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Social support moderates self- and environmental exploration effects on career choice among beauty education students

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the direct effects of self-exploration, environmental exploration, and social support on career choice and tested the moderating role of social support among Beauty Education students. A cross-sectional explanatory survey involved 177 students selected through proportionate stratified random sampling. Data were collected using a validated 56-item questionnaire and analyzed using multiple regression, moderated regression, and simple slope analysis. The predictors explained 36.6% of career-choice variance. Environmental exploration ($\beta=0.382$), self-exploration ($\beta=0.301$), and social support ($\beta=0.153$) contributed positively. Interaction terms added 2.8% explained variance. Social support strengthened self-exploration ($B=0.230$, $p=0.028$) but attenuated environmental exploration ($B=-0.242$, $p=0.013$). Social support differentially moderates career exploration, highlighting the importance of integrating self-reflection, occupational exploration, and supportive career guidance.



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Introduction

Vocational education students face increasingly complex career decisions as technological development, changing consumer demands, and flexible employment reshape professional pathways. This challenge is particularly relevant to Cosmetology and Beauty Education, where graduates may pursue careers as teachers, make-up artists, hairstylists, beauticians, therapists, beauty advisors, freelancers, or entrepreneurs. Career choice in this field therefore requires more than technical competence; students must integrate their interests, values, abilities, professional identities, and understanding of labor-market opportunities. Indonesian evidence indicates that career preferences are influenced by psychological and personal factors, while professional competence and job congruence do not necessarily guarantee favorable economic outcomes (Kholifah et al., 2025; Megasari et al., 2024). Career interests among Beauty Education students are also shaped by self-perception, perceived ability, employment opportunities, and environmental conditions (Shabrina & Wahyuningsih, 2024). These conditions highlight the need to understand how students interpret both personal and occupational information when making career choices (Lv et al., 2025; D. Wang et al., 2024; T. Wang et al., 2024).

Career exploration provides a relevant framework for explaining this process. The Career Exploration Survey distinguishes self-exploration from environmental exploration (Stumpf et al., 1983), while subsequent research confirms career exploration as an important adaptive process in career development (Jiang et al., 2019). Self-exploration involves examining interests, values, strengths, weaknesses, experiences, and aspirations, whereas

environmental exploration concerns information about occupations, qualifications, organizations, opportunities, risks, and labor-market conditions. Career exploration is associated with decision clarity, career support, and perceived employability (Kleine et al., 2021), while exposure to authentic academic and professional trajectories can broaden students' awareness of career possibilities (Chen & Kizilcec, 2024). Although both dimensions contribute to career development, they represent distinct mechanisms: self-exploration clarifies person–career compatibility, whereas environmental exploration reduces uncertainty about available opportunities. This distinction is especially important in beauty education, where career decisions involve diverse professional, entrepreneurial, and portfolio-based pathways (Olsen et al., 2024; Stead et al., 2025).

Social support provides an additional contextual resource that may shape how exploration translates into career choice. Family members, peers, lecturers, alumni, practitioners, and institutions can provide emotional encouragement, career information, practical resources, feedback, and professional networks. Organizational and teacher support have been associated with career exploration through career adaptability, engagement, and motivational processes (Lu et al., 2024; Ma et al., 2023), while perceived social support is related to career exploration through self-efficacy and life satisfaction (Jia & Wang, 2024). Indonesian evidence similarly shows that career exploration can mediate the relationship between social support and career decision-making self-efficacy (El Barusi & Suharso, 2024). Community social capital may also contribute to career development through exploration-related mechanisms (Su et al., 2024). These findings indicate that social support may operate not merely as an independent resource but as a contextual condition that changes how students use personal and environmental information in career decision-making.

This moderating function can be explained through the social cognitive model of career self-management, which positions contextual supports and barriers as conditions that facilitate or constrain adaptive career behaviors (Lent & Brown, 2013), extending the broader social cognitive perspective on career interests and choices (Lent et al., 1994). Supportive environments may strengthen self-exploration by validating students' interests, abilities, and career aspirations, thereby helping reflective self-knowledge translate into clearer career choices. Conversely, extensive social support may reduce the additional value of independent environmental exploration when students already receive substantial occupational information and guidance through their networks. Pham et al. (2024) reported a comparable asymmetric pattern in which social support strengthened the relationship involving self-exploration while weakening the contribution associated with environmental exploration. Nevertheless, evidence regarding this differential moderating mechanism remains limited, particularly within vocational higher education and specialized fields such as beauty education (Sun et al., 2024; Suyitno et al., 2024).

Several gaps therefore warrant investigation. First, career exploration research has largely addressed broader student populations, leaving limited evidence from Cosmetology and Beauty Education, where professional pathways combine employment, freelance work, portfolio-based competence, and entrepreneurship. Second, although self- and environmental exploration are theoretically distinct, their separate contributions to career choice remain insufficiently examined in this context. Third, social support has commonly been investigated as a direct resource or antecedent of career development, whereas its potentially different moderating roles across the two exploration dimensions remain underexplored. Addressing these gaps, this study integrates the Career Exploration Survey framework with the career self-management perspective to examine self-exploration and environmental exploration separately while positioning social support as both a direct predictor and contextual moderator (Karimi et al., 2024; Rahmi et al., 2024). Accordingly, this study examines the effects of self-exploration, environmental exploration, and social support on career choice and determines whether social support moderates the relationships between each exploration dimension and career choice among Cosmetology and Beauty Education students.

Method

Design and Participants

This study employed a quantitative approach using a cross-sectional explanatory survey design. No experimental treatment or intervention was administered; therefore, the term effect refers to statistical predictive contribution rather than causal inference. The study population consisted of 316 active students enrolled in the Cosmetology and Beauty Education Program at Universitas Negeri Padang, comprising 85 eighth-semester students from the 2022 cohort, 95 sixth-semester students from the 2023 cohort, and 136 fourth-semester students from the 2024 cohort. A sample of 177 students was determined using the Yamane formula and allocated proportionally across the three semester groups.

Table 1. Distribution of Population and Sample

Semester	Cohort	Population	Sample	Percentage
8	2022	85	48	27.12%
6	2023	95	53	29.94%
4	2024	136	76	42.94%
Total		316	177	100.00%

Source: Data processed for the preparation of the article draft (2026).

The sampling procedure was designed as proportionate stratified random sampling, with semester level used as the stratification criterion. The implementation of random sampling required a complete list of students within each stratum, from which respondents were randomly selected according to the predetermined proportional allocation. The inclusion criteria were active enrollment in the fourth, sixth, or eighth semester of the Cosmetology and Beauty Education Program and not having graduated at the time of data collection.

Instruments

The research instrument consisted of 56 statements rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Self-exploration was measured using 10 items covering future reflection, self-focused exploration, evaluation of personal experiences, introspection, and interpretation of the relationship between self and career. Environmental exploration was assessed using 20 items addressing career opportunities and threats, career role models, training opportunities, employment prospects, labor-market conditions, and career information sources. Career choice was measured using 12 items assessing clarity of career direction and goals, realism, confidence, planning, and commitment. Social support was measured using 14 items encompassing emotional, instrumental, and informational support, confidence reinforcement, and academic-career support.

Four social support items (DS7, DS8, DS13, and DS14) were negatively worded and reverse-scored prior to calculating the composite scores. Content validity was assessed at the item level using Aiken's V, while empirical item validity was evaluated using corrected item-total correlations. [Insert the number of validators, range of Aiken's V coefficients, number of items revised, pilot-test results, and final instrument decisions based on the actual empirical data.]

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in four stages. First, the dataset was screened to identify incomplete responses, duplicate entries, straight-lining, and other unusual response patterns. Second, descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for each construct to summarize the data and assess internal consistency. Third, the assumptions underlying regression analysis were examined, including residual normality, linearity, multicollinearity, heteroscedasticity, and influential observations. Fourth, the hypotheses were tested using multiple regression analysis and moderated regression analysis (MRA). Self-exploration (X1), environmental exploration (X2), and social support (Z) were mean-centered before constructing the interaction terms $X1 \times Z$ and $X2 \times Z$. Statistically significant interaction effects were subsequently examined using simple slope analysis at low (-1 SD), mean, and high ($+1$ SD) levels of social support.

The direct-effect regression model was specified as:

$$Y = b_0 + b_1X_1 + b_2X_2 + b_3Z + e.$$

The moderation model was specified as:

$$Y = b_0 + b_1X_{1c} + b_2X_{2c} + b_3Z_c + b_4(X_{1c} \times Z_c) + b_5(X_{2c} \times Z_c) + e.$$

The statistical significance level for all hypothesis tests was set at $\alpha = 0.05$.

Results and Discussions

The results of this study provide empirical evidence regarding the relationships among self-exploration, environmental exploration, social support, and career choice among students in Cosmetology and Beauty Education. The findings include descriptive characteristics of the study variables, instrument reliability, direct relationships among the variables, and the moderating role of social support in the relationship between career exploration and career choice.

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of the Constructs

Construct	Number of Items	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD	Alpha
Self-Exploration	10	1.10	4.00	2.680	0.712	0.851
Environmental Exploration	20	1.00	4.00	2.662	0.659	0.908
Social Support	14	1.00	4.00	2.734	0.654	0.863
Career Choice	12	1.00	4.00	2.742	0.672	0.864

Source: Data processed for the preparation of the article draft (2026).

All constructs demonstrated adequate internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.851 to 0.908. The residuals of the moderation model satisfied the normality assumption, as indicated by the Shapiro-Wilk test ($p = 0.260$) and Lilliefors test ($p = 0.483$). The model also showed no evidence of heteroscedasticity based on the Breusch-Pagan test ($p = 0.973$), while the maximum variance inflation factor (VIF) was 1.213, indicating no problematic multicollinearity among the predictors.

Direct Effects**Table 3.** Multiple Regression Predicting Career Choice

Predictor	B	SE	Beta	t	p	Decision
Constant	0.516	0.193		2.668	0.008	
Self-Exploration	0.284	0.063	0.301	4.524	< 0.001	H1 supported
Environmental Exploration	0.389	0.068	0.382	5.729	< 0.001	H2 supported
Social Support	0.157	0.063	0.153	2.481	0.014	H3 supported

Source: Data processed for the preparation of the article draft (2026).

The multiple regression model was statistically significant, $F(3, 173) = 33.339$, $p < 0.001$, with $R = 0.605$, $R^2 = 0.366$, and adjusted $R^2 = 0.355$. Thus, H4 was supported, indicating that self-exploration, environmental exploration, and social support jointly contributed significantly to the prediction of career choice. Based on the standardized beta coefficients, environmental exploration showed the strongest relative contribution ($\beta = 0.382$), followed by self-exploration ($\beta = 0.301$) and social support ($\beta = 0.153$).

Moderation Analysis**Table 4.** Model Change after the Inclusion of Interaction Terms

Model	Predictors	R ²	Adj. R ²	Delta R ²	F/Delta F	p
Model 1	X1, X2, Z	0.366	0.355		33.339	< 0.001
Model 2	X1, X2, Z, X1×Z, X2×Z	0.395	0.377	0.028	3.979	0.020

Source: Data processed for the preparation of the article draft (2026).

Table 5. Coefficients of the Moderation Model

Predictor	B	SE	t	p	Direction	Decision
Constant	2.744	0.037	73.484	< 0.001		
X1c	0.282	0.062	4.519	< 0.001	Positive	
X2c	0.393	0.067	5.884	< 0.001	Positive	
Zc	0.178	0.063	2.823	0.005	Positive	
X1×Z	0.230	0.104	2.219	0.028	Strengthening	H5 supported
X2×Z	-0.242	0.097	-2.497	0.013	Weakening	H6 supported

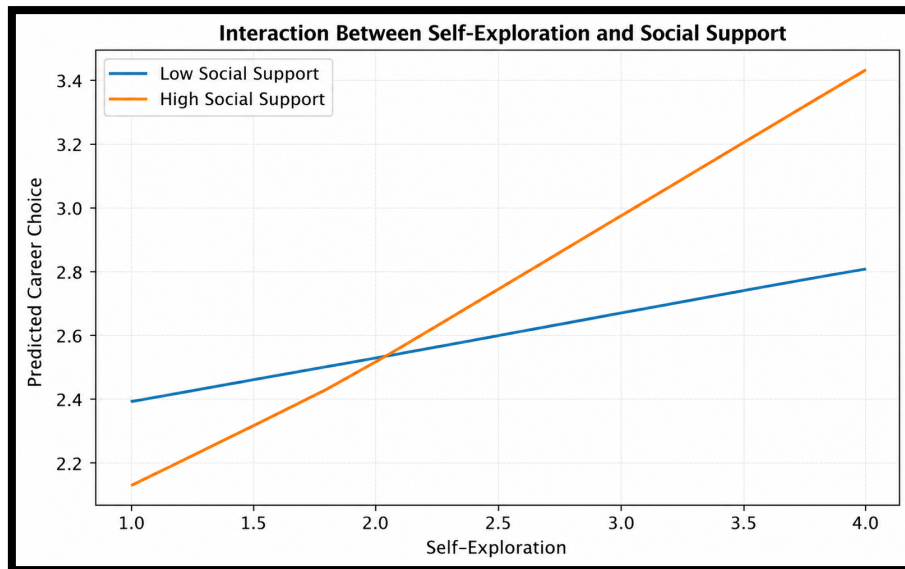
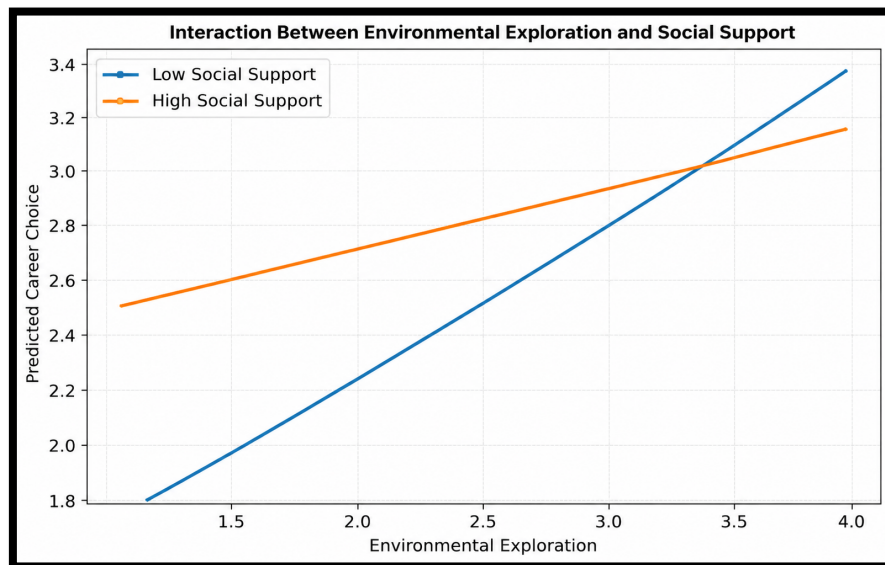
Source: Data processed for the preparation of the article draft (2026).

The inclusion of the two interaction terms increased the model's explained variance by 2.8% ($\Delta R^2 = 0.028$). The positive $X1 \times Z$ interaction coefficient ($B = 0.230$, $p = 0.028$) indicates that social support strengthened the positive relationship between self-exploration and career choice. In contrast, the negative $X2 \times Z$ interaction coefficient ($B = -0.242$, $p = 0.013$) indicates that social support reduced the strength of the positive relationship between environmental exploration and career choice. This negative interaction should not be interpreted as indicating that environmental exploration becomes detrimental; rather, its positive association with career choice becomes weaker as the level of social support increases.

Table 6. Simple Slopes at Three Levels of Social Support

Predictor	Social Support	B	SE	p	Interpretation
Self-Exploration	Low (-1 SD)	0.132	0.091	0.147	Not significant
Self-Exploration	Mean	0.282	0.062	< 0.001	Positive and significant
Self-Exploration	High (+1 SD)	0.433	0.084	< 0.001	Positive and significant
Environmental Exploration	Low (-1 SD)	0.551	0.088	< 0.001	Positive and significant
Environmental Exploration	Mean	0.393	0.067	< 0.001	Positive and significant
Environmental Exploration	High (+1 SD)	0.235	0.089	0.009	Positive and significant

Source: Data processed for the preparation of the article draft (2026).

**Figure 1.** Social Support Moderation on the Effect of Self-Exploration**Figure 2.** Social Support Moderation on the Influence of Environmental Exploration

The findings demonstrate that self-exploration positively contributes to students' career choices. Students who are able to recognize their interests, values, abilities, successful experiences, and limitations are better positioned to determine appropriate professional pathways. In Cosmetology and Beauty Education, this reflective process enables students to assess their suitability for careers requiring visual creativity, precision, client communication, teaching competence, or entrepreneurial readiness (Jilong et al., 2024; Scott et al., 2025; Shougee et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2024). This finding supports the conceptualization of self-exploration as a

reflective career process rather than merely an expression of talent or academic achievement (Stumpf et al., 1983).

Environmental exploration showed the strongest relative contribution to career choice ($\beta = 0.382$), exceeding self-exploration ($\beta = 0.301$) and social support ($\beta = 0.153$). This result is particularly relevant to the beauty industry, where career opportunities are strongly shaped by professional certification, consumer trends, service technologies, portfolios, networks, and business models. Access to occupational and industry information enables students to compare opportunities across schools, salons, beauty studios, spas, cosmetic companies, and entrepreneurial careers. This finding is consistent with Pham et al. (2024) and with evidence that exposure to authentic academic and professional trajectories can broaden students' awareness of available career opportunities (Chen & Kizilcec, 2024).

Social support also positively predicted career choice, although its direct contribution was smaller than those of the two exploration dimensions. Support from family, lecturers, peers, alumni, practitioners, and institutions may provide emotional encouragement, practical resources, career information, feedback, and professional networks. These resources can facilitate career decision-making without replacing students' personal agency (Belfi et al., 2024; Salim et al., 2024; Su et al., 2025; Wall, 2024). This finding is consistent with previous studies linking social and organizational support to career development through self-efficacy, life satisfaction, career adaptability, and learning engagement (Jia & Wang, 2024; Lu et al., 2024; Ma et al., 2023).

The most notable finding concerns the asymmetric moderating role of social support. Social support strengthened the relationship between self-exploration and career choice ($B = 0.230$, $p = 0.028$); the simple slope increased from $B = 0.132$ under low support to $B = 0.433$ under high support. Conversely, social support weakened the relationship between environmental exploration and career choice ($B = -0.242$, $p = 0.013$), although this relationship remained positive and significant even at high social support ($B = 0.235$, $p = 0.009$). This pattern may reflect diminishing returns, whereby students with strong social support already obtain substantial career information through their social networks, reducing the additional contribution of independent environmental exploration (Jemini-Gashi & Hoxha, 2024; Lam et al., 2025; Lubis, 2024; Mahasneh et al., 2024). This contextual pattern is consistent with Pham et al. (2024), although the underlying mechanism requires further empirical investigation.

These findings suggest that career development programs should integrate self-reflection, industry exposure, and autonomy-supportive social resources rather than emphasizing career information alone. Career services could progressively emphasize interest and competency mapping, industry and certification exploration, and portfolio, networking, entrepreneurial, and career-transition preparation across different semesters. Nevertheless, the cross-sectional design limits causal interpretation, while self-reported data may remain susceptible to common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2012). The single-program context and the aggregation of different sources of social support also limit generalizability. Future research should therefore employ longitudinal or multi-institutional designs and examine specific sources of social support alongside career self-efficacy, adaptability, internship experience, and entrepreneurial orientation (Duong et al., 2024; Gilchrist et al., 2025; Salleh et al., 2024; Shang, 2025).

Conclusions

Self-exploration, environmental exploration, and social support positively contribute to career choices among Cosmetology and Beauty Education students, with environmental exploration demonstrating the strongest relative contribution. Social support plays a dual role by directly contributing to career choice, strengthening the relationship between self-exploration and career choice, while weakening the additional contribution of environmental exploration. These findings demonstrate that vocational students' career choices are shaped by the interaction between self-understanding, occupational information, and social resources. Therefore, study programs should provide progressive career development services that integrate self-reflection, industry exposure, professional certification, portfolio development, networking opportunities, and autonomy-supportive guidance.

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