Cultural and Religious Dimensions in Career Search Efficacy: A Qualitative Study on Vocational High School Students

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ABSTRACT: This study aims to explore how cultural and religious values shape the Career Search Efficacy of vocational high school students (SMK) in Banda Aceh, Indonesia. Employing a descriptive exploratory qualitative approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) involving 15 students from grades XI–XII and two guidance and counseling teachers. The findings reveal that Career Search Efficacy is deeply embedded within Acehnese cultural norms, including Islamic principles, family decision-making traditions (*musyawarah*), and informal social interactions such as discussions in coffee shops. The analysis identified four main dimensions of Career Search Efficacy influenced by the cultural context: career exploration, interviewing efficacy, networking efficacy, and personal exploration. The novelty of this study lies in its integration of religious dimensions and local cultural practices into the framework of Career Search Efficacy, an aspect that remains underexplored in both national and international scholarship. The findings underscore that the career development of vocational students is not merely an individual process but also a social construction shaped by communal values and spiritual beliefs. Nevertheless, the limited number of participants and the contextual nature of this study highlight research gaps that should be addressed in future investigations using mixed-methods designs and broader participant coverage to obtain more generalizable results. Practically, this study contributes to the development of culturally responsive career guidance services and supports the integration of local wisdom into vocational education practices.

INTRODUCTION

Career preparation is a crucial aspect of vocational education, as it emphasizes not only the mastery of technical skills but also the psychological readiness of individuals to face the transition into the workforce. One key psychological factor is Career Search Efficacy, defined as an individual's belief in their ability to perform tasks related to job search activities, such as exploring career information, attending job interviews, networking, and engaging in self-reflection (Solberg & Nord, 1994). Research has demonstrated that Career Search Efficacy significantly contributes to career goal clarity, persistence in career exploration, and the quality of employment outcomes (Saks & Ashforth, 2002; Van Hooft et al., 2020).

A growing body of international research emphasizes that efficacy in career decision-making and job search is strongly influenced by cultural context and social support. Mau (2000) found that career decision-making styles differ between individualistic and collectivist cultures, with self-efficacy serving as a primary predictor. Similarly, a meta-analysis by Kleine and Wisse (2021) demonstrated that career exploration is strongly shaped by self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and social support, and is positively associated with career decidedness and employability. More recent

studies further highlight that parental involvement and parent–child congruence in career expectations are critical factors in career exploration, particularly within collectivist cultures (Çelik, 2019).

In the Indonesian context, the issue of career efficacy has become increasingly relevant, particularly among vocational high school (SMK) students who are expected to enter the workforce immediately after graduation. Research by Sandra and Mularsih (2021) demonstrated that self-efficacy plays a significant role in the career decision-making of SMK students in Jakarta. Similarly, a study by Bella, Retnaningdyastuti, and Ajie (2022) found a strong positive relationship between self-efficacy and senior high school students' ability to make career decisions. Other local studies have also confirmed that career guidance services are effective in enhancing the self-efficacy of SMK students, particularly through structured group guidance interventions (Assahrawiza & Hariko, 2024).

Nevertheless, to date, few studies have comprehensively examined how Career Search Efficacy is formed and understood by vocational high school students within specific socio-cultural frameworks. In Acehnese society, for instance, job seeking is not merely perceived as a rational process but also as a social and spiritual journey. Considerations such as *halal* aspects, the pursuit of blessings (*barakah*), and alignment with Islamic values often play a central role in career decision-making. This underscores the need for research that explores the dynamics of Career Search Efficacy while in consideration of local contexts.

Thus, this study carries both academic and practical urgency. Academically, it contributes to broadening the discourse on Career Search Efficacy by incorporating social, cultural, and religious dimensions that remain underexplored. Practically, the findings are expected to serve as a foundation for developing career guidance services that are more contextualized, culturally sensitive, and aligned with the needs of vocational high school students in Aceh. Based on the preceding background, it is essential to further review prior studies on Career Search Efficacy, both in international and national contexts. Given the limited research that examines this issue within local cultural frameworks, particularly in Aceh, the following section presents a literature review that maps previous findings while identifying the research gaps that constitute the focus of this study.

Career Search Efficacy (CSE) is defined as an individual's belief in their ability to carry out tasks related to the job search process, including exploring career information, attending interviews, building networks, and engaging in self-reflection (Solberg & Nord, 1994). This concept is rooted in Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory and has been integrated into Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), which emphasizes the interaction between personal, behavioral, and environmental factors in career development (Ali & Menke, 2014). Solberg et al., (1994; 1998) identified four key dimensions of CSE career exploration efficacy, interview efficacy, networking efficacy, and personal exploration efficacy, which have been consistently employed as a conceptual framework for understanding job search behaviors.

The Career Search Efficacy Scale (CSES) developed by Solberg et al., (1994) has been validated across various populations of college students and job seekers, and has been shown to predict the effectiveness of job search behaviors, career goal clarity, and persistence in overcoming barriers (Solberg, 1998). Alongside the advancement of career assessment, other approaches have also been developed, such as the Kuder Career Search with Person Match (Zytowski, 2001), which emphasizes matching individual profiles with people in diverse occupational fields. These developments underscore the need for Career Search Efficacy assessments to remain adaptive to the increasing complexity of the labor market.

In the Indonesian context, research has shown that Career Search Efficacy can be enhanced through educational interventions. Tarigan and Wimbarti (2011) found that a career planning

program was effective in improving CSE among recent graduates in Yogyakarta. A more recent literature review by Ramadhani (2023) further affirmed that the CSES demonstrates strong validity and reliability, although its application remains limited to specific contexts and rarely explores the role of cultural and religious factors in shaping students' career beliefs.

Cross-cultural studies have shown that Career Search Efficacy is influenced by social norms, family roles, and religious values. Ali and Menke (2014), through the application of SCCT to Latino adolescents in rural areas, found that family support, cultural identity, and contextual barriers were critical determinants of success in the career search process. These findings parallel the context of Aceh, where Islamic values, family decision-making traditions (*musyawarah*), and informal social interactions such as discussions in coffee shops play a significant role in career decision-making.

Although previous studies have examined CSE in various contexts, most have focused on urban student populations within Western cultural frameworks (Solberg et al., 1994; Ramadhani, 2023). In Indonesia, research on career efficacy has largely centered on issues of self-efficacy and career decision-making (Tarigan & Wimbarti, 2011), without providing an in-depth exploration of cultural and religious influences. Therefore, the novelty of this study lies in its attempt to explore CSE within the socio-cultural framework of Aceh, emphasizing the role of religious and cultural values in shaping vocational high school students' career beliefs.

Based on the foregoing discussion, it is evident that studies on Career Search Efficacy have been widely conducted in both international and national contexts; however, most have remained focused on individual aspects and have not comprehensively examined the role of culture and religion. This condition highlights a research gap that requires more contextualized inquiry. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by examining how Acehnese cultural and religious values influence the Career Search Efficacy of vocational high school students.

Study Aim

This study aims to explore how the unique cultural and religious values of Acehnese society influence the Career Search Efficacy of vocational high school (SMK) students. Employing a qualitative approach, the research focuses on an in-depth understanding of students lived experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making processes throughout their career search journey, including career information exploration, job interviews, professional networking, and self-reflection within the framework of local social norms, customs, and Islamic teachings.

The primary objective of this study is to provide a contextual understanding of how Acehnese vocational students construct and interpret their Career Search Efficacy, while also identifying the cultural practices and social challenges that shape their confidence in navigating the transition to the workforce. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of culturally sensitive and locally relevant career guidance services in vocational education settings.

Although this study is exploratory in nature and does not seek to test hypotheses through quantitative means, it is grounded in the assumption that Aceh's cultural and religious values exert a significant influence on the development of students' Career Search Efficacy. In other words, students' interpretations and enactments of job-seeking activities are shaped by the socio-cultural environment in which they grow and learn, including value systems that regulate behaviour, norms of politeness, interpersonal relationships, and spiritual considerations in choosing appropriate occupations.

METHODS
Design

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive exploratory design. Such an approach was deemed most appropriate for capturing students' subjective experiences in

interpreting and navigating the career search process within the local cultural context of Aceh. Qualitative research focuses on an in-depth understanding of naturalistic conditions and emphasizes meaning rather than generalization (Sugiyono, 2013). Accordingly, this method allows researchers to explore the complex, dynamic, and meaningful realities from participants' perspectives while producing an accurate portrayal of the facts, characteristics, and interrelationships among the phenomena under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).
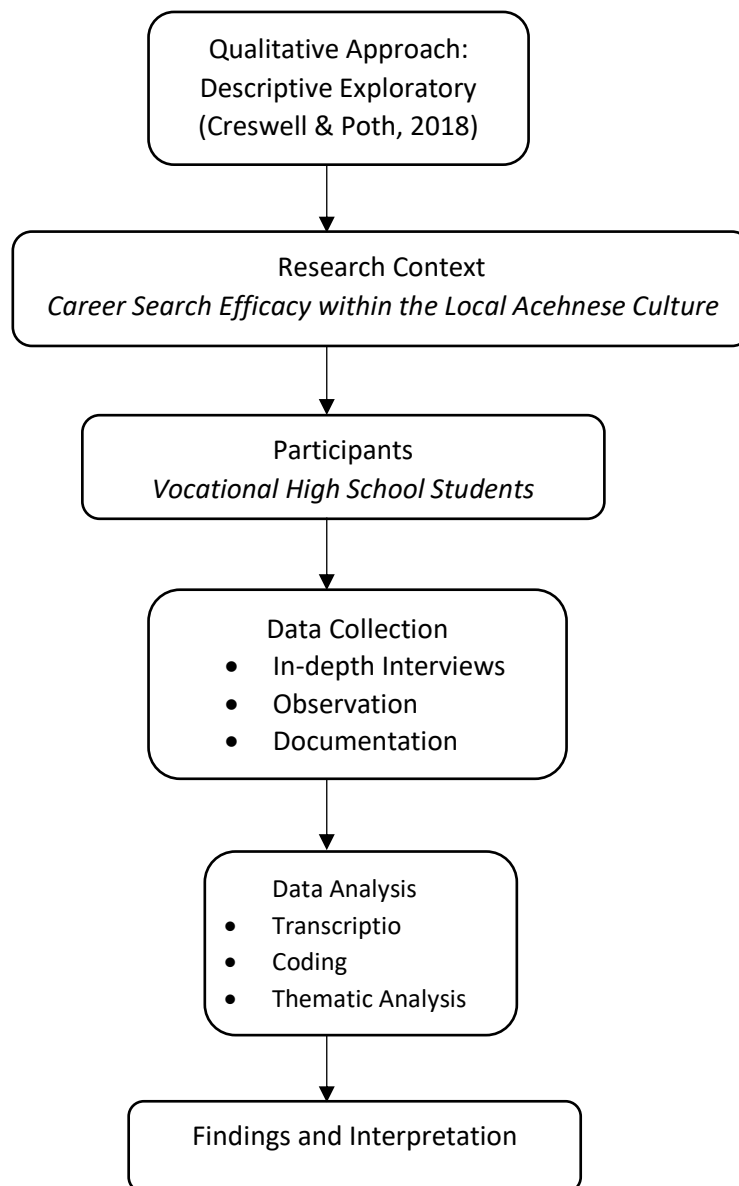
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Figure 1. Research Flow of Qualitative Descriptive-Explorative Design (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants

The participants in this study were vocational high school (SMK) students in Banda Aceh, selected through purposive sampling. This method was chosen because it allows researchers to determine participants based on specific criteria (Sugiyono, 2013; Campbell et al., 2020). The criteria for participation were as follows: (1) students in grade XI or XII who were at the stage of career exploration or job preparation; (2) willingness to take part in in-depth interviews; and (3) possession of knowledge or experience related to job searching. In addition, several guidance and counseling

(BK) teachers were involved as key informants to provide complementary perspectives on students' behaviors and beliefs in planning their career pathways.

Data Collected

Research data were collected using two primary techniques: semi-structured interviews with students and guidance and counseling teachers, and focus group discussions (FGDs) with small groups of students. The interviews were conducted face-to-face using open-ended question guides that allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives, while FGDs were employed to capture the social dynamics and collective values influencing Career Search Efficacy. The interview and FGD protocols were developed based on the four dimensions of Career Search Efficacy identified by Solberg et al., (1998) career exploration efficacy, interview efficacy, networking efficacy, and personal exploration efficacy, which were then contextualized within Acehnese cultural and religious values. Sample questions included: for career exploration efficacy, "How do you search for career information that aligns with your interests and Acehnese cultural values?"; for interview efficacy, "How confident do you feel about facing a job interview while maintaining proper manners in accordance with Acehnese culture?"; for networking efficacy, "How do you build relationships with teachers, peers, or community leaders to support your career?"; and for personal exploration efficacy, "How do you determine a job that suits your personal interests and Islamic values?" The research instruments consisted of interview guides, field notes, and audio recording devices to ensure data completeness and reliability.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the thematic analysis framework of Braun and Clarke (2006), supported by the qualitative software Quirkos. The analysis involved the following stages: (1) verbatim transcription of interviews and FGDs, (2) repeated reading to understand contextual meaning, (3) initial coding, (4) identification of main themes and subthemes, (5) refinement and review of themes, and (6) interpretive narrative writing. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation (student and teacher interviews) and member checking with participants. This study was conducted in accordance with the principles of ethical research, including obtaining informed consent, maintaining the confidentiality of participant identities, and ensuring the right to withdraw at any time. All participants signed a consent form after being informed of the study's objectives and procedures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Results

This study was conducted among vocational high school (SMK) students in Banda Aceh, in consideration of the local cultural context of Aceh, which is rich in social, religious, and traditional values. Based on semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with students and Guidance and Counseling teachers, the dimensions of Career Search Efficacy as proposed by Solberg et al., (1998) were found to remain relevant in this setting. However, each dimension manifested distinct local nuances that reflect a deep integration between the career search process and the cultural norms and spiritual values upheld in Acehnese society.

The findings of this study classify the elements of Career Search Efficacy into four main dimensions: career exploration, interviewing efficacy, networking efficacy, and personal exploration. These four dimensions provide the analytical framework for understanding how vocational students in Aceh construct self-belief and develop strategies to navigate career-related challenges within the context of local cultural values.

Table 1. Career Search Efficacy of Vocational High School Students based on Interviews and FGDs.

| Dimension	Individual Interviews	Focus Group Discussions
Career Exploration Efficacy	Ahsan sought information through the internet and social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok) as well as by asking friends; he remained confident even though company information was not always clear. Fauzan searched for information via TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook; he expressed confidence because the information aligned with his interests. Firza utilized websites, YouTube, and WhatsApp groups; however, his confidence was only moderate (approximately 50:50) due to personal barriers.	Students sought information through the internet, teachers, and parents. Putri and Nurul mentioned that they evaluated their career options by consulting with parents, teachers, and peers to ensure alignment with their interests and talents.
Interview Efficacy	Ahsan prepared for interviews by using the internet and articles, and occasionally relied on AI; he tried to respond even when faced with difficult questions. Fauzan studied in advance before attending interviews; he remained confident despite encountering challenging questions. Firza engaged in intensive practice due to nervousness; when he did not understand a question, he chose to be honest with the interviewer.	Putri practiced interviews with her friends. Nurul trained herself in speaking to reduce nervousness. Ocha emphasized the importance of ethics, appropriate dress, and polite behavior during interviews. Fatimah added that maintaining discipline and courteous manners is also essential.
Networking Efficacy	Ahsan built relationships through peer-to-peer connections, shared hobbies, and social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok), with additional support from his family. Fauzan expanded his network by socializing in informal gatherings and used social media to directly ask questions. Firza developed relationships through social gatherings, alumni networks, WhatsApp, and Instagram.	Sharia and Putri emphasized the importance of parental approval and input from peers or teachers. Nurul highlighted discussions with close relatives as a way to evaluate her career plans.
Personal Exploration Efficacy	Ahsan felt confident because he already knew his interests; although his family did not always provide support at first, they eventually followed his choices. His career plans were still in progress. Fauzan considered self-confidence to be important; his career plans had not yet been achieved, and he aspired to pursue higher education. Firza assessed that his career development had only reached about 50%, citing personal barriers such as lack of motivation; he planned to continue his studies and attend additional courses, while also emphasizing honesty and Acehnese values.	Ocha responded honestly despite acknowledging her shortcomings, while demonstrating readiness to learn. Fatimah emphasized the importance of greetings and proper etiquette. Putri highlighted the need for self-confidence even when facing criticism. Sharia underscored patience and maintaining a positive attitude in accordance with Acehnese cultural values.
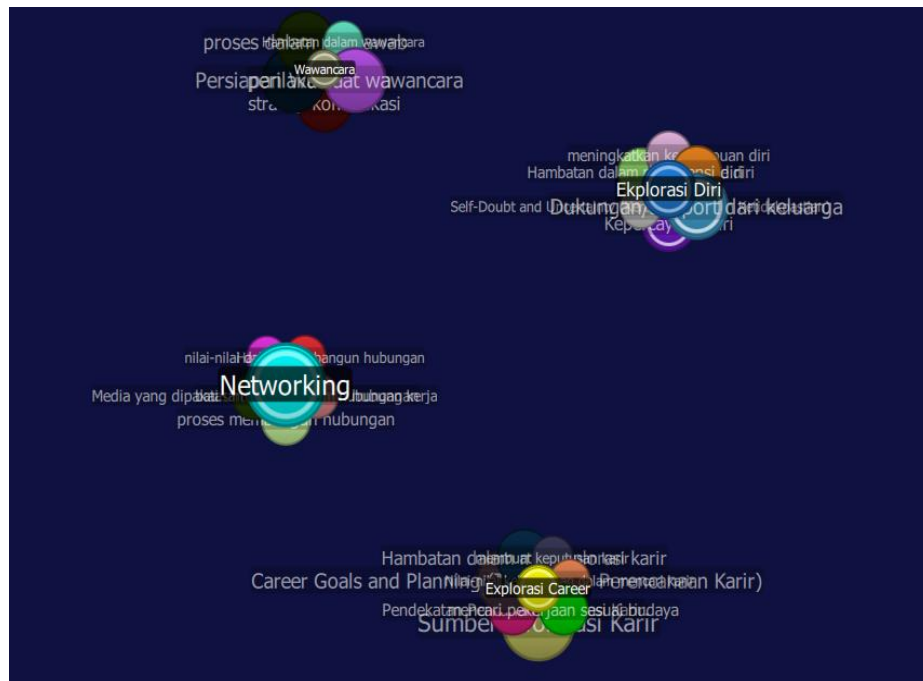
Figure 2. Thematic Visualization of Career Search Efficacy using Quirkos Software.

The thematic visualization generated using the Quirkos application (Figure 1) illustrates the mapping of thematic codes derived from interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with vocational school students in Banda Aceh. The analysis revealed that students' Career Search Efficacy is strongly influenced by various elements of local culture, including social, religious, and customary values unique to Acehnese society. These cultural aspects not only shape students' perceptions of the job search process but also affect how they prepare themselves, build networks, and make career-related decisions. Based on these findings, the components of Career Search Efficacy were categorized into four main dimensions: (1) career exploration, (2) interview efficacy, (3) networking efficacy, and (4) personal exploration.

Career Exploration

Students demonstrated their career exploration skills through diverse sources of information, including social media (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, WhatsApp groups), search engines (e.g., Google), newspapers, and discussions with peers and parents. Career-related information was obtained not only through formal channels but also within informal social spaces, such as conversations in local coffee shops, experience sharing with senior students, and consultations with parents. These social spaces in Aceh play a strategic role in motivating students to seek employment. However, several challenges were reported, including limited internet connectivity, outdated company websites, and the absence of social media use in certain recruitment processes.

The exploration process was guided not only by rational motives but also by cultural and religious values.

> Ahsan stated, *"I usually search on the internet and through personal connections, mostly using Instagram"* (Interview, Ahsan). Fauzan added, *"I use TikTok, IG, and Facebook to find job information"* (Interview, Fauzan). In an FGD, Nurul emphasized the role of family: *"I usually ask the people closest to me, like teachers or parents, to check whether my choices fit my talents"* (FGD, Nurul).

These accounts indicate that students' career exploration is shaped not only by individual factors but also by collectivist values, parental approval, and religious considerations such as *halal*, *barakah*, and alignment with Islamic law.

Interview Efficacy

Students' ability to engage in job interviews was reflected in their efforts to maintain a stable tone of voice, eye contact, and composure. Preparation was conducted holistically, including reading articles, watching training videos, using artificial intelligence for practice, seeking advice from experienced peers, and even consulting religious teachers on etiquette and moral conduct.

> Ahsan stated, *"I prepare myself by using the internet, reading articles, and sometimes using AI as well"* (Interview, Ahsan), while Fauzan emphasized, *"I study first before the interview, ma'am"* (Interview, Fauzan). In an FGD, Ocha highlighted the importance of manners: *"Our clothing must be neat and polite, and most importantly, etiquette and ethics"* (FGD, Ocha), whereas Fatimah added, *"Confidence, speaking politely, and discipline are very important"* (FGD, Fatimah).

These accounts illustrate the integration of cognitive, technical, and spiritual strategies in shaping interview efficacy, where interview skills are not only understood as professional competencies but also as a space to embody Acehnese cultural identity that emphasizes courtesy, greetings, and discipline. Nonetheless, some students reported limitations in their preparedness due to the lack of formal training and the misalignment between interview content and their personal career interests.

Networking Efficacy

The process of building relationships in job searching among vocational high school students in Aceh was carried out through social practices that emphasized *silaturahmi* (maintaining ties), mutual support, and kinship bonds. They initiated conversations with peers, expanded networks through family connections, and engaged in informal gatherings such as chatting over coffee, which serves as a distinctive social space in Acehnese culture.

> Ahsan explained, *"Usually it starts from friend to friend, sometimes through shared hobbies"* (Interview, Ahsan). Fauzan added, *"I try to expand my acquaintances, often starting by exchanging ideas with friends, then getting introduced from one friend to another"* (Interview, Fauzan). Firza relied on alumni networks: *"I often share with senior classmates, and communication still continues even after they graduate"* (Interview, Firza). In an FGD, Sharia underscored the role of family: *"We first ask our parents so that we have their support"* (FGD, Sharia).

The modes of communication employed included the use of local language, informal social invitations, and family introductions to potential employers. However, students also reported several challenges, such as language barriers, discomfort in unfamiliar social settings, and rigid seniority systems, which sometimes created hesitation to initiate interactions. These findings highlight that SMK students' networking in Aceh is shaped by a combination of family support, the cultural value of *silaturahmi*, and the unique social interaction spaces of the local community.

Personal Exploration Efficacy

Personal exploration was reflected in students' confidence in their own potential, willingness to learn, and participation in self-development activities such as private lessons or informal training. They demonstrated optimism and resilience when facing negative comments from their environment, although challenges such as self-doubt, difficulty in managing emotions, and poor time management frequently emerged. A particular concern was the excessive use of time in informal social spaces such as coffee shops, which could distract them from more productive activities. Conversely, family support played a crucial protective role. The Acehnese tradition of *musyawarah* (deliberation) reinforced parental involvement in communication, decision-making, and the provision of both moral and emotional encouragement.

Students' self-reflection was also evident in goal-setting and the alignment of personal values with religious principles.

> Ahsan stated, *"I feel confident because I already know what I am interested in"* (Interview, Ahsan). Fauzan emphasized, *"If we are not confident, then we will not be able to obtain the information we want"* (Interview, Fauzan). Firza recognized his limitations, saying, *"My career plan is only halfway, about 50%, and I am not very confident because of personal barriers"* (Interview, Firza). In an FGD, Ocha stressed the importance of honesty: *"We should answer honestly and show that we are willing to learn and make an effort"* (FGD, Ocha), while Sharia added patience as a key value: *"We must be patient first, ma'am, and not be easily provoked"* (FGD, Sharia).

These findings confirm that SMK students' personal exploration in Aceh is not only related to recognizing self-potential but is also profoundly shaped by religious values, honesty, patience, and family support rooted in local culture. To provide a more structured overview, a summary of thematic indicators and descriptive findings from the interviews is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Thematic Findings from Interviews and FGDs Related to Career Search Efficacy

Theme	Description
Career Information Sources	Various sources were used to enrich students' knowledge about job opportunities, including social media, Google, and newspapers.
Approaches to Seeking Career Information	Career information was sought through commenting on social media posts from peers or seniors, informal discussions at local coffee shops, and utilizing parents as credible sources of information.
Barriers to Accessing Career Information	Challenges included poor internet connectivity, outdated company websites, and the limited use of social media platforms by employers.
Cultural Values in Career Search	Cultural values such as honesty, hospitality, and respectful manners were considered essential in identifying suitable jobs.
Religious Considerations in Career Choice	Students prioritized jobs that comply with Islamic teachings those that are halal, lawful, and believed to bring barakah (blessings).
Interview Strategies	Strategies included maintaining a steady tone of voice, staying calm, and sustaining eye contact to ensure clear and respectful communication.
Interview Preparation	Preparation involved reading relevant materials, watching training videos, practicing with AI tools,

Theme	Description
	discussing with experienced peers, consulting religious teachers, and dressing appropriately.
Interview Process	Students expressed openness, acknowledged knowledge gaps, and responded honestly during interviews, reflecting self-awareness and sincerity.
Interview Behavior	Behaviors reflected Acehnese etiquette, including knocking before entering, greeting with Assalamu'alaikum, and speaking politely in line with local customs.
Barriers in Interview Settings	A lack of preparation and misalignment between interview questions and students' career interests emerged as key challenges.
Networking Process	Students built relationships through mutual discussion, family networks, and warm social interactions such as "coffee chats," rooted in the values of togetherness and silaturahmi.
Networking Media	Communication was facilitated through the local language, casual invitations to social activities, and family-mediated introductions to others.
Barriers to Networking	Challenges included language barriers, unfamiliar environments, and rigid seniority systems that made students hesitant to initiate interactions.
Self-Development	Self-development was reflected in students' confidence, willingness to learn, participation in private courses, and commitment to self-improvement despite social pressures.
Barriers to Self-Exploration	Students often experienced low self-confidence, emotional regulation difficulties, and poor time management particularly due to unproductive time spent in social settings.
Family Support	Effective communication with family provided moral and informational support. Disagreements were resolved through musyawarah (deliberation), and families actively participated in the student's career development.

Discussion

This study reveals that Career Search Efficacy among vocational high school students in Banda Aceh is deeply embedded within a distinctive socio-cultural context. The career exploration process is shaped not only by individual efforts through digital means such as social media, Google, and newspapers but also by informal social interactions, including discussions in coffee shops, guidance from parents, and conversations with senior students. These findings underscore that career exploration is both a collective and contextualized experience. Within Aceh's cultural framework, which places high importance on familial bonds and religious values, students consider factors such as the halal status of a job, its alignment with Islamic law, and whether the job brings spiritual blessings. This expands Solberg et al.,'s (1994) notion of career exploration efficacy, emphasizing the integration of spiritual and cultural values into the job search process. These insights are supported by Yiming et al., (2024), who found that self-efficacy and cultural values significantly shape adolescents' career exploration behaviours across nations. Similarly, Ng et al., (2024) emphasize the importance of incorporating socio-cultural contexts in promoting career adaptability

among youth in Southeast Asia. These findings suggest the need for locally grounded career guidance programs, where school counselors utilize participatory approaches within community-based social spaces as entry points for career exploration.

The second dimension emerging from this study is the efficacy of interviews. Students demonstrated a holistic approach to interview preparation, which included technical training such as reading articles and watching interview videos, as well as spiritual consultation with religious teachers on matters of etiquette and ethics. Students' behaviour during interviews reflected Acehnese norms of politeness, including knocking before entering, initiating greetings with *Assalamu'alaikum*, and maintaining a respectful tone. These practices suggest that job interviews are perceived not merely as formal assessments but also as opportunities to embody personal, cultural, and religious values. This aligns with Savickas' (2013) model of career adaptability, which views readiness for career transitions as requiring flexibility and the integration of personal values. In the Indonesian context, Aminah (2024) affirms that locally adapted career models are vital in preparing students for the labor market. Consequently, school-based interview preparation should be designed to integrate cultural and spiritual norms that are embedded in students' communities.

Another key theme identified is the efficacy of networking. In Aceh, building professional relationships is rooted in social mechanisms such as informal gatherings (*ngopi*), family-mediated networking, and acts of *silaturahmi* (social cohesion). Students develop networks through friends, relatives, and the community in a relaxed yet effective manner. However, barriers such as discomfort in unfamiliar language environments and rigid seniority structures also emerged. These findings affirm the importance of networking efficacy, as conceptualized by Lent et al., (2002) in Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), which emphasizes the critical role of social support and interpersonal networks in career development. Salim (2023) further notes that career decision-making efficacy increases when students are supported by peers and family. Therefore, culturally relevant, and communicative networking skills must be reinforced through career guidance.

Self-exploration also emerged as a significant dimension of Career Search Efficacy. Students engaged in self-development through private tutoring, informal training, and a commitment to self-improvement. Optimism and resilience were evident in their willingness to overcome negative social feedback. However, obstacles such as self-doubt, emotional regulation difficulties, and poor time management, especially time wasted in unproductive social settings, were reported. These findings indicate a need for enhanced self-regulation support. Bandura (1997) states that self-efficacy is shaped through direct experience, social reinforcement, and self-reflection. In line with this, Yiming et al., (2024) assert that strengthening self-efficacy consistently improves career readiness. In Aceh, the family system serves as a primary support structure that promotes self-exploration through *musyawarah* (deliberative discussion) and frequent communication, as described by Kenny and Bledsoe (2005). The implication is that individual counseling in schools should prioritize emotional regulation and time management skills, while involving parents in reflective and goal-setting processes.

Finally, family support emerged as a crucial protective factor in students' career search process. Families served not only as sources of information but also actively participated in career-related decision-making and motivation. The tradition of *musyawarah* in Acehnese families suggests that career choices are collective decisions rooted in religious and communal values. This aligns with Salim (2023), who found that both familial and peer support have a direct influence on career decision-making efficacy. Similarly, Kenny and Bledsoe (2005) show that family support enhances expectations of success and reduces psychological stress during career transitions. Accordingly, integrating families into career guidance services is strongly recommended. This can be achieved through parent forums, *musyawarah*-based career planning workshops, and collaborative initiatives among students, teachers, and parents.

Implications

The findings of this study offer important implications for the development of contextualized and culturally grounded career guidance services. Career Search Efficacy among vocational high school students in Banda Aceh is shown to be influenced not only by individual psychological factors but also by deeply embedded social, religious, and cultural values that shape students' daily lives. Therefore, school-based career guidance should integrate culturally responsive approaches that incorporate local traditions such as *musyawarah* (family deliberation), religious considerations in selecting halal employment, and informal exploratory practices within social spaces such as local coffee shops.

The role of the family as a source of both informational and emotional support is also central to strengthening students' career efficacy. Parental involvement in career guidance programs can enhance the relevance and impact of such services, enabling students to make decisions that are aligned with their values and socio-cultural context. In addition, challenges such as self-doubt, emotional regulation difficulties, and ineffective time management highlight the need for counseling interventions that promote self-regulation skills grounded in religious and cultural values.

From a policy perspective, the study underscores the urgency of developing career guidance curricula that are localized and culturally sensitive. This includes equipping school counselors with the necessary competencies to deliver culturally responsive guidance. As a result, career services can be designed to be more inclusive, adaptive, and meaningful for students in diverse regional settings.

The broader impact of these findings lies in their potential to inform educational policy, curriculum development, and counselor training programs. By embedding local wisdom and spiritual values into career guidance frameworks, stakeholders can ensure that vocational students are better prepared both technically and psychologically to transition into the workforce with a strong sense of cultural identity and purpose.

Limitations and Further Research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the qualitative approach and the limited number of participants drawn from several vocational schools in Banda Aceh constrain the generalizability of the findings to other regions with different cultural or educational contexts. The results are inherently contextual and may not fully represent the diverse experiences of vocational students across Indonesia.

Second, although the study successfully identified four culturally relevant dimensions of Career Search Efficacy, these constructs remain localized and have yet to be validated quantitatively. Furthermore, the reliance on narrative and self-reported experiences may introduce biases, such as social desirability or selective disclosure.

Future research is encouraged to adopt a mixed-methods approach to enhance the validity of findings and enable comparative analysis across regions. There is also a need to develop and validate culturally grounded instruments for measuring Career Search Efficacy, which would support their application in broader psychological and educational assessments. Additionally, longitudinal studies that examine the impact of culturally responsive career guidance interventions on students' career readiness and decision-making processes represent a promising direction for future inquiry.

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that the Career Search Efficacy of vocational high school students in Banda Aceh is shaped by the interaction between personal dimensions and a distinctive local cultural context, including religious values, social structures, and traditional practices such as family

deliberation (*musyawarah*) and informal social relationships. The four key dimensions, career exploration, interview efficacy, networking efficacy, and personal exploration, demonstrate that the career search process is holistic and deeply embedded in community-based values. However, the use of a qualitative approach and a limited participant scope restricts the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, future research is recommended to develop and validate culturally grounded instruments using quantitative methods and to assess the long-term impact of culturally responsive career guidance interventions. The findings of this study are expected to serve as a foundation for developing more contextualized, inclusive, and locally relevant career guidance services for youth in regional settings.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Asriyana served as the primary author, responsible for the research design, data collection and analysis, and manuscript writing. DYP. Sugiharto, Sunawan Sunawan, and Heru Mugiarso acted as academic supervisors, providing conceptual guidance, critical feedback, and scholarly support throughout the research and manuscript development.

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