

The Impact of COVID-19 as an Unforeseen Crisis on the Career Anxiety in Final Year Students

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected our lives drastically in the past year, it has affected all aspects of our lives, from economics to the education sector (Hiscott et al., 2020). Mode of education had completely shifted online for almost an entire year and now that many institutions are turning to a hybrid (online and offline) mode, the unrest and uncertainty caused by a global crisis such as this continues to affect everyone. This study explored career anxiety among final year students through a qualitative method. Eight college students participated in a semi-structured interview. The content gleaned from the interview was analyzed through the method of thematic analysis. The results discussed the themes of Uncertainty, Situation of Job Market and Economy, Personal Skills and Abilities, Role of Peers and Role of Parents, which were identified and their sub themes. After making recommendations for the phenomena discussed, this study also discusses the need of a tool measuring career anxiety within the context of unforeseen crises to better help the populace in the future.

Keywords: Career anxiety, COVID-19, Unforeseen crisis, College students, Stress, Education

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, dominated the entire world in 2020. The pandemic caused many sectors of the society and the economy to come to a pause. The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the largest spread crises that the world has experienced due to the way it affected every aspect of people's life, like health, jobs, education, economy, trade, politics etc (Hiscott et al., 2020). This was mainly because of lockdown and social distancing protocols that were issued as they were the main defenses against the spread of the virus. Due to these lockdowns and other protocols most sectors were shut down. This unexpected halt in the economy has affected the job market very negatively. According to Bloomberg (2020), in India alone, over four million people have lost their jobs due to the pandemic, and an estimated number of 1.6 billion people were unemployed since the beginning of the pandemic (Temko, 2020). Among the sectors that were infected, one among the badly affected was the education system where educational institutes around the world were closed down indefinitely at the

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beginning and shifted to an online mode of learning, even though now many institutes have moved to a blended mode of learning, the impact of the shift still exists. With rapid changes in structure of all systems and timelines, and the situation of the job market and the economy can be quite intimidating to students who are looking to start their career or pursue higher education eliciting anxiety towards one's career.

This career anxiety may be even more heightened in this situation due to the crisis present. During times of crisis people find themselves even more susceptible to anxiety due to the fear of the unknown and the uncertainty of the situation (Carleton, 2016). Hence it is important to consider the situation of crisis in instances as the one given if one was to truly measure the career anxiety faced during the current situation. Situations of uncertainty breeds anxiety, depression and many other distress reactions. Especially given the uncertainty that is attached to the economy, job market and generally financial aspect of life in the current situation of crisis, it is necessary to glean the feelings and reactions that students are experiencing to adequately provide support for them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Anxiety is a complex and elusive concept (Iacovou, 2011). It is characterized by negative feelings, worried and/or dreadful thoughts, and physical changes like increased blood pressure, sweating, trembling, dizziness, tension, and rapid heartbeat (Barlow, 2002).

Career Anxiety is that fear that arises once you realize you will have to take a risk to achieve your career goals, which is your next step, and it might or might not go very well (Peintner, 2019).

Although a number of factors are associated with heightened levels of career anxiety, one of the constructs is beginning to emerge as a fundamental factor associated with intolerance of uncertainty. Anxiety caused by unforeseen disasters or large-scale crises appears in the literature, which is the result of intolerance of uncertainty (Carleton, 2016). Early researchers such as (Buhr & Dugas, 2009) recognized this construct, i.e., intolerance of uncertainty as a characteristic that results from a set of negative beliefs about uncertainty and its implications and involves the tendency to react negatively on an emotional, cognitive, and behavioral level to uncertain situations and events. It is mainly associated with anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder. An unknown is the lack of details at any level of consciousness. As per that definition the unknown is a necessary core component of several closely related words and constructs such as uncertainty, unfamiliarity, and strange (Carleton, 2016). Dealing with uncertainty is part of daily life which is unavoidable. Because we cannot see the longer term and may never be sure about what's going to happen day to day. Research has found that people vary in their ability to tolerate uncertainty. That is, some people are okay with having a lot of uncertainty in their lives, and other people cannot stand even a little amount of it. Anxious people, especially those adults who worry excessively, are more likely to be very intolerant of uncertainty. They will often try to plan and prepare for everything as a way of avoiding or eliminating uncertainty. But being very intolerant of uncertainty can result in many problems, as it leads to a lot of time-consuming and tiring behaviors, causes stress and anxiety, and is the major fuel for worry (Canada, 2015). In situations such as covid-19, things are very uncertain which in result causes career anxiety among students. Students will be very worried about their future career plans if they don't know what is going to happen next. Career anxiety among students can have many adverse effects on college students such as academic performance, reducing their quality of life, etc.

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Another construct which is related with career anxiety is beliefs about personal abilities, academics and job excelling. Beliefs about personal abilities is defined as one's belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task. It finds out about how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave. It includes things like taking risks and learning from mistakes, exhibiting confidence, committing to courage, etc. Stress, anxiety and depression can be caused by academics which is a major cause of concern. College students often have more complex problems today than they did over a decade ago. Common stressors in college include greater academic demands, fear of failure, being on your own, etc. Some of the problems specific to college students are fear of failure, pressure of academic excellence, tough competence, etc. Emotional problems such as feeling inferior, worrying too much, etc. (Kumaraswamy, 2013). During unforeseen circumstances, such as the Great Recession resulted in people suffering from financial, housing-related, or job-related hardships. Because during such a crisis, the unemployment rate is at its peak and people start to fear losing or getting jobs. Research showed that they were more likely to show symptoms of anxiety, depression, etc. Looking at this construct will help us understand how an individual's beliefs about his academics, personal abilities and job excelling affect his confidence, fear, etc. about their career.

Another construct is relating to the avoidance where, Avoidance is defined as any behavioral act that helps a person to avoid the expected uncomfortable or painful circumstances, stimuli or activities, including conditioned aversive stimuli. Or it refers to the activity or instance of staying away from specific circumstances, events, places, people, objects or topics of thought by either (a) the expected negative effects of certain events or (b) the anticipated nervous or painful feelings associated with such things or incidents. (M.S, 2013). In crisis or any situations, it is observed that individuals, mainly students and employers show avoidance behavior. From a study, it was found that individuals showed psychological problems in crisis situation such as COVID where, individuals showed confusion, anger and post-traumatic stress symptoms and an increase in anxiety and depressive symptoms which later transform into increased stress related to infection fears, inadequate supplies and support which makes them disconnected from the society. And other issues like, *detachment from society*, *deteriorating work performance* also prevails within the individuals making them reflect avoidance behaviors. (Rogowska et al., 2020).

Similarly, A study showed that students who were exposed to different types of crisis issues faced problems with academic achievements and instead of facing adverse effects on academics, they faced psychological issues and the situations affected on learning and increased *avoidance* of learning activities which reduced their psychomotor concentration. And impacted in lower achievements and standout situations from the student groups leading to avoidance behaviors.(Al-Rabiaah et al., 2020).

Another construct which is highly related to career anxiety is interpersonal pressure. Where, interpersonal pressure contains family pressure, peer pressure, social pressure, etc. Family pressure or parental pressure has a major role in anxiety formation as due to over protecting behavior, the individual is not exposed to explore new situations and new skills which develop an anxiety that makes the individual to stand back (Festa & Ginsburg, 2011). And also, it was found that 90% of the students or job seekers tend to choose the goals the parents want and not the individual wants.(Antonietti et al., 2020).

Another study shows that social pressure develops psychological distress causing the individuals to face severe anxiety issues which could cause career anxiety as well during any

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crisis situation. And it was found that family, peers and society conjoin to form one factor that causes the anxiety issues. where, the peers and family due to a good relationship tend to be influenced by the participant which has a relationship towards the pressure to choose themselves and to work independently. In the context of crisis, we could see that a study reflects that family and peer relationship correlate each other and the individuals will face negative evaluation which might makes the individual to be pressurized for the society and family (Coleman & Carter, 2007)

Beliefs about Unemployment and Job Market due to crisis

Looking back upon the crisis that occurred in the past, we come across the financial crisis in 2007, Western countries suffering through a deep recession which had huge impacts not only in the economic sector, but also in the cultural, social and political sector. Many determinants of health have undergone a profound transformation, as it can be seen in the increasing flexibility and non-standardized forms of employment, mass unemployment, salary cut, etc. All these effects were especially serious in southern European countries where the European institutions and International Monetary Fund had imposed strict measures, large-scale cuts, etc. This all affected mental state of people including young adults.

Rationale and significance of the study

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected people from all walks of life and this is found especially in education sector due to the shift the mode of education and as well as the timeline of semester and examination, these are only a few problems among the many faced by the students and teachers, however, the final year students are affected by this in a larger scale as plans for final year projects, internship and other opportunity which is crucial for future endeavours has been unexpectedly changed and in some cases completely halted. There are no studies or research currently available which studies the concept of career anxiety caused due to unforeseen crisis, as this is a global situation. Awareness of how it is affecting the students could be beneficial not only for the students themselves but also for recruiters and higher education boards as they can empathize and understand the psychological state of the students better. This could also equip us better for such situation it were to occur in the future

Research Question

- Do unforeseen crisis induce career anxiety among final year students?

METHODOLOGY

Objectives

To study the impact of unforeseen crisis on levels of career anxiety in final year students
To investigate how situations of unforeseen crisis effects career anxiety among final year university students.

Research Design

This study will follow a qualitative method with the help of interviews and will be structured within a phenomenological research design.

Sample

The participants consisted of 9 final year university students (undergraduate and graduate students) studying in South India. This followed the convenience sampling method.

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Inclusion criteria

- Student who are currently in their final year of undergraduate or postgraduate education
- Students who fall under the young adult age category (18-25)
- Students who plan for a career after the completion of their current course
- People who are eligible and capable of giving informed consent

Exclusion criteria

- Students who are looking for work
- Students who are studying through distance learning, open universities or doing an online degree
- Students who have any diagnosed psychological illness
- Students who have any chronic/severe physical or cognitive disorders
- Semi - Structured Questionnaire:
 - The questionnaire was carried out in a face to face interview on an online platform
 - The questionnaire addressed the levels of career anxiety during times of crisis

Procedure

The participants who are under the target demographic were invited to participate in this study. Then an interview was scheduled by the primary researchers with the participants who fulfilled the needs of the participation criteria. Prior to the interview the participants filled the consent forms and were briefed about the study. After clearing any remaining doubts or concerns about the study, the participants and the researchers then engaged in a semi-structured interview according to the scheduled time. After the interview, if there were any feelings of distress, the participants were then given contacts of psychologists and organizations through which they could acquire help.

Ethical consideration

This study will follow all the ethical regulations and guidelines laid down by the American Psychological Association for conducting research. The information gleaned from the participants will remain confidential, and this will be ensured by coding participants names when storing data. No deception will be practiced, the participant will have the liberty to exit the study at any point and no intentional harm will come to the participants from participating in this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The interview recordings were transcribed and then both the researchers followed the process of familiarization and coding to identify themes and subthemes individually. Then the researchers discussed the themes and subthemes that were identified. Disagreements were resolved by revisiting transcripts and reevaluating the theme or subtheme in question. The themes carried forward to be reported were finalized after a second round of analysis and discussion. There were four main themes that were identified: Uncertainty, Situation of Job Market and Economy, Personal Skills and Abilities, Role of Peers, Role of Parents.

Table 1.1 Sub Themes within Uncertainty

Theme	Description	Example
Uncertainty	Role of unpredictable circumstances on career decisions	“I don’t know what is happening anymore... It makes me every anxious that what I would do next”
Sub Themes	Description	Example
Avoidance	Procrastinating and avoiding decisions and actions regarding their career plans	“Because of this (the uncertainty and anxiety) I wanted to keep delaying my career options and what it is that I want to pursue after my undergraduate. So, I procrastinated for a really long time and now that it's hitting me that I will be graduating in less than a month. I am very stressed...”
Productivity	Inability to focus time and effort due to uncertainty of the situation	“My overall productivity has been low... now that we don’t know when I’d go out, I don’t want to do anything”
Change in career plans	Unable to pursue previously decided or desired career plans due to uncertainty of the situation	“I did give the CAT (exams) but due to the entire pandemic situation, I was underprepared... and now I don’t know what is sort of happening... This (uncertainty) changed my plan of doing masters to this (job placement), definitely...”

Table 1.1 presents the first theme, that is, Uncertainty, and the sub-themes that were present and were identified to be associated with it. This theme refers to the role that unpredictability plays in career anxiety. To further elaborate, especially in a crisis situation such as one that world is currently with right now, i.e., COVID-19 pandemic where things are unclear and unpredictable. Hence the anxiety in relation to one's career that is invoked by this situation is what this study is trying to study. According to the data collected from the participants, uncertainty was a factor that influenced the anxiety that they had towards their career as they didn't know what to expect and therefore there was a lot of confusion in their surroundings. Anxiety levels rise when there is a lot of confusion. Uncertainty's emotional counterpart is anxiety. Similarly, in literature also it is seen that uncertainty is associated with anxiety and is linked to activation of anxiety-related brain circuits. And thus, it makes sense in our context. Anxiety arises from the fear of negative outcomes, as the students were worried about their future. 3 sub-themes were identified. The first sub-theme was avoidance. Avoidance is the tendency to avoid situations with stress. In our context, to avoid decision-making to avoid stress due to the uncertainty of the situation. Similarly, Turner claims that when anxiety levels are too high, people are less likely to engage with others or work and instead try to avoid them. Another sub-theme of uncertainty that was identified is productivity. Productivity can be defined as the amount of work produced by an individual in a specific period. The participants in our study felt like the pandemic was going to end soon and this kept on delaying their work and career-related goals. And, in general, procrastination and unproductive attitudes are common problems among students. Lastly,

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another factor that was identified as changes in plans, i.e., inability to pursue previously decided or desired career plans due to uncertainty of the situation.

The participants felt that they have procrastinated for a relatively long time and thus kept delaying their career plans. Some of them are not able to pursue their masters abroad as it is not safe. These situations in turn resulted in change of plans.

Table 1.2 Sub Themes within Situation of Job Market and Economy

Theme	Description	Example
Situation of Job Market and Economy	Career anxiety that is induced by the deteriorating situation of the economy and, rising competition and dropping rate of employment in job market	“(economic situation)That has affected my career decisions very much... I wanted to go to a different country for pursuing my education... the economy is also fluctuating everyday... I feel so muddled up... I feel like I cannot take the right decision, unless all of this is over.”
Sub Theme	Description	Example
Choice of profession	Changing desired profession to something that would pay better and avoiding risks	“Now I constantly find myself looking for, uh, looking to learn something that would give me a job faster than before... a job that would pay me better and where, which would, um, hire me faster than what I would have chosen before”
Intense Competition	Increased competition in job and high education avenues due to crisis situations	“It was like (students from) three campuses, you know, fighting for.. The role or the job, which affected everyone’s mental health and stress levels”

Table 1.2 presents the second theme, that is, Situation of Job Market and Economy, and the sub-themes that were present and were identified to be associated with it. It refers to career anxiety that is induced by the deteriorating situation of the economy and rising competition and dropping rate of employment in the job market. Moreover, in the current Covid-19 crisis, we have seen a huge rise in unemployment and thus leading to many people losing their jobs. Unemployment can make life feel overwhelmingly grim. Some jobs have been more affected than others. Although some sectors, such as food service and tourism, have been hit badly, others, such as IT and healthcare, have done exceptionally well. This is one of the reasons the participants are very scared and nervous about their future. In our context, we noticed that the recession and the drop in the employment rate made them anxious or made them rethink their career or future plans. The sub-themes identified under this were choice of profession and intense competition. The first one being the choice of profession. The choice of profession is a career choice made by people and they are usually stuck to this profession for their entire lives. The participants in our study had a second thought of changing their desired profession to something that would pay better and avoid risks. The

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second sub-theme that is identified is intense competition. That is, increased competition in job and high education avenues due to crisis situations. As the unemployment rate has risen due to the uncertainty of the pandemic situation, companies who were coming for placements at college start hiring less students. This made the students very scared.

Table 1.3 Personal Skills and Abilities

Theme	Description	Examples
Personal Skills and Abilities	Being able to rely on one’s own skill enough so much so that it reduces the impact of a crisis situation stress on career	“(If one has) a good idea and belief in their abilities that I feel like there would be a lot that will deter them from trying to pursue it.”
Sub Themes	Description	Examples
Confidence	The confidence that comes from believing in one's skills and ability	“Being able to rely on (my) skills and abilities would definitely boost my confidence... helps in dealing with anxiety about career”
Self-Doubt	Doubting one’s capability to achieve one’s dream career due to perceived personal skills during current times	“I see everyone around me doing so well... there are so many (peers) around me, and, I feel like sometimes my skills aren't up to par with the others. And that definitely gives me anxiety, with this situation

Table 1.3 represents the third theme, that is, personal skills and abilities. Personal skills and abilities are defined as being able to rely on one’s skill so much so that it reduces the impact of crisis stress on the career. To further elaborate this concept, it was observed that during the pandemic, a lot of the participants were struggling a lot in terms of their placements or decisions related to higher studies. According to the data collected by the participants, there were two sub-themes identified under this factor. The first one being confidence, the confidence that comes from believing in one's skills and ability. Similarly in literature, it is found that academic self-confidence influenced both performance impairment and intrusive worry dimensions of test anxiety (Lawal et al., 2017). Therefore this construct can be taken into consideration. The second sub-theme is self-doubt. It is doubting one’s capability to achieve one’s dream career due to perceived personal skills during current times. Experiencing a lack of control over the current situation people find themselves in prompt feelings of self-doubt. In a few studies, it is proven that anxiety arousal and avoidant behavior are mainly co-effects of perceived coping inefficacy(Bandura, 2007). And thus these two sub-constructs influence the theme.

Table 1.4 Role of Peers

Theme	Description	Example
Role of peers	Influence of one's peers over one's career choices and anxiety	"...Peers definitely play a role in this perception (of career)... I am personally affected by my peers a lot..."
Sub Theme	Description	Example
Positive Support	Encouragement from peers to work towards one's career choices	"You have been helping each other out especially in matters of Internships good internships that can add value to our resumes everyone recommends internships to each other"
Peer Motivation	The stimulation and motivation that one gets when learning/working with peers	"Otherwise (before the pandemic) I would have been surrounded with people who I could readily go to... or I would just see them doing their work and I would somehow get motivated on my own, but that has not happened in the last year where, because I had to spend most of the time inside my room"
Advice and information sharing	Being able to approach peers for advice to make more informed career decision	"They (peers) help me think of the pros and cons of my (career) options. They try to help me think of both sides... and I can make a decision based on that"
Facing crisis as a group	Decreased perception of distress during a crisis by the knowledge of being in the shared struggle with the group	"...Like, we are all going through the same thing... It definitely helps to know I am not alone in this"
Influence on career decision	The influence of peers on the choice of career or future plans, based on their plans or opinions	"I mostly go to them (peers) for advice, but if someone is, is explaining something to me using very strong claims, then I often find myself getting influenced by them as well."

Table 1.4 presents the fourth theme, that is, the role of peers and the influence of one's peers over one's career choices and anxiety. Many of the participants in our sample were in their final year of study. There was a lot of negativities among them because of the pandemic. As a result, they found that their peers provided them with a lot of inspiration and positivity. This element was seen to be broken down into five sub-themes. Positive Support was the first sub-theme. It is defined as the encouragement from peers to work towards one's career choices.. Peer Motivation is the second sub-theme. It alludes to the stimulation and inspiration that comes from studying and interacting with others. Advice and information sharing is the third sub-theme. It is the ability to seek advice from colleagues in order to

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make a more educated career choice. The fourth sub-theme is facing a crisis as a group. That is, the experience of being in a common struggle with the community reduces the perception of discomfort during a crisis. Finally, influence on a career decision is the fifth sub-theme. It refers to the impact of peers on one's career or plans, which is focused on their plans or opinions, to further explicate, here is a quote this from participants' response, "I find myself constantly turning to them for advice, whether it's career stuff or even just daily stuff for college. And when I see that someone is following a certain career... I also find myself rethinking whether I should have done that or whether I should focus on what I would want to do"

Table 1.5 Role of Parents

Theme	Description	Example
Parental Support	The boost in determination and confidence in one's career choice or decisions when their parents support them	"The fact that my parents are extremely supportive of my career decisions is something that despite all the problems that are happening is something that is pushing down this anxiety that I have the regarding my future career that I'm going for"

Table 1.5 depicts the theme of the role of parents. This theme has many implications but is one without further sub-themes. During the pandemic situation, it was very important to motivate the students and spread positivity. And a very big role is played by the parents as most of the participants in our sample were in their homes all this while. In general, you want to do whatever you can as a parent to protect your kids. The coronavirus disease pandemic (COVID-19) has posed new problems for families all over the world. From the moment a child is born, parents are considered to be their child's first teacher, and as they grow into adults, parents' typical roles include teaching, guiding, and raising children to become strong members of their communities. So hence there was positive support from their side. However, there were a few cases where parents were not supportive of their choices and the students couldn't change their decision. I further quote this to prove this, "I have changed my career, uh, like my dream career because my family thought that I would do better at something else".

Recommendations

Based the results and the findings of this study, this study suggest the following techniques and practices to reduce distress that comes from career anxiety during times of crisis: firstly, as it repeatedly noticed through the participants, a source of strength and motivation for most was having a support system in the form of people around them, this could be friends, family or peers. Having this support system or group of people who help persevere through tough times is crucial to endure difficult situations, as an alternative one can even join an existing support group that they can share their struggles and find community bonding through. Another factor that it was found that influences impact of career anxiety and its distress is productivity and motivation; it was seen that being unable to find motivation or being less productive can highly affect a person self-perception and fear towards their future, hence, it is advisable to engage in activities that one is intrinsically motivated towards or find pleasure in, to increase productivity and subsequently, overall motivation, support groups and people can also help in this.

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Being mindful and aware of one's own thoughts, mental health and overall self can also improve wellbeing, therefore, maintaining a mood tracker, thought journal, planner etc can help one connect with oneself better.

Future Scope

Drawing upon the results and discussions, a crisis situation can cause a lot of distress. Especially when it comes to career anxiety in students. Career anxiety is a phenomenon that is experienced by students generally. But, when faced with a situation such as the current pandemic, i.e. a crisis situation the anxiety is amplified and experienced not only at a higher level but also in a different way than what is experienced when the situation is normal. Because of this, future studies could look at developing a career anxiety scale which would test this phenomenon within the context of a crisis situation, this won't only help understand the current situation and stress experienced but also help the community be more prepared for a future where such crisis may occur and be able to properly aid the students with tools that are better equipped and specialized in the given situation, and have better ecological validity. Future studies could also include final year masters and other graduate students and even high school graduating batches perhaps as this would be experienced by them as well.

CONCLUSION

Career anxiety is a factor that is possibly affecting most of the current student populus in the world as they prepare and plan for their future careers. It is essential that educational institutes and educators aptly perceive and give importance to this very real distress state and adequately provide support for the student through school counseling, support groups and other programs. As shown in this study the stress and anxiety that the students are experiencing in relation to their career is a multifaceted one and even though some may have support from the student community and parents, it is important for schools and institutes to also take the extra step to provide support for their students and their wellbeing.

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Conflict of Interest

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