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The relationship between family support and stress levels in career decision-making among students

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ABSTRACT

Late adolescence is a developmental phase in which Grade XII high school students are required to make career decisions that can cause stress. Family support was considered an important factor in helping students face this pressure. However, evidence on family support and career decision-making stress among Grade XII students remains limited. This study aimed to determine the relationship between family support and stress levels in career decision-making among Grade XII students at SMAN 1 Sukoharjo. A quantitative correlational study with a cross-sectional design was conducted. The sample consisted of 81 students selected by proportional random sampling (Slovin formula with a 10% margin of error; adequacy checked by power approximation). Data were collected using modified family support (Perceived Social Support-Family, 20 items) and stress (Perceived Stress Scale, 10 items) questionnaires (Cronbach's alpha 0.934 and 0.871). Data were analyzed using the Spearman Rank test ($\alpha = 0.05$). Family support was mostly in the good category (75.3%), and stress was mostly in the moderate category (85.2%). There was a weak, significant negative correlation between family support and stress in career decision-making ($\rho = -0.328$; 95% CI -0.51 to -0.11; $p = 0.003$). Higher family support tended to be accompanied by lower stress. Because of the correlational design, this finding does not indicate a causal relationship. Career guidance involving families merits further development, and future studies should use validated instruments, more diverse samples, and longitudinal designs.

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INTRODUCTION

Late adolescence is an important developmental phase, particularly for Grade XII senior high school students who are transitioning to adulthood (Febriana & Masykur, 2021). At the age of 16–18 years, adolescents begin to face important decisions regarding further education and careers, a crucial developmental task because it affects education, employment, and economic independence (Almanhettami & Sulastri, 2025). Globally, the Programme for International Student Assessment

(PISA) reports that approximately 39–40% of 15-year-old students do not yet have a clear career plan (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2024). World Health Organization (2025), reported that approximately 14% of adolescents worldwide experience mental health disorders, with uncertainty about the future as one risk factor. In Indonesia, the National Adolescent Mental Health Survey found that approximately 34.9% of adolescents experience mental health problems, including stress and anxiety (Center for Reproductive Health & Health, 2022). Adolescents are vulnerable to various complex life pressures and challenges (Putri & Oktaviana, 2024). Career decision-making requires psychological readiness, self-understanding, and environmental support so that choices fit students' interests and abilities (Sukma & Rasyid, 2024). Academic demands, competition for university admission, social expectations, limited career information, and self-readiness can generate psychological pressure (Febriana & Masykur, 2021; Putri, 2024). These figures are general indicators of adolescent vulnerability, not direct measures of career-related stress.

This pressure can develop into career decision-making stress, that is, psychological pressure arising from uncertainty about choosing a career, including whether to continue education or to work (Almanhettami & Sulastri, 2025; Nguyen et al., 2024). This condition triggers anxiety and fear of making mistakes (Shu et al., 2023), characterized by doubt, fear of failure, and difficulty concentrating (Dewi & Hartono, 2023). Stress can also impair emotional functioning, rational thinking, and the effectiveness of decision-making (Sabti, 2025). Stress levels are categorized as mild, moderate, and severe (Ahmad et al., 2021). If unmanaged, stress can reduce self-confidence, learning motivation, and mental health (Putri, 2024), as well as hinder adolescents' career maturity (Dina, 2022).

Career decision-making stress should be distinguished from related constructs. It refers to perceived psychological strain from the demands and uncertainty of choosing a path after graduation (Fris et al., 2022); career decision-making anxiety is a more specific emotional response of apprehension and fear of choosing wrongly (Nguyen et al., 2024); and career indecision is the difficulty or inability to reach a decision (Aminah et al., 2025; Kusumawardani & Hidayat, 2024). They may co-occur, but findings on one construct cannot be assumed to hold for the others.

Stress is influenced by internal and external factors. A lack of career information and readiness makes career decisions difficult (Kusmana, 2024), whereas parental interference in career choices increases career anxiety (Martiani et al., 2023). Limited social support (Zhou et al., 2024) and low self-efficacy (Setiawan & Musslifah, 2024) also increase stress. Adolescents with minimal family support tend to experience greater stress (Hidayat & Ikromi, 2025).

Stress can be managed through counseling, stress management training, strengthening adaptive coping, and career mentoring (Nur'aeni & Yuliastini, 2022). Family support is commonly described as emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support (Masroni, 2025) that gives adolescents a sense of security because they feel cared for (Hidayat & Ikromi, 2025). Two frameworks explain why it may be related to stress. In transactional models, perceived stress depends on how demands are appraised against available resources, and resources such as self-efficacy and coping predicted students' perceived stress (Dickhäuser et al., 2024); the buffering hypothesis proposes that social support may counteract perceived stress, and among secondary school students parental support moderated some stress-related relationships (Hoferichter et al., 2024). Applied here, students who perceive family support may appraise career decisions as more manageable, which would appear as lower stress. This is a theoretical expectation to be tested, not a causal claim.

Previous correlational studies broadly agree that family support is negatively related to stress or anxiety and positively related to career decision-making self-efficacy. Family support was significantly related to stress among vocational health high school students (Ahmad et al., 2021), and it was negatively related to stress among junior high school adolescents in Jambi City ($r = -0.396$; Kuswara et al., 2026) and to anxiety among university students ($r = -0.415$; Firdausi et al.,

2022). For career-related outcomes, family social support was positively related to career decision-making self-efficacy among 63 Grade XI students (r = 0.491; Febriana & Masykur, 2021) and among 402 final-year university students (r = 0.455; Salwani & Cahyawulan, 2022). These studies differ in outcome, population (junior high school to university), and analytic approach, and the evidence is not fully consistent: in a mediation model among 770 university students, the direct effect of social support on career decision-making difficulties was not significant once psychological capital and self-efficacy were modeled (Zhou et al., 2024). Moreover, none of these studies examined career decision-making stress among Grade XII students, who face an imminent transition; this is the gap addressed here.

A preliminary study through informal interviews with Grade XII students at SMAN 1 Sukoharjo showed confusion about determining a career after graduation and limited family support. The interviews involved 13 students, several of whom reported confusion and pressure in deciding on a career and limited family support (little guidance, motivation, and parental involvement). Being informal, they only illustrate the local context and were not used as data. Therefore, this study aimed to determine the relationship between family support and the level of career decision-making stress among Grade XII students at SMAN 1 Sukoharjo, including a description of both variables and the relationship between them. It contributes a stress-specific estimate with a confidence interval for a group not covered by earlier studies, to inform school career counseling.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research was conducted with ethical approval under approval number 6499/B.1/KEPK-FKUMS/VII/2026. Participation was voluntary. Because most respondents were under 18 years old, written informed consent was obtained from their parents or guardians as well as from the students themselves, after both received an explanation of the study's aims, procedures, and benefits, and respondents could withdraw at any time. The researcher guaranteed the confidentiality of identities and data, which were used only for research purposes. Signed consent forms and questionnaire data were stored in the researcher's Google Drive and used only for this study; in the analysis files, respondents were identified by serial numbers rather than names.

This study used a correlational method with a quantitative approach. A cross-sectional design was adopted because it allows the researcher to assess relationships between variables objectively and measurably (Yunandar et al., 2025). This design aimed to determine the relationship between family support and the level of stress in career decision-making among Grade XII students at SMAN 1 Sukoharjo at a single point of measurement, without any intervention by the researcher. The study was conducted at SMAN 1 Sukoharjo, Sukoharjo Regency, Central Java, with data collection from July to September 2026. Both variables were measured once, simultaneously, with questionnaires distributed by the researcher to the selected students, who first received an explanation of the study aims and how to complete the questionnaires and then filled them in themselves. Completed questionnaires were checked for completeness and consistency before data entry. Data collection took about 2–3 weeks.

The population in this study comprised 426 Grade XII students of SMAN 1 Sukoharjo. The sample comprised Grade XII students who were still active at SMAN 1 Sukoharjo. Based on the Slovin sample size calculation, the sample consisted of 81 students ($n = N/(1 + Ne^2) = 426/(1 + 426 \times 0.10^2) = 80.99 \approx 81$, with a 10% margin of error, a level of precision commonly accepted in school-based studies of a limited population). Because Slovin's formula ignores effect size, adequacy was also examined after the sample size had been set, as a sensitivity check using a Fisher z approximation: 81 respondents give 80% power ($\alpha = 0.05$, two-tailed) to detect $|\rho| \geq 0.31$, a small-to-moderate correlation. The sampling technique used was proportional random sampling so that every class had an equal opportunity to be included in the sample (Suriani et al., 2023). Each class was represented by 7 students in classes XII-1 to XII-9 and 6 students in classes XII-10 to XII-12

(Table 1). In each class, the sample was selected by lottery: students' attendance numbers were written on small slips of paper, rolled up, placed in a container, shaken, and drawn one by one without replacement until the required sample size was reached. The inclusion criteria were Grade XII students of SMAN 1 Sukoharjo in late adolescence (16–18 years) who were at the stage of career decision-making, male or female, still attending school or enrolled in formal or nonformal education, and willing to participate voluntarily after understanding the research procedures, benefits, and risks. The exclusion criteria were being outside the 16–18-year age range, not attending school or having dropped out, being unwilling to participate or withdrawing from the study, being absent during data collection, and having a self-reported history of severe mental disorder diagnosis that could act as a confounding variable in the relationship between family support and the level of stress in career decision-making. Students with a self-reported diagnosis of severe mental disorder were excluded for a scientific reason (such conditions can alter perceived stress independently of family support and would confound the association) and an ethical one (answering stress-related questions could burden them); this may cause selection bias and is acknowledged in the limitations.

Table 1. Population and sample distribution per class

Class	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Total
Population	36	35	36	35	36	35	36	36	36	35	35	35	426
Sample	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	6	6	6	81

Data were collected using two questionnaires. The family support questionnaire was the Perceived Social Support–Family (PSS-Fa) from the study by Aisyah, (2021), which the researcher modified to fit the context of career decision-making among Grade XII students; it consisted of 20 items with the response options "Don't Know" (1), "No" (2), and "Yes" (3) on a Likert scale. Both instruments were adapted to the study context: the item wording was contextualized so that every statement refers to family support or perceived stress in relation to career decision-making (choosing a path after senior high school), while the response format and scoring of the source instruments were retained. The adapted items were then reviewed for relevance, clarity, and fit with the construct through expert judgment with the research supervisor until the final version was agreed, and subsequently pilot tested. For example, the PSS item on being upset because of something unexpected was reworded to ask how often the respondent felt upset because of something unexpected related to his or her career plans. Because the adaptation changed the referent of the items from general life to career decisions, the modified stress scale is treated as a context-adapted measure of perceived stress related to career decision-making, not as a validated career decision-making stress scale; the evidence for both instruments is limited to item–total correlations and internal consistency. Scores were categorized as poor (20–34), fair (35–47), and good (48–60). The stress questionnaire used the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), an instrument used to assess a person's perception of stress in relation to their life situation Hakim et al., (2024), from the study by Masroni, (2025), which was modified by the researcher to fit the same context; it consisted of 10 items with the response options "Never" (0), "Almost never" (1), "Sometimes" (2), "Fairly often" (3), and "Very often" (4). Stress levels were categorized as mild (0–13), moderate (14–26), and severe (27–40). Both sets of categories split the possible score range (20–60 and 0–40) into three roughly equal intervals; they are conventions, not clinical thresholds. Scores for each questionnaire were calculated according to the instrument's scoring guidelines, including reverse scoring of unfavorable items.

Validity testing was conducted on 34 respondents (students from a different population and school than the 81 respondents; 33 valid cases for the family support questionnaire) using item–total Pearson correlation with an r table value of 0.339 for the stress questionnaire ($n = 34$, $df = 32$) and 0.344 for the family support questionnaire ($n = 33$, $df = 31$), $\alpha = 0.05$. All items of the family support questionnaire had calculated r values greater than the r table value and were

therefore declared valid, as were all items of the stress questionnaire (Table 2). Reliability indicates the extent to which an instrument produces consistent or stable results when used repeatedly under the same conditions (Forester et al., 2024). The reliability test yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.934 for the family support questionnaire and 0.871 for the stress questionnaire; thus, both were declared reliable. Because the instruments were modified, they cannot be assumed to keep the psychometric properties of the originals; the pilot test gives only initial evidence. Item-level results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Item-level validity (item–total Pearson r; r table = 0.344 for family support, n = 33; 0.339 for stress, n = 34) and reliability; all items valid, Cronbach's α = 0.934 (family support) and 0.871 (stress)

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Family support, r	.708	.665	.618	.558	.793	.775	.661	.644	.866	.691
Item	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Family support, r	.801	.770	.523	.842	.766	.527	.558	.728	.513	.557
Item	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Stress, r	.830	.858	.662	.636	.536	.615	.613	.557	.821	.663

Univariate analysis was performed using descriptive statistics in the form of frequency distributions to describe family support and stress levels. Bivariate analysis used the Spearman's rank correlation test at a 95% confidence level (α = 0.05) to determine the direction and strength of the relationship between family support and stress levels (Mustofani & Hariyani, 2023). Normality was checked with the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test. Spearman's test was chosen because family support scores were not normally distributed and both scores are ordinal sums of Likert-type items; it assumes paired, independent observations and a monotonic relationship (checked by comparing mean stress across quartiles of family support). The 95% confidence interval was computed from the Fisher z transformation with the Bonett–Wright standard error for Spearman's coefficient and checked with a percentile bootstrap (10,000 resamples), which performs acceptably with non-normal data (DelosReyes & Padilla, 2021). Data were edited, coded, and entered into IBM SPSS Statistics 20 for analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Characteristics

Data were obtained from 81 Grade XII students of SMAN 1 Sukoharjo who met the specified criteria. The respondents' characteristics are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Respondent characteristics (n = 81)

Characteristic	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age		
16 years	3	3.7
17 years	64	79.0
18 years	14	17.1
Sex		
Male	33	40.7
Female	48	59.3
Total	81	100.0

Most respondents were 17 years old (79.0%) and female (59.3%). Age and sex were used only to describe the sample; they were not analyzed against stress.

Family Support and Stress Levels in Career Decision-Making

The distribution of family support and stress levels in career decision-making is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Distribution of family support and stress levels in career decision-making (n = 81)

Variable and category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Family support		
Poor	3	3.7
Fair	17	21.0
Good	61	75.3
Stress level		
Mild	10	12.3
Moderate	69	85.2
Severe	2	2.5

Most respondents had good family support (61 respondents; 75.3%) and moderate stress (69 respondents; 85.2%) (Table 4). Because the categories are score-range intervals rather than clinical or population norms, "moderate" should not be read as problematic stress. Median scores were 51 (IQR 48–52; range 28–55) for family support and 19 (IQR 16–21; range 6–30) for stress.

Good family support in most students is in line with studies of Grade XII students (Ashudi et al., 2022) and of parental career-related behavior (Martiani et al., 2023). Family support does not mean that the family must determine students' career choices; rather, it helps students become better prepared to consider their own decisions. Nevertheless, some students still perceived family support in the fair and poor categories, indicating that family support is not yet perceived optimally by all students.

The stress level, which was mostly in the moderate category, indicates that deciding on a path after graduating from senior high school remains quite challenging for students. This is consistent with the study by Fris et al., (2022) on medical students, which showed that career decision-making stress is related to self-efficacy beliefs, clarity about the desired occupation, and the demands encountered. Grade XII students face not only considerations about the future but also academic demands, parental expectations, and preparation for continuing their education or entering the workforce. Why did most students report moderate stress despite good family support? Several explanations are possible but were not tested. First, the moderate band (14–26) covers almost half of the score range and may reflect ordinary rather than problematic stress. Second, stress is shaped by factors beyond family support, such as self-efficacy (Setiawan & Musslifah, 2024), career information (Kusmana, 2024), and academic demands and university admission competition (Febriana & Masykur, 2021; Putri, 2024); data were also collected during the final school year. Third, family involvement can be experienced as pressure when expectations are high (Wang, 2023).

Relationship Between Family Support and Stress Levels in Career Decision-Making

Normality testing (Kolmogorov–Smirnov, n = 81) showed that family support was not normally distributed ($p = 0.002$) whereas stress was ($p = 0.491$); therefore, Spearman's rank test was used. The results of the Spearman's rank test of the relationship between family support and stress level are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Results of the Spearman's rank test of family support and stress level (n = 81)

Variable	Spearman's ρ	95% CI	Sig. (2-tailed)	N
Family support and stress level in career decision-making	-0.328	-0.51 to -0.11	0.003	81

The Spearman's rank test results in Table 5 show a Spearman's ρ of -0.328 (95% CI -0.51 to -0.11) with a significance value of 0.003 ($p < 0.05$) among 81 respondents. There was a significant negative relationship of weak strength between family support and the level of stress in career decision-making among Grade XII students at SMAN 1 Sukoharjo. A negative relationship means that the higher the family support students receive, the lower their level of career decision-making stress tends to be. Conversely, the lower the family support students perceive, the higher their stress in choosing a career tends to be. Because this study used a correlational design, these results

cannot be interpreted to mean that family support directly causes a reduction in stress; the direction could also be reversed (more stressed students may perceive less support) or reflect third variables. The observed correlation indicates a weak negative association, and the interval spans weak to moderate values, so its strength should be read cautiously. A percentile bootstrap interval was similar (-0.52 to -0.11). Mean stress scores decreased overall across quartiles of family support (20.9, 17.6, 18.6, 16.6), supporting a broadly monotonic pattern, and excluding the three lowest family support scores left the result essentially unchanged ($\rho = -0.31$; $p = 0.006$).

The coefficient is weaker than those reported for stress among junior high school students ($r = -0.396$; Kuswara et al., 2026) and for anxiety among university students ($r = -0.415$; Firdausi et al., 2022), but populations and outcomes differ, so the gap should not be over-interpreted. It is compatible with Zhou et al. (2024), where the direct effect of social support was not significant. Together, family support appears to be one of several correlates. Wang, (2023) discussed how excessive parental involvement can be counterproductive when it reduces university students' independence in making choices, so family support should be provided according to need rather than in the form of pressure or coercion. The weak strength of the relationship indicates that family support is not the only aspect related to students' stress levels. Other factors may also be related to this condition, but this cannot be established from this study because they were not specifically analyzed. Uncontrolled confounders include sex, academic achievement, family socioeconomic status, parental education and expectations, self-efficacy, and peer support. The study's contribution is a stress-specific estimate, with a confidence interval, for Grade XII students; it supports, but does not establish, the relevance of family involvement. Practically, school-based support can reduce adolescent stress (a randomized trial found that a peer-counselor app improved stress scores compared with counseling alone; Septiana et al., 2026), and guidance and counseling teachers could add family-oriented components such as parent–student career discussion sessions and give attention to students who perceive low family support; the added value of such components needs testing with appropriate designs.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. First, the study used a cross-sectional design, so data on family support and stress levels were collected at a single point in time and causality cannot be inferred. Second, the study was conducted among Grade XII students at SMAN 1 Sukoharjo (one school; excluding absent students and those with a self-reported mental disorder, and voluntary participation, may cause selection bias), so the results should be considered carefully if applied to students in schools with different characteristics. Family involvement also varies by cultural context: among high school students in Kudus Regency, Central Java, Javanese cultural values were the dominant factor in paternal involvement (Rahmawati et al., 2026), limiting transfer to other settings. Third, the study examined only family support and the level of stress in career decision-making, whereas other factors, such as personal factors, the school environment, and peers, were not analyzed or controlled, so residual confounding is likely. Fourth, both variables were self-reported and may be affected by recall, social desirability, and shared-method bias. Fifth, the instruments were modified and checked in a pilot test without factor analysis or test–retest reliability, and construct validity is therefore not established, and the scales should not be regarded as validated measures of career decision-making stress; the score categories are conventional; the sample of 81 also yields a wide confidence interval.

CONCLUSION

Family support was mostly good and stress in career decision-making mostly moderate. A weak, significant negative correlation was found between them ($\rho = -0.328$; $p = 0.003$): students who perceived higher family support tended to report lower stress. This is an association and does not establish causality. Family support is related to stress but is clearly not the only factor, so the

finding is a modest contribution from a single school. Career guidance may consider involving families, and future research should test this with validated instruments, more diverse samples, and longitudinal designs.

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