From Shadows

Revealing academic anxiety through graphic design

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an artistic practice-led research that applies autoethnographic and phenomenological methods to investigate, design and illustrate the ways that academic anxiety manifests in the human experience. A subjective account of anxiety recorded through journaling is distilled into lucid themes that provide form and character to the complex and multifaceted phenomenon of anxiety prompted by academic stress in a year of COVID-19. At the centre of this research is the exploration of how collage and illustration techniques, in the form of thematic cards, may be used to communicate, reflect and provoke an emotional resonance and self-awareness to the viewers regarding the protean nature of anxiety. From Shadows is the resultant design artefact produced from this research, and contribute to current practice-related methodologies to empower the personal within the researcher-practitioner.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Applied computing**; • **Arts and humanities**; • **Media arts**;

KEYWORDS

Practice-led research, Graphic design, Anxiety, Poetic writing, Shadows

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1 INTRODUCTION

From Shadows is a design artefact and practice-led research project that explores the author's experience with anxiety during an academic year affected by COVID-19. My interest in researching this experience for my final project was sparked when I discovered a gap in my previous research about the subjective meanings of place, and the grey areas between childhood and adolescence, though I had never delved too deeply into those intervening years. This project uses collage illustration and journaling as methods to understand the phenomenological lived experience. The aim of the project is to visually communicate the complex nuances of human emotion and the pain aroused by the anxiety caused by the academic process that privileges success over learning.

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2 CONTEXTUAL KNOWLEDGE

2.1 Anxiety

Anxiety is known to be a complex topic that can be examined from multiple angles, be they psychological, physiological, philosophical, social, or cultural [25]. Researching under a qualitative phenomenological lived experience, it is essential to understand the phenomenon from a scholarly perspective. According to Korstjens & Moser [14], "qualitative research takes into account the natural contexts in which individuals or groups function to provide an in-depth understanding of real-world problems".

Anxiety can be understood as a human emotion that from an evolutionary perspective is adaptive and functions biologically as an alert system against danger and threat, enabling a greater chance of survival. When feelings of anxiety occur, it is because the individual perceives impending danger within their environment [20]. What distinguishes anxiety from fear is that with anxiety, the individual cannot identify what the threat is. Anxiety is characterised by uncertainty towards the future possibility of a subtle negative experience [24]. Philosophy holds the idea that anxiety stems from our awareness and fear of our eventual death.

The Greek Stoic philosopher Seneca argued that "the man who fears death will never do anything worthy of a man who is alive" [27]. Kierkegaard [16], Heidegger [7], and other existentialist philosophers extended this to consider the root of anxiety as the human realisation that human existence is finite. One way to escape the clutch of anxiety is to devote one's attention to the present instead of worrying about the future.

Although there are students who thrive in a stressful academic environment, many struggle with the challenges encountered on the road to obtaining a degree [9]. According to Banga [2], academic anxiety has four components—worry, emotionality, task-generated interference, and study skills deficits. This particular type of anxiety, a reaction to the pressures of the learning environment, can have a severe impact on a student's performance [8], [1].

2.2 Phenomenology

Phenomenology is an approach to research that aims to find a deeper understanding of the individual and subjective experience of the world, specifically through patterns of consciousness and the ways we attach meaning to our reality. It is a field of research that has a distinguished history that includes significant phenomenologists like Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger.



Figure 1: Card illustrations.

According to Husserl [12], to conduct a phenomenological study is to actively reflect on and describe a phenomenon or an individual experience using the senses. This research is considered phenomenological as it critically investigates personal experience with anxiety, through retrospective journaling about emotional and sensorial occurrences with regards to the phenomenon [22].

2.3 Collage Cards

In terms of the format of the collage illustration design output, the decision was to create thematic cards. Inspired by the tarot deck, From Shadows is a project laden with symbolism and metaphor. Tarot cards are known in popular culture as a specific set of playing cards used for divination and fortune-telling. The research explored tarot as a relevant support mechanism in a therapeutic context that allows participants to identify new perspectives, aspirations, and desires [10].

Within this study, participants were asked specific questions to inspire them to reflect on the meanings of the cards. By formatting the thematic illustrations as double-sided cards (Figure 1), the design artefacts can elicit an emotional connection to the illustrative content through poetry on the front of the cards. In this sense, the cards become a tool to inspire personal reflection about anxiety. Having written elements in conjunction with visual design strengthens the message of the collage and conveys anxiety through visual communication in a multifaceted way.

2.4 Lyric Poetry

The study includes poetic verses created by the researcher to accompany the collage illustrations as a means of evoking emotional resonance with the experience of anxiety. A feature of poetry is its ability to bring our emotions into being for not only own our self-understanding but also for eliciting emotion in others. Using 'I' in personal narrative allows practitioner to achieve a level of vulnerability and depth where trauma and the self can be awoken and confronted—allowing a sense of coherence and awareness through the ideas we choose to focus on when writing poetry. American poet Gregory Orr comments on the genre of lyric poetry:

> In the personal lyric, the self encounters its existential crises in symbolic form... the self is able to acknowledge the existence, nature, and power of what is destabilising it... When someone, in the throes of a powerful and disturbing experience, turns instinctively to the writing or reading of a poem, it is because they sense the personal lyric can be a powerful aid in helping them survive and make sense of their experience. [21]

3 METHODOLOGY

Research methodology can be understood as the system or plan of action for structuring or conducting a research project. This process includes the way that we collect and interpret data and This process includes the way that we collect, interpret and analyse data to inform research finding [13], [15]. The methodology allows the researcher to clarify the research methods assess the process whilst re-evaluating any formerly held assumptions towards the research.

This research is positioned as a form of self-inquiry whereby the methods are predominantly qualitative. Increasingly, practitioners of arts-based research acknowledge the value of non-traditional modes of knowing and representation. Such research rests on the stance that no one truth or interpretation of reality should be privileged, but that reality is shaped by the nuances of individual experience [3]. This type of research critically investigates social, cultural, and political contexts using a qualitative approach, as opposed to the traditional positivist paradigm [26].

The research adopted methods used in phenomenological and autoethnographic research to design a reliable self-inquiry about a personal experience of anxiety (Figure 2). As such, the research tends towards a post-positivist paradigm [4]. Elements were borrowed from autoethnography to analyse personal experience. More specifically, the study was conducted using an autobiographical style but rather using elements of the researcher's account by drawing from their journal entries, to inspire the design practice and the creation of poetry about the anxiety experienced, as the research question focuses on evoking emotional resonance through the distilling and communication of a personal experience into a visual design outcome.

Autoethnography is a framework for research and writing that considers the author's experience as a means of uncovering knowledge concerning a cultural or societal phenomenon. As noted by Ellis et al. [25], [5], autoethnography merges autobiographic and ethnographic research methods. For many forms of artistic self-inquiry, the critical analysis of creation is retrospective, meaning that it is dependent on the researcher's memory of what occurred in practice. It is because of this that some regard autoethnography as dubious or errant as a method [23].

However, this can be counterbalanced through rigorous analysis and self-directed reflection from the start of creation and throughout, where the researcher actively keeps a journal recording their insights about the process, which may be later revised. The research ensured active reflection on the creative process through the author recording their thoughts and ideas as they arise when creating the collages, enquiring into the ways that the practice relates to the

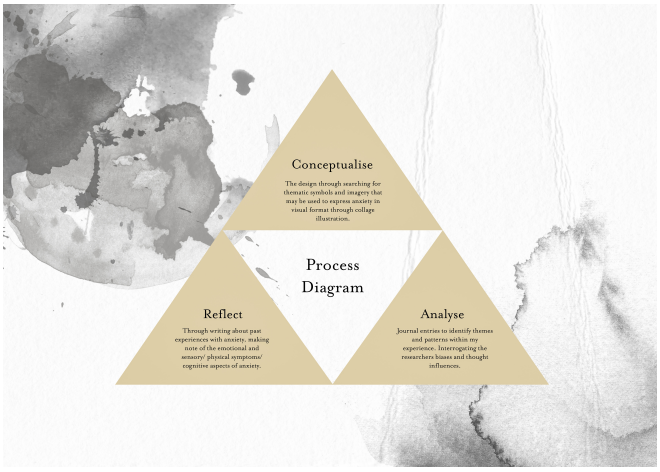


Figure 2: Process employed in the study.

experience of anxiety and outlining the actions that were successful for the design artefact and those that led away from the initial sphere of inquiry or research question.

This idea can be seen in the journal entry where I discuss the following passage from Michie and Mortensen Steagall [17]: "The academic expectations within high school breeds an unhealthy sense of competitiveness amongst students from the point they enter. We are segregated into classes labelled advanced, mainstream and development, also known as 'cabbage', classes. Students would be moved between these classes according to our grades. I have observed and felt moments where grades have determined my sense of self-worth, and in the worst case, I have witnessed the breakup of friendships". It was from this passage that the researcher was able to look at the content of the journal writing in a broader sense and discover the theme of anxiety that manifests due to pressure in education to achieve high standards.

3.1 Journaling as a Reflexive Method

A primary method of this research is the researcher's use of journaling to capture their personal experience of anxiety, both in the creation of a work and in retrospect. When approaching the journaling process, there are a few examples of journals used by researchers to capture their reflective encounters with practice. One example of this kind of journal is found in Mortensen Steagall's PhD thesis, The Process of Immersive Photography [19]. In this example journal entries describe the designer's immersion in the landscape evoking highly descriptive and emotive reflections, using photographs to illustrate and further document. According to Mortensen Steagall [18], the journal can integrate "elements of the real 'inner drama' of research, with its intuitive base, its halting time-line, and its extensive recycling of concepts and perspectives".

This research adopted a similar approach in the sense that it included a summary of the design practice with collage. It used the following methods to help generate inspiration for the journal entries. To reveal insights about the specific patterns and occurrences that exist for more than one person, mind mapping was used as an idea generation tool throughout the ideation stage of the research. However, especially with my journal, there were times when I needed to just get something on paper or break down ideas that seemed too complex to explain in depth. One of the techniques I used to keep track of progress and learnings during the creation of the collages was to divide journal entries into categories. Once a general brainstorm for an entry was completed, headings were created labelled 'insights', 'questions' and 'challenges'. At the end of each entry, it was necessary to make sure that the content aligned with the way that anxiety was felt.

For instance, this entry was written in such a way as to create an ongoing dialogue with the self:

> Reading through my writing has given me an insight to the way that anxiety is felt and experienced for me. I would describe it as a kind of duality of myself. It is a version of me that has its own traits and habits that characterise it and give weight to its presence. Emotions come and go, but with anxiety, it is a sort of deeply ingrained feeling that is almost imperceptible now. I cherish the moments that I am free from anxiety and expectantly dread its return. Anxiety is like heaviness on your shoulders, a shadow, an uncanny or weakened version of the self that preys on the mind, exploiting my mistakes and negative past experiences. I seem to find myself anxious about morality, social relationships, my own life and where I am heading, how I have missed out on my youth because I am overly ambitious towards my studies. The emotion that follows my bouts of anxious behaviour is regret. Sometimes this is because I act in ways that help me to avoid feeling anxious in the short term but results in self-destructive patterns. Anxiety brings out my most immature or primitive nature, where I feel the need to survive stressful situations that seem threatening. For instance, these are situations where I could fail at something, and I perceive it to be catastrophic, thinking that It could destroy my future. This moment is where feelings of doubt arise. When my anxiety has been terrible, I stop engaging in everyday activities, in a sense, I give up on myself—bringing about a sense of meaninglessness. I tend to isolate myself from social interaction, as it seems I feel scared to share my experience. I write about how people's views towards mental illness and negative feelings, in general, seem to be that it is frowned upon and this had shaped a kind of self-stigma that left me feeling like I was alone and not ordinary. Like I needed to hide my anxiety. In a sense, my anxiety hides in plain sight; it presents myself to others as someone very motivated, organised, and conscientious. But beneath that lies an obsessive need to ensure that I am in control of everything so that I can avoid failure. An example of this is my nervous anticipation and questioning of new situations and feeling like I am wearing a mask. [17]

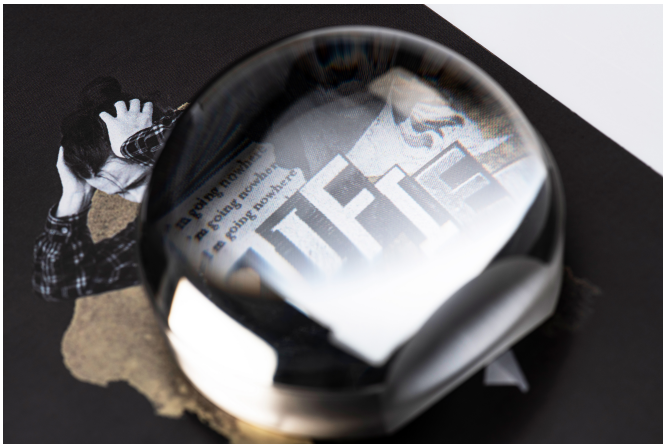


Figure 3: Typographic Experimentation.



Figure 4: Shadow collage.

3.2 Typographic Experimentations

Journaling, in the sense of writing, helped me analyse the patterns that emerged in my behaviour and the thoughts that emerged from my anxious state. Other specific aspects of this method that revealed to sensory and emotional experiences were mind mapping, sketching, and conducting experiments and reflecting on the results.

The first experiments I did were not with collage itself. Instead, they were designed to generate raw and accurate visual representations of anxiety to use as content for the collage. This led to experimenting with typography and with the idea of cognitive distortion, the subconscious manifestation of negative thoughts within the theme of insecurity and doubt. A shadow as a skewed point of view raised the possibility of seeing things different from reality or how it would be typically interpreted by someone not in an anxious state. Warped typographic applications were tested with a lens effect which distorted the type.

Expanding these ideas further, a way was devised to show the pervasive yet hidden nature of anxiety in the construction and experience of making the collage. I used repetitive fine-print typography to create literal representations of thoughts generated by the anxious mind and a magnifying lens tool to zoom in on or create a sensation of fixating on these patterns, just as one does when feeling anxious, despite these thoughts having no basis in truth. The intention was to evoke a mild sense of paranoia where anxious minds wonder whether negative thoughts are a reflection of truth or fear or a form of intuition (Figure 3).

3.3 Collage: A Method for Qualitative Inquiry

In addition to being a form of creation, collage can be used as a method for inquiry and analysis. Alongside autoethnography and poetry, collage is considered a non-traditional mode of knowing. When collage is involved as part of the research process, the researcher can become deeply involved in the process. According to Butler-Kisber [3]: "Collaging can also be helpful in conceptualising a phenomenon by fleshing out different facets in order to get a nuanced understanding of it". This research investigates the author's lived experience of anxiety, and collage has allowed many facets of that experience to entwine, such as the sensory experience of physical symptoms, as well as the conveyance of emotions through symbols, colour, and textures, which reflect intangible meanings within reality.

Irwin [15] argues that "The collage-making process inherently uses metaphor (similarity or comparison) [and] metonymy (contiguity or connectedness) and . . . challenges the dichotomy of the intellect and the senses". I found the collaging process heavily intuitive. Illustrations and photographs were procured, physically scanned from printed mediums or digitally sourced through image searches. From there, I began to build an image bank on a hard drive, to ensure that the process of importing content into Photoshop was both efficient and effective. As referred to in the journal regarding image selection, "I chose content that spoke to me in the sense that the themes and visual language reflected the way that I perceive my anxiety" [17]. For example, in the first stage I chose to work with black-and-white textured silhouettes, creating a sense of harshness in contrast with the human figure in the collage.

Active reflection during the process of making the assemblage along with prior research about the theme contributed to the realisation that my anxiety was a sort of constant shadow in the background every day, a lingering sense of danger, representing the duality of the self. From this initial conceptual experimentation, I narrowed my focus by implementing symbols that were connected to these concepts of threat and duality. For example, I used the image of a serpent since it is a metaphorical representation of evil which characterises the negative thoughts of anxiety (Figure 4).

4 CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Since the study was conducted through a qualitative phenomenology-based enquiry, the way that the information was navigated was through focusing primarily on the researcher's own experiences and drawing connections using imagery within the collages. Early in the research, through reflection, I became distressed once I realised that the anxiety did not fit inside a neat box where all emotions and pain could be attributed to a singular cause. I discovered that some of the symptoms fell under the category of being 'natural', in the sense that every person experiences this level of anxiety in

the undercurrent of the everyday. Other symptoms were more pervasive and could be included as part of my disorder. It was this point that I questioned why trying I categorise aspects of anxiety in the first place. To focus on one facet, i.e., existential anxiety, would be to exclude much of or the rest of the experience. One of the more challenging aspects of this research was managing the complexity of anxiety as a topic that can be viewed from multiple angles. This pushed the search for patterns or themes emerging from within a personal account and trialling and testing ways of communicating key emotions and sensorial experiences.

A challenge that came with this research was my personal intimacy with the topic. It was found to be incredibly difficult to distance the ego sufficiently far from the memories and ideas under investigation in order to deliver an honest account without feeling too much agony. The way to manage this was to take breaks from the project and to tell a confidant about my troubles with the research. This person was usually my brother, who helped me understand that the deeper I delved and the more shared about my personal experience, the more strongly people would be able to identify with it.

Through the design practice, I learned that collage enables the maker to bring forth the hidden and sometimes neglected parts of our experience. As a practice, it can draw upon connections between ideas that form through the visual juxtapositions of the assemblage. These images end up holding different meanings for the researcher compared to the stage before the collage because of the experience of anxiety that the image signifies. Collage is a means of mapping out the past through intentional reflection and encoding the various nuances of the experience of anxiety through visual language. A simple way to describe the research process is that it was possible to elicit new meaning through old memories and visually communicate personal experience, in this case of anxiety, by conceptualising the nuances of lived experience.

Once all the journal entries were compiled, it was necessary to go through them and highlight specific recurring themes and ideas. The aim was to sieve out the 'valuables' or most critical recurring ideas within the broader experience of anxiety. These experiences were distilled into moments of anxiety reflecting the recurring themes of freedom, pressure, doubt, control, isolation, social support, and self-compassion. Freedom is characterised by a sense of anxiety that comes with change and transition and with responsibility, for example, when the goal was to prepare for the outcome for the final year in the university, and again, in anticipation of the graduation. Pressure stems from societal expectations of success and achievement, in addition to the pressure to conceal the anxiety due to my own self-stigmatisation in response to societal perceptions surrounding mental health. I felt doubt towards my ability to control and accept failure and be the possible best version of myself. Social support concerns the people around and the voices that offered support and shared experiences of anxiety, shifting the perception and easing self-acceptance.

These themes are all connected in the sense that they are emotions that every person has experience with. The study identified that at the core of anxiety lay insecurity and doubt. I began to question how my psychological symptoms could be transformed into a more digestible and human felt account of my experience. For this, the study turned to poetry, specifically of the lyrical genre. From there, I was able to identify the commonalities between the written language and the imagery produced in the mind by tone and rhythm of the spoken language. For instance, associating the sound of anxious thought with an evil whispering voice, when reading the poem, appeared as an image of a snake. It was then through a thorough search for images and symbology that I came to an understanding about the social, cultural, and theological associations attached to images, which I could use to add multiple layers of meaning to my collage.

4.1 Personification of Anxiety

Multifaceted/ duality/ hidden shadow self. Unearthed, neglected, ignorance contrasted with enlightenment, compassion, patience, curiosity. In terms of the visual language constructed for the illustrated collage, the inspiration came from a variety of collage illustrators from various styles, but especially surrealism collage. The theme of anxiety added an element of mystery and grimness to the poetic style of metaphorical imagery. The choice of colours included blacks and whites and lent the illustrations a dark undertone; complemented by the use of ink stains as background texture. The yellow-cream colour in the collage was intended to communicate the uncanny and irrational disposition of the prominent figure who endures a multifaceted experience of anxiety.

4.2 Imagery and Symbolism

The Serpent: The most fitting representation of the inner shadow was the serpent. The Christian Bible contains "passages which describe snakes as subtle, cunning, poisonous, and sharp-tongued" [28]. The serpent symbolises the enemy (evil), double-edged wisdom (treachery) as it first appears to Adam and Eve, coercing them towards sin. It represents a part of our own nature that if not tamed may be a threat to ourselves.

The Nighthawk: The second animal whose image I used is the nighthawk. This animal also acutely represents the subconscious mind as a threat, although it refers specifically to a phenomenon occurring at night. The shadow takes the form of the nighthawk to signify insomnia, which is a sensorial symptom of anxiety. It was important to use the term 'hawk' rather than 'owl' as hawks tend to be viewed as apex predators. I also use employed the owl as a symbol of a less menacing aspect of anxiety.

Athena/Minerva's Owl: In reference to my experience with anxiety during secondary education as well as acknowledging the necessity of a sense of self-awareness when approaching anxiety, I focused on a group of images around the contrasting ideas of knowledge and ignorance. The first ware statues of Athena and the owl. "The owl is considered Athena's sacred animal, the source of wisdom and judgment... the animal most associated with her has such exceptional night vision, symbolizing Athena's ability to 'see' when others cannot" [6]. Athena and the owl were used to represent the idealised wisdom that society promotes, especially in education. Through analysis, I concluded that anxiety may be caused by a sense of insecurity in the ability achieve aspirations due to doubt about intellectual capability. Yet it is also important to note that anxiety has the potential to promote a healthy sense of wisdom when experienced not as a destructive threat but as a beneficial alert system that aids in survival.

The Pedestal & Statue: Imagery of statues and pedestals was included for similar reasons to Athena and the owl. The pedestal refers to the pressure of success and achievement placed on the young within society. It symbolises the anxiety's perfectionistic tendency to strive toward subconsciously desired but unattainable expectations with avoidance and fearing failure as a result. Throughout history statues have represented the evolution of humanity In a deeper sense, statues signify morality [11], a theme the anxiety touches upon in the journal entry concerning my dismay about past mistakes and learning to forgive oneself.

Other images and symbols that appear within the collage series:

The Keyhole (Lock): Mystery, Uncertainty, Potential, Freedom, Control.

The Key: Enlightenment, Curiosity, Understanding.

The Lungs: Relationship, Support, Comfort, Clarity, Openness.

The Bleeding Heart: Emotionality, Fragility, Self-Pity, Weakness, Defenceless.

The Locked Cranium: The image of a lock on the mind was used as a literal representation of a lack of open-mindedness. More subtly, it also evokes ignorance, lack of self-awareness and neglecting the voice inside. In the illustrations, it is the prison within which the shadow of anxiety dwells.

5 CONCLUSION

This article presented a practice-led research that questions how the use of poetry, collage, and autoethnographic methods could contribute to the designer-researcher identifying and extricating the nature of the reality of anxiety through distillation and conceptualising the nuances of lived experience through visual communication. The project gave rise to a design outcome in the form of thematic illustrative cards that encourage viewers to reflect on their own emotions whilst engaging with the design artefact. From Shadows was created to incite reflection and emotional resonance through practice-led design research.

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