

Student career anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic: A phenomenological exploration

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a crisis in students' career development. Online learning activities could not have been optimal during the pandemic due to the poor quality of the internet network. Meanwhile, more than 1.2 million individuals had their employment terminated, resulting in their job loss. The pandemic contributes to students' career anxiety and mismatches in determining future careers. Our study explored the dynamics of student career anxiety that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic through a phenomenological approach. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews by teleconference Zoom meeting. The interviews focused on 1) how the participants experience career anxiety and 2) how it affects their career planning. Fifteen students participated through purposive sampling with criteria: 19-25 years old and undergraduate students. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is applied as an analysis framework. We synthesized phenomenological themes identified as students' career anxiety: doubts about career plans, limited job opportunities due to the pandemic, and social comparison. The analysis also found that engaging in career-relevant communities was relevant to career readiness and deepening knowledge of career paths. This study encourages improving student skills by adjusting educational materials, training, or internships relevant to the student's potential and career needs during this critical time.

Introduction

Since 2019, the COVID-19 outbreak has spread worldwide and infected more than 500 million people globally, with a 1.2% mortality rate of approximately 6 million people ([World Health Organization \[WHO\], 2022](#)). The first case in Indonesia was reported on March 2, 2020, and since then, it has continued to increase rapidly throughout Indonesia's territory. Until July 9, 2022, as many as 6.057.660 cases of positive infection have been reported, with 156.624 cases of death ([Kementerian Kesehatan RI, 2022a](#)). Indonesia also recorded the Delta variant domination until August 2021, which has caused a dreadful wave of infections and fatalities ([Kementerian Kesehatan RI, 2022b](#)). The COVID-19 pandemic has caused radical changes and worsened mental health issues, such as pandemic stress, anxiety, emotional instability, and loneliness ([Nurdiyanto & Harjanti, 2022](#)). Likewise, the pandemic also increases the suicide risk for women ([Nurdiyanto et al., 2022](#)). After enacting COVID-19 as a pandemic, the authorities governed various efforts to suppress transmission through travel restrictions, prohibition of physical contact or social distancing, and even semi-

lockdown in almost every region (Kementerian Kesehatan RI, 2020). This mobility restriction policy, the government believed, could suppress the transmission spreading.

It is no surprise that mobility restrictions affect Indonesia's economy and career sector. Tourism and services that rely on people's mobility were experiencing a downturn; this also includes industries such as tourism, hotels, restaurants, transportation, and manufacturing (Badan Pusat Statistik [BPS], 2020; Kementerian Pariwisata RI, 2021). The impact of the pandemic has put pressure on the industry to reduce employees and even make permanent layoffs on a large scale. More than 1.2 million workers in Java Island have received mass layoffs and lost their jobs (Kementerian Ketenagakerjaan, 2021). The pandemic has also caused educational disruptions, such as closing schools, reduced academic hours, and temporarily stopping teaching and learning activities. In higher education, virtual learning has reached up to 60% from the previous level during the pandemic (Marinoni et al., 2020). Online learning was less sweet than one would expect. Students with poor internet connection in their area cannot follow online learning smoothly, and the teacher's poor online class management contributes to concerns about the quality of online learning (Hagedorn et al., 2022; Khalil et al., 2020). The impact is that students' academic performance tends to decline and threatens to lose an educated generation (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2020).

The pandemic also impacts students' career orientation. In tertiary institutions, students are considered to have chosen majors or specializations designed for future work in specific fields. Many individuals seek stability in their early careers and strive to improve their financial situation around the age of twenty (Chowdhury et al., 2022). Pandemic disruption may lead to students' career anxiety, which may influence students' future well-being (anticipatory anxiety) and decision-making. Career anxiety is a form of fear of failure in the future related to individual career development (Vignoli, 2015). Excessive career anxiety will impact task adjustments and career challenges (Shin & Lee, 2019). A study suggests a link between career indecision and experiencing anxiety (Miller & Rottinghaus, 2014). An unmanaged career anxiety can encourage counterproductive attitudes, such as a lack of confidence which can hamper career decisions in the form of a lack of readiness and motivation (Boo & Kim, 2020). A study found that career decisions are hampered due to students' lack of readiness (Zhu et al., 2021). All the while, when motivation is hampered, it will impact career information gathering and interpretations (Storme & Celik, 2018).

Students' career anxiety is related to career decision-making in their professional life after graduating from university. The courses, training, extracurricular activities, and relevant internships are related to career decision-making. Students should make career choices that will indeed affect their future life, and the career decisions they choose will show an influence on their current financial condition and self-esteem. Based on previous research, a manifestation of career anxiety is students' inability to decide their career choices (Tsai et al., 2017). One's ability to make career decisions is associated with career exploration. Low career exploration is related to indecisiveness and dysfunctional career path beliefs, where individuals will have irrational and unrealistic expectations regarding career options (Storme & Celik, 2018).

The emergence of such a pandemic may become a threat to students' plans in the future. This pandemic makes students ought to observe the whole circumstances full of uncertainties, given that career anxiety affects various aspects of student's life and their future. The COVID-19 pandemic drives social risks, encouraging poverty, social isolation, and increasingly unequal distribution of security and resources (Haase, 2020). The pandemic pushes students to experience career anxiety and economic instability (Belle et al., 2022), unavailability of social support due to mobility restrictions, and limited adaptation during the pandemic (Wang et al., 2022). The pandemic still leaves career-related problems, such as economic crisis, unemployment, and limited job vacancies, which may lead to frightening feelings in determining a career (Mahmud et al., 2021). Moreover, learning disruption and

lack of technological knowledge also influence how students negatively perceive their future and poor career aspirations, as they face difficulty deciding their career plan due to their unpreparedness and limited career information (Khalil et al., 2020). The presence of such a pandemic has disrupted ideal conditions and steps in achieving a career and future.

Previous research has brought insight into career anxiety and COVID-19 pandemic circumstances as factors propelling career anxiety (Mahmud et al., 2021). The research found that students who experience career anxiety will make wrong career decisions. Therefore, it is hoped that the benefits of this research will give students an idea of career anxiety and better prepare them for their future careers. The university can also acquire an overview of student career anxiety and provide facilities such as career counseling for students to prepare for their careers.

A qualitative method was selected to investigate the deeper meanings of each participant's experience of career anxiety. This study is intended to provide information regarding students' career anxiety during the pandemic. The study proposes research questions, "How is career anxiety perceived?" and "What are the strategies for dealing with career anxiety?".

Method

Research Design

This research implemented a phenomenological qualitative method (Smith et al., 2009) to explore the participants' unique experiences related to career anxiety. Phenomenology was selected to capture the meaning and participants' perception and in an effort to see through participants' career anxiety experiences. In addition, this research elaborated on the forms and strategies of students dealing with career anxiety. This research has obtained ethical clearance from the Research Ethics Committee of Universitas Gadjah Mada (approval date: November 10, 2021; No: KE/UGM/013/EC/2021).

Participants

Fifteen participants participated voluntarily with the criteria: 1) 19-25 years old and 2) undergraduate students. Participants recruited from our previous research (Nurdiyanto & Harjanti, 2022) and reported having fear for their future regarding career disruption through an open-ended survey. With career anxiety reaching disruption on career planning as a parameter, this study exists to further elaborate on the received survey answers. Initially, the study recruited 21 students; however, six could not participate in the interview due to their eligibility. Eleven of them were female participants. As a whole, the participants had a mean age of 20.6 years. Ten participants were domiciled in Java, while four were in Kalimantan and one in Sumatra. After interviewing 15 participants, we reached the point of data saturation in the interviews.

Procedure

Considering the mobility limitations and the high number of COVID-19 infections, data was collected using a teleconference Zoom meeting. We elaborated the open-ended questions responses and mixed them with semi-structured interviews to better understand the participants' career anxiety. The data collection was conducted from February to March 2022. The questions asked to the participants focused on what kind of career anxiety they perceived and the strategies for dealing with such anxiety. For example, "What is your current career plan?", "How does the COVID-19 situation worry you about your career plan?", "Why does it make you feel worried about your future career plan?" and "What are the strategies you employ to cope/handle those newfound worries?" Interviews for each

participant were done separately and conducted in as many as 1-2 meetings, each ranging from 40 to 70 minutes.

Participants were asked to fill out an online informed consent before the interviews. It contained the research objective, what participants were asked to do, and the option or chance to withdraw from participating in this research. Verbal informed consent was taken before the online interview. All participants agreed to participate, and we received their consent. [Table 1](#) shows the demographic of participants in this study.

Table 1
Participants Demographics

Subject	Age	Sex	Major	Year
P1	19	Male	Civil Engineering	2nd
P2	19	Female	Accounting	2nd
P3	19	Female	English Education	2nd
P4	20	Female	Public Relation	3rd
P5	20	Female	English Education	3rd
P6	20	Male	Mechanical Engineering Education	3rd
P7	20	Female	Accounting	3rd
P8	20	Female	Environmental Engineering	3rd
P9	21	Female	Law	3rd
P10	21	Male	Law	3rd
P11	21	Female	Psychology	3rd
P12	21	Female	Psychology	3rd
P13	22	Female	Agriculture	4th
P14	22	Male	Psychology	4th
P15	24	Female	Psychology	4th

Data Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis ([Smith et al., 2009](#)) was applied as the framework for identifying the dynamics of career anxiety. The analysis was conducted in a panel discussion and involved trained research assistants. They transcribed the interview recordings and rechecked their accuracy in a parallel fashion. In the first step, ABP and ABP read the transcription repeatedly to discover the familiarization data and make an exploratory comment on every data element. Afterward, those comments were paraphrased to emphasize emergent themes. FAN and EPH checked the entire emergent themes and made notes to refine and clarify the themes. ABP and ABP built the superordinate themes by categorizing emergent themes with similar patterns and meanings. FAN and EPH re-audited such themes to ensure the quality and accuracy of superordinate themes. Data credibility was achieved by triangulation, confirming our findings to participants, and continuous internal discussions to obtain saturation. Data analysis and transcription were conducted using an Excel spreadsheet, and participant names were changed to pseudonyms.

Results

This research identifies the themes related to students' career anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic: forms of career anxiety and career adjustment. The themes of career anxiety synthesize doubts about career plans, social comparison, and fear of existing opportunities as career anxiety that arises during a pandemic. Meanwhile, career adjustment themes describe participants' strategies, such as benefiting from the internet, beneficial relations,

and exposure towards work culture. This article also underlies that although all participants are students, not all can adjust to career development related to technological advancements. The pandemic states and massive technological acceleration create the gap in technological finesse that students comprehend even more apparent. Limitation in technological prowess is also perceived as related to student's career anxiety.

Form of career anxiety

Career plans doubt

Participants revealed their doubts about career plans that were increasingly perceived during the pandemic. This finding shows doubt on the selection of career path the participants would choose related to the several career choices available without being accompanied by profound knowledge of the career insight. Participants perceived that the COVID-19 pandemic made them feel doubt about their growing career plans. The lecture system and limitations that occurred during the pandemic were considered to increase doubt and unpreparedness for entering a more specific career path. This condition occurs from the lack of resources and fieldwork institutions are able to provide students. This finding underlies that the pandemic contributes to sharpening the doubt about career plans experienced by the participants.

Subject P11, who studied Psychology major because she did not pass the department she had initially been interested in since high school, experienced doubt about her career plan. The doubts that P11 was experiencing grew when the learning was conducted online, with her relying on the capabilities of exploration and interactions within the campus grounds. These conditions make her considerations of new career plans limited. Subject P11's doubt at the beginning of college and the learning situation she considered completely limited during the pandemic were perceived as worrying about her future career.

"Certainly, I am worried because I am unsure if I could pursue a psychology career. I doubt whether I can do it or not."

P11 underwent college in Psychology major over the past year before the pandemic. She perceived that she had insufficient knowledge during college to determine her career. P11 doubted choosing among the career selections available in the Psychology major because it is a new issue to imagine, especially if you are a freshman in college. The pandemic was perceived to worsen the doubt about career plans since the online learning system and social restrictions hinder exploration and competency improvement. The pandemic using an online lecturing system and limited exploration at the campus made P11 doubt her career plan. This condition becomes the cause of her fear of failure in the foreseen future regarding the career path she chose. Meanwhile, the lecturing situation during the pandemic was perceived to impede the introduction of various choices of career plans as well as mastering competencies that she feels are necessary.

"I wonder if being a child psychologist would be easy or difficult, but what challenges lie ahead? I still need to find out. In case I could not be a child psychologist, what would I do? I feel doubtful."

While P11 developed a worry about her career path due to the limited campus exploration opportunities, P1 saw online classes as unbeneficial in a different way. When asked if online courses affect his career anxiety, this was her response:

"For online, my grades are higher because you can still open your book - but really, what is more important is understanding the materials offline. Even though the chance of getting a high grade is low, the materials are delivered well because you can understand them. Which is a different case with online where you only need to cheat."

P1, a civil engineering student, values the knowledge that he can attain with classes being held in person. This field consists of constructing buildings that rely on precise counting expertise. P1 sees this as a risk of potentially taking people's lives; hence, he needs the proper knowledge he could not get from online learning. Like many other majors, P1 relies on precise knowledge and practice in face-to-face classes. Through this experience, educational institutions should better prepare facilities for a pandemic. Supported by subject P10's claim of:

"Of course, I am worried. I am worried that I will never grow because there are many campus activities I want to do. But the pandemic makes that impossible."

Social comparison

The social comparison theme emphasizes the judgment that others are better than themselves. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the educational system brought up a social comparison among students, and participants compared their skills with others. The pandemic, accompanied by less intense meetings, tends to lead universities to shut down programs for a certain period, preventing subject P13 and her year from gaining experience despite the campus giving juniors and seniors a chance. It makes participants more focused on their weaknesses while viewing others as better than themselves, including competency issues.

This comparison was conveyed by P13, who judged that the junior class's competence was superior to hers. Subject P13 appraises that the current academic system during the pandemic is better, as follows:

" Meanwhile, my junior class seems to have made things easier during this pandemic. It is because the juniors can do research earlier and get more training, such as national-level training, while in our class, we cannot participate in these activities because there is a block system."

P13 is a final-year student at a state university in Java. She felt that the college system in her class became the source of competence shortages compared to the junior class beneath her. She perceived that her junior students have a better opportunity to participate in various extracurricular activities or productive academics; for instance, they are allowed to do early research. In addition, the participant also viewed that the applied college system makes other batch classes have superior competencies and higher working opportunities. P13 also revealed:

"I am just afraid because I feel lacking here and there; competitors are way cooler out there. When others study hard, I hardly do anything to achieve it. So, yes, I am afraid, and I am still stuck here, and it is worrisome. Astaghfirullah."

During the COVID-19 pandemic, she viewed that others had done something to achieve their goals, such as following online courses, research practice, or internships. On the other side, P13 felt that she had not done anything relevant to her career. She thought she was left behind by observing others make a step forward in their careers.

Another participant experienced social comparison detached from the university programs. Subject P3 was not accepted to any major university and desperately wanted to apply to two different universities. She compared herself to others in a better university and major, and they were leading lives with accomplishments she did not have. We highlighted that the pandemic gave her much more downtime, and she spent all her extra time on screen time.

"I would see posts of my friends and end up comparing myself to them in a negative way. How can they be at this point? While I am still like this."

Fear of limited career opportunities

This research underlies participants' anxiety related to limited working opportunities during the pandemic because of widespread employee layoffs. The theme of fearing the opportunities to achieve a career in this study is a form of career anxiety experienced by students. Participants viewed that the presence of the COVID-19 pandemic influenced their chances of achieving their careers. Participants realized that all careers in every sector were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, reducing working hours or even employees, which affected the chances of getting a job in the future. The fear of limited working opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic that gets lessened is one of the forms of career anxiety experienced by students, as expressed by P2:

"If the pandemic continues, surely the company might not be as free as it used to be in their recruitment. May be seeking for a lesser number of employees. Even more, many smarter competitors or have more skillset, so it is much tougher to compete for a job."

She viewed that the COVID-19 pandemic's outbreak will influence the organization's recruitment of employees. She also added that the company limits the employees they hire. She worried that the accepted candidate was far superior compared to herself and reduced its chance of hiring in the future. P1 also perceives these concerns:

"I am afraid I would not get a job. Because the competition gets a lot tougher."

Strategies to deal with career anxiety

Benefiting from the internet

This research also discovers participants' strategies to make a career adjustment by utilizing various media to pursue their planned careers. Many seminars can be reached online during the pandemic with affordable student fees. One of our participants, subject P5, participated in an online seminar about the career she wanted.

"There are many occasions to participate in activities, and more webinars are held in this pandemic. We also can join in distance learning, and sometimes it is free. So, many opportunities to develop ourselves are less expensive and more affordable than normal occasions, which is what I think."

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, P5 has utilized online education. In addition to spending spare time, her participation was also helpful in coping with her career anxiety. P5 believed that the pandemic did not always negatively affect her career. During the pandemic, she can pursue many different learning opportunities that might be inaccessible in the lecture class.

P4 also carried on pursuing her career. She accessed many different courses available on the internet to follow her arranged career plan. P4 said,

"Just following online courses. Even though sometimes it could be better than a regular class, I still enjoy it. I could also do this discipline. So, it has its own unique reward."

P4 is a third-year college student majoring in public relations in Central Java. During the pandemic, she occupied herself by adding new skills and knowledge by following training and online classes. She also participated in online classes that were relevant to college and design. P4's participation in various courses made her realize that her information technology mastery still needs to improve. Previously, she underestimated information technology-related tasks by employing services or getting others to help to complete them. P4 stated that she gained more confidence with her new capability by following information technology courses.

This finding implies that during the pandemic, participants made particular efforts to increase their competence in the career plan they had arranged by following various seminars and online courses. The finding also underlies the participants' requirement to enhance information technology competence due to limitations in accessing the available online workshops and courses. The participants pursued competence to make career adjustments during the pandemic.

Beneficial relations

This theme sums up participants' strategy to choose supportive friendships as one of the ways to deal with career anxiety. Participants tried to get closer to social environments that bring positive things and support their career plans. During the pandemic, participants had the discretion to choose the social environments that supported their career plan and eliminate the social circle that was not supportive, as expressed by P4, who joined the group, conforming to her interest.

"Back in High school, I was associated with particular communities. This community helped the surrounding people. I also participated in church activities, such as social services for church congregations in remote areas. I like this kind of activity, such as health education, which concerns daily life."

P4 wanted to become a volunteer or work in the humanities sector someday. When she was a child, she was inspired by her family to be a volunteer and affiliated with communities related to humanity's actions. P4 had done the activities since high school and continued through church activities during college. The community was not only helpful in her career, but she was being facilitated on how to manage herself in every process. Subject P7 also has a similar sentiment regarding bringing positive things to her career plans:

"If there is a job opening, it would be great to share it with my friends. We were applying together. Even though it does add pressure, especially when you know they have better skills than you."

To achieve her goal of filling out her CV, she expects to get from her friends to benefit from her in a way that she can get more information about job vacancies. In contrast, she also accounts for friends that might hinder her career and avoids them:

"The important thing is for my friend not to be like that. If it is too bad and they saw someone else get an internship, it makes them stressed out on their own."

P4 expressed how she often received negative comments regarding her career plans in humanitarian aid. She mainly underestimated limited salaries and vacancies. Despite trying to ignore it, the words made her doubt. Therefore, P4 has relations with supportive friends with the same values in humanitarianism to further support her career plans.

"Now it is better not to listen if somebody says something bad about what I want. You just do not listen to other people."

Exposure to work culture

Work practice becomes the following one of the strategies in our findings. The participants said that preparation in the working industry, such as work practice or internship, can help them cope with career anxiety. The mentioned work practice or internship is an activity to add working experience or be directly involved in the field of work they are interested in. Some participants have carried out this practice to cope with their career anxiety. One way of the practice is to open a business. During the pandemic, the opportunity to do small business is wide open. As expressed by subject P9, who is planning to be an entrepreneur:

"I am still determining what my passion is. However, I realized that I like to trade the more I do this. I used to endorse or make content on Instagram, and I

like these things. I also like to offer my products to my friends. So, I know more and more that I like the business world."

P9 is a college student who initially needed to learn her career direction. Even though P9 is a law student, she has fun managing her business. At the beginning of college, she also already had business ideas. Then, she succeeded in making her business ideas come true. Her vast connections and social skills helped her in advancing this business. Having fun managing a business makes her career direction more straightforward. P9 experience is one example that students can see clearer when they obtain real experience on the job.

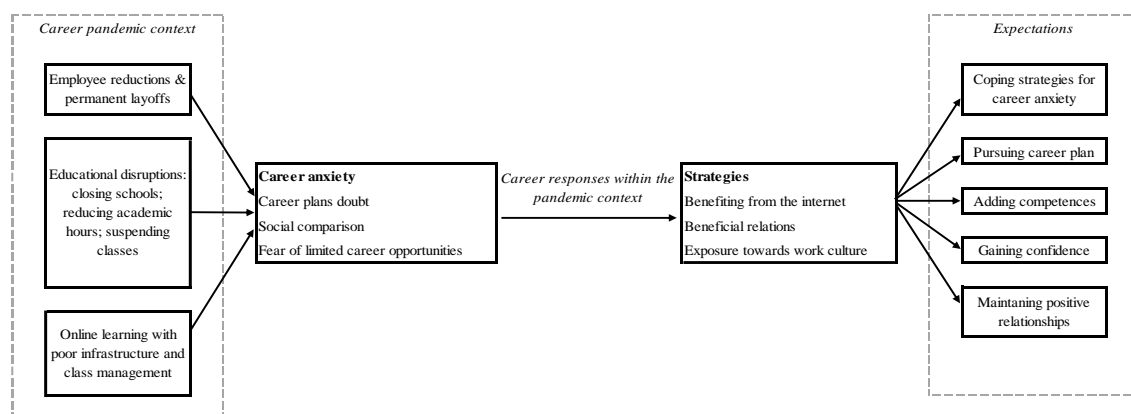
Opening a business is one of many ways to equip oneself for a student's career plan. An internship in a company is another activity that they can do. Students should be encouraged to enroll in internships before entering the real working industry to add experience. Subject P7 is one of the participants who have to utilize the opportunity. She said:

"It is actually off the track, deviating from my goal. However, how to put it, instead of nothing, it is better to fill something in. So, when I do want to apply, I already have adequate working experience."

P7 is an accounting student with more work experience than other participants in this research. She has a high passion for working. At the beginning of her college, P7 looked for and took many opportunities to work and did the work to get extra money and add to her experience. Especially after the pandemic, work was moved online, and she looked for jobs that could be done from her home, like becoming a research assistant and lecturer's assistant. Although that is the case, P7 is adamant about finding a work-from-office internship rather than from home. She greatly values her social experience from working in the office, even though the job is unrelated to her study. P7 repeatedly mentions having a portfolio related to her work experience during her study. With the high competition due to the pandemic, she wants to be viewed as a candidate who can do several things that later become an investment in experience. Figure 1 describes the phenomenological dynamics of career anxiety.

Figure 1

The Phenomenological Dynamics of Career Anxiety and Its Strategies



Discussion

This research was conducted to explore how students experienced career anxiety during the pandemic. The study identifies two main themes related to career anxiety: forms of career anxiety and its strategies. From both themes, sub-themes explain more dynamic subtleties, such as the participants' experiences related to career anxiety in the context of the pandemic.

The sub-themes were derived from the similar experiences encountered by each participant. This research found that the external context encountered by the participants also contributed to their career anxiety, such as social environment, technological advancement, health crisis, and socio-economic impact generated by the pandemic.

Deciding on a career is an essential task because it affects self-esteem and one's finances. Internal and external circumstances are capable of influencing career selection. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has a proven effect on career plans; students tend to be afraid of limited career opportunities, considering many employees' layoffs and reductions during the pandemic. This research underlies several career adjustments students carry out, such as discovering more about the dream career, polishing supporting skills, and establishing supportive social relations with the career plan.

This study underlies that the pandemic was perceived as making career plans even more nebulous. Participants believed the changed career direction was related to the pandemic, such as limited working opportunities, low salaries, irregular working hours, poor working environments, and career path uncertainties. This study also discovers that students experience extended distress and frustration related to technology implementation, family and social relations issues, emotional stress, and financial problems. Students have been having issues planning careers since the COVID-19 pandemic; about 5% of students quit college due to the pandemic, and 20% or 500 students plan to discontinue their studies after spring 2020 (Hagedorn et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic also negatively impacted the learning circumstances that forced them to stay at home because students believed that the environment at home was way beyond conducive (Hagedorn et al., 2022). These circumstances hinder students from exploring their careers because the time to focus and be productive becomes limited. The pandemic threatened everyone and was full of movement (Nurdiyanto & Harjanti, 2022). In the stay-at-home context, people are in a monotonous and boring rhythm of life, and they do not have a variety of activities and spend more time with screen time. Not being focused here means that people experience limitations in exploring potential career plans and spend time on monotonous activities at home. The pandemic has created an effect of fear of failure in planning a career, along with changes in the online learning system and restrictions on mobility.

This research points out that career anxiety occurred to some participants with poor support systems. The discussion regarding social support and academic disruption was conducted by previous research (Boo et al., 2021), that the students may interpret the family expectation as career planning encouragement. Students employ external expectations as the main source to validate their career decisions. This research also observed that participants wanted social support to help on their career path. Seeking social support is one of the strategies students use to develop their career plans (Kang et al., 2020). The positive social response has a lower correlation with anxiety than the absence of appreciation (Deer et al., 2018). Social comparison becomes the next aspect of students' career anxiety. Participants described themselves in a lower position than others. This finding aligns with previous research in the form of self-blaming and maladaptive strategies (Lopes & Nihei, 2021). Regarding the coping anxiety that occurred in this event, it may implement an active strategy by redefining self-potential and various opportunities with social support. A previous study also emphasized the importance of social support for adaptive development (Minza et al., 2022). Although career anxiety is seen as no more frightening than a viral infection or health crisis, these particular issues need to be anticipated to prevent career delays and focus on developing students' potential along with the pandemic disruption.

Students encountered career doubts due to COVID-19 pandemic conditions. Many sectors are considered inactive or dead due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study conducted on hospitality and tourism students conveyed that they became doubtful about their careers in tourism due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They hoped everything would return to the way before the pandemic, though not soon (Minza et al., 2022). The cause of career anxiety is

the lack of information and preparation in determining a career (Arbona et al., 2021). Moreover, our findings also revealed that the migration to online learning caused career anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic; these circumstances decreased their access to explore further the career.

Career anxiety has diverse dynamics among students. Previous studies have stated that women's career anxiety is often higher (Chowdhury et al., 2022). Men choose more alternative activities as a diversion when faced with stressors, problems, and negative emotions. It implies that male students have more diverse career choices and higher incomes than female students. The factors that cause student career anxiety during a pandemic are more related to academic problems and their year of study (Bai et al., 2021). Students over 18 years were also found to have a higher level of career anxiety than those aged 18 and under. Final-year students transition from their academic life as students into the workplace, while juniors are concerned with academic adjustment. First-year and later-year students are more similar than different regarding career issues. This finding warrants further investigation to understand better when students are most at risk for career anxiety. Career-related anxiety is related to existential concerns, such as awareness of responsibilities, choices, and creating authentic lives (Pisarik et al., 2017). Career anxiety was identified among final-year students during the pandemic, and stress during the pandemic also significantly influenced career anxiety. Students who have faculty affiliations have a lower anxiety level than those who do not (Daniels et al., 2011). Faculty environment factors relate intuitively to students' resolution of career uncertainty.

This study reflects on various new opportunities and efforts to develop oneself. A previous study found an indirect correlation between career anxiety and career adaptation through self-reflection (Shin & Lee, 2019). The effect of self-reflection makes an individual capable of managing career anxiety and career adjustment. Parallel to the previous research, the pandemic leads to personal gains, such as unexpected personal growth (August & Dapkewicz, 2020). This personal gain helps the student to see the future with various available opportunities and chances. This finding is also supported by other research that views the pandemic as an opportunity for self-growth and development (Nunn et al., 2021). One of our participants reflected on the pandemic as the propeller to be more developed in the education discipline. During the pandemic, the issue of the teaching profession became disrupted, leading to many teachers receiving layoffs, indecent salaries, and health risks; however, teachers' careers will always be needed.

This research also highlighted that students' adjustment to the pandemic determined their career plans. In this research, participants used these strategies to polish the skills conforming to the discipline they chose, such as foreign language and technology. Students follow foreign language courses during online learning (Hazaymeh, 2021). Interest in technology also developed along with the awareness that the world is highly dependent on technology during the pandemic. The skill in digital and computer skills contributed to decreasing students' career anxiety (Tsai et al., 2017).

The lack of preparation, information, and self-confidence makes the students unready for the working world (Arbona et al., 2021; Kang et al., 2020). Searching for information regarding career and social support is viewed as a way to cope with career anxiety (Boo & Kim, 2020). High-confident students tend to have low career anxiety (Deer et al., 2018). The study also found that positive responses and support from the environment lead to lower anxiety levels than participants with negative responses. The outcome is related to self-confidence due to favorable environmental reactions. This self-confidence related to working experience is helpful in re-planning students' careers, eventually decreasing career anxiety (Lopes & Nihei, 2021). Self-confidence is more likely to occur in students with higher exposure to the internship experience (Belle et al., 2022).

We acknowledge the limitations of this research. Data collection carried out through teleconference, which was the best solution during the pandemic, needed to improve in

establishing personal bonds with participants. Teleconference technical problems during the interview also affect the discussion we have. The research was conducted when the pandemic can be controlled, which potentially might be having different career anxiety experience dynamics when the pandemic is not under control.

Conclusion

This research discovers phenomenological themes identified as the forms of students' career anxiety and the myriad of strategies that deal with it. Students said anxiety arose from doubt about their career plan, perceived social comparison, and limited working opportunities after the pandemic. Adjustment strategy needs to be implemented in students' lives, including pursuing careers, technological literacy, industrial jobs, and internships. Additionally, involvement in the community with the same interest may encourage more positive career aspirations. Following our two findings, career doubt and social comparison, this research was expected to provide a discussion contribution regarding students' career anxiety. This study also suggests an educational and training institution to facilitate students' career training to improve their career readiness. Educational and training institutions must facilitate managing students' career anxiety to prepare a more adaptive career plan for pandemic disruption.

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Declarations

Author contribution. FAN led and conceptualized the research design. ABP and ABP carried out the data collection and initial analysis. FAN and EPH conducted supervision and reviewed the data analysis. All authors wrote and approved the final manuscript version.

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