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Employment Anxiety among Graduating English Majors in China's Private Universities: A Neglected Landscape during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Wang Jian[1,a,*], Zhang Tengyao[2,b]

[1]*School of Foreign Languages and Culture, Geely University of China, Chengdu, China*
[2]*Applied Science and Technology College, Shangqiu University, Kaifeng, China*
[a]*wangjian@bgu.edu.cn,* [b]*1292097582@qq.com*
**Corresponding author*

Abstract: *This study was situated in the COVID-19 pandemic occurring sporadically in China's mainland where prevention and control measures were strictly implemented due to health concerns. The ongoing pandemic has engendered tremendous and negative impacts on people's work and life. In particular, it has given a heavy blow to the national economy, reducing college students' job opportunities. Against such a backdrop, we adopted a mixed research approach to probe into the employment anxiety among graduating English majors from private universities. Specifically, 375 students participated in the pilot study for testing the validity and reliability of the Employment Anxiety Scale for Graduating Students (EASGS). Then, 987 students took part in the main study and filled in the adapted version of EASGS. Ten students participated in the semi-structured interview. Results showed that these graduating students experienced a high level of employment anxiety induced by insufficient employment support, the pandemic situation, lack of competitiveness and confidence in job hunting, the policy for compulsory education, dissatisfaction with their major, and challenges in role shifting. Moreover, female graduates generally suffered from a significantly higher level of employment anxiety (mainly caused by COVID-19 and fierce competition) than male graduates, but no significant difference in the overall anxiety level was found between students from rural and urban areas. This article ends up with a call for familial, institutional, and governmental attention to the psychological well-being of college graduates to guarantee the sustainable development of individual college students, higher education, and the society at large.*

Keywords: *COVID-19 Pandemic, Graduating English Majors, Private Universities, Employment Anxiety, Psychological Well-being*

1. Introduction

Employment is an integral part of human life and one of the most essential elements in the sustainable development of humanity because it not just affords people the means to make a living but gives them a sense of confidence and self-worth[1][2]. Conversely, unemployment is positively associated with mental health challenges[3][4], hindering people's sustained development. The unemployed will often exhibit a lower level of function and go through negative emotions like anxiety, depression, and stress [2][5][7]. Therefore, unemployment is an issue warranting special attention.

In recent years, graduates' psychological state has piqued substantial research interest in China due to the severity of the unemployment issue in higher education[8][9][10][11]. Especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, graduating college students have been assuming greater pressure (from graduation, work, and life changes) than other populations[12][13]. They comprise a special social group who are bound to undergo dramatic changes when leaving the "ivory tower" and trying hard to integrate themselves into the highly competitive workplace. Although they have acquired professional knowledge and interview techniques, most graduating students may still feel anxious and pressured when hunting for a job. At the macro level, students' employment pressure is caused by multiple factors. The most observable one is the growing number of the graduating cohort year on year. In 2019, prior to the onset of COVID-19, the Ministry of Education of China reported that approximately 8 million graduating university students were faced with employment problems[14]. This figure breached ten million in 2021[1]. This delicate situation is

[1]http://www.moe.gov.cn/fbh/live/2021/53931/mtbd/202112/t20211229_591046.html

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further confounded by the pandemic, which has lasted for almost three years and has forced governments at all levels to implement lockdown and quarantine policies. Evidence has shown that the pandemic has engendered adverse repercussions for people's daily life and social development, such as travel bans, corporate shutdowns, and even economic recession. Some scholars pointed to the dual impact of economic slowdown on the labor market: for one thing, economic downturn might lead to the shrinking demand for labor (i.e., the increasing unemployment rate); for another, the sluggish economy might often result in salary cuts, which would, in turn, discourage labor participation and aggravate the unemployment problem[15].

To mitigate the negative consequences of the pandemic and boost the economic development of the country, the Chinese government has stuck to the normalization of pandemic prevention and control and has put forward various favorable policies and incentives, contributing to the gradual economic recovery. However, at the time when we conducted the research, the sporadic spread of the novel coronavirus still impacted different social spheres. Students' employment was no exception. Overall, university graduates had access to fewer career options and less frequent face-to-face recruitment activities[16]. Instead, they had to be faced with cancellation and postponement of job fairs, fierce competition in the labor market[17], and uncertainties in job prospects[18]. In this case, graduating students are prone to job anxiety, whose pernicious effect on the sustainability of higher education should not be overlooked.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Employment Anxiety

Employment anxiety (abbreviated as EA hereafter) refers to the nervous, restless, intense, and lasting negative emotion experienced by individuals (especially graduating college students) in the face of career choices[19]. This emotional state is likely to evoke individuals' corresponding physiological and behavioral changes, such as sleep disorder, lack of concentration, etc. Cai and Li defines college graduates' EA as the complex emotional response to their perceived inability to control their destiny, to the failure to address their psychological problems induced by lack of information on how to tackle competition in the labor market, and to all the conflicts or setbacks encountered while hunting for a job[20]. It is also believed that EA varies from person to person and is caused by employment situations and college students' failure to meet employment expectations[21]. EA is regarded as one of the most critical problems for university students[22]. To a certain extent, EA serves as a motivating factor to mobilize graduating students to enthusiastically hone their skills (e.g., interview techniques) and finally helps them to land coveted jobs. However, excessive anxiety will backfire in that it undermines graduates' mental health and even leads to their withdrawal from, avoidance of, and fear of choosing a career. Behavioral and psychological symptoms such as insomnia and mental depression will also ensue. Therefore, EA has a deleterious effect on one's comprehensive and sustainable development[14][23][24].

2.2. Research on Graduating Students' EA

To have a clear picture of the research landscape in graduating college students' EA, we first conducted a coarse retrieval in Web of Science Core Collection with graduating college or university students, employment or job anxiety, and COVID-19 as the keywords. Then, we retrieved sources in Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) with "dà xué bì yè shēng" (graduating college students), "jiù yè jiāo lǜ" (EA), and "xīn guàn yì qíng" (COVID-19 pandemic) as the keywords. The retrieval results reveal that college graduates' EA in times of COVID-19 has not been well-documented. To the best of our knowledge, only a handful of researchers have conducted exclusive exploration into this field[25][26][27]. Most studies have probed into the factors impacting college graduates' EA and the interrelationships between EA and other internal or external factors. For example, Alrawadieh drew on the questionnaire data collected from 130 tour-guiding students in Turkey to examine the links between employability anxiety and psychological distress, perceived social support, and academic major satisfaction. Results indicated that graduates' EA had a positively significant correlation with psychological distress but a negatively significant one with academic major satisfaction. It also found that when students were anxious about their vocational future, their perceived social support would not alleviate their psychological distress and academic major satisfaction[25]. Chen et al. revealed that 318 medical graduates in Wuhan city experienced a high level of EA which exhibited a negative correlation with social support and active coping strategies and a positive correlation with passive coping strategies[27]. Li found that male and female graduates differed significantly in EA. Besides, graduates' negative coping styles significantly increased EA, which could be alleviated by social support with the

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mediating effect of self-efficacy[28]. Cao pointed to the significant relationship between graduates' communicative competence and EA[29]. Lu analyzed graduates' EA at the personal, familial, institutional, corporate, and social levels and demonstrated the ubiquity of EA among the participating students. It further corroborated students' necessity to refine their skills in making resumes, adapting themselves to online interviews, mitigating their psychological pressure, and maintaining physical and mental health[30]. Feng found that MTI (Master of Translation and Interpreting) graduates' career anxiety was mainly derived from three aspects: low self-efficacy, career development concerns, and competition pressure[31].

2.3. The Rationale of the Present Study

While inquiring into the EA among college graduates, the above studies also demonstrated immense diversity in the research foci, subjects, and instruments. These empirical efforts are valuable in illustrating the status quo of employment issues in higher education. However, we find that graduates' EA in times of COVID-19 has received scant attention. As teachers, we feel graduating students are experiencing great pressures related to job hunting. Therefore, this area needs further in-depth research, which is of utmost practical significance and will shed light on sustainable education. Besides, only a small number of studies in the extant literature have targeted one specific population (i.e., students specializing in one major), and this is the research lacuna we attempt to address.

The present study took English majors from private universities in China's mainland as the research subjects, and the rationale of this is threefold. First, English majors' EA has not been exclusively probed. One study investigated the EA among MTI graduates in public universities, but this study did not delve into the impact of the pandemic on employment[31]. Second, most English majors choose to work in such sectors as cross-border e-commerce, foreign trade, and English language training, which have been hit hardest by the pandemic. This may incur tremendous psychological stress among English majors. Third, we selected private universities as the research setting. In China's mainland, private universities generally receive funds from students' tuition fees[32][33]. To obtain more revenues, they have to improve their reputation in various respects[34], among which is high-quality employment. However, the employment stress of graduating students in these institutions remains a neglected landscape. Considering these factors, this article sets out to answer the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1: Do graduating English majors in private universities experience EA? Is their anxiety at a low, moderate, or high level?

RQ2: Are English graduates' gender and family background (residence) associated with their EA?

RQ3: What are the antecedents of graduates' EA in times of COVID-19?

Beyond answering the above research questions, we also endeavor to propose suggestions for mitigating graduating students' anxiety.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants and Sampling

The study was conducted between September and November 2022 and was divided into two parts: a pilot study for testing the validity and reliability of the questionnaire and the main study. For the pilot study, we adopted convenience sampling to collect data. Three hundred and seventy-five graduating English majors from the universities where both authors worked filled in the paper-and-pencil questionnaires. For the main study, data were collected through snowball sampling, a common and non-probability approach to recruiting research subjects. We made an online survey via *wenjuanxi*, an online platform (*www.wjx.cn*) with a link and a QR code generated automatically. Next, we posted the link and QR code on social media (e.g., Tencent QQ, WeChat, or Sina Weibo) or sent them directly to our friends and acquaintances teaching English majors in private universities. Then, these teachers forwarded the link and QR code to their students or colleagues. Altogether, the sample included 987 respondents from 10 provinces or municipalities, and their ages ranged from 20 to 24 years old (M=21.212, SD=1.2016). We carefully checked the results of the questionnaire survey and found 82 responses were invalid with missing data. We finally got 905 valid responses (91.69%, with 265 males and 640 males). The biological information of the respondents is listed in Table 1.

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Table 1: Demographic information of respondents (N=987)

Dimension	Variable	Number	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	280	28.37
	Female	645	65.35
	Preferred not to say	62	6.28
Location of university	Sichuan	243	24.62
	Guizhou	125	12.66
	Henan	118	11.96
	Guangdong	105	10.64
	Chongqing	86	8.71
	Shaanxi	82	8.31
	Zhejiang	74	7.50
	Jiangxi	45	4.56
	Yunnan	43	4.36
	Hainan	36	3.65
	Preferred not to say	30	3.03
Residence	Urban	539	54.61
	Rural	392	39.72
	Preferred not to say	56	5.67

3.2. Instruments

3.2.1. Employment Anxiety Scale for Graduating Students (EASGS)

The questionnaire was composed of three parts. The first part required participants to fill in a consent form for ethical consideration. The second part was about their demographic information, including their gender, family background (i.e., residence), and university location. The last part was a quantitative questionnaire about graduating students' EA.

As mentioned earlier, before the main study, we conducted a pilot study to confirm the validity and reliability of the scale—Employment Anxiety Scale for Graduating Students (EASGS). Participants filled in the questionnaire before leaving their schools for internship. All the participants were informed of the purpose of the study, and they could choose not to take part. EASGS is based on the Vocational Selection Anxiety Scale[19], which consists of four sub-scales: pressure from employment competition (7 items), lack of employment support (8 items), lack of self-confidence (6 items), and worry about career prospects (5 items). This scale has been well validated with eligible psychometric quality, but it does not consider the impact of COVID-19 on graduates' EA. In this case, we added one factor (with 5 items)—COVID-19-related anxiety (CA)—to the scale. Therefore, the questionnaire contained 31 items in total. It was arranged on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 point meaning "strongly agree" to 5 points denoting "strongly disagree". Lower scores indicate higher anxiety. We then assessed its psychometric properties, including its construct validity, convergent validity, discriminant validity, and reliability.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to confirm the construct validity of EASGS. The CFA was run via AMOS 26.0 with six indices employed to evaluate the model fit, including chi-square (χ^2), degree of freedom (*df*), the Tucker Lewis Index (TLI), the comparative fit index (CFI), the standardized root mean square residual (RMSR), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). The preliminary examination revealed that the 31-item scale did not satisfy the benchmarks for a good model fit[35] (see Table 2). In this situation, we modified the scale by removing the items with low factor loadings (lower than 0.5). This resulted in removing 9 items (items 1, 6, 8, 9, 12, 18, 21, 27, and 30) from the 31-item pool, and we finally obtained a 22-item scale. Considering the high correlations between the three latent variables: employment competition, worry about career prospects, and lack of self-confidence, we then combined the three into one factor—competition-induced stress. As a result, the remaining 22 observable variables were grouped into three factors: insufficient employment support (ES), competition-induced stress (CS), and COVID-19-related anxiety (CA). The CFA findings revealed that the 22-item scale was satisfactory (see Table 2).

We also conducted normality tests with SPSS 23.0 to see whether the scores of all items were normally distributed. The acceptable limits were within the range of -2 to +2[36]. Results showed that the Skewness and Kurtosis of all the 22 observed variables ranged from -.026 to 1.470 (*SD*=.126) and from -1.431 to 1.974 (*SD*=.251), respectively, indicating that all the scores were normally distributed.

In addition to the construct validity of the whole scale, the convergent validity of the three subscales

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was also examined. As shown in Table 3, they obtained good model fits.

We compared the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and the determination coefficients (r^2) to evaluate the discriminant validity between two subscales. Results in Table 4 indicated that the subscales showed high discriminant validity as the AVEs for each subscale were higher than the determination coefficients.

We conducted two types of reliability tests. First, we analyzed the internal consistency of the overall scale and its subscales. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for the whole scale was .894, .914 for ES, .934 for CS, and .888 for CA, all meeting the threshold (i.e., higher than 0.7). Two weeks later, we evaluated the test-retest reliability by administering the questionnaire to the same cohort of participants. The test-retest reliability results of the overall scale and subscales were .897, .912, .926, and .897, respectively, indicating high stability of EASGS. From the statistical analyses, we can see that the 22-item EASGS is an ideal scale and can be applied to large-scale investigation.

Table 2: Results of confirmatory factor analysis (N=375)

	χ^2	*df*	CFI	TLI	SRMR	RMSEA [90% C.I.]
Benchmark			>.90	>.90	<.08	<.08
31-item	3081.126***	424	.792	.772	.569	.092 [.091, .093]
22-item	990.135***	206	.957	.940	.064	.075 [.073, .076]

Note: ***means that the significance level is lower than 0.0001; C.I. refers to the confidence interval.

Table 3: Convergent validity and model fit indicators of each subscale (N=375)

Factor	Item	Convergent Validity					Model Fit Indicators				
		λ	*p*	COM	AVE	CR	χ^2/df	*P*	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR
Factor 1	ES1	.699	.000	.489	.577	.915	124.641/28	.733	.943	.023	.017
	ES2	.798	.000	.637							
	ES3	.688	.000	.473							
	ES4	.870	.000	.757							
	ES5	.812	.000	.659							
	ES6	.775	.000	.601							
	ES7	.746	.000	.557							
	ES8	.664	.000	.441							
Factor 2	CA1	.883	.000	.780	.745	.936	48.023/10	.473	.937	.057	.025
	CA2	.847	.000	.717							
	CA3	.855	.000	.731							
	CA4	.812	.000	.659							
	CA5	.914	.000	.835							
Factor 3	CS1	.771	.000	.594	.534	.911	158.073/36	.291	.921	.066	.013
	CS2	.633	.000	.401							
	CS3	.751	.000	.564							
	CS4	.743	.000	.552							
	CS5	.819	.000	.671							
	CS6	.646	.000	.417							
	CS7	.687	.000	.472							
	CS8	.707	.000	.500							
	CS9	.795	.000	.632							

Note: COM=Communalities; CR=Composite Reliability

Table 4: Results of discriminant validity of each subscale (N=375)

Subscale	r^2			AVE
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	
Factor 1	—			0.577
Factor 2	0.503***	—		0.745
Factor 3	0.452***	0.516***	—	0.534

3.2.2. Semi-structured Interview

A semi-structured interview was conducted to triangulate the quantitative results obtained from the

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EASGS. We also attempt to probe into other potential factors related to graduating students' EA beyond the three latent variables (i.e., ES, CA, and CS). The interview revolved around two questions: (1) Do you perceive any EA? (2) If any, what might contribute to your anxiety? The interview was conducted in Mandarin Chinese.

We invited students who had filled in the EASGS earlier to participate in the interview via Tencent Meeting, an application commonly used in China's mainland during the pandemic. Finally, ten were willing to take part, and their information is listed in Table 5 and their names were all pseudonyms.

Table 5: Demographic information of respondents and duration of the interview

No.	Name	Gender	Age	Residence	Location of University	Duration of Time
1	Gao	Male	21	Urban	Sichuan	29'34"
2	Ke	Female	22	Urban	Henan	32'16"
3	Liu	Female	21	Rural	Hainan	29'17"
4	Lv	Male	23	Urban	Guangdong	28'56"
5	Meng	Female	22	Rural	Guizhou	29'14"
6	Niu	Female	21	Rural	Zhejiang	30'02"
7	Wang	Male	22	Urban	Shaanxi	29'19"
8	Huang	Male	23	Urban	Chongqing	30'32"
9	Kang	Female	22	Rural	Jiangxi	27'33"
10	Zhu	Female	22	Rural	Yunnan	28'13"

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis for the Main Study

For the main study, quantitative data were collected via administering the EASGS. All the data were downloaded from *wenjuanxin* and stored in the excel spreadsheet. We checked all the data carefully and removed all the outliers. Then, we used SPSS 23.0 to run descriptive statistical analysis and independent-samples *t*-test. Significance level was set at $p<0.05$. Qualitative data was gleaned by analyzing the emerging themes in the interview. Before the interview, we asked for the participants' permission to record the interview. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes (see Table 5). After the interview, the ten recordings were transcribed into scripts verbatim. Both researchers analyzed the contents and extracted the themes. Any disagreement was resolved through negotiation, with the inter-coder agreement being 92.86%.

4. Findings

4.1. Overall Level of English Graduates' EA

Table 6 shows the descriptive results and the results of normality tests. The Skewness and Kurtosis statistics were within the range of -2 to +2, indicating that all the variables were normally distributed and that parametric analyses should be conducted in subsequent statistical procedures[36].

Table 6: Descriptive results of the overall level of anxiety (N=905)

Variable	Possible range	Observed range	*Mean* (factor)	*SD*	*Mean (item)*	Skewness (*SE*)	Kurtosis (*SE*)
Factor 1	8-40	8-40	17.023	6.6336	2.128	0.800 (0.081)	0.697 (0.162)
Factor 2	5-25	5-15	7.561	2.6468	1.512	0.326 (0.081)	-1.184 (0.162)
Factor 3	9-45	9-44	21.116	7.4201	2.346	0.201 (0.081)	-0.294 (0.162)
Overall	22-110	22 -89	45.701	13.5264	2.077	0.329 (0.081)	0.312 (0.162)

Note: SD=standard deviation; SE=standard error

The mean scores of the responses suggest that the participants perceived themselves as having a high overall level of EA (max.=89, min.=22, *M*=45.701, *SD*=13.5264). The EASGS contains 22 items in total, with the average score of each item being 2.077 (45.701/22). The majority of participants selected the "strongly agree" (1 point) and "agree" (2 points) options, meaning they did encounter the situations presented in the items. In terms of the subscales, the participants reported a high level of anxiety induced by insufficient employment support (max.=40, min.=8, *M*=17.023, *SD*=6.6336, average score for each item=2.128), COVID-19 (max.=15, min.=5, *M*=7.561, *SD*=2.6468, average score for each item=1.512), and fierce competition on the labor market (max.=44, min.=9, *M*=21.116, *SD*=7.4201, average score for each item=2.346). Of special note is that COVID-19 is a significant source of students' anxiety.

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4.2. Effects of Gender and Residence on EA

4.2.1. Impact of Gender on EA

Statistics in Table 7 show that the average scores of the overall scale, subscales, and each item were relatively low, suggesting that males and females were highly pressured in the face of job hunting. Generally speaking, females (*M*=45.306, *SD*=13.2218) experienced a higher level of anxiety than males (*M*=47.306, *SD*=14.1320). Concerning the subscales, the average scores of females were lower than those of males, indicating that females suffered more stress from lack of support, the pandemic, and competition.

Table 7: Descriptive results of both genders' anxiety levels

	Gender	Possible range	Observed range	*Mean* (total)	*SD*	Mean (item)	Skewness (*SE*)	Kurtosis (*SE*)
Factor 1	Male	8-40	8-40	17.468	6.7745	2.184	0.773 (0.150)	0.583 (0.298)
	Female	8-40	8-40	16.893	6.5710	2.112	0.812 (0.097)	0.761 (0.193)
Factor 2	Male	5-25	5-15	7.943	2.6502	1.589	0.138 (0.150)	-1.139 (0.298)
	Female	5-25	5-15	7.403	2.6312	1.481	0.409 (0.097)	-1.168 (0.193)
Factor 3	Male	9-45	9-44	21.894	7.4912	2.433	0.137 (0.150)	-0.322 (0.298)
	Female	9-45	9-44	20.794	7.3724	2.310	0.227 (0.097)	-0.265 (0.193)
Overall	Male	22-110	22-89	47.306	14.1320	2.150	0.320 (0.150)	0.143 (0.298)
	Female	22-110	22-89	45.306	13.2218	2.059	0.317 (0.097)	0.385 (0.193)

Note: N for males=265; N for females=640.

The results of independent-samples *t*-tests (see Table 8) reveal that females' overall level of EA was significantly higher than that of males (*MD*=2.2697, *SD*=0.9857, *p*=0.022). In terms of the three factors, there is a significant gender difference in factor 2 (*MD*=0.5403, *SD*=0.1926, *p*=0.005) and factor 3 (*MD*=1.1006, *SD*=0.5411, *p*=0.042), which means that compared to males, females perceived COVID-19 as more annoying. Factor 1 did not show gender difference (*p*>0.05). From these results, we can see COVID-19 and employment competition are two contributing factors to gender difference.

Table 8: Results of independent-samples t-tests for gender difference

	t	*df*	*p*	*MD* (M-F)	*SD*	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Limit	*Upper Limit*
Factor 1	1.298	903	0.195	0.6289	0.4844	-0.3218	1.5795
Factor 2	2.805	903	0.005	0.5403	0.1926	0.1623	0.9183
Factor 3	2.034	903	0.042	1.1006	0.5411	0.0386	2.1625
Overall	2.303	903	0.022	2.2697	0.9857	0.3351	4.2043

Note: df=degree of freedom; MD=mean difference; M=male (N=265); F=female (N=640)

4.2.2. Impact of Residence on EA

Data in Table 9 suggest that the average scores of the overall scale, subscales, and each item were comparatively low, implying that participants from rural and urban areas felt high-level employment stress. The participants from rural areas (*M*=45.229, *SD*=13.0241) experienced a higher level of anxiety than those from urban areas (*M*=46.042, *SD*=13.8808). As for the subscales, participants from rural areas obtained lower average scores in factors 1 and 3 than those from urban areas, indicating that they were more stressed due to insufficient support and intense competition. However, COVID-19 seemed to engender less stress for them than for graduates from urban areas.

Table 9: Descriptive results of anxiety in students from rural and urban areas

	Residence	Possible range	Observed range	*M (total)*	*SD*	*M (item)*	Skewness (*SE*)	Kurtosis (*SE*)
Factor 1	Rural	8-40	8-40	16.879	6.5541	2.110	0.828(0.125)	0.794 (0.250)
	Urban	8-40	8-39	17.128	6.6949	2.141	0.782 (0.107)	0.647 (0.213)
Factor 2	Rural	5-25	5-15	7.647	2.6426	1.529	0.286(0.125)	-1.171 (0.250)
	Urban	5-25	5-15	7.499	2.6505	1.500	0.358(0.107)	-1.190 (0.213)
Factor 3	Rural	9-45	9-39	20.703	6.9827	2.300	0.299 (0.125)	-0.179 (0.250)
	Urban	9-45	9-44	21.415	7.7141	2.379	0.128 (0.107)	-0.367 (0.213)
Overall	Rural	22-110	22-89	45.229	13.0241	2.056	0.443 (0.125)	0.521 (0.250)
	Urban	22-110	22-87	46.042	13.8808	2.093	0.253 (0.107)	0.200 (0.213)

Note: N for urban students=525; N for rural students=380.

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Independent *t*-tests (see Table 10) show that no significant difference was found in the overall level of anxiety (*MD*=-0.8130, *SD*=0.9111, *p*=0.372), insufficient employment support (*MD*=-0.2487, *SD*=0.4470, *p*=0.578), COVID-19-related anxiety (*MD*=0.1483, *SD*=0.1783, *p*=0.406), and competition-induced stress (*MD*=-0.7126, *SD*=0.4916, *p*=0.148), although rural graduates experienced more stress than urban graduates.

Table 10: Results of independent-samples t-tests for residence difference

	t	*df*	*p*	MD (R-U)	*SD*	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Limit	*Upper Limit*
Factor 1	-0.558	903	0.578	-0.2487	0.4470	-1.1259	0.6285
Factor 2	0.832	903	0.406	0.1483	0.1783	-0.2016	0.4982
Factor 3	-1.450	859.330	0.148	-0.7126	0.4916	-1.6775	0.2522
Overall	-0.892	903	0.372	-0.8130	0.9111	-2.6011	0.9752

4.3. Antecedents of EA

Through carefully analyzing the interview transcripts, we obtained 56 extracts. In addition to the three latent variables in the EASGS, another three significant themes emerged. Therefore, we finally extracted six antecedents of EA from the interview.

4.3.1. Insufficient Employment Support

Employment support includes constructive advice and professional guidance from family members and higher-education institutions. All the participants conveyed that they had no clear understanding of the suitable career selection, which could be exemplified in the following excerpts (translation from Mandarin Chinese).

Gao: *I formed only a vague idea about my future career because both* ***my parents and teachers didn't give me valuable suggestions,*** *although they were constantly urging me to hunt for a job. I didn't even know what I should do in the future. Anyway, I felt quite at a loss.* (interview extract #1)

Meng: *I did not feel so stressed in my life until graduation was drawing near. I was confused about my future job* ***without parental and institutional assistance****. My parents were traditional Chinese peasants and* ***had no vision for my future development****. Most of my teachers taught us English knowledge but* ***not how to secure a job****.* (interview extract #34)

Niu: *My university offered courses to train our skills in finding jobs. However, you know, these courses were often optional with an oversized enrollment. ...emm,* ***customized guidance was impossible****.* (interview extract #39)

The above excerpts revealed that insufficient familial and institutional support or assistance was commonplace for graduating English majors regardless of gender and residence. Another participant (Liu) even stated that she "***lacked the most basic skills in making a delicate CV and in preparing for the face-to-face or virtual interviews***" (interview extract #18). These statements can also corroborate the quantitative results obtained from the questionnaire survey.

4.3.2. COVID-19 Related Anxiety

In recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted college students' lives. To avoid the transmission of the virus and guarantee students' and staff's physical well-being, most higher education institutions often take more rigorous prevention and control measures. This has brought various inconveniences to college students' daily life and job interviews. Moreover, the economic downturn has reduced job opportunities. All this has caused the graduating students to experience acute stress, which can be illustrated by the following statements made by some participants.

Ke: ***The pandemic was way too frustrating****. You know, it is* ***tough for me to get an opportunity*** *for the internship, let alone land a coveted job. I'm* ***getting more hopeless and stressed out*** *these days.* (interview extract #8)

Lv: *I feel* ***mentally and physically exhausted due to the pandemic****, which is a nightmare for us graduating students.* ***Repeated shutdowns and quarantines have been worrying me****...*(interview extract #27)

Niu: *You know,* ***the pandemic has resulted in a sagging economy****, which has an* ***immediate impact on graduates' employment****. I planned to be engaged in cross-border e-commerce, but this sector has*

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been heavily squeezed. So, now I'm ***kind of upset and uneasy****.* (interview extract #37)

4.3.3. Competition-induced Stress

All the interviewees articulated their concerns over the highly competitive job markets. Their distress mainly came from their lack of confidence in rivaling other job hunters, worry about failure to live up to the expectations of their parents, unwillingness to be assessed by the interviewers, and others. Their fear of competition was further intensified by the surging number of college graduates and the deteriorating economic situation, as they recounted in the semi-structured interview.

Liu: ***Competition*** *with thousands of graduates* ***is frightening****... I feel I'm the one who will* ***lose in the competition game****...* (interview extract #22)

Wang: ***My parents have been always expecting me*** *to find a vacancy in the world's top 500 enterprises. But,* ***it's a challenge for an English major who lacks the needed expertise****. The thought of this* ***upsets me*** *a lot.* (interview extract #46)

4.3.4. Negative Perception of the English Major

Some students (*N*=6) were stressed out due to dissatisfaction with their major. They believed that students majoring in English had fewer advantages than students in other disciplines who were armed with more professional knowledge needed by the labor market. During the undergraduate years, English majors mainly received language drills, which were not enough for after-graduation working lives. Although some practical courses were also offered, like *Business English*, *International Trade*, *Second Language Teaching*, most were often unable to prepare the students for their future careers.

Huang: *I now think it's a* ***lousy choice to major in English****.* ***Language*** *is just a communicative tool,* ***not something that can provide you with practical technical knowledge****.* (interview extract #49)

Kang: ***As an English major****, I think* ***the options for my career are limited****. According to my understanding, many English graduates are occupied in other fields where* ***they never use English as the working language****.* (interview extract #52)

4.3.5. Anxiety Induced by the "Double Reduction" Policy

An interesting theme (mentioned by five students) emerged from the interview: the "double reduction" policy, which dates back to the year 2018 when China's Ministry of Education and other departments jointly released the "Notice on Effectively Reducing the Extracurricular Burden of Primary and Secondary School Students and Implementing Special Governance of Off-school Training Institutions"[2] and the "Measures to Reduce the Burden on Primary and Secondary School Students"[3]. And in July 2021, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and General Office of the State Council issued the "Suggestions on Easing the Burden of Excessive Homework and Off-campus Tutoring for Students Undergoing Compulsory Education" [4], which prevented local authorities from approving the establishment of any new tutoring institutions for academic course training.

This policy for compulsory education has dual implications. For one thing, it is intended to reduce students' pressure from homework so that they can get an overall development and receive higher-quality education. For another, by strictly regulating the off-school academic training industry, families' expenditure on education will also be reduced so that parents will shoulder less financial burden. However, due to this policy, the once flourishing training industry has taken a heavy hit and lost its luster, which undoubtedly has a far-reaching impact on English graduates' employment. Before the release of the "double-reduction" policy, a large number of English graduates worked as teachers in off-school training institutions. But now, with so many institutions having gone broke, the demand for English tutors has been decreasing drastically. In the face of such a situation, it is perfectly reasonable for graduating students to become distressed.

Zhu: *Years ago, I chose to be enrolled in the English department because my sister told me that I could get high pay by teaching kids English in a training center. But now* ***the "double reduction" policy "ruined" my dream****...* (interview extract #55)

Huang: *...* ***The "double reduction" policy is a double-edged sword****. On the one hand, it does reduce the burden on children and parents. But on the other hand, it also* ***hinders our employment****,* ***which is***

[2]http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A06/s3321/201802/t20180226_327752.html
[3]http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A06/s3321/201812/t20181229_365360.html
[4]http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2021-07/24/content_5627132.htm

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upsetting. (interview extract #50)

4.3.6. Insufficient Preparation for Role Transition

All the interviewees expressed their insufficient preparation for changing their roles from college students to employees in a company. They felt uncertainties about what would transpire in the workplace, such as the corporate culture, the politics in the working place, the workload they have to withstand, and the interpersonal relationships. Instead of leaving the "ivory tower", they would rather "postpone graduation" (Lv, extract #26).

Niu: *I **don't fancy leaving my university**. Overall, I am **carefree on campus**, even though I often complain about my school. In the workplace, **the boss will usually require you to work overtime**. **That's not what I want**, anyway.* (interview extract #37)

Kang: *I often watch TV series whose plots are set in the workplace. I know **it is tough to survive in this competitive world**. Compared to campus life, **life in the workplace is inconceivably harsh**.* (interview extract #53)

5. Discussion

Results show that graduating English majors suffered from crippling stress, which can be indicated by the low average scores of the overall scale and each subscale (from 1.507 to 2.345, far lower than 3 points). Their anxiety was fueled by multifaceted factors, including insufficient social support, the pandemic situation, lack of competitiveness and confidence in job hunting, the policy for compulsory education, dissatisfaction with their major, and challenges in role shifting.

Social support is related to the material and spiritual capital people perceive in social relations. Extensive social support provides positive emotional experiences and benefits people's mental health[37]. Research also implies that college students who have gotten employment guidance will have a more precise plan for their future careers and a more explicit employment goal when choosing a job[38]. However, the participants in our study stated that their parents, teachers, and schools delivered little support to them, whether it involved employment guidance or relevant suggestions. Moreover, both males and females perceived a lack of social support without significant difference ($p>0.05$), but participants from rural areas were more anxious than those from urban areas ($p<0.05$). The results of the present study are not in line with Li's (2021) observation that graduates perceived a high level of social support (from families and universities)[28]. As Li noted, when interacting with others (e.g., family members, teachers, school administrators, etc.), the graduates would try every means to seek social resources through which they adopted more coping strategies to address the employment problems. It also found that females perceived more social support due to their emotional explicitness[28]. The discrepancies between the results obtained from both studies might be attributed to the divergences in the sample selection. Participants in this study were English majors from private higher institutions, while participants in Li's study were from mixed majors in public universities. However, more studies are needed to confirm the effect of different samplings on research results.

We also find that English graduates' EA partially came out of the intense competition in the labor market and students' lack of confidence in finding an ideal job. This can also be inferred from the low average scores for each item (lower than 3 points) and their accounts in the interview. Fierce competition among students is closely connected to education policies. To ensure the rights of every citizen to receive more education, the Chinese government allowed the development of privately-funded education, which hastened the "massification" of higher education[39] and, in turn, led to increased challenges and competition for graduates' employment[40][41]. In China's mainland, if high school students fail to get high grades in Gaokao (College Entrance Examination), they cannot be admitted to public universities and have no choice but to enroll in private ones. Academically, these students are typically inferior to those enrolled in public universities, where students are often exposed to more opportunities to develop their full potentials. Upon graduation after four years, the gap in knowledge and skills between the two groups of students will be further widened, which places students graduating from private schools at a disadvantage when competing for a job vacancy with those from public schools. This can also explain why many students expressed their lack of confidence when plunging into the competitive job market. Some of them were afraid of meeting the requirements of their employers. A perception of their incompetence, lack of competitive advantages and failure to meet parental expectations discouraged them a lot. We further find that when competing with other job applicants, females were more stressed out than males. Still, the residence of these participants did not contribute to a significant difference in anxiety

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level. This is partially in line with Li's results[28] but differs from Zheng et al.' findings[26]. Li suggested that male graduates had a higher level of self-efficacy than female graduates, so they tended to cope with competition using more active strategies[28]. However, Zheng et al. indicated that males had higher expectations for employment due to the traditional Chinese image of men as the breadwinners of the family[26]. Again, the mixed findings might be produced by the different samplings.

COVID-19 is another contributor to graduating students' EA due to its negative impact on the economy (e.g., corporate shutdown, bankruptcy, downsizing) and multiple inconveniences brought to job hunting. This echoes Zheng et al.'s research finding that more than 70% of the respondents believed that the pandemic was a source of the alarming employment situation. Since the pandemic outbreak, regular job interviews have often been blocked by travel bans and quarantine policies[26]. Moreover, the number of students planning to further their studies overseas has shrunk, intensifying the domestic competition in the labor market[26]. Therefore, graduating students' distress level in finding the desired job has increased, and their psychological burden has reduced their confidence in securing a job[42].

The results obtained from the semi-interview not only confirmed the findings of the questionnaire survey but also provided some new insights. First, most interviewees held a negative stance on English as a major. As they claimed, language was only a communicative tool and should not be regarded as a major because they did not acquire any practical professional knowledge. They were even skeptical about having chosen English as their major. As far as we know, English departments in most private universities have integrated courses like *Business English*, *International Trade*, and *Cross-border E-commerce* into the talent development framework for English majors. However, because students have little access to hands-on experiences and these courses are often undertaken by English teachers rather than teachers specializing in these fields, the students will not benefit much from these courses. Second, we find the "double reduction" policy boosted English graduates' EA because this policy had put tremendous constraints on the English training industry and thus reduced the job opportunities for English majors. This is partially in line with Wang et al.'s observation that confidence and concerns coexisted under the influence of this education policy. It found that most students still held a positive attitude towards English as a major and would choose to get employed in sectors related to the English language[43]. Finally, some interviewees voiced concerns over the role transformation from a "carefree" student to a novice in the workplace. In grappling with the role changes, students new to the complicated miniature "society" will often feel uncertainties and unpredictability and inevitably perceive the conflict between the expectations before graduation and the reality facing them[44]. How to smoothly shift their roles plays a decisive role in reducing their EA and achieving success in their future career.

This study has shed some light on graduating college students' mental status in the face of employment during the pandemic. However, it had several limitations. First, as a cross-sectional study, it did not consider the dynamic nature of graduates' psychological activities. Second, as mentioned earlier, we did not consider the impact of socioeconomic factors on graduates' anxiety level, such as parents' educational background, family income level, institutional policy, etc. Third, we only targeted graduating English majors. Whether the first-year students, sophomores, and juniors have similar anxiety and whether their perceived anxiety will influence their subsequent learning behaviors remain to be explored down to the last detail. Future studies can factor into these aspects.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, the questionnaire survey and interview in this study confirmed that English graduates in private higher education institutions have suffered from high-level EA. The findings of this study contribute to our understanding of English graduates' mental status during the pandemic. If not appropriately handled, this aversive emotional experience might continue to have a deleterious effect not only on graduates' mental health but also on the sustainable development of the whole higher education sector in China. Unfortunately, it seems that this research territory has not drawn due attention. We believe that this issue should not be neglected. Besides scholarly attention to graduating students' EA, familial and institutional guidance and effective psychological interventions are necessary and essential.

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