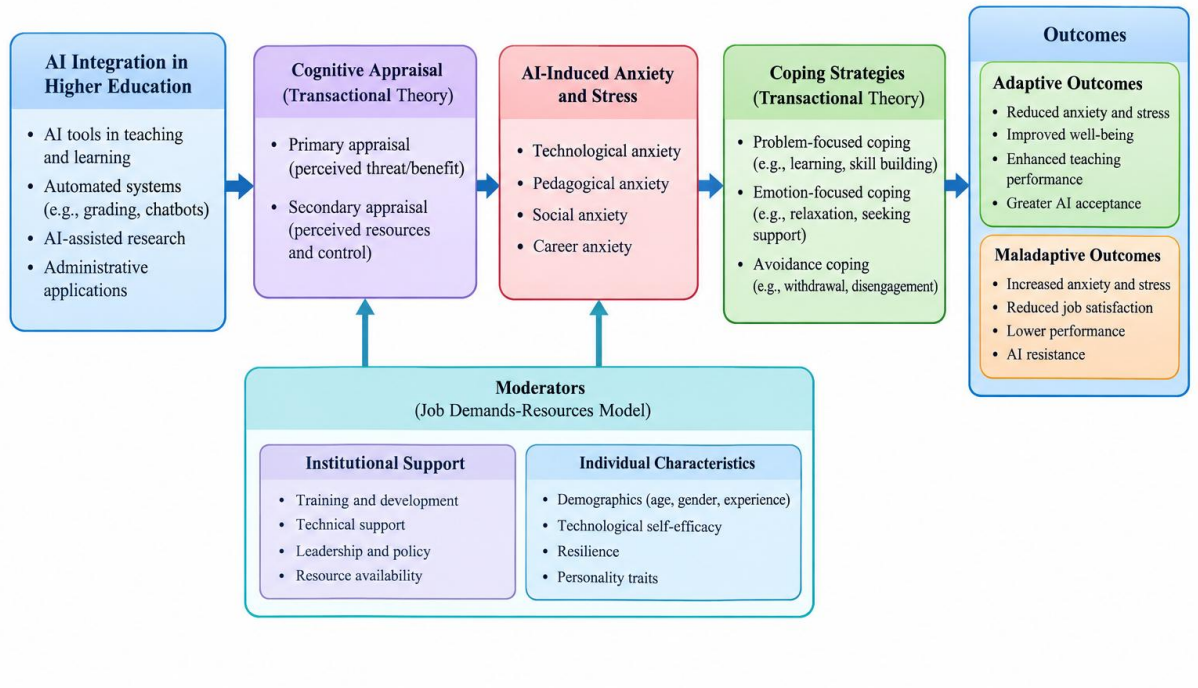
1. **Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984):** This theory posits that stress is a product of the transaction between an individual and their environment, mediated by cognitive appraisal and coping processes. Primary appraisal involves evaluating whether a situation is relevant to one's goals and whether it is threatening, benign, or challenging. Secondary appraisal involves evaluating one's

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resources and ability to cope with the situation. Coping strategies are then employed to manage the stressor.

2. **Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989):** This model explains how users come to accept and use new technologies. It identifies two primary determinants of technology acceptance: perceived usefulness (the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance their job performance) and perceived ease of use (the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would be free of effort). In the context of AI integration, faculty who perceive AI as useful and easy to use are likely to experience less anxiety and stress.
3. **Job Demands-Resources Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007):** This model proposes that job demands (aspects of a job that require sustained physical or psychological effort) and job resources (aspects of a job that help individuals achieve work goals, reduce job demands, and stimulate personal growth) interact to influence well-being and performance. In the context of AI integration, job demands may include the need to learn new technologies and adapt to changing work processes, while job resources may include institutional support, training opportunities, and peer networks.

Figure 1. AI-Induced Anxiety and Coping Framework (AI-ACF)



The AI-Induced Anxiety and Coping Framework (AI-ACF) illustrates the dynamic relationships between AI-related stressors, cognitive appraisal, anxiety and stress, coping strategies, and outcomes. The framework also identifies moderating variables that influence these relationships at individual, institutional, and social levels.

Overview of the Proposed Framework

The proposed **AI-Induced Anxiety and Coping Framework (AI-ACF)** integrates the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the Technology

Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989), and the Job Demands-Resources Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) to explain the dynamic relationships between AI-related stressors, cognitive appraisal, coping strategies, and faculty outcomes. The framework posits that AI-related stressors, technological complexity, job insecurity, and performance expectations, trigger primary appraisal processes, wherein faculty evaluate the significance of the stressor for their goals and well-being, perceiving it as threatening, challenging, or benign. Secondary appraisal then involves evaluating one's resources to cope, including individual characteristics (self-efficacy, digital literacy), institutional support (training, technical assistance), and social resources (peer support, mentoring) (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). These cognitive appraisal processes determine whether the AI-related stressor is experienced as anxiety and stress (Spielberger, 1983; Öhman, 2008). Subsequently, coping strategies, problem-focused, emotion-focused, or avoidant, are employed to manage the stressor and its emotional consequences, with adaptive coping reducing anxiety and maladaptive coping exacerbating it (Ajmal & Ahmad, 2019; Vitasari et al., 2010; Ravada et al., 2023). Ultimately, these coping efforts result in outcomes encompassing psychological well-being, job performance, and professional satisfaction (Ansari et al., 2024; Renz & Hilbig, 2020; Kozub et al., 2025).

Table 1. Summary of Framework Components and Their Relationships

Component	Key Elements	Relationship to Other Components
AI-Related Stressors	Technological complexity, job insecurity, performance expectations	Trigger primary appraisal processes
Primary Appraisal	Threat (harm/loss), challenge (growth), benign	Determines emotional response (anxiety/stress)
Secondary Appraisal	Individual characteristics, institutional support, social resources	Influences coping strategy selection
Anxiety and Stress	Emotional symptoms (tension, worry), physiological symptoms (sweaty palms, racing heartbeat)	Mediates relationship between appraisal and coping
Coping Strategies	Problem-focused, emotion-focused, avoidant	Determines outcomes (well-being, performance, satisfaction)
Outcomes	Psychological well-being, job performance, professional satisfaction	Result of coping efforts

Moderating Variables

The framework identifies several variables that moderate the relationships between AI-related stressors, cognitive appraisal, coping strategies, and outcomes:

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Table 2. Moderating Variables in the AI-ACF Framework

	Moderating Variable	Description	Influence on Framework
Individual	Self-efficacy	Belief in one's ability to successfully use AI tools	High self-efficacy strengthens secondary appraisal and promotes problem-focused coping
	Digital literacy	Ability to understand and use digital technologies	High digital literacy reduces perceived technological complexity and anxiety
	Prior experience with technology	Previous exposure to AI or related technologies	Positive prior experience reduces threat appraisal and enhances challenge appraisal
Institutional	Training opportunities	Availability of professional development for AI tools	Training enhances secondary appraisal and promotes adaptive coping
	Technical assistance	Access to technical support for AI tools	Technical support reduces technological complexity and anxiety
	Organizational culture	Norms and values regarding technology adoption	Supportive culture encourages experimentation and reduces fear of failure
Social	Peer support	Emotional and instrumental support from colleagues	Peer support promotes emotion-focused coping and reduces isolation
	Mentoring	Guidance from experienced colleagues	Mentoring enhances secondary appraisal and promotes problem-focused coping
	Professional networks	Connections with other faculty and professionals	Networks provide resources and social support for coping

Discussion

Theoretical Contributions

The proposed AI-Induced Anxiety and Coping Framework (AI-ACF) makes several theoretical contributions to the literature on faculty mental health and technology integration in higher education. First, it integrates three complementary theoretical perspectives, the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping, the Technology Acceptance Model, and the Job Demands-Resources Model, into a coherent framework that explains the complex relationships between AI-related stressors, cognitive appraisal, coping strategies, and outcomes. This integration

addresses the fragmentation in existing literature, which has tended to examine these factors in isolation (Renz & Hilbig, 2020).

Second, the framework identifies cognitive appraisal as a critical mediating mechanism in the relationship between AI-related stressors and anxiety/stress. This emphasis on appraisal processes is consistent with the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and highlights the importance of individual perceptions and interpretations in shaping faculty responses to AI integration. The framework suggests that interventions aimed at modifying appraisal processes, such as enhancing self-efficacy and digital literacy, may be effective in reducing AI-induced anxiety and stress (Alam, 2022).

Third, the framework distinguishes between problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant coping strategies, recognizing that different strategies may be more or less effective in different contexts (Ajmal & Ahmad, 2019). This distinction is important for designing targeted interventions that promote adaptive coping and reduce maladaptive coping among faculty (Vitasari et al., 2010).

Practical Implications

The AI-ACF framework has several practical implications for higher education institutions seeking to support faculty well-being during AI integration.

Table 3. Practical Implications of the AI-Induced Anxiety and Coping Framework (AI-ACF)

Stakeholder	Key Recommendation	Specific Actions
Institutional Leaders	Recognize AI integration as both a technological and psychological challenge	Acknowledge faculty anxiety and stress as natural responses to technological change; address them through supportive policies and practices
	Prioritize training and professional development	Provide opportunities that enhance faculty digital literacy and self-efficacy
	Foster a supportive organizational culture	Encourage experimentation, tolerate failure, and recognize the emotional dimensions of technological change
Faculty Developers	Design training programs addressing technical and psychological aspects	Include instruction in AI tools and techniques alongside opportunities for faculty to discuss concerns, share

		experiences, and develop coping strategies
	Establish peer support networks and mentoring programs	Reduce isolation and promote adaptive coping among faculty
Mental Health Professionals	Develop interventions tailored to faculty needs	Be aware of specific stressors associated with AI integration and design targeted interventions
	Implement cognitive-behavioral interventions	Target maladaptive appraisals and promote adaptive coping
	Offer mindfulness-based interventions and relaxation training	Reduce anxiety and stress among faculty
Policymakers	Recognize faculty well-being as critical to educational quality	Allocate resources accordingly to support faculty mental health
	Support training and professional development	Fund programs that enhance faculty digital literacy and coping skills
	Develop mental health services	Create accessible support systems for faculty experiencing AI-related anxiety
	Create supportive organizational cultures	Promote policies that encourage experimentation and tolerate failure
	Consider ethical implications of AI integration	Develop guidelines that protect faculty autonomy and professional identity

This table summarizes the practical implications of the AI-Induced Anxiety and Coping Framework (AI-ACF) for four key stakeholder groups: institutional leaders, faculty developers, mental health professionals, and policymakers. Each stakeholder group has specific recommendations and actions supported by the reviewed literature to address AI-induced anxiety and stress among college faculty.

Limitations and Future Research

The proposed framework has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, the framework is primarily based on theoretical reasoning and existing empirical evidence; it has not yet been empirically tested. Future research should conduct empirical

studies to validate the proposed relationships and identify the relative importance of different variables (Renz & Hilbig, 2020).

Second, the framework focuses primarily on individual-level factors and does not fully incorporate organizational and systemic factors that may influence faculty responses to AI integration. Future research should examine how institutional policies, organizational culture, and broader societal factors shape faculty experiences (Alam, 2022).

Third, the framework does not address the developmental and longitudinal aspects of faculty responses to AI integration. Future research should examine how faculty anxiety and coping evolve over time and how early experiences shape later outcomes (Cheng & Liang, 2023).

Fourth, the framework is developed primarily based on literature from Western contexts. Future research should examine the applicability of the framework across different cultural contexts, particularly in South Asian countries where the pace of AI integration and the nature of faculty work may differ (Gupta et al., 2025).

Conclusion

The integration of artificial intelligence into higher education presents both opportunities and challenges for college faculty. While AI offers the potential to enhance teaching, research, and administrative efficiency, it also generates anxiety and stress that can impair faculty well-being and performance. This conceptual paper has proposed the AI-Induced Anxiety and Coping Framework (AI-ACF), an integrated theoretical framework that explains the dynamic relationships between AI-related stressors, cognitive appraisal, coping strategies, and outcomes.

The framework makes several contributions to the literature. It integrates three complementary theoretical perspectives into a coherent model, identifies cognitive appraisal as a critical mediating mechanism, and distinguishes between different types of coping strategies. It also identifies moderating variables at individual, institutional, and social levels that influence faculty responses to AI integration.

The practical implications of the framework are significant. Institutional leaders, faculty developers, and mental health professionals can use the framework to design targeted interventions that enhance faculty digital literacy, promote adaptive coping, and support mental health. Policymakers can use the framework to develop policies that protect faculty well-being and promote ethical AI integration.

The challenge of AI-induced anxiety and stress is not insurmountable. With evidence-based interventions and coordinated action across multiple levels of influence, it is possible to support faculty well-being and promote healthier relationships with technology. The stakes are high, not only for individual faculty members' professional satisfaction but for the broader project of educating students to thrive in an increasingly digital world.

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