Coping with Anxiety: Lived Experiences of Final Year Students

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ABSTRACT

The prevalence of anxiety has been increasing gradually over the years, becoming one of the most critical issues in colleges and universities. A phenomenological approach was used to explain how final-year undergraduate students experienced anxiety during their internship. In-depth interviews were conducted with four female final-year students at a Public Institution of Higher Education (PIHE) in Klang Valley, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The findings revealed that anxiety affected the students in three aspects: physical, mental, and emotional. In coping with anxiety, five strategies were employed, which are staying connected with others, taking care of physical health, taking time out, using structured problem-solving, and writing expressive journals.

Keywords: Anxiety, Coping strategies, Internship, University Students

1. Introduction

There has been an increasing interest in the mental health of university students. One of the growing concerns is the high prevalence of stress, anxiety, and depression in this population. Research indicates that university students are more susceptible to mental health issues (Auerbach et al., 2018) and are at higher risk of experiencing stress, anxiety, and depression compared to other populations (Tosevski et al., 2010). Reports also highlight that university students across various countries, such as the UK, the US, and Malaysia, often suffer from poor mental health, including higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress (Brown, 2018; Mey & Yin, 2015).

Based on the WHO survey on mental health among university students, generalized anxiety was found to be widespread globally (Auerbach et al., 2018). Given its potential to significantly impact students' social functioning, academic performance, and physical well-being, it is crucial to explore the anxiety phenomenon among university students. This knowledge is vital for designing effective intervention strategies to assist them in overcoming anxiety. Therefore, there is a need to explore the experiences of anxiety among university students and how they manage and cope with their anxiety.

2. Literature Review

Numerous studies examining anxiety in college and university students have concentrated on various determinants and factors (Alasqah et al., 2023; Al-Shaer et al., 2024; Amaro et al., 2024; Jiang et al., 2024; Li & Su, 2024; Mac-Ginty et al., 2024; Yasmin et al., 2024). Some have explored internal factors such as religiosity, autonomy, competence, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and

psychological distress (Al-Shaer et al., 2024; Amaro et al., 2024; Dasinger & Gibson, 2024; Li & Su, 2024). A substantial number of studies have investigated socio-demographic factors, bullying experiences, lack of physical activity, and sleep deprivation (Alasqah et al., 2023; Amaro et al., 2024; Ibrahim et al., 2024; Jiang et al., 2024; Mac-Ginty et al., 2024; Yasmin et al., 2024). These socio-demographic factors encompass gender, age, academic year, field of study, socioeconomic status, history of mental health issues, academic performance, and substance use. Few studies have focused on strategies to alleviate anxiety, such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, emotion-focused coping strategies, and technologies like wearables and intelligent agents (Alotaibi et al., 2024; Jensen et al., 2024; Leigh & Clark, 2018; Rasouli et al., 2024).

In addition to investigating the underlying factors contributing to anxiety among university students and strategies for overcoming it, studies have also explored the relationships and correlations between anxiety and various other variables. These include gaming and phone addiction, procrastination, experiences of discrimination, food insecurity, sleep quality, perceived social support, gender dysphoria, and suicidality (Caramat et al., 2024; Esin & Ayyıldız, 2024; Fitzke et al., 2024; Garmabi et al., 2024; Howlader et al., 2024; Niazi et al., 2024; Wei et al., 2024). A moderate number of studies have also examined variations in anxiety levels based on gender, academic enrolment status, academic disciplines, and sexual orientation (Archer, 2024; Asriati et al., 2024; Popovska Nalevska et al., 2024).

While the Covid-19 pandemic has transitioned to an endemic phase, several writings continue to focus on anxiety levels among students during the pandemic, along with coping strategies (Archer, 2024; Briones et al., 2023; Hawes et al., 2022; Masha'al et al., 2024; Peng et al., 2024). Conversely, a smaller number of recent studies have explored anxiety among university students during practicum and clinical practice (Briones et al., 2023; Muslem et al., 2019; Purbaya et al., 2024; Yi et al., 2022). Therefore, this study focuses on anxiety among university students during internship and their strategies for coping with it. Most literature on anxiety among university students consists of empirical studies employing a quantitative research design, typically cross-sectional (Alasqah et al., 2023; Alotaibi et al., 2024; Amaro et al., 2024; Archer, 2024; Asriati et al., 2024; Caramat et al., 2024; Darteh et al., 2023). Only a few writings take a theoretical approach (Leigh & Clark, 2018; Mac-Ginty et al., 2024), and there is a limited number of studies using qualitative research designs (Dillingham, 2024; Muslem et al., 2019; Purbaya et al., 2024; Yi et al., 2022). Hence, this study employed a qualitative research design.

3. Method

This study employed a phenomenological method of inquiry and analysis to uncover and comprehend the meaning of anxiety experienced by final-year university students. The choice of a phenomenological approach is apt for this study as it delves into the significance of the lived experiences of multiple individuals pertaining to a particular phenomenon. As emphasized by Moustakas (1994) and other scholars like Creswell and Poth (2024) and Marshall et al. (2021), this approach is well-suited for such a study, as it not only delineates the nature of the phenomenon experienced by participants but also delves into the nuances of how they navigate through it. In this study, researchers delineate the experiences of anxiety encountered by students and shed light on the strategies they employ to cope with it.

Participants of this study comprised four final-year students: Sofea, Qaleesya, Insyirah and Dayana. All are pseudonyms. They were purposefully selected based on four inclusion criteria, which are (a) a final year undergraduate student, (b) having gone through a counselling internship, (c) experienced anxiety, and (d) agreeing to participate in the study. According to Creswell and

Poth (2024), criterion sampling is appropriate for phenomenological research since all individuals included in the study have firsthand experience with the phenomenon.

Several steps were involved in recruiting participants for this study. Initially, the researchers acquired a list of students who completed counselling internships during Semester 2, 2023/2024, from the Practicum Unit of a public university in Klang Valley, Malaysia. Subsequently, the General Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) test was administered to these students. Those who scored within the moderate (10-14) to severe (15-21) range were invited to take part in the study. Four students agreed to participate.

All participants were virtually interviewed using Google Meet. Throughout the interviews, the researchers employed a semi-structured approach with open-ended questions. Each interview lasted from one to two hours. Prior to the formal interviews, the researchers piloted the interview questions with a student enrolled at a private university. Following this pilot, the researchers refined the interview questions for the actual interviews.

Each interview was recorded, and the verbal recordings were transcribed post-interview, following Creswell and Creswell's (2017) recommendations. Directly after the interviews, analytic memos were composed to capture reflections and insights, as well as to document the emergence of themes and meanings, in accordance with the suggestions of Bogdan and Biklen (2007). The researchers personally transcribed the interviews to maintain ongoing engagement with the data while also maintaining supplementary analytic memos to illustrate the process and their thoughts and reactions to the data.

Based on the interview transcriptions, the researchers identified significant statements, sentences, or quotes that offer insight into the participants' internship-related anxiety experiences. Subsequently, these significant statements were organized into thematic clusters. These themes served as the foundation for crafting a narrative depicting the participants' experiences and the unfolding of those experiences. Finally, a composite description was formulated, encapsulating the essence of the phenomenon by focusing on shared experiences among the participants. Throughout this data analysis process, the researchers adhered to the methodology outlined by Moustakas (1994).

4. Findings

The findings were categorized into two primary core facets, specifically, participants' description of anxiety and coping strategies that they practised.

4.1. Description of Anxiety

4.1.1. Physical effects

Anxiety has diverse impacts on participants' physical health, evident from changes they noticed during their internship. Sofia described enduring various physical tensions such as headaches, loss of appetite, low energy, and disrupted sleep patterns. She attributes these symptoms to the stress and pressure associated with her internship responsibilities. Sofia elaborated on her experiences: *"I've been experiencing headaches and require plenty of rest and sleep due to the pain. My appetite has decreased, and during relief classes, I struggle to smile due to stress. I find it challenging to maintain energy levels in class."* She further explained, *"I have trouble sleeping because I can't stop thinking about my clients' issues. Even when I'm very tired, I find it difficult to sleep because*

of a case related to a client's school suspension." In summary, the stress and demands of Sofia's internship have significantly impacted her physical well-being, leading to a range of symptoms that have affected her daily life and functioning.

Meanwhile, Qaleesya described how she often experiences a shaky voice and avoids making eye contact during interactions with others. When she finds herself deep in thought, it typically results in a loss of appetite and a preference for lying down. She expressed, *"I feel like trembling. I tend to avoid eye contact when talking to people. All I want to do is lie down. When I overthink, I lose my appetite."* Similarly, Dayana also tends to have a shaky voice during conversations due to being prone to anxiety. Despite this, she actively works to manage and reduce its visibility. She remarked, *"I'm someone who easily gets nervous. My voice tends to sound shaky, but I make an effort to control it."* In summary, both Qaleesya and Dayana experienced manifestations of anxiety during communication, with Qaleesya additionally noting physical reactions such as trembling and loss of appetite, while Dayana focused on managing her shaky voice due to her predisposition to anxiety.

4.1.2. Mental and emotional effects

Meanwhile, these participants experienced internal pressure stemming from their negative self-perceptions and self-blame regarding their performance. They tend to hold themselves accountable, believing that their execution of internship assignments fell short of the graduate school's expectations. Sofia's anxiety arises because she intended to complete her daily tasks during the internship but encountered difficulties in doing so. She expressed, *"Despite my intentions to complete tasks daily, my efforts fell short, leading to feelings of anxiety."* However, the most concerning symptom is her self-harm thoughts. She sensed that these thoughts occurred whenever she was alone and felt inadequate due to the overwhelming workload of the internship. *"Whenever I'm alone, I feel so sad, and I have self-harm thoughts. I feel that I want to bang my head to the wall due to excessive workload. I have lots of tasks to be done. I feel useless that I can't complete all the tasks on time like others."*

Meanwhile, Dayana is inclined to suppress her negative emotions while at the internship site. However, upon returning home, she began to exhibit increased sensitivity and defensiveness. She did not conceal these emotions from her family members, stating, *"I don't usually share my negative emotions with others at the internship site. But when I'm at home, I express them to my family members and become more defensive and sensitive."* As for Qaleesya, her mind was preoccupied with negative thoughts and excessive rumination. She often dwelled on her performance during counselling sessions and classroom guidance, repeatedly revisiting these thoughts. This constant reflection left her feeling unsettled.

Additionally, she frequently worried about her counselling skills while working with clients. Overthinking led to her becoming easily tearful, as she explained, *"After relief classes, I feel dissatisfied with my classroom guidance and can't stop thinking about it. During counselling sessions, I become anxious if my intervention strategies aren't effective for my clients. I overthink to the point of crying uncontrollably."*

Insyirah harbours negative thoughts about her communication skills when delivering information to clients and worries excessively about how clients perceive her. Additionally, she is anxious about her academic performance in the current semester due to slow progress on internship tasks and her final project paper. Despite these concerns weighing on her mind, she feels compelled to hide her negative emotions during counselling sessions. The effort to appear unaffected leads to

feelings of burnout. She expressed her concerns: "*I fear that clients may have negative perceptions of me and might not understand my explanations. I'm also worried about achieving good results because I'm uncertain if I can meet the required counselling hours. I haven't completed even half of the necessary hours, and I haven't started my project paper. Sometimes, these worries overwhelm me, but I have to maintain a smile in front of my clients. I have to appear okay.*"

4.1.3. Anxiety Coping Strategies

Participants of the study practised different coping strategies to overcome anxiety during the internship. Among the strategies are staying connected with others, taking care of physical health, taking time out, using structured problem-solving, and writing expressive journals.

4.1.4. Staying connected with others

Socializing can alleviate stress, foster feelings of joy and unity, and reduce feelings of isolation. Research indicates that maintaining social connections can enhance resilience against anxiety over time. Sofea finds relief from anxiety by staying in touch with loved ones, often messaging friends or calling her mother when she feels anxious. She explained, "*I send messages via WhatsApp to my close ones and sometimes call my mom to feel connected.*" Similarly, Qaleesya spends her leisure time with close friends, engaging in outdoor activities or visiting places like the lake. She shared, "*I enjoy hanging out with friends during my free time; sometimes, we head to the lake.*" In addition to maintaining social connections, participants in the study discussed how sharing their concerns with their site supervisor or internship partner helped them manage anxiety. Having someone listen and show care was crucial in their anxiety management strategies. Qaleesya mentioned, "*I talk to my site supervisor or share my concerns with my internship partner to receive support when needed.*"

4.1.5. Taking care of physical health

Regular physical exercise is known to effectively reduce anxiety and contribute positively to emotional well-being. Consequently, participants in the study prioritize their physical health through physical activity and the use of supplements. They have established weekend routines to ensure they remain physically active. For instance, Qaleesya prefers to start her weekend mornings with a leisurely walk in the park, stating, "*I walk in the park on Saturday and Sunday mornings to maintain my health.*" Dayana chooses to manage her mood swings and support her physical well-being through swimming and the intake of nutritional supplements. She explained, "*I try to stay positive and keep healthy by swimming on weekends when I feel low... I keep vitamins handy so that whenever I experience headaches or tension, I can boost my energy.*"

4.1.6. Taking a time-out

Participants in the study prioritize taking breaks by engaging in hobbies, reading motivational quotes, practising relaxation techniques, and cultivating self-gratitude. These strategies are designed to help them step away from problems and clear their minds. For example, Dayana finds relief in karaoke sessions at home to release pent-up emotions following challenges with her internship tasks. She recalled, "*On the third day, I left my internship site early and then sang karaoke alone in my room.*" Insyirah finds motivation and upliftment by reading motivational quotes on social media to enhance her mood. She mentioned, "I enjoy reading motivational quotes on social media for inspiration." When Sofea encounters difficulty in relaxing, she turns to relaxation techniques such as deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation.

Additionally, she practices self-gratitude to foster a sense of calmness. She explained, "*We learned about relaxation techniques and self-gratitude. I try to incorporate both into my routine to stay calm and relaxed.*"

4.1.7. Using structured problem-solving

Some individuals experiencing anxiety tend to be 'worriers', focusing more on fretting about problems rather than actively seeking solutions. Learning the skill of structured problem-solving, which involves breaking down issues into manageable parts and then planning a course of action, is valuable for anxiety management. Sofea described her approach to managing her time effectively by creating a time management sheet to organize her tasks and ensure the timely completion of all internship assignments. She explained, *"To manage my time effectively, I create a detailed time management sheet outlining all assignments and their respective deadlines. This helps me stay on track and complete everything within the specified timeframes."*

4.1.8. Writing Expressive Journal

Journaling serves as a beneficial method for expressing and tracking anxious thoughts over time. It is valuable to document the circumstances surrounding episodes of anxiety, enabling participants in the study to identify triggers and early warning signs. Insyirah has found journaling particularly effective for articulating her anxious feelings. She writes about her thoughts, behaviours, and emotions whenever anxiety arises, whether related to her internship or other aspects of life. She clarified, *"I use journaling as a way to express myself whenever I encounter problems, not just with my internship. When I find myself consumed by an issue, I write about it in my diary, although I don't write every day."* Additionally, Insyirah occasionally turns to journaling to uplift her mood when she feels overwhelmed by worries. She expressed, *"Sometimes, I write in my diary or journal to help improve my mood."*

5. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that participants experienced various negative effects of anxiety, which can be categorized into physical, mental, and emotional domains. Physical effects encompass symptoms such as headaches, reduced appetite, low energy, disrupted sleep patterns, difficulties in communication, and trembling. Several studies have established a correlation between anxiety and sleep deprivation (Garderen & Van Leeuwen, 2021; Garmabi et al., 2024; Moore et al., 2020). Garderen and Van Leeuwen (2021) reported that poor sleep quality in individuals with anxiety was 2.1 times higher compared to the control group ($p < .001$). Additionally, Garmabi et al. (2024) found that depression and anxiety were significantly associated with poor sleep quality in their study participants. Contextual factors such as long internship hours, sleep deprivation, and challenging internship environments adversely affect the psychological well-being of interns (Moore et al., 2020).

Furthermore, Xiong and Zhu (2023) identified different types of pressures experienced by trainee nurses during various stages of an internship. In the initial stage, operational pressures accounted for 80.0% of the stressors. During the intermediate stage, communication challenges between trainee nurses and their patients constituted 50.0% of the stressors. In the final stage, concerns about employment opportunities for trainee nurses accounted for 70.6% of the pressures. Yi et al. (2022) discovered that anxiety increases among trainee nurses during the latter stage of their clinical internships.

Participants in the study employed various coping strategies to manage anxiety, including staying connected with others, maintaining physical health, taking time out, using structured problem-solving techniques, and journaling. Lampadan (2014) categorized coping mechanisms used by teacher trainees during internship into four types, which are adaptation, preparation, attitude, and relationship. Adaptation involves adopting a flexible approach to handle diverse situations. Comprehensive preparation plays a crucial role in preparing for challenges within the internship setting. Maintaining a positive attitude is essential for managing unforeseen circumstances in the classroom. Finally, establishing a rapport with the site supervisor enhances the sense of belonging and acceptance among teacher trainees at their internship sites. Two coping mechanisms identified by teacher trainees, holistic preparation and developing a rapport with the site supervisor, are parallel with strategies employed by participants in the current study, namely structured problem-solving and maintaining a connection with their site supervisor.

Emotional intelligence played a crucial mediating role in the relationship between problem-focused coping strategies and anxiety (Alotaibi et al., 2024; Masha'al et al., 2024). Among nursing trainees, those who employed problem-focused coping strategies exhibited higher levels of emotional intelligence, which corresponded to reduced levels of anxiety (Masha'al et al., 2024). Conversely, individuals utilizing emotion-focused coping and avoidant strategies reported higher levels of anxiety and depression (Alotaibi et al., 2024). In addition to coping strategies, gender was identified as another significant factor influencing anxiety levels. Several studies have consistently shown that female students experience higher levels of psychological disorders compared to males, including depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms (Rabby et al., 2023; Alotaibi et al., 2024; Batra et al., 2021; Deng et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2023). This disparity may be attributed to various factors such as genetic predispositions, hormonal differences, societal expectations, psychosocial challenges, and other related factors (Bandelow & Michaelis, 2015; Pedrelli et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2018). All participants in the current study were female students who scored moderate (10-14) to severe (15-21) on the General Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) test. Therefore, it can be inferred that females are more susceptible to experiencing anxiety compared to males.

6. Recommendations

The study findings yielded valuable insights into the detrimental impact of anxiety experienced by university students during their internship. Consequently, it is crucial for counsellor educators and university administrators to acknowledge the factors contributing to students' anxiety in internship settings and implement effective interventions to mitigate these effects on students' well-being, thereby supporting successful internship completion. Specifically, it is recommended that graduate schools offer courses in anxiety management, provide psychological support, and offer guidance tailored to the challenges faced by students during internships. Furthermore, relevant parties who are responsible for internship placement should actively monitor the psychological well-being of their interns and consistently provide psychological support. Integrating wellness initiatives, such as anxiety management programs, is essential. These programs play a pivotal role in alleviating psychological symptoms and enhancing academic performance by increasing students' awareness of anxiety triggers and outcomes. They also impart mindfulness techniques, cognitive behavioural therapy skills, and strategies for effective problem-solving and positive coping mechanisms. Implementing anxiety management programs for final-year students represents a highly beneficial and enriching approach, fostering a supportive environment that effectively addresses personal and academic stressors.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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