Systematic Literature Review: The Role of Social Isolation in Shaping Future Aspirations and Employability of Undergraduates in Pakistan and Malaysia in Post-COVID Career Landscape

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Abstract: This systematic literature review aims to determine the influence of COVID-19 social isolation on the employability and career aspirations of students in Pakistan and Malaysia. The study focuses on identifying the strategies used by these students to cope with the impacts of social isolation and assessing the extent to which these variables were affected by the outbreak. A comprehensive review of the literature was conducted to establish the theoretical relevance of the research and to identify frameworks that could support the findings. The data was collected from previously published articles discussing the influence of COVID-19-related social isolation, its impact on students in Pakistan and Malaysia, and the coping strategies adopted to mitigate the negative effects on employability and career aspirations. Thematic analysis was employed to identify key themes. The results revealed a significant impact of COVID-19 social isolation on the employability and career aspirations of students in both countries. Additionally, the findings highlighted the importance of religious association and practical thinking in enhancing students' coping mechanisms during the pandemic. The study contributes to the existing literature by uncovering new insights, such as the role of career counselling, religious and spiritual associations, and the support provided by universities during the pandemic. Nonetheless, the study is limited by time and resource constraints, which future researchers may address.

Keywords: Career Aspirations, COVID-19, Employability, Malaysia and Pakistan Students, Social Isolation

1.   Introduction

This systematic literature review aims to analyse the impact of social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic on the future career aspirations and employability of undergraduate students in

Pakistan and Malaysia. The study will rely on qualitative data collected from secondary sources to critically evaluate the influence of COVID-19 social isolation on these research objectives.

2. Background

Career aspirations (CA) are reflected in the self-efficacy, sense of identity, and future optimism of an individual (Dudovitz et al., 2018). These are the long-term ambitions and hopes that people develop based on their vision, skills, and resource accessibility. On the other hand, employability refers to the relative chances of obtaining and managing different types of employment (Alrifai & Raju, 2019). Career aspirations and employability are correlated because the future vision and hopes of a better future enable people to acquire the required skills and abilities for different professions.

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged in Wuhan, China, in 2019 due to transmission of coronavirus from one human to another (Rafiq et al., 2022). Coronavirus was recognised as a global pandemic because it emerged as one of the biggest health concerns for the global health system in the 21st century (Sawicka et al., 2022). The pandemic resulted in various changes across the globe, from the closure of businesses to the imposition of quarantine conditions and travel restrictions between regions. Government efforts to reduce human contact and consequently control the spread of coronavirus led to the closure of educational institutes in almost all parts of the world for an indefinite period. Some businesses were closed permanently, and some occupations became irrelevant for the future due to a sudden shift from traditional business activities to a digital working environment. Concerning this, Jeffers et al. (2022) predicted that the unexpected consequences of social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic will negatively impact mental health and lead to increased substance use among people. Xiong et al. (2020) also identified that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increase in post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression among people. Brooks et al. (2020) also identified the potential long-term negative impacts of pandemic-related stressors on the well-being of people. Hence, social isolation was found to be associated with increased mental health issues and reported cases of covid-related deaths during the pandemic (Henry et al., 2020). In addition to this, people who had a history of mental health issues were found to be more influenced by social isolation during the pandemic than others.

The onset of COVID-19 pandemic and consequent social isolation also influenced the wellbeing, perception and attitude of students. Knight et al. (2021) reported that students faced challenges initially adopting to self-isolation because of limited interactions with their peers and national and international level changes in policies. The lockdown influenced the students' perception of 'normal' as they were exposed to social isolation for a longer period of time. Even though the challenges were multifaceted, most students and academic staff reported that the impact of these challenges declined with the progress of the pandemic as they began to adjust to meet the requirements of the 'new normal'. Students mostly faced challenges related to the impacts on their studies, which required additional flexibility and investments from educational institutes. The shift to online learning also influenced the perception of students. According to Mahmood et al. (2021), Pakistani students reported restrictions on their daily routine activities, a sense of uncertainty about their future, low mood and feeling bored due to social isolation during the pandemic. On the other hand, Malaysian students experience loneliness, and they adopt positive interpretation, acceptance and active coping as a way to deal with loneliness. However, social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic was found to be correlated with stress and feelings of loneliness among Malaysian students (Hussin et al., 2021).

The objectives of the present study are as follow: (1) to systematically review existing literature on the effects of social isolation during COVID-19 on the career aspirations of Malaysian and Pakistani students; (2) to compare existing studies on the effects of social isolation during COVID-19 on the employability of Pakistani and Malaysian students, and (3) to compare and contrast the coping strategies of Pakistani and Malaysian students as documented in the literature. Previous studies have highlighted the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the overall perception and attitude of students. However, data comparing the pandemic's impact on Pakistani and Malaysian students is very limited. Furthermore, the percentage of studies assessing COVID-related social isolation and its impact on the career aspirations and employability of Pakistani and Malaysian students is also very low. While some studies have examined these variables for either Pakistani or Malaysian students individually, the career

aspirations and employability within the context of COVID-related social isolation have not been jointly examined for both groups. This systematic literature review aims to fill this research gap and contribute to the literature.

3.   Literature Review

3.1   Career Aspiration

Career aspiration refers to the professional route a person aims to maintain and follow (Arhin, 2018)**.** The process lasts throughout the life and demands from an individual to accurately perceive their potential and abilities and the extent to which they can achieve certain objectives **(**Arhin, 2018), Hafsyan (2015) has also defined career aspiration as a long-term process associated with the professional objectives of an individual.

3.2   Employability

Employability is the obtaining of an individual to maintain and obtain employment throughout their career (Römgens et al., 2020). It is the capability to modify one's self-efficacy as per the requirements of the labour market to make accurate judgments about the potential to sustain employment and grow in career (Römgens et al., 2020). The importance of employability has significantly increased in today's competitive environment, where multiple options are available to employees and employees to achieve their objectives.

3.3   Social Isolation related to COVID-19

Social isolation emerged as a primary concern caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The dangerous impacts of social isolation, including the potential of developing anxiety and depressive symptoms, attracted the attention of researchers and health practitioners from across the globe **(**Lodder et al., 2021)**.** According to Mojsa-Kaja et al. (2023)**,** social isolation was a requirement of time since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic had adversely impacted the global health system and required extraordinary steps such as lockdown and quarantine conditions to reduce human contact and control the spread of the virus. Schools, businesses and offices were closed across the globe for an indefinite period to minimise the adverse impacts of the pandemic. While these measures were implemented with good intentions, an extremely negative outcome was social isolation, which many people experienced due to bans on social gatherings (Traunmüller et al., 2020). Social isolation is defined as an objective state associated with very little to no social contact. Isolation is often confused with loneliness. However, isolation is an objective state, whereas loneliness is an individual feeling associated with social isolation caused by the discrepancy in the desired and actual level of social association (Mojsa-Kaja et al., 2023)**.** Social isolation led to feelings of loneliness among people due to the restraint strategies that were imposed by global governments to reduce the health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, these restrictions generated negative impacts on the mental health of people despite their positive intent of improving physical health. These restrictions led to social isolation, which is a primary stress source and has the potential to impact sleep by creating sleep disturbance for people. It also leads to improved anxiety and depression among people who are exposed to isolation for a longer period.

3.4   Social Isolation impact on students

The negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic were observed in various areas of life, including educational institutes. According to Aucejo et al. (2020)**,** the pandemic influences university enrolment and the academic performance of students. Concerning this, Acheampong (2023) also mentioned that university enrolment significantly reduced with the improved potential of students to face academic problems due to online classes. In addition to this, Owusu-Fordjuour et al. (2020) also mentioned that the government shifted to online education from the traditional setup of classroom

learning at the peak of the pandemic, which exposed millions of students to a new era of learning challenges (Aucejo et al., 2020). As per the findings of Saha et al. (2023), more than 60% of students across the world are affected by the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic related to the closure of educational institutes, quarantine conditions and online learning. All students, particularly university students, faced challenges in maintaining their social and academic lives. Not only this, the pandemic also raised uncertainty about future careers and goals of students couples with limited interactions with friends and family members (Cao et al., 2020). According to Saha et al. (2023), undergraduate students started to view the complexities of professional life and perceive workload due to changes in career roles and preferences of experts across the globe. However, a major challenge was a transformation from a traditional to a digital learning environment where social interactions were only limited to the family members of students in their home environment (Neuwirth et al., 2021). Overall, the pandemic interrupted the academic journey of students, impacted their routine and generated uncertainty around their future careers. According to Zhai and Du (2020) COVID-19 could have made profound impacts on the mental health of undergraduate students. However, there is still very limited research on the psychological influences of the pandemic on students, especially those who are at a greater risk of observing negative consequences on their mental health (Hamza et al. 2021). However, Hamza et al. (2021) identified that, unlike the common assumption that students with preexisting mental conditions were more vulnerable to the negative impacts of the pandemic, these students were the ones who showed improved patterns of mental health during the pandemic as compared to their previous years. In contrast, those who had not experienced any mental health challenges were more stressed during the pandemic.

3.5   Career Aspirations and Employability during COVID-19

The pandemic made various impacts on the mental health and overall perception and attitude of students. According to Akkermans et al. (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic emerged as a career shock for students, which refers to an extraordinary or disruptive event that, at least to some extent, is caused by factors that are not in the control of an individual and trigger an intention thought process about the career of the individual. A career shock comprises two elements including the initial process of understanding the event and the event itself (Akkermans et al., 2020). It means that the event is not a shock in itself but it is disruptive and extraordinary in nature. For instance, students may have been shocked by losing their mentors and tutors to the pandemic during lockdown. These career shocks can vary in intensity, duration, frequency and valence. However, the disrupt the career perception of students regardless of their intensity, frequency and duration. The consistent occurrence of these events strengths negative perceptions of the future and consequently impacts the career choices of students (Akkermans et al., 2020). The impacts of the pandemic on the employability of youngsters are also identified in the literature. For instance, Morgan et al. (2023) mentioned that the mental health of youngsters must be managed and improved in light of the recent pandemic to enhance their employability. In addition to this, the author also identified that the pandemic creates a dilemma around improving the employability of youngsters or supporting their progress in work. Concerning this, Maguire & Keep (2021) mentioned that assessing different factors, such as socioeconomic and demographic factors, is also important for determining the extent to which the pandemic has influenced the employability of youngsters. The impact of COVID-19 on employability can be determined through changes in the career choices of people. For instance, exposure to the digital learning world might have influenced the perception of how students perceive digital learning and shaped their choice of joining a digital field due to the stability and reliability of these fields.

3.6   Event Systems Theory

Event Systems Theory or ECT supports the idea of individual and contextual interactions. As per the event systems theory, external are external and found at the intersection of an activity within the given context (Morgeson et al., 2015). It suggests that stronger events, such as those characterised by criticality, disruption and novelty, are more likely to introduce change than weaker events (Akkermans et al., 2020). In other words, the contextual features, such as the career event and decision-making process of individuals, collectively determine the impact of a career shock. This approach is focused on

the most and least interesting and explicated dimensions of context, such as the extent to which discrete events influence an organisation and organisational behaviour (Morgeson et al., 2015**).** ECT relies on the theory of interpersonal conditions to view events as objective instances instead of perceptions. It applies the context-as-events strategy can complement or contract with more common contexts such as features strategy. On the other hand, features are considered enduring and comparatively stable, whereas events are defined are salient and discrete occurrences limited in space and time that can generate changes in features.

### 3.7   Social Cognitive Career Theory

The social cognitive career theory (SCCT) assumes that the core elements of career behaviours are choice of objectives, self-efficacy and outcome expectation (Wang et al., 2022). The connection between these elements further describes the career development and success of individuals. It is an empirically validated approach used in various research to understand the cognitive process of career choices. As per this model, self-efficacy has a direct influence on the behaviour of people. Hence, the outcome expectations are reflected in the way a person makes judgment of potential outcomes resulting through the application or non-application of specific behaviours (Duffy et al., 2014). The theory suggests that self-efficacy is an effective tool for determining the outcome expectations. Both self-efficacy and outcome expectations are key variables in making career choices. According to Lent (2020)**,** the SCCT is a career development model that delineates the way socio-cognitive variables, personal inputs and contextual affordances impact the development of career goals, actions and vocational interests. This approach is based on the social cognitive theory. Hence, it emphasises the significance of learning along with outcome expectations and self-efficacy in the career choices of students (Duffy et al., 2014). This approach is also concerned with the dynamics of different variables such as gender, predispositions, race, ethnicity, socio-cognitive variables, career outcomes and vocational interests. This approach is based on five modes that include interest development, decision-making, performance outcomes, satisfaction and well-being and procedures involved in the achievement of outcomes (Lent, 2020).

4.   Research Methodology

Saunder's research onion method will be applied to describe the methodology for the current research. Saunder's research onion approach provides a sequence of steps that must be followed by researchers to cover each aspect of the research methodology. A visual depiction of this model is provided below:

Figure 1

Saunder's research onion (Tengli, 2020)
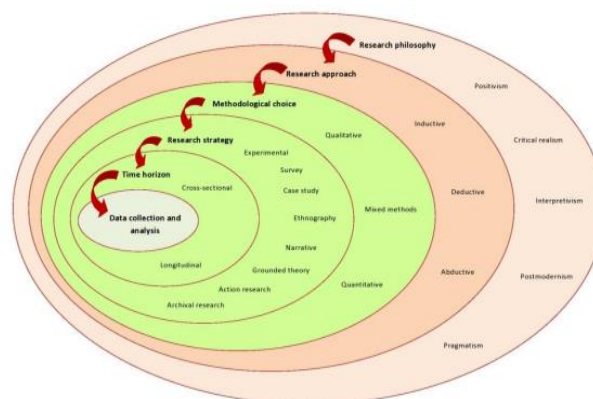
4.1   Research Philosophy

The research philosophy comprises interpretivism and positive philosophy. The positivist philosophy focuses on testing theories to determine their outcomes using natural sciences concepts that follow a legal sequence to provide scientific justification for variables (Ryan, 2018). In contrast, the interpretivism philosophy assumes that the nature of different objects is determined through the way these objectives are observed by different people. The present research will rely on the interpretivism philosophy because it focuses on the descriptive approach and applies subjective strategies to obtain research goals.

4.2   Research Approach

The research approach comprises inductive and deductive approaches. The deductive approach converts general details into specific information by driving specific outcomes from general facts through observation, generalisation and application of relevant methods. The application of this approach allows the researcher to develop and test a new theory by acquiring the required details (Kim, 2021). On the other hand, the inductive approach coverts specific information into generalisable results by conducting research, establishing a theory and observing and analysing the theory to make it more relevant for the general audience. The present research will apply the inductive approach because it will enable the research to obtain information on the influence of COVID-related social isolation on the employability and career aspirations of students in Pakistan and Malaysia. This approach will allow the research to focus on preliminary similarities and patterns in data to develop a tentative strategy to describe the regularities and patterns in data (Kim, 2021).

4.3   Research Methodology

This systematic literature review employed a qualitative approach to explore existing literature related to the investigated concepts. This review aims to understand the impact of COVID-19 social isolation on the employability and career aspirations of students.

4.4   Techniques and procedures

This systematic literature review relied on secondary data sources for the collection and analysis of data. However, a major challenge with secondary data is the threat of plagiarism, incorrect citations, managing large volumes of data, including outdated information, and ensuring the incorporation of relevant and reliable data. To address these concerns, the review included journals and articles published from 2015 onwards. Given the focus on COVID-19, data will specifically be sourced from publications from 2019 onwards. Keywords such as "career aspirations," "employability," and "COVID-19 social isolation" will be used to find relevant information online. Additionally, the researcher will utilize reputable sources such as Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and the National Institute of Health to access credible information. The findings will be presented in tabular format to clearly define the aims and outcomes of each article. These findings will be used to identify key themes in the data and relate the findings to the previous literature analysed in the study.

4.5   Ethical Considerations

The threat of plagiarism was managed by rephrasing the content and using accurate intext citations along with bibliography at the end of the research. Moreover, the researchers carefully examined each source to ensure that the data incorporated is evaluated critically and measured using relevant sources of information.

5.   Findings

Table 1

Summary of Studies on the Impact of COVID-19 on Students' Career and Mental Health

	Author(s) and Year	Aim	Method	Findings
1	Albien, A. J., & Beppo, T. A. (2022).	To assess the impact of covid19 on migration and career development aspirations of students.	Qualitative research	Covid19 has significantly impacted the migration aspirations of students to find sustainable job opportunities. Covid19 has influenced career aspirations of students by urging them to find more sustainable sources of income for the future.
2	Capone, V., Marino, L., & Park, M. S. A. (2021).	To examine the correlation between ambition, perceived employability, career planning, organisational commitment, self-efficacy, academic burnout and engagement of students during the pandemic.	Online questionnaire	The pandemic has led to increased levels of uncertainty about employability and career development of students. However, students have depicted positive and healthy levels of engagement, self-efficacy and mental wellbeing during this period.
3	Salman, M., Asif, N., Mustafa, Z. U., Khan, T. M., Shehzadi, N., Hussain, K., ... & Khan, M. T. (2020).	To assess the psychological impacts on COVID-19 pandemic on university students and their coping strategies in Pakistan	Web-based cross section analysis	The pandemic has adversely influenced the mental health of Pakistani students. Students have adopted religious and spiritual coping, self-distraction, active coping and acceptance strategies.
4	Hussain, T., Gilani, U. S., Khan, S., & Raza, S. M. M. (2021).	To evaluate the understanding of the pandemic and its coping strategies among youngsters in Pakistan	Questionnaire-based survey	The Pakistani youth is aware of the adverse impacts of the pandemic. The Pakistani youth is prepared to avoid mass gatherings and adopt precautionary measures. (Hussain, T., Gilani, U. S., Khan, S., & Raza, S. M. M. (2021).

	Author(s) and Year	Aim	Method	Findings
5	Akhter, N., Ali, M. S., Siddique, M., & Abbas, R. (2021).	To determine the significance of career counselling from an Islamic perspective within the context of covid-19 pandemic.	Focus group interviews	Career counselling is important for providing career orientation, building confidence, connecting students with markets and supporting their career aspirations. Career counselling is important to minimise the impact of covid-19 pandemic on the career choices of Pakistani students Akhter, N., Ali, M. S., Siddique, M., & Abbas, R. (2021).
6	Irfan, F. (2021).	To evaluate the experience and career choices of Pakistani students in Hungary during the COVID-19 pandemic	Mixed research approach	The career aspirations of Pakistani students have been significantly influenced due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
7	Li, G., Pervaiz, S., & He, Q. (2021, July).	To investigate the influence of universities on the attitude of Pakistani students towards entrepreneurship during COVID-19.	Online questionnaire-based survey	Entrepreneurial acquaintance and education are important for developing entrepreneurial intentions among students. Educational institutes can significantly influence the future employability of students in Pakistan. Li, G., Pervaiz, S., & He, Q. (2021, July).
8	Butt, H.S., Shahzadi, M. & Khan, M.S.G. (2021).	To analyse the influence of COVID-19 on job searching in Pakistan	Cross-section analysis using a convenient sampling method	The job searching of Pakistanis was affected due to COVID-19. Universities can play an important role in developing soft and hard skills in students to improve their future employability. Butt, H.S., Shahzadi, M. & Khan, M.S.G. (2021).
9	Yassin, A. A., Razak, N. A., Saeed, M. A., Al-Maliki, M. A. A., &	To determine the influence of COVID-19 pandemic on the psychological	Questionnaire-based survey	Students felt more anxious, less confident and stressed during the pandemic. The

	Author(s) and Year	Aim	Method	Findings
	Al-Habies, F. A. (2021).	wellbeing and learning of Malaysian students.		psychological stress negatively influenced their approach towards online learning. (Yassin et al., 2021).
10	Mohamad, N. M., & Jaaffar, A. H. (2021).	To determine the thought process of Malaysian undergraduate business students regarding their employability and future careers amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.	A quantitative research approach	Malaysian students depicted a confident attitude towards their perceived employability based on different dimensions of employability. Mohamad, N. M., & Jaaffar, A. H. (2021).
11	Ng, K. A., Trupp, A., & Phongpanichanan, C. (2023).	To examine the career decision-making process of hospitality students during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia.	Semi-structured interviews and informal conversations	Malaysian hospitality students showed a positive career outlook during the COVID-19 pandemic. Family members had a significant influence on the career outlook of students. (Ng et al., 2023).
12	Falahat, M., Ling, T. J., & Thurasamy, R. (2021).	To examine the psychological traits of people and covid-19 pandemic, which impact entrepreneurial intentions in Malaysia.	Secondary data analysis	Innovativeness, self-efficacy, COVID-19 pandemic and entrepreneurial vision have a significant impact on entrepreneurial intentions in Malaysia. Falahat, M., Ling, T. J., & Thurasamy, R. (2021).
13	Noman, M., Kaur, A., & Nafees, N. (2021).	To determine the influence of stressors including financial and employment anxiety and supports including lecturer and university support on academic performance and dropout intentions of Malaysian students during the COVID-19 pandemic.	Quantitative analysis	Lecturer and university support mitigates the identified stresses, improves academic performance and reduces dropout intentions among Malaysian students. (Noman, M., Kaur, A., & Nafees, N. (2021).
14	Kamaruddin, M. I. H., Ahmad, A., Husain, M. A., &	To determine the influence of COVID-19 on the graduate employability of	Questionnaire survey	Malaysian students were willing to explore internship opportunities during the lockdown.

Author(s) and Year	Aim	Method	Findings
Abd Hamid, S. N. (2021).	Malaysian students. To analyse the readiness of students to explore internship opportunities during the lockdown in Malaysia.		Malaysian students believed in the employment prospects after the pandemic. (Kamaruddin et al., 2021).

6.   Discussion and Analysis

The discussion and analysis section will follow the application of thematic analysis to identify and explain relevant themes from the obtained information on the influence of COVID-19 on future career aspirations and employability of undergraduates in Malaysia and Pakistan.

6.1   Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis has led to the identification of four themes. The themes are explained below:

6.1.1 Preferences and Choices of Students during COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the preferences and choices of students (Falahat et al., 2021; Irfan, 2021). The results related to the findings of Akkermans et al. (2020), who regarded the COVID-19 pandemic as a career shock because of its impact on the motivations and choices of students. In addition, Akkermans et al. (20201) also mentioned that the pandemic made impacts during the period of its occurrence with long-term consequences that can be perceived by students and organisations in the future. Concerning this, Albien & Beppo (2022) also mentioned that COVID-19 influenced the preferences of students by highlighting the requirement of sustainable routes to employment and indicating the importance of professions that can provide a sustainable future to students. The authors identified that the migration intentions of students were improved to areas that offer sustainable employment opportunities due to the pandemic (Albien & Beppo, 2022). The results related to the findings of Saha et al. (2023), who identified that the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the complex realities and potential workload of the professional world to students. The pandemic also caused a shift from the traditional to a digital workspace, which changed preference from working in a traditional workspace to a digital and cloud-based setup among students (Neuwirth et al., 2021). Students are facing more uncertainty and work-related stress due to the emergence of the pandemic (Capone et al., 2021). However, students have managed to depict positive trends in mental well-being and engagement levels through this period of uncertainty and challenges (Capone et al., 2021). The results are further related to the ECT approach that highlights the influence of stronger events on introducing major changes in the preferences, attitudes and choices of people (Morgeson et al., 2015). The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the preferences and choices of students indicates a strong influence of this event.

6.1.2 Career Aspirations and Employability of Pakistani Students during COVID-19

The results have revealed a significant influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the career aspirations of Pakistani students (Irfan, 2021). The pandemic influences career aspirations by impacting job job-searching efforts of Pakistani students. However, Butt et al. (2021) identified that universities can play a positive role in facilitating job acquisition by developing soft and hard skills among students. Concerning the role of educational institutes, Li et al. (2021) also mentioned that educational institutes can positively influence the employability of Pakistani students by developing entrepreneurial intentions.

On the other side, the findings have also highlighted the negative impact of the pandemic on the mental health of Pakistani students (Salman et al., 2020). The results revealed that students are adopting spiritual and religious coping strategies, active coping, acceptance and self-distraction to mitigate these impacts on their future well-being (Salman et al., 2020). These results relate to the findings of Xiong et al. (2020), who mentioned that anxiety, depression and stress have become a primary outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic among the population. Brooks et al. (2020) also mentioned that the pandemic can generate long-term consequences for the mental health of the population. The results also correlate with the findings of Jeffers et al. (2022), who identified that social isolation during the pandemic will generate unexpected results for the mental well-being of students. In this light, Akhter et al. (2021) highlighted the role of career counselling to minimise the influence of the pandemic on the career aspirations of students in Pakistan. However, Hussain et al. (2021) shed light on the positive aspect regarding the attitude of Pakistani youth towards the pandemic. The authors mentioned that the youth in Pakistan are adopting necessary measures to protect themselves from the adverse impacts of the pandemic (Hussain et al., 2021). The application of the social cognitive career theory can be made in this regard because of the role of its key elements, including career goals, outcome expectations and self-efficacy on the success and career development of people (Wang et al., 2022).

6.1.3 Career Aspirations and Employability of Malaysian Students during COVID-19

The results have revealed a significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the employability and career aspirations of Malaysian students. For example, Cao et al. (2020) mentioned that Malaysian students have experienced increased uncertainty about their careers due to the pandemic. However, Ng et al. (2023) identified that Malaysian students have maintained a positive outlook towards their careers during the pandemic and family support has made a significant impact on the career outlook of these students during the difficult period of the outbreak of coronavirus. Mohamad & Jaaffar (2021) also identified that Malaysian students remained confident and maintained a positive attitude towards their future employability during the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers like Kamaruddin et al. (2021) also mentioned that Malaysian students maintained a positive career outlook by depicting an increased willingness to explore internship opportunities with the prospect of the potential positive impact of these opportunities on their future employability. However, the pandemic had negative impacts on the mental health of Malaysian students. According to Yassi et al. (2021), Malaysian students experienced more stress, anxiousness and reduced confidence during the pandemic. These results relate to the findings of Xiong et al. (2020), who identified that the percentage of psychological disorders increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Concerning this, Henry et al. (2020) also mentioned that social isolation led to increased levels of mental health concerns during the pandemic. Falahat et al. (2021) determined that the COVID-19 pandemic has also made an impact on the entrepreneurial intentions of students. However, support from universities has played an important role in improving academic performance and reducing dropout intentions among students in Malaysia (Noman et al., 2021).

6.1.4 Pakistani and Malaysian students' Coping Strategies

Both Pakistani and Malaysian students have adopted unique approaches to deal with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their employability and career aspirations. Pakistani students adopted different approaches, such as spiritual and religious coping, acceptance and active coping mechanisms to manage the influence of the pandemic on their mental health and well-being (Salman et al., 2020). On the other hand, Malaysian students maintained a positive outlook towards their careers by obtaining internship opportunities to keep themselves occupied and acquire relevant skills to increase their chances of getting the desired jobs in the future (Kamaruddin et al., 2021). The results also indicate the application of the SCCT approach, which indicates the influence of socio-cognitive factors, contextual variables and personal inputs on career aspirations, vocational interests and activities of individuals (Lent, 2020). The influence of socio-cognitive, personal and contextual factors was identified in the adoption of coping strategies by Pakistani and Malaysian students. For example, acceptance among Pakistani students was related to the application of religious and spiritual coping strategies (Salman et

al., 2020). Likewise, Malaysian students focused on skill development and internships to contextually shape their approach to career development and growth (Kamaruddin et al., 2021).

7. New Findings

The present study has highlighted various new findings that can be further explored to identify the diverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on students. The results have indicated a positive role of university and lectures on the coping strength and mental health of students. In addition to this, the findings revealed that students were willing to explore internship opportunities during the pandemic to maintain their employability, which indicates that students are willing to explore unique opportunities in challenging circumstances like the pandemic to achieve their career objectives. In this context, the study has also highlighted the impact of COVID-19 on the job search efforts of students, which shows that the pandemic may have potentially generated long-term impacts on the employability of students who were affected by social isolation and quarantine conditions due to the outbreak of coronavirus. In addition to this, the research showed the connection of religious factors and spiritual spirit with the healing and coping of students. Lastly, the research has highlighted the positive role of career counselling on the coping strength of students during the pandemic, which can serve as a major contribution to the literature by helping researchers explore the role of psychological assistance and counselling in managing the employability of students.

8. Research Gaps

This systematic literature review contributes to the literature by exploring the influence of COVID-19 on the future career aspirations and employability of Pakistani and Malaysian students. However, the study has some limitations that future researchers can address. Firstly, this study employs a qualitative, cross-sectional approach, collecting data at a single point in time due to resource and time constraints. Consequently, the findings rely solely on previously published research and articles, limiting access to the unique opinions and perspectives of Pakistani and Malaysian students. Additionally, the cross-sectional method confines the research to immediately available data, restricting the identification of evolving patterns in career aspirations and employability over time.

Moreover, this review focuses on the influence of COVID-19-related isolation on only two variables: career aspirations and employability. Given the diverse and extensive impacts of COVID-19 on various aspects of life, the study's scope is limited to these two areas. Another limitation is the provision of generic findings specific to Pakistani and Malaysian students, which cannot be generalized to a larger population. Within Pakistan and Malaysia, numerous contextual factors could be explored separately to understand the diverse impacts of the pandemic on students' employability and career aspirations. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating longitudinal studies, expanding the scope to include additional variables, and exploring different contextual factors within and beyond these countries.

9. Conclusion

The purpose of the review was to analyse the existing literature on the influence of COVID-19 isolation on the employability and career aspirations of Pakistani and Malaysian students. Concerning this, a qualitative data analysis was performed to determine how Pakistan and Malaysian students have been affected by the pandemic and what strategies have been adopted by students in these regions to minimise the negative impacts of the pandemic on their career aspirations and employability. A literature review was also performed to determine the theoretical relevance of the study and determine the views and opinions of previous literature on the career aspirations and employability of students due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The literature review showed that the ECT and SCCT approaches were the most relevant approaches in this regard because the approaches focus on the impact of an event on the coping approach and preferences of people and determine what measures are adopted by the population to manage their cognitive wellbeing and career growth during the times of uncertainty. The qualitative data analysis was applied to further investigate relevant studies and research in this domain.

The application of qualitative data was ensured due to time and resource constraints and to obtain detailed information about the preferences and choices of Pakistani and Malaysian students. The qualitative data was presented using thematic analysis, which helped with the identified of relevant themes from the obtained information. The results revealed a significant impact of COVID-19 on the career aspirations and employability of Pakistani and Malaysian students. The findings showed that the pandemic adversely impacted the mental health of students in both Pakistan and Malaysian by imposing social isolation and creating an uncertain environment about their future. However, students in both regions maintained a positive outlook towards their careers and adopted unique approaches to minimise the negative impacts of the pandemic on their well-being and motivation. On one side, Pakistani students adopted religious and spiritual healing, acceptance and active coping mechanisms to deal with the negative outcomes of the pandemic. On the other side, Malaysian students focused on their skill development by identifying and acquiring relevant internship opportunities. Overall, the research has contributed to the literature by comparing the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the career aspirations and employability of students in Pakistan and Malaysia and examining the coping strategies adopted by students in both regions. However, there were certain limitations of the study that were primarily associated with time and resource constraints in the research. Future researchers can further explore this topic to identify other relevant factors that are associated with the academic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

10. Recommendations

The following recommendations are generated for the future researchers. The research results can be further explored to evaluate the role of universities in diverse conditions within the context of different backgrounds and social factors to assess their influence on the career aspirations and employability of students. Moreover, the role of career development opportunities like internships can be explored in different contexts, such as the accessibility of these opportunities to determine their influence on the employability of students particularly within the context of uncertain events like the COVID19 pandemic.

Moreover, the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on job-searching efforts can be explored within the context of different backgrounds and regional conditions to compare the influence of students functioning in different areas. However, the role of religious and spiritual factors can be explored in supporting the healing and mental wellbeing of people during the outbreak of COVID19 pandemic and its correlation with the academic performance and career aspirations of students. The influence of career counselling on the wellbeing and coping strength of students can be explored along with the barriers in the accessibility of counselling facilities on the career aspirations and employability of students.

It would be interesting to have a quantitative analysis that can be performed on Pakistani and Malaysian students to determine their views and opinions and compare the differences in their perception of the impact of COVID-19 isolation on their career development and employability. Moreover, a longitudinal analysis can also be performed to determine how the students dealt with the pandemic over the years and compare the long-term impacts of the pandemic on the employability and career aspirations of students in Pakistan and Malaysia.

The influence of COVID-19 on other variables that are related to career aspirations and employability, such as job search, job satisfaction and job-related migration, can be explored by future researchers within the context of Pakistani and Malaysian students. Researchers can utilise more specific variables such as students enrolled in certain courses or students aiming to work in certain fields in Pakistan and Malaysia and compare their attitude towards employability in a post-pandemic world. Lastly, social and cultural factors can be examined to determine their influence in directing the impact of the COVID19 pandemic on the career aspirations and employability of students in Pakistan and Malaysia.

11. Co-author contribution

The authors affirm that there is no conflict of interest in this article. All co-authors actively contributed to refining the structure, content, and overall quality of the manuscript.

12.   Acknowledgement

13.   References

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