

Decomposition and Comparative Differences in Career Choice Anxiety Between Urban-Rural in Vocational School Students: A Cross-Sectional Study from Jawa Timur Province, Indonesia

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Abstract

Anxiety represents a primary global health concern. The divide between urban and rural areas has caused development gaps, leading to notable differences in career choice anxiety levels between these regions in Jawa Timur. However, there is a shortage of comprehensive national research analyzing these disparities among VHS students. This study involved 5,000 VHS students from Jawa Timur province. The study applied multiple regression modeling to explore determinants of career choice anxiety among vocational high school students across urban and rural districts in Jawa Timur. In addition, a partitioning technique was utilized to assess how distinct variables contributed to differences in anxiety levels between students from urban and rural backgrounds. The general linear model shows that differences in career choice anxiety among VHS students in rural and urban Jawa Timur are reflected in interpersonal networks (personal ability, self-exploration, decision stress), interpersonal network levels (VEC, family communication), policy levels (public insurance coverage), community levels (amount of information, monthly per capita family income) and institutional levels (environmental exploration, career guidance services). The Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition reveals that 79.48% of the disparity in anxiety between city and village students in Jawa Timur can be explained, with the level of intrapersonal networks being the key predictor. The incidence of career choice anxiety is disproportionately higher in metropolitan areas relative to rural regions. Consequently, it is imperative for policymakers to identify the causal drivers of this disparity in order to design effective interventions that mitigate psychological health inequities between urban and rural communities.

Keywords: Career Anxiety, Career Exploration, Commitment to Career Choice, Student Vocational, Urban-Rural Disparities.

Introduction

Anxiety is a common psychological condition that affects a person's ability to function in various aspects of life, including their professional development (1, 2). The World Health Organization estimates that around 3.6% of the global population suffers from anxiety (3). Indonesia has 2.5 million adolescents aged 10-17 who suffer from mental health issues, including anxiety. In education contexts, vocational high schools (VHS) play critical role in career development, as they are designed to equip students with the practical skills and knowledge needed to find employment (4). However, the transition into the workforce often triggers emotional reactions rooted in fear or uncertainty about the future. To a certain extent, anxiety acts as a natural response that helps

individuals remain alert. However, excessive anxiety levels disrupt daily functioning and become a serious problem (5). Career anxiety emerges when general anxiety combines with uncertainties regarding career and work. This refers to emotional stress experienced by individuals when facing problems related to their future employment, accompanied by physiological and behavioral changes. Individuals with high career anxiety are more prone to negative emotional reactions such as worry, tension and low self-evaluation, which significantly impair their perceptions of career certainty and satisfaction (6, 7). For VHS students, the internship period represents an important turning point in their transition toward future

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careers (8). Unfortunately, the pressure arising from the contradiction between high demands and the shortage of job vacancies causes self-doubt and career anxiety, which are often worsened by a lack of self-competence or insufficient information (9, 10). This subjective assessment of uncertain achievements in the world of work triggers internal conflicts, fear and avoidance behaviors. In Indonesia, the high unemployment rate specifically among VHS graduates further intensifies this anxiety. Prolonged anxiety ultimately contributes to a decline in quality of life (11), compromises immune function (12) and triggers various psychosomatic diseases (13–15), causing heavy social and economic burdens (16).

Given these substantial consequences, identifying specific risk factors is necessary. One critical factor causing anxiety when facing the workforce is a negative self-concept, which includes a lack of practical experience and minimal information about the labor market (17). Furthermore, imbalances in career construction management can disrupt career development. Career exploration conducted without the ability to manage anxiety causes confusion and information overload, while career commitments formed without adequate exploration risk creating premature, unrealistic commitments (18). Without effective anxiety management, the exploration process is hindered and established commitments are weakened, leaving students vulnerable to shifting interests and inconsistencies in technical competency development (19).

The integration of career exploration, career anxiety and commitment to career choice forms an essential career development cycle. An intensive career exploration process enables students to recognize job opportunities aligned with their technical competencies, while giving rise to functional career anxiety as an awareness mechanism regarding work challenges (20). This functional anxiety encourages deeper, more realistic exploration, which eventually crystallizes into a mature career commitment based on a comprehensive understanding of individual strengths and limitations. To navigate this decision-making process successfully, students need a solid cognitive construct consisting of career exploration to gather information (21), career anxiety as a natural emotional response to uncertainty (22) and career commitment as a

mechanism to resolve cognitive tension through definitive decision-making.

Previous empirical research indicates that career choice anxiety is multifactorial, linking exploration, anxiety domains and commitment patterns. First, at the level of career exploration, anxiety during exploration emerges as a decisive factor influencing career choice, where social support can sometimes negatively impact the relationship between environmental exploration and career choices (18). Second, specific anxiety domains determine career choice anxiety; psychological, economic and psychosomatic factors relate positively to career anxiety and perceived pressure, while social factors exhibit a mitigating effect (23). Third, career anxiety significantly influences career commitment by increasing the tendency to foreclose or make rigid, premature decisions (24). However, most existing studies focus only on isolated factors, leaving a critical gap in comprehensive research that simultaneously examines the interplay of these multiple factors on career choice anxiety.

This study focuses on urban-rural differences in anxiety among students to analyse and measure the extent to which career exploration, career anxiety and commitment to career explain these differences. The Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition method provides us with an effective tool for breaking down urban-rural differences in anxiety into two parts: on the one hand, those explained by observable differences in characteristics between urban and rural areas (the explained component) and on the other hand, those that can be attributed to unmeasured or unobservable factors (the unexplained component) (25, 26). Indeed, although rural and urban areas may share similar individual characteristics, the differences between them may still be influenced by unknown factors. Therefore, this study is designed to identify and then facilitate adjustments for urban-rural differences caused by known factors, thereby revealing how unmeasured or unobserved factors continue to influence urban-rural differences in anxiety when these known factors are excluded. This study will provide policymakers with valuable insights in the field of public health, particularly in promoting equitable mental health development among VHS students in urban and rural areas of Jawa Timur province.

Methodology

Given the scattered nature of previous research perspectives on factors related to anxiety, we used the Social Ecological Model (SEM) as a conceptual framework in this study to identify them comprehensively. This model covers individual characteristics, intrapersonal networks,

interpersonal networks, institutions, communities and policies (27). This study was conducted in Jawa Timur, which has an administrative population of 41.92 million, or approximately 14.88% of the country's total population. The survey sample was selected using a multistage random sampling procedure, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Multistage Random Sampling Procedure

Hierarchical Level	Total Population Available	Number Selected	Inclusion / Stratification Criteria
Regency/City	38	8 Regency/City	Representing the region's geographic diversity (divided into Western, Eastern, Northern and Southern regions).
District	666	24 districts (3 districts from each selected regency/city)	Districts that have at least two or more public schools within their jurisdiction
School	297	48 Public Schools (2 schools from each selected district)	Public high schools that are active and have at least a B accreditation
Student	368.701	5,413 Students (Approximately 113 per school)	Active students, registered in academic year and willing to participate.
Final sample size	Total population: 368.701 students	N=5413 students	

In the final sample selection, between 112 and 113 students were randomly selected from each school (proportionally based on the school's size), resulting in a total of 5,413 participating students. The entire random sampling procedure was conducted computationally using IBM SPSS Statistics 27.0 software.

The questionnaire was distributed online using the SurveyMars platform and was estimated to take 30 minutes to complete. To ensure data accuracy and reliability, the questionnaire included two verification questions: a repetition question and a general knowledge question. If a respondent answered either of these questions incorrectly, the questionnaire was considered invalid and excluded from the analysis. Participants in this study had to meet the following inclusion criteria: i) currently enrolled as a vocational high school student and ii) normal cognitive function capable of completing the questionnaire independently.

The exclusion criteria used were i) participants with anomalous response times (too fast or too slow) and ii) incorrect answers selected by participants on the verification questions. A total of 5.413 participants completed the questionnaire and proceeded to the screening phase. The screening results revealed 363 participants with anomalous response times and 50 participants were excluded for exhibiting irregular response patterns (careless responding). These irregular patterns included extreme inconsistencies in responses to control items and uniform answering patterns (straightlining) from the beginning to the end of the questionnaire, indicating that respondents did not read the questions carefully. This screening process yielded 5.000 valid participants and an effective response rate of 92.37%. The participant sample screening process is illustrated in Figure 1.

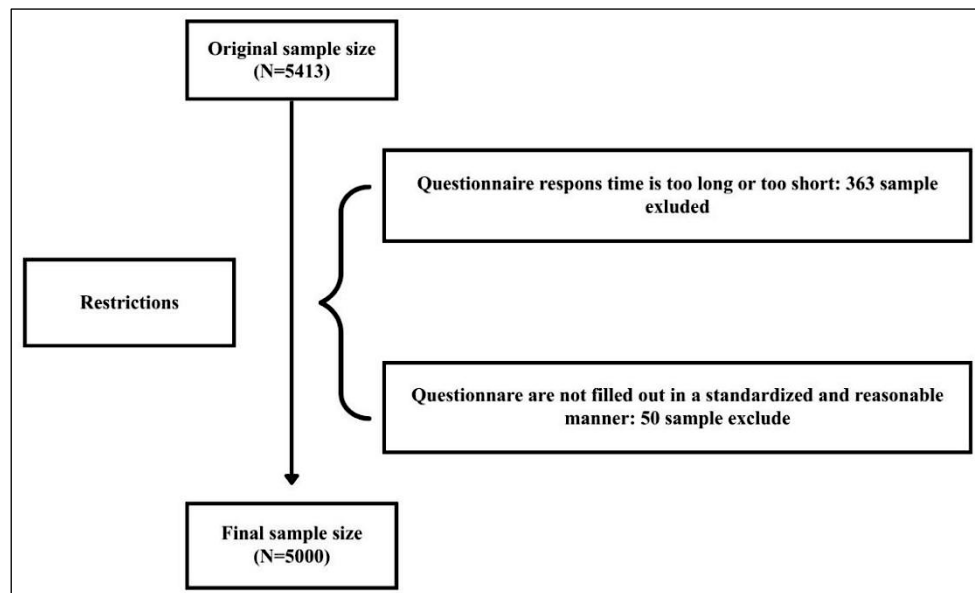


Figure 1: Participant Screening Flowchart

Standardized Questionnaires

Mental Health Status

The Generalised Anxiety Disorder scale (GAD-7), consisting of seven items, was utilized to assess the frequency and severity of anxiety manifestations. Each item was scored on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 0 ("not at all") to 3 ("nearly every day"). Scores under 5 indicate the absence of anxiety symptoms, while scores of 5 or higher denote their presence (28). The GAD-7 instrument, as applied in this study, achieved a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.944, reflecting robust reliability. The GAD-7 instrument used in this study was adapted from previous research, with construct validity ranging from 0.54 to 0.75 and a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.94, indicating strong reliability (29). This instrument was selected because of its reputation as the gold standard for measuring the severity of anxiety symptoms with very high efficiency.

Career Exploration Survey

Aligned with the multidimensional framework of career exploration emphasized in both theoretical and empirical literature, this study adapted four scales from the Career Exploration Survey (CES) developed by past research (21). This instrument is considered to have theoretical and methodological advantages that are far superior to those of other similar instruments, particularly in the context of comparative studies and analyses of differences between students in urban and rural areas. Unlike conventional instruments, which are limited to behavioral dimensions, the CES uniquely

integrates an inherent affective subscale to measure anxiety and stress during the career exploration process. The Self-Exploration (SE) dimension comprises five items that evaluate the extent of personal reflection and self-assessment. The Environmental Exploration (EE) dimension includes six items designed to assess the breadth of career option investigation. The Amount of Information (INF) scale, consisting of four items, captures the degree of informational acquisition through exploratory activities. The Decision Stress (DS) scale is derived from the CES and composed of four items. It measures psychological strain associated with career decision-making in comparison to other stress-inducing experiences. Given that the CES was originally tailored for VHS students, several items were slightly revised to accommodate respondents uncertain about their career trajectories (30). Psychometric testing of the revised instrument showed strong evidence of construct validity, with all items exhibiting significant corrected item-total correlations ranging from 0.41 to 0.73. In addition, internal consistency testing yielded highly reliable Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each dimension: 0.87 for EE; 0.82 for SE; 0.82 for INF; and 0.86 for DS. This indicates that the adapted instrument is highly reliable for use in primary data collection. Validity evidence for the CES is supported by theoretical alignment with career development constructs (21) and empirical associations with predictive outcomes (30, 31).

Career Anxiety Scale

This instrument adapts four scales from the Career Anxiety Scale (CAS), which were originally developed by previous research (32). The selection of the CAS was based on its perfect construct alignment with the research objectives; this instrument was specifically designed to capture the psychological manifestations of individuals' fears, concerns and uncertainties regarding their future transition into the workforce. Specifically tailored for VHS students, the CAS comprises eight items distributed across four dimensions of personal ability. One representative item is "thinking about my future career is frightening." Responses were captured using a four-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Elevated scores correspond to higher levels of perceived career anxiety. Psychometric testing of the instrument revealed strong construct validity, with all items exhibiting significant corrected item-total correlations ranging from 0.51 to 0.75 and a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.85.

Commitment to Career Choice

The Commitment to Career Choice Scale (CCC) was designed to assess adolescents' career-related commitment. It consists of two subscales: the Vocational Exploration and Commitment Scale (VEC) and the Tendency to Foreclose Scale (TTF). This instrument was adapted from a previous study (33). The selection of this instrument was based on the theoretical need to test the reciprocal relationship between the level of career choice anxiety (dependent variable) and the degree of stability in students' career decisions.

The VEC comprises 19 items that evaluate self-awareness, knowledge of jobs, confidence and overall dedication to particular career preferences. It also examines the perceived importance of exploring careers, the presence of uncertainty in career decisions and the awareness and willingness to overcome possible barriers (30). Participants rated each item on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = "rarely true of me" to 7 = "always true of me"). A lower VEC score reflects a stronger commitment to career choices, whereas higher scores indicate weaker commitment and greater openness to exploration (34).

Meanwhile, the TTF subscale consists of 9 items using the same 7-point Likert scale. This subscale measures an individual's tendency to commit to

career and educational decisions as quickly as possible in a rigid manner without further exploration, as reflected in the sample item: "I believe there is only one right job for me." A high TTF score indicates a tendency toward rigid, premature commitment, while a low score indicates flexibility and openness to tentative decisions. In this study, construct validity was tested using corrected item-total correlation analysis, in which all items had validity coefficients ranging from 0.45 to 0.72. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were 0.89 for the VEC subscale and 0.90 for the TTF subscale, indicating good internal consistency.

Statistical Analyses

Normality of continuous data was examined using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Variables that did not follow a normal distribution were summarized using the median and the 25th–75th percentile range. Nominal data were presented as frequencies and proportions. Group comparisons were conducted using the Mann-Whitney U test for continuous data and the chi-square test for nominal data. To identify the main predictors of career choice anxiety among VHS students in Jawa Timur, both in village-based and city-based settings, a general regression framework was applied. Furthermore, the Oaxaca decomposition technique was utilized to evaluate the relative contribution of different factors to career choice anxiety. All computations were carried out using IBM SPSS Statistics SPSS 27.0 and STATA 16.0. Two-sided tests were applied and results were considered statistically significant when the probability value was below 0.05.

Results

Demographic Characteristics

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of VHS students residing in village-based and city-based settings in Jawa Timur. A total of 61.00% of VHS students in Jawa Timur came from urban areas. Of these, 3251 (65.02%) participants were male. Overall, the percentage score indicating symptoms of anxiety among VHS students in Jawa Timur in this study was 2971 (59.42%). The percentage score indicating anxiety symptoms among VHS students in urban areas was 42.31%, exceeding the total anxiety score of all VHS students in rural and urban areas, which was 40.22% ($P < 0.001$).

Table 2: Distribution of the Variables in Rural and Urban Respondents

Characteristics	Total (N=5000)	Urban (N=3050)	Rural (N=1950)	P value
Individual characteristics level				
Gender, n (%)				0.002
Male	3251 (65.02)	1998 (65.51)	1253 (64.26)	
Female	1749 (34.98)	1052 (34.49)	697 (35.74)	
Class Rangking, n (%)				0.003
$\mu \leq 25.0\%$	1239 (24.78)	753 (24.70)	486 (24.92)	
$25.0\% < \mu \leq 50.0\%$	1604 (32.08)	952 (31.21)	652 (33.44)	
$50.0\% < \mu \leq 75.0\%$	1453 (29.06)	875 (28.68)	578 (29.64)	
$\mu > 75.0\%$	704 (14.08)	470 (15.41)	234 (12.00)	
Intrapersonal				
Anxiety Disorder n (%)				< 0.001
≥ 5	2011 (40.22)	719 (36.87)	1292 (42.31)	
< 5	2989 (59.78)	1758 (57.64)	1231 (63.13)	
Personal abilities, median (P ₂₅ , P ₇₅)	20.00 (15.00, 25.00)	17.00 (15.00, 21.00)	21.00 (16.00, 25.00)	0.002
Self-Exploration, median (P ₂₅ , P ₇₅)	23.00 (19.00, 25.00)	25.00 (20.00, 27.00)	21.00 (17.00, 23.00)	0.003
Decision Stress, median (P ₂₅ , P ₇₅)	16.00 (10.00, 20.00)	15.00 (10.00, 19.00)	17.00 (12.00, 20.00)	< 0.001
Tendency to Foreclose, median (P ₂₅ , P ₇₅)	48.00 (30.00, 59.00)	50.00 (32.00, 59.00)	47.00 (30.00, 52.00)	0.002
Smoking, n (%)				< 0.001
Yes	4528 (90.56)	2875 (94.26)	1653 (84.77)	
No	472 (9.44)	175 (5.74)	297 (15.23)	
Alkohol n (%)				< 0.001
Yes	1330 (26.60)	944 (30.95)	386 (19.79)	
No	3670 (73.40)	2106 (69.05)	1564 (80.21)	
Exercise, n (%)				0.003
Yes	2841 (56.82)	1851 (60.69)	1083 (55.54)	
No	2159 (43.18)	1292 (42.36)	867 (44.46)	
Interpersonal				
Vocational Exploration & Commitment, median (P ₂₅ , P ₇₅)	80.00 (50.00, 115.00)	85.00 (55.00, 120)	75.00 (45.00, 110)	< 0.001
Family communication, median (P ₂₅ , P ₇₅)	23.00 (17.00, 26.00)	25.00 (18.00, 26.00)	20.00 (17.00, 24.00)	0.003
Institutional				
Environmental Exploration, median (P ₂₅ , P ₇₅)	18.00 (15.00, 21.00)	20.00 (17.00, 22.00)	17.00 (15.00, 20.00)	0.002
Career Guidance Services, median (P ₂₅ , P ₇₅)	10.00 (8.00, 12.00)	8.00 (6.00, 10.00)	11.00 (8.00, 12.00)	< 0.001
Community				
Family per capita monthly income (US\$), n (%)				< 0.001
$\leq$ US\$ 240	1886 (37.72)	1083 (35.51)	803 (41.18)	
US\$241– US\$ 599	2062 (41.24)	1330 (43.61)	732 (37.54)	
$\geq$ US\$ 600	1052 (21.04)	637 (20.88)	415 (21.28)	
Amount of Information, median (P ₂₅ , P ₇₅)	10.00 (7.00, 12.00)	11.00 (9.00, 13.00)	9.00 (7.00, 11.00)	
Policy				
Public insurance coverage, n (%)				< 0.001
Covered	4712 (94.24)	2923 (95.84)	1789 (91.74)	
Non covered	288 (5.76)	127 (4.16)	161 (8.26)	

Note: N = Number of Respondents.

Determinants of Anxiety Between Rural and Urban

Table 3 presents the results of the general linear model concerning career choice anxiety among

VHS students in both rural and urban regions of Jawa Timur. In both countryside and city areas, personal ability, decision-related stress, self-exploration and the volume of information

constitute risk factors for anxiety; meanwhile, environmental exploration, a tendency to foreclose and physical activity serve as protective factors.

The disparity in career choice anxiety among VHS students in rural and urban regions of Jawa Timur is evidenced by three primary factors. The

provision of career guidance services (estimate = 0.074) functions as a risk factor within rural areas, whereas the family per capita monthly income ($\geq$ US\$600, estimate = 0.71) constitutes a risk factor in urban environments areas.

Table 3: Associations Between Study Variables and Anxiety Among VHS Jawa Timur District Rural and Urban

Variable	Estimate	Urban 95% CI	P value	Estimate	Rural 95% CI	P value
Individual characteristics level						
Gender (No. Female)	-0.089	(-0.138, -0.039)	< 0.001	0.021	(-0.073, 0.011)	0.152
Class rank (ref. $\leq$ 25.0%)						
25.0% < $\mu \leq$ 50.0%	0.074	(0.025, 0.122)	0.063	0.012	(-0.040, 0.064)	0.055
50.0% < $\mu \leq$ 75.0%	0.057	(-0.001, 0.116)	0.055	0.056	(-0.003, 0.115)	0.064
$\mu > 75.0\%$	0.041	(0.004, 0.078)	0.029	0.046	(0.019, 0.092)	0.023
Intrapersonal						
Personal abilities	0.063	(0.553, 0.736)	< 0.001	0.060	(0.480, 0.758)	< 0.001
Decision stress	0.024	(0.501, 0.921)	< 0.001	0.071	(0.401, 0.802)	< 0.039
Self-exploration	0.083	(0.655, 1.074)	< 0.001	0.089	(0.664, 1.037)	< 0.001
Tendency to foreclose	-0.026	(0.232, 0.296)	0.015	-0.028	(0.222, 0.304)	0.025
Status smoking (ref. No)	0.023	(-0.033, 0.078)	0.424	0.035	(-0.021, 0.091)	0.223
Drinking alkohol (ref. No)	0.023	(-0.023, 0.068)	0.324	0.036	(-0.007, 0.079)	0.103
Exercise (ref.no)	-0.011	(-0.029, 0.057)	0.527	-0.013	(-0.038, 0.059)	0.649
Interpersonal						
Vocational exploration & commitment	0.038	(0.553, 0.736)	< 0.001	0.036	(0.480, 0.758)	< 0.001
Family communication	0.039	(0.694, 1.013)	0.129	0.092	(0.727, 1.165)	0.245
Institutional						
Environmental exploration	-0.081	(0.720, 0.924)	0.004	-0.078	(0.670, 0.926)	0.002
Career guidance services	0.027	(-0.361, -0.179)	0.021	0.074	(-0.438, -0.250)	0.213
Community						
Family per capita monthly income (USD) (ref. $\leq$ US\$ 240)						
US\$ 241– US\$ 599	0.031	(0.351, 0.639)	0.172	0.023	(0.411, 0.563)	0.182
$\geq$ US\$ 600	0.071	(0.454, 1.042)	0.061	0.038	(0.454, 0.642)	0.319
Amount of Information,	0.079	(0.653, 0.958)	0.003	0.070	(0.521, 0.962)	0.002
Policy						
Public insurance coverage (ref. No covered)	-0.043	(-0.122, 0.010)	0.032	0.031	(-0.067, 0.047)	0.046

Note: CI = Confidence Interval, ref = Reference.

Decomposition Analysis Results

Table 4 presents the results of a detailed analysis of differences in anxiety levels among high school students in Jawa Timur. The results show that observable factors explain 79.04% of the variation in anxiety, while the remaining 20.96% cannot be explained. Table 5 presents the results of the analysis: personal competence (45.87%), self-exploration (30.92%), decision-making stress (26.15%), career guidance services (20.18%), family communication (15.68%), amount of

information (12.14%), monthly per capita family income (2.16%), vocational exploration & commitment (-3.67%) and environmental exploration (-15.14%) were significant ($p < 0.05$) in accounting for variation in anxiety regarding career choice.

Figure 2 displays how individual traits, intrapersonal network, interpersonal network, institutional factors and community influences contribute to the differences in career choice anxiety between rural and urban VHS students.

The analysis shows that the intrapersonal network level accounts for the largest portion of the disparity at 79.48%. Contributions from the community level, interpersonal network,

institutional level, individual characteristics and policies follow, accounting for 14.30%, 12.01%, 5.09%, 3.57% and -2.29% respectively.

Table 4: Overall Blinder-Oaxaca Decomposition of the Urban-Rural Disparities in Career Choice Anxiety Among Student VHS Jawa Timur

Component	Estimate	95% CI	P value	Contribution
Explained difference	0.152	(0.093, 0.252)	< 0.001	79.48
Unexplained difference	0.044	(-0.039, 0.117)	0.375	20.96
Total Difference	0.196	(0.129, 0.331)	< 0.001	

Note: CI = Confidence Interval.

Table 5: Detailed Decomposition of Urban-Rural Disparities in Anxiety.

Variable	Explained component			Unexplained component		
	Estimate	95% CI	Contribution (%)	Estimate	95% CI	Contribution (%)
Individual characteristics level						
Gender	0.002	(-0.001, 0.004)	2.92	0.068*	(-0.007, 0.144)	31.19
Class rank	0.012	(-0.040, 0.064)	0.65	0.074	(0.025, 0.122)	25.03
Intrapersonal						
Personal abilities	0.001 ***	(-0.001, 0.002)	45.87	0.001	(-0.068, 0.070)	-84.86
Decision stress	0.057***	(-0.091, -0.024)	26.15	-0.203**	(-0.395, -0.011)	-93.12
Self-exploration	-0.002***	(-0.006, 0.003)	30.92	0.181***	(0.058, 0.304)	-70.03
Tendency to foreclose	0.003	(0.080, 0.120)	0.46	-0.185	(-0.768, 0.398)	46.05
Status smoking	0.002*	(-0.000, 0.005)	0.92	0.003	(-0.033, 0.040)	1.38
Drinking alkohol	-0.002	(-0.006, 0.001)	-15.73	0.007	(-0.036, 0.050)	3.21
Exercise	0.057	(-0.091, -0.024)	-9.15	-0.203**	(-0.395, -0.011)	93.12
Interpersonal						
Vocational exploration & commitment	-0.008***	(-0.014, -0.003)	-3.67	0.027**	(0.003, 0.051)	12.39
Family communication	0.032***	(0.020, 0.045)	15.68	0.272	(-0.288, 0.831)	120.32
Institutional						
Environmental exploration	0.013***	(-0.044, -0.021)	-15.09	0.278	(-0.167, 0.724)	127.52
Career guidance services	0.044***	(0.002, 0.087)	20.18	0.121	(-0.193, 0.435)	55.50
Community						
Family per capita monthly income	0.005***	(0.001, 0.008)	2.16	0.126	(-0.131, 0.334)	58.93
Amount of Information	-0.033***	(-0.043, -0.010)	12.14	0.033	(-0.209, 0.276)	32.14
Policy						
Public insurance coverage	0.005***	(-0.016, 0.005)	-2.29	0.008	(-0.241, 0.257)	3.67***

Note: CI = Confidence Interval. * P-value < 0.1, ** P-value < 0.05 and *** P-value < 0.01.

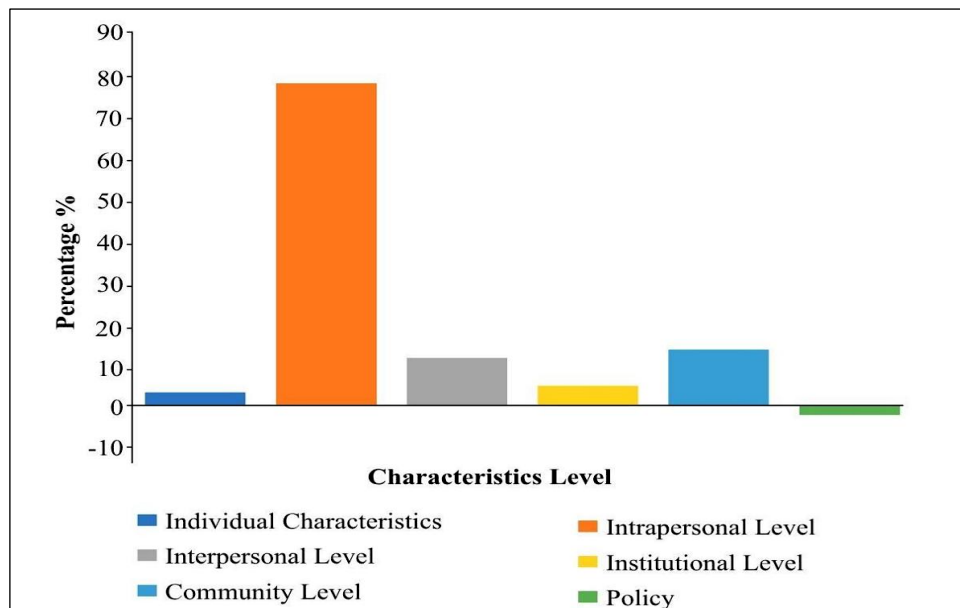


Figure 2: Main Contributor Factors to the Urban-ural Disparities in Career Choice Anxiety

Discussion

The main findings of this study confirm the existence of significant spatial disparities in career choice anxiety among VHS students. Based on data analysis, students' anxiety levels in urban areas were found to be significantly higher (42.31%) than those of their peers in rural areas (36.87%). These figures challenge the conventional assumption that limited facilities and access to information in rural areas automatically lead to greater career anxiety. Using the Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition approach, it was found that this striking disparity is primarily driven by endogenous characteristics, with personal abilities accounting for the most dominant contribution at 45.87%. This phenomenon indicates that students' perceptions of their own abilities, when faced with structural environmental pressures, serve as the primary anchor determining the level of their psychological burden as they look toward their post-graduation future.

When analyzed through the SEM, Bronfenbrenner's ecological concept and the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), the high levels of career-choice anxiety among urban adolescents are significantly influenced by pressures from the macro environment. Urban areas, characterized by intense industrial competition, a high cost of living and an information overload, do not automatically foster healthy self-confidence (self-efficacy) in students; without the necessary mental preparedness, these factors actually become major triggers of anxiety. Conversely, rural areas with a

more communal and family-oriented social climate can act as a buffer against psychological stress, so that students' career expectations are more realistic and aligned with the availability of local job opportunities (35). This situation supports the SCCT principle that career choices depend heavily on the interplay between self-assessment and environmental constraints (36, 37). In the current situation, post-pandemic learning challenges and economic difficulties have become tangible obstacles that make students feel their future in the workforce is uncertain. Consequently, students' self-confidence declines, leading to acute career anxiety (38). Nevertheless, this anxiety can be mitigated through broader structural support, such as a functioning public health insurance system that acts as a safety net to reduce families' financial burdens, which in turn helps strengthen students' mental resilience as they plan for their future (39, 40).

Intrapersonal

Intrapersonal exploration is particularly important, given that personal abilities account for the largest share (45.87%) in explaining this anxiety gap. Gender dynamics reveal contrasting patterns of vulnerability between male and female students in the VHS setting. Female students in urban areas are found to experience more layered psychological stress. Sociologically speaking, they are not only required to master technical competencies which have traditionally been dominated by a specific gender but must also confront the reality of an industrial labor market

that is not yet fully inclusive (41, 42). The pressure to prove their capabilities amid this competitive urban landscape undermines their career self-efficacy, thereby triggering higher levels of anxiety compared to their male peers or female students in rural areas who face more conventional gender role expectations (43, 44).

These intrapersonal factors are further complicated by students' position within the socioeconomic status (SES) stratification. The findings of this study suggest the existence of a "double burden" phenomenon experienced by students from low-income families in urban areas. When a family's financial constraints collide with the high cost of living and the demands for qualifications in major cities, students' career orientation is no longer merely about self-actualization but transforms into an urgent struggle for survival (45). This situation triggers "paralysis by analysis"—a state in which students feel powerless to face the future because they recognize a wide gap between their personal abilities and the socioeconomic capital required to compete (46). On the other hand, negative lifestyle adaptations such as smoking or alcohol consumption have been found, statistically, to have no significant direct impact on career anxiety. This indicates that such behaviors are merely a form of temporary maladaptive coping mechanism for daily academic stress, but do nothing to address the root of their anxiety regarding the uncertainty of the transition from school to the workforce.

Institutional and Interpersonal

Turning to the institutional level, the interaction between academic performance at school and the support system plays a crucial role in shaping students' career anxiety (47). One interesting finding at this level is how students' academic standing (class ranking) interacts with the expectations of their immediate environment. In urban areas, students who rank at the top academically are often trapped in anxiety due to excessively high social expectations to immediately succeed in a competitive job market or gain admission to prestigious higher education institutions. Conversely, students with lower rankings face a real fear of failure in competing in a job market that is already saturated due to short and long-term unemployment in the region. The intense interpersonal competition in these urban schools transforms academic achievement, which

should serve as a source of self-confidence, into a new source of mental strain.

This psychological condition is exacerbated by the suboptimal functioning of career guidance services provided by schools. Based on available data, current career guidance services tend to remain normative and administrative in nature, limited to disseminating information about job openings or facilitating the administrative aspects of fieldwork placements. A critical evaluation of this reality reveals that schools have not yet been able to address students' psychological and emotional needs, such as building mental resilience, fostering career adaptability and reducing anxiety itself (48). This is precisely why institutional interventions that focus solely on aligning hard skills without being balanced by stress management and personalized career counseling will always fail to bridge the gap of career anxiety (49, 50). This is especially true for urban VHS students who are exposed daily to the aggressive dynamics of the industry.

Community and Policy

At the policy level (the macro level), the Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition analysis reveals that gaps in health insurance coverage significantly widen disparities in career anxiety between urban and rural vocational students. On the surface, health insurance coverage appears to have no direct causal relationship with adolescents' career decision-making. However, if examined through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, this social safety net actually functions as a structural financial buffer against the risk of unexpected emergency expenses. Based on the Family Stress Model, parents who are free from anxiety about catastrophic sociomedical costs exhibit healthier emotional stability (51). This calm psychological state of the parents then creates a transfer of positive energy within the household, where parents are able to provide adequate emotional and material support for their children (52). The direct impact on adolescents is freedom from the moral burden and external demands to immediately become the "emergency backbone" or economic pillar of the family once they graduate from school.

This mechanism aligns with the SCCT, in which financial security at the macro level provides vocational high school students with greater mental bandwidth to engage in rational, well-

considered career exploration that aligns with their interests and self-actualization (37). Conversely, the absence of an institutional safety net distorts students' expectations regarding their future outcomes. Students from families without insurance are vulnerable to anxiety transmission from their parents. They are haunted by the perception of contextual barriers that if even one family member falls ill, all their educational aspirations and future career plans will collapse, forcing them to engage in premature career foreclosure by taking whatever job is available just to make money quickly.

This macro-level stress has escalated massively due to the disruption of the Chronosystem in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the current student cohort has come to realize a skills deficit (learning loss) resulting from the previous online learning system (53). The collision of these practical competency gaps with the high productivity demands of the urban workforce, coupled with the absence of family-based social safety nets, acts as an accelerator that multiplies their career anxieties. Therefore, expanding medical infrastructure and strengthening family health insurance are not merely public health issues but rather vital structural vocational interventions in maintaining the mental resilience and stability of young workers' career decision-making.

Conclusion

This study aims to measure career choice anxiety among VHS students by analysing and measuring the extent of career exploration, career anxiety and commitment to career among rural and urban VHS students. The study uses seven variables, each with its own factors. The results of this study found that factors across the intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, community and policy levels significantly influence students' career choice anxiety. This difference can be reduced by approximately 79.04% after risk factors are corrected.

The study also found that, on average, rural VHS students experience lower career choice anxiety than their urban counterparts. Intrapersonal variables are the dominant contributing factors to students' anxiety levels, comprising factors that individuals personally experience. VHS students in rural areas experience limitations in developing

their potential due to a lack of access to adequate educational facilities and inequality in instructional materials available during classroom activities. This situation is in contrast to students in urban areas who have access to more adequate resources, especially in terms of information, facilities and educational and career opportunities. The interpersonal variable analyses students' interactions and relationships with their surroundings. In rural VHS communities, students tend to have lower social resources, while urban residents have easier access to social resources and interaction due to more centralized areas. Rural students also experience a lack of participation and economic difficulties that hinder VHS students' career planning. Families in rural areas also tend to prioritize stability and expect their children to work in their hometowns with lower economic standards and health services. The final variable is the community level, which assesses the quality of environmental resources and the socio-economic conditions of VHS students. In rural areas, income levels, access to information and the process of recognize and learning about the environment are generally below those in urban areas. VHS students in villages do not have many career options available to them, so their career choice anxiety tends to be lower.

Overall, this study shows that geographical location (urban and rural areas) has an influence on career choice anxiety among VHS students. Career choice anxiety disparities can be overcome by implementing policies to improve interpersonal networking, career guidance and equitable access to infrastructure in rural areas. The government, together with the community, must pay attention to the policies and programmes that are adopted.

Limitations

This investigation is subject to specific restrictions arising from the use of a cross-sectional approach. While it identifies factors that may influence career choice anxiety among VHS students in Jawa Timur province, it cannot establish causality. Future investigations should examine these latent elements to achieve a more precise understanding of the processes driving regional variations in psychological distress and to strengthen the knowledge base for policy development. Information was obtained through participant-completed survey forms. Although anonymity was emphasized and leading questions minimized,

there remains the possibility of recall errors or respondent tendencies that may result in either overestimation or underestimation of outcomes.

Abbreviations

CCC: Commitment to Career Choice, CES: Career Exploration Survey, DS: Decision Stress, EE: Environmental Exploration, GAD-7: The Generalised Anxiety Disorder Scale, SE: Self-Exploration, TTF: Tendency to Foreclose, VEC: Vocational Exploration and Commitment, VHS: vocational high school.

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Author contributions

All authors contributed equally to the research, designing the study, collecting data, analyzing data, drawing conclusions, writing the manuscript and approving the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declaration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Assistance

The authors used ChatGPT and Google Gemini for language editing and grammar correction during the preparation of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content's originality, interpretation and accuracy.

Ethics Approval

We voluntarily declare our moral commitment to maintaining scientific integrity in the conduct of

this research. The researchers have drafted this declaration independently because the nature of the study falls under the category of research posing minimal risk to participants. The research instrument consists solely of an anonymous survey regarding work readiness analysis. We guarantee the confidentiality of information and participants' freedom to voluntarily participate in completing the questionnaire. The research team is fully responsible for upholding publication ethics during the dissemination of these research results.

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