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Coping Behaviors of Filipino Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Contextual Application of the PERMA-H Framework

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Abstract

This study utilized an interdisciplinary approach within behavioral science to understand the coping behaviors among undergraduate students in a low- and middle-income country (the Philippines) during the occurrence phase of a global crisis. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this period was marked by strict physical restrictions and a shift to remote learning. The PERMA-H framework was utilized to identify the coping behaviors of students and how these behaviors improved their well-being through each domain of the framework: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishments, and physical health. Qualitative data was gathered from 110 undergraduate students through an online survey about their coping behaviors during the community quarantines in 2020. Deductive thematic analysis yielded 17 themes across the six domains. Examples of themes include indulging in personal hobbies, practicing self-improvement, and reconnecting with family and friends, with the behaviors producing positive effects relative to the domain (e.g., behaviors under positive emotions enhanced feelings of joy, productivity, comfort, and companionship; behaviors under engagement led to greater control and involvement in their lives). The study highlighted the relevance of the PERMA-H framework in understanding the impact of actions on the well-being among students during a crisis, as well as the importance of including the physical health domain within the framework. Findings suggest various ways to enhance well-being among students in rapidly changing environments, such as providing opportunities for extra-curricular activities, promoting physical health, and enhancing relationships.

The well-being of undergraduate students declined during the COVID-19 crisis. They reported difficulty transitioning to remote learning (Waters et al., 2022) due to increased unpredictability (Tsamakis et al., 2021), restrictive measures (Knight et al., 2021), as well as important mental health services and peer support being cut off (Waters et al., 2022). Many students experienced a lack of confidence in their academic performance, a reduction in social interactions, and increased worry towards their own health and that of their loved ones (Son et al., 2020). As a result, the majority reported an increase in feelings of stress, depression, and anxiety, especially at the onset of the pandemic (Tsamakis et al., 2021).

Coping behaviors such as meditating, exercising, and socializing with loved ones (Ogueji et al., 2021) have been observed to improve well-being in varying ways (Son et al., 2020), such as increasing

positive emotions and deepening family ties (Waters et al., 2022). Reinforcing the importance of coping behaviors within educational institutions can build both academic and well-being skills among students while forwarding the traditional outcomes of schooling (Seligman & Adler, 2019).

Given that a majority of studies on well-being have been conducted in the Global North (Mahali et al., 2018), further research on well-being among university students in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) are warranted to ensure proper representation and the development of culturally-relevant programs for students (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020). This study was conducted in the Philippines, an LMIC in the ASEAN region (Ong et al., 2023). Presently, literature on coping among Filipino undergraduate students appears to be limited, and recent studies on the topic mainly focused on the process of coping (Serrano & Reyes, 2022) and utilized methods with smaller and less diverse sample sizes (Asiones, 2023). As such, this study contributes to nascent literature on coping by focusing on the behaviors of undergraduate students in an LMIC. Through the use of an online qualitative survey, it was able to gather data from a wider sample size while still ensuring depth from the qualitative data (Braun et al., 2021).

The purpose of this study was to understand the coping behaviors that undergraduate students utilized to improve their well-being during the crisis occurrence phase of the COVID-19 pandemic (Pedersen et al., 2020). It utilized the PERMA-H framework from the field of positive psychology (Seligman, 2011) to identify ways of coping, and how these affect specific dimensions of well-being. By integrating knowledge from various disciplines such as psychology and education, relevant approaches that improve the quality and effectiveness of the educational system can be formulated to better equip learners with the skills needed to thrive and cope in a rapidly changing world (Wilaphan et al., 2023).

Literature Review

This section provides an overview of the PERMA-H model of well-being, coping, and the coping behaviors of students. It also describes the research setting to provide context that shaped the coping behaviors.

Positive Psychology and the PERMA-H Model

Positive psychology has emerged as a relatively new yet highly relevant field that can be integrated within one's life to support mental well-being during crises (Mosanya, 2021). It is the scientific study of optimal human functioning that examines various factors that allow individuals and communities to thrive (Morgan & Simmons, 2021; Seligman, 2011).

Seligman (2011) proposed the PERMA model, a well-being theory that consists of five essential, measurable elements: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. The theory posits that all individuals pursue these five elements for their own sake in various areas of their lives (Seligman, 2011). Recently, the PERMA model has subsequently been extended to PERMA-H to recognize the importance of physical health in overall well-being (Morgan & Simmons, 2021). In this study, the PERMA-H framework was used to understand how specific coping behaviors used by Filipino undergraduates during the pandemic increased well-being relative to a specific domain. Each of the domains are described in the subsequent paragraphs.

Under the domain of positive emotions, happiness and life satisfaction are used as subjective measures of well-being (Seligman, 2011). Positive emotions are commonly associated with feelings of joy, pleasure, and love (Buchanan et al., 2022). Among undergraduate students, performing activities that foster positive emotions is an effective way of combating daily challenges in both their personal lives and academic responsibilities (Chu, 2022).

Engagement pertains to a condition called “flow”, a state wherein individuals often lose their thoughts, feelings, and awareness with time because they are completely absorbed in or connected to their current activity (Buchanan et al., 2022; Miksza et al., 2022). For example, undergraduate students experience the flow state when applying their skills towards academic challenges such as difficult problems or complex tasks (Chu, 2022).

Relationships represent social connections to other individuals through feelings of love and care (Miksza et al., 2022). This domain involves nurturing positive and supportive relationships (Kern et al., 2015). In school environments, having positive and meaningful relationships amongst instructor-to-student and student-to-student interactions can foster positive learning outcomes (Chu, 2022).

Meaning pertains to a sense of purpose within one’s life and a contribution to something bigger than oneself that makes one feel like they matter (Miksza et al., 2022; Buchanan et al., 2022). Among students, this domain can train them to apply their strengths towards greater opportunities and purpose even through adverse events (Chu, 2022).

Accomplishments pertain to one’s achievement of tasks and intrinsically defined goals (Miksza et al., 2022). Feeling one’s capability to perform activities and attain goals allows students to see their own potential for growth even amidst academic and personal struggles (Chu, 2022; Kern et al., 2015).

As a critical factor affecting well-being, physical health is an extension of the PERMA framework that acknowledges positive feelings in relation to one’s physical health (Morgan & Simmons, 2021). The inclusion of this domain can complement the emotional, social, and psychological aspects of overall well-being (Morgan & Simmons, 2021). Sustaining or increasing levels of physical activity can aid in supporting the mental health of students amidst the adverse effects of the pandemic (Rodríguez-Romo et al., 2022).

Coping Behaviors During the COVID-19 Crisis

Coping entails behavioral and cognitive efforts to reduce, minimize, or tolerate stress (Serrano et al., 2022). It helps people manage emotional distress and address “the troubled person-environment relationship” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987, p. 147). This requires either a problem-focused coping approach, where the source of the stress is reduced or eliminated, or an emotion-focused coping approach, where strategies are used to regulate emotional distress (Serrano et al., 2022). The relevance of the relationship between the person and the environment in the understanding of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) aligns with Lewin’s (1939) field theory, which emphasizes how behavior can be understood as a function between a person and the environment or their “life-space” (p. 878). According to field theory, a person’s society, including one’s social relationships and situations, influences his or her attitudes and actions (Lewin, 1939). Thus, it is important to investigate how the mental burden and stress caused by the COVID-19 crisis influenced one’s coping behaviors relative to his or her social context (Eiroa-Orosa, 2020).

During the pandemic undergraduate students utilized both adaptive and maladaptive strategies to cope with the academic and social struggles caused by remote learning. For example, they sought a more conducive environment, borrowed learning materials, and reached out to peers to deal with the sudden loss of access to learning resources and social interactions (Rotas & Cahapay, 2021). Students also coped by having a positive outlook and perceiving the pandemic as temporary (Serrano et al., 2022). Meanwhile, some reported engaging in maladaptive and avoidant coping strategies (Serrano et al., 2022; Ogueji et al., 2021). Though these behaviors may have provided relief, they may also have negative effects. For example, consuming alcohol to cope with stress may be a risk factor for developing further health complications from the pandemic (Ogueji et al., 2021). Given that different people utilize different strategies to meet intra- and interpersonal demands (Karmakar et al., 2021), this study adopted a multidisciplinary approach that considers context in examining adaptive behavior in stressful situations.

Study Setting

As coping may be understood in relation to the person and the environment, it is imperative to describe the context in which these coping behaviors were utilized. In this section, we describe the national context of the Philippines, and changes that occurred during the crisis occurrence phase of the COVID-19 pandemic that impacted students' lives.

Much of the literature on the well-being of university students is from research conducted in developed countries such as the United States (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020). However, it is important to consider context in the study of well-being (Eiroa-Orosa, 2020). This study is situated in the Philippines, an LMIC with issues such as limited health care accessibility (Ong et al., 2023; Mendoza & Valenzuela, 2022). It is a collectivist society which places emphasis on group dynamics and social harmony (Hofstede, 1980). Temporally, the study focused on the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, otherwise known as the crisis occurrence phase (Pedersen et al., 2020). This is when the crisis had already hit, prompting organizations to respond in various ways (Pedersen et al., 2020). Students reported experiencing increased stressors, anxiety and confusion at the beginning of the pandemic (Son et al., 2020; Serrano & Reyes, 2022).

The Philippines has been described as having one of the longest and strictest lockdowns in the world (See, 2021). On March 17, 2020, the government implemented the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), the highest tier of restriction, in an effort to curb the rise of cases at the onset of the pandemic (See, 2021). Mass gatherings were prohibited, transportation was restricted, and schools and non-essential businesses were closed (Mendoza & Valenzuela, 2022). A number of lockdowns with varying levels of restrictions were subsequently implemented throughout 2020 depending on the transmission rates (Mendoza & Valenzuela, 2022).

The study focused on the experiences of students during the first year of the pandemic because this was the critical period where undergraduate students were required to adapt amidst sudden changes in lifestyle (Tsamakis et al., 2021). Most notably, the transition to remote learning restricted the learning experience of students, limited interaction with peers and mentors, and depleted the financial resources of lower-income groups (Barrot et al., 2021).

Research Questions

The negative impacts from a crisis among the youth, especially undergraduate students, is higher than other age groups due to increased risks of psychological distress leading to mental health disorders or risk behaviors such as self-harm and suicidal behavior (Serrano & Reyes, 2022). Finding effective coping behaviors are therefore crucial in mitigating or preventing psychological distress among an already vulnerable demographic during very stressful situations like the COVID-19 crisis (Serrano & Reyes, 2022). Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the coping behaviors of Filipino undergraduates relative to the domains of well-being in the PERMA framework during the crisis occurrence phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Amidst studies showing the value of physical health to well-being (Morgan & Simmons, 2021), the study contributes to literature by including the physical health dimension in the PERMA framework. As such, it utilizes a more holistic approach in assessing students' coping behaviors during this critical period.

Extant literature on well-being draws mostly from experiences in the Global North (Mahali et al., 2018). However, the impact of COVID-19 on countries in the Global South may differ due to socio-economic contexts (Mahali et al., 2018). Thus, the study contributes to the fields of positive psychology and education by examining well-being in the context of an LMIC with a collectivist culture, the Philippines. Conducting studies about well-being in higher education institutions in developing countries allows for a deeper understanding of how to support students in a contextually-relevant manner (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020)

Lastly, literature has highlighted the relevance of the PERMA framework in educational institutions (Kovich et al., 2023), showing its value in providing a foundation for improving well-being in school settings (Kern, 2022; Morgan & Simmons, 2021). Indeed, Kovich et al. (2023, p. 3) have highlighted that “well-being should be assessed regularly across university and college campuses to inform development of strategies to enhance college student well-being”. As such, findings of the study on student coping behaviors may be useful for professionals in the field of education by providing information relevant to the development of programs, interventions and policies to better care for their students, promote positive behaviors, and enhance their well-being during periods of stress and uncertainty.

In this study, the following research questions were asked:

1. What coping behaviors did undergraduates in the Philippines utilize to improve their well-being during the crisis occurrence phase of the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How do the coping behaviors reflect positive emotions, engagements, relationships, meaning, accomplishments, and health?

Method

Research Design

A qualitative research design was utilized. An online survey with open-ended questions was used to gather qualitative data from undergraduate students who were studying in the Philippines at the onset of the pandemic. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. This flexible method of analysis is not bound to a pre-existing framework; as such, it allowed for alignment with the guiding framework of this study (PERMA-H) and ensured fit with the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Participants/ Sample

The following inclusion criteria were used: participants must be at least 18 years old, and were undergraduate students, studying and residing in the Philippines at the time of the 2020 community quarantines due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 110 participants met the inclusion criteria and completed the online questionnaire. One participant was not included in the dataset due to their non-inclusion of pertinent demographic information. In terms of gender, 48% were male, 44% were female, 5% identified as non-binary, and 3% preferred not to say. The average age was 21 with ages ranging from 20 to 23. Participants came from nine regions in the Philippines: 63% from National Capital Region, 17% from Calabarzon, 7% from Central Luzon, 4% from Ilocos, 3% from Caraga, 2% from Western Visayas, 2% from Northern Mindanao, 1% from Zamboanga Peninsula, and 1% from Davao. Among the participants, 32% were first-year, 60% were second-year, 5% were third-year, and 3% were fourth-year students during the time period covered. Additionally, the participants were studying under five different undergraduate fields: 63% were in social sciences, 18% were in sciences and engineering, 12% were in business and entrepreneurship, 6% were in humanities, and 1% were in education.

Data Collection and Instrument

Purposive sampling was utilized, and recruitment was done through social media platforms. An online Google Form survey was utilized to gather qualitative data between January to February 2023. Online qualitative surveys are an underutilized but useful tool in qualitative research, producing a rich dataset from a large and diverse sample that tends “to be densely packed with relevant information, more focused and ‘on target’ than interview data”, while giving participants more control over their participation in the study (Braun et al., 2021, p. 644). Indeed, this data-gathering approach was utilized in previous research that examined behaviors during the pandemic (see for example Teng-Calleja et al., 2020 for coping behaviors of employees).

Information about the study and the rights of participants were provided on the consent form in the survey’s first page. Respondents who signified consent proceeded to the second page where they were

asked to recall their experiences during the 2020 community quarantine period (March 17, 2020 to December 31, 2020). In particular, the questions were divided according to each domain of the PERMA-H model. Each domain had a set of two questions, and each was operationalized beforehand to establish their definitions. The first question asked participants about the specific coping behaviors they performed during the 2020 community quarantines as associated with the domain. The second question asked how their indicated coping behaviors improved well-being in line with the specific qualities of the domain. For example, the domain of positive emotions was operationalized as being commonly associated with positive feelings of joy, pleasure, and life satisfaction. The questions that followed were: (1) “What did you do during the 2020 community quarantine period of the COVID-19 pandemic that increased positive emotions? Kindly elaborate.” and (2) “What changes in your positive emotions did you observe after doing these activities?” After the domains, participants were asked to elaborate on what specific difficulties during the 2020 community quarantine period led them to do these coping strategies. The questions were open-ended, and participants were allowed to freely type their qualitative responses based on their reflections and personal experiences. Finally, demographic information was collected to ensure fit with inclusion criteria.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is a flexible method of analyzing qualitative data, which can be useful across different research questions in the field of psychology (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It has similarly been used to examine qualitative data from surveys in studies conducted during and after the COVID-19 crisis (see for example Teng-Calleja et al., 2020). In this study, deductive/theoretical thematic analysis was used to analyze the data in line with the PERMA-H framework. It employed a semantic approach, which examines the explicit meanings of the data, and seeks to describe (i.e., organize, present patterns, and summarize) and interpret the data to depict its importance and implications (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Data cleaning was done to remove the responses of participants who did not fit the inclusion criteria. Then, the thematic analysis steps of Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed. This involves the following: familiarization with data, generating initial codes or patterns, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

To enhance data validity and rigor, data was first coded and analyzed independently by three researchers prior to intercoding (Agius, 2013). Afterwards, identification, modification, and clarification of themes were done to enhance consistency and coherence of analysis (Yardley, 2007). To demonstrate trustworthiness, quotations from the dataset were used to expound on themes and sub-themes presented in the results section (Agius, 2013) and descriptions of context were included in the report (Nowell et al., 2017). Additionally, team meetings were documented across the different steps (Nowell et al., 2017). The respondent numbers were noted in parentheses to indicate the source.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to data gathering, the study underwent review and received approval in accordance with the research ethics policies of University Research and Ethics Committee of the Ateneo de Manila University (protocol ID: DREC-Psyc_B308) on November 9, 2022.

Results

The analysis of coping behaviors yielded a total of 17 themes across the six domains: two under positive emotions, three under engagement, three under relationships, four under meaning, three under accomplishments, and two under health. Some themes repeated across domains, highlighting that the impact of coping behaviors is not limited to a single domain of PERMA-H. Repeating themes were described in the context of the unique characteristics of the domain, especially with regards to the specific activities

performed and their corresponding effects. Prior to the description of the themes on coping, the difficulties that led to coping will first be described to provide further context.

Difficulties that Lead to Coping

In order to better contextualize the results of each domain, there was an array of answers gathered regarding the specific difficulties that led to these coping strategies. A number of students cited feelings of hopelessness as they were “wasting away what could have been [their] prime years” (2), “missing out on [their] true college experience” (45), and “feeling... no direction in life” (27). Anxiety was the most common difficulty mentioned as they would have “fear of the future” (106) for themselves and their family due to constant exposure to negative news “during a period of uncertainty” (42). Some of this anxiety also manifested as frustration towards the local leadership as respondents said “how the government handled the pandemic was depressing” (77) and that they did “an ill job at mitigating the pandemic” (45) with an “inefficient government response, and malicious political propaganda” (53).

These difficulties made the students feel like they “had no control over what was happening in [their lives]” (1) and that they were “trapped at home” (90). Transitioning into the remote setting meant that “the work space was now also [their] rest space” (75), blurring their boundaries and making their environments and “every day [blend] into each other” (102). Being confined to the household meant frequent contact with family members and contact with others in the online setting became common, but students still had “feelings of loneliness, missing out and family problems” (74). Respondents said “the lack of physical and face to face interactions [were] definitely a hindrance to [their] sanity” (14), as the feeling of loneliness [were] still apparent “even though [they] talked to [their] friends a lot” (39).

When it came to self-reflection, a number of students felt “unhappy with the current state [they were] in” (60), leading them “to focus on the things over which [they had] control” (66) as they “wanted to do something to help [themselves]” (100). The pandemic also instilled feelings of boredom which “forced [them] to make these changes in [their] life” (6), which was a clear option for most as “[they] had much more time during the pandemic” (31). They tackled this boredom by “[taking] up new hobbies” (43) because these outlets allowed them to distract [themselves] from negative and pessimistic feelings” (9) and “take [their] mind off of the horrible reality of the pandemic” (26).

Positive Emotions

There were two themes under the domain of positive emotions: indulging in personal hobbies and maintaining social connections. Results found that students experienced feelings of productivity, joy, comfort, and companionship after performing the coping behaviors.

Indulging in Personal Hobbies

Students coped through hobbies like watching different “films and series” (100), “reading” (5), and “journaling” (110). These increased feelings of productivity, which “in turn made [them] feel better” (39). Students also felt more joyful with their time in quarantine. As another respondent said, “it honestly felt like a high because I was happy with what I was doing” (82). Indulging in these also eased the students’ feelings and helped in bringing out more positive emotions. As one reported, “[engaging in hobbies] really helped me stay afloat, ...doing something new created that uptick in my positive emotions” (2). These personal hobbies also served as a way of combating negativity during the first year of the pandemic. One student highlighted how “doing one of these activities also comforted [her] that while things and events are not the best, [she is] doing well. Doing one of the activities also distracted [her]... so [her] anxiety was more manageable” (53).

Maintaining Social Connections

Staying connected with friends and family also arose as a prevalent way of feeling positive emotions. Students reported that being with others cultivated feelings of “happiness and belongingness

amidst the restraints and distance” (14). Another reported that they saw “an increase in joy” (28) after being able to spend more time with their family. Because of the restrictions set during the community quarantines, feelings of isolation were expressed. However, many reported feeling “less alone” (32) through spending time with their loved ones, whether physically or virtually. It also became an opportunity for them to become closer with their family and as a result “made [them] thankful that [they had] them” (18).

Engagement

Three themes were found under the domain of engagement: practicing self-improvement activities, indulging in personal hobbies, and doing non-academic work. Through these activities, students gained greater involvement and control over their lives.

Performing Self-Improvement Activities

Reading self-help books and practicing self-reflection were some ways students found a greater sense of engagement. As a result, there was a desire “to be more involved with the things [they were] currently doing in [their] life” (66) and to “become more focused on every activity in which [they] would involve [themselves]” (66). Another respondent noted that by trying to improve as a “student, family member, and person as a whole” (87), he was able to experience “a greater sense of agency or control” (87) over his life amidst the pandemic.

Indulging in Personal Hobbies

Engaging in hobbies such as “edit[ing]..photos” (88) and “baking” (89) were also found to have improved students’ engagement. Many reported exploring their different interests while some shared discovering new ones. This helped students become absorbed in their activities and gain agency over their lives. Exploring new hobbies gave students a “sense of fulfillment” (89), and the realization of enjoying “something [they] loved versus something [they] had to do” (88). This also helped students create a “purpose and plan” (102) to gain control of their situation “despite the ongoing health crisis” (102).

Doing Non-Academic Work

Doing non-academic work deepened self-awareness and meaning. For example, “undertaking projects or internships” (50) helped students become “more engaged to do something bigger than [themselves]” (36) and being an “[organization] officer” (67) made them feel “more ‘active’ in school” (81). Working in professional roles also increased satisfaction as students felt their “energy was going towards something concrete” (50).

Relationships

The study identified three themes under the domain of relationships: bonding with family at home, socializing with friends and online, and reconnecting with family and friends. Given the physical restrictions of the quarantine, interactions with family members in the immediate household were primarily physical while interactions with friends were digital. Many students also attempted to reconnect with family members or friends whom they may have lost touch with in the past. Effects of these coping behaviors include strengthening relationships, reducing loneliness, and rekindling past connections.

Bonding with Family

Family members in immediate households were in constant “close proximity” (27) during quarantine. This allowed for “more time spent together” (80) through communal activities such as “watching TV” (22) and “game nights” (36). These activities “deepened relationships” (27) and allowed many to “realize the importance of family relationship” (19).

Socializing with Friends Online

Friends utilized online platforms such as Facebook, Zoom, and Discord as opportunities to “get closer together as a group” (6). Online interactions with friends were done either through “chat or video

calls” (30), with common activities including “video games” (49), and “watching movies” (85). Majority of the students reported that their “friendships became deeper over time” (85), while some cited that these engagements made them “feel less lonely” (29) and more “present in [their] friends’ life” (49).

Reconnecting with Family and Friends

Students also took the effort to reconnect with people whom they may have lost touch with. This allowed many to “rekindle and strengthen [past] connections” (93). As shared by one student, “I reached out and reconnected with two of my old friends. We would often have watch-parties and just spend time together in a call. I observed that my relationship with my friends have somewhat improved because we were constantly in contact” (1). For others, reconnecting with friends had the effect of maintaining relationships. As another student shared, “I set up game nights with families and friends, reconnected through video calls, and [messed] junior high school friends. The quality wasn't made better but the maintenance was consistent to keep our friendship thriving until now” (36).

Meaning

Behaviors that involved service, self-reflection, self-improvement, and creativity were found to enrich the sense of meaning among participants. Service-oriented initiatives cultivated purpose, while self-directed activities increased clarity and boosted self-awareness. Creative endeavors were found to increase both fulfillment and enthusiasm.

Participating in Service-Oriented Initiatives

Supporting organizations and participating in advocacy-based volunteer programs cultivated a greater sense of purpose among students. Examples of these involvements included “outreach programs [that provided] goods for deprived communities” (6), “fundraisers” (50), and donation drives for “COVID-19 and typhoon victims” (21). These behaviors deepened students’ sense of meaning by allowing them to “help people who weren’t in [their] immediate circle” (50) and “communicate and involve [themselves] with society” (9). One student shared that engaging in these initiatives “widened [her] perspective about [her] purpose in life or the meaning [she was] always trying to find” (21), while another shared that his “existence had more meaning” (50) and that doing these “helped [him] feel that [he] was making positive change even if he was confined in his home” (50).

Practicing Self-Reflection

Engaging in self-reflection deepened self-insight and widened perspectives. Common areas of reflection were about one’s “future...goals...and values” (53), as well as one’s “identity...and career” (74). Regular reflection allowed students to “rethink positively about the meaning of life” (53). Activities such as “prayer, journaling, and meditation” (2), also resulted in a “greater sense of meaning” (68) and “perspective in life” (19). One shared that by reading more books, she “found clarity on who [she wanted] to be in this world” (5).

Performing Self-Improvement Activities

Doing various activities that developed one’s “skills, talents, and overall well-being” (46) enriched one’s sense of direction in life. According to one student, “I journaled a lot for self-growth” (9). Another shared that by learning another language, exercising, and planning for the future, he “felt that there was more meaning to living life” (46), while another stated that by improving on his martial arts skills, he felt that he was “leveling up in real life” (81).

Engaging with Creative Endeavors

Creative activities were found to increase enthusiasm. Creating art made students feel that “life had more meaning beyond studying and finding a job” (1) and enriched their “overall outlook” (16) and “satisfaction in life” (43). For some, making art deepened their sense of fulfillment in life, with one student sharing that “[he] felt it was [his] calling” (99).

Accomplishments

Three themes were identified under accomplishments: accomplishing academic responsibilities, doing non-academic work, and indulging in personal hobbies. The second theme has two sub-themes: participating in extracurricular activities and working in professional roles. Students mostly mentioned that fulfilling their responsibilities throughout the pandemic made them feel more accomplished. They were able to find a sense of achievement, growth, and pride through their personal hobbies with more time at home.

Accomplishing Academic Responsibilities

Due to the difficult transition to the online setting, one student mentioned that when she “had online school, [she] felt like it was one of the few things [she] had commitment to and a chance at feeling some sense of accomplishment” (2). Another expressed that the “sense of achievement became more evident because practicing proper time management allowed [her] to get good grades in [her] requirements despite how online classes were taking a toll on [her] mental health” (85). This sense of accomplishment through academics brought an initial wave of validation, but students also “felt much more motivated to continue improving” (14) and “achieving more” (21). This was highlighted by a student who said, “I became more confident in my abilities from gaining good grades” (7).

Doing Non-Academic Work

Apart from academic responsibilities, a number of students voluntarily committed themselves to non-academic work too. Committing to additional responsibilities and developing new skills boosted a number of the students’ confidence in their own capabilities.

Participating in Extracurricular Activities. Experiences in school organizations and extracurricular activities fostered varying levels of self-growth. For example, a student said it “increased [her] self-worth and independence” (65), and one mentioned that they were “motivated to push [their] boundaries even farther and get back to being more org active” (58). Some also expressed positivity from leadership roles, with one student saying he believed “[he] stepped up as leader by joining school organizations” (72). Another said these roles made her “more open to growing because [she] was more open to putting [herself] in uncomfortable situations” (30) by becoming a committee head in her organization.

Working in Professional Roles. Taking on professional roles helped a student feel “more fulfilled with [herself] and with what activities [she’s] done during the time of the CQ” (45). Another felt increased pride because she “learned new skill sets that [she] could use in the future” (28). Additionally, these experiences also increased “self-worth and independence” (65), with one student feeling like he was “getting older engaging in activities that count as ‘the real world’” (3). Formal occupations also helped some “[provide] for [their] family” (19) and brought about “career advancement and clarity” (33).

Indulging in Personal Hobbies

Students also experienced achievement through personal hobbies. One student shared that he “felt overall more achieved and accomplished since [he] was doing an activity that [he] was passionate about” (50). This sense of accomplishment was also felt because students were “going for activities [they] never had the time for” (36) prior to the pandemic. Additionally, these activities helped some feel rewarded. One student stated that “gaining in-game awards and improving [his] ‘rank’ in certain games felt rewarding” (42), while another was “able to earn through [her] skills & talents” (16). All of these factors led to a “motivation for growth” (53) for students that “picked up new hobbies... they enjoyed” (26).

Health

The study identified two themes under the domain of health: engaging in physical exercise, and practicing a healthier lifestyle. The first theme was observed to have two sub-themes: committing to

exercise routines and exercising with others. Due to the increasing fear of COVID-19, students became more conscious of their physical health. This influenced students to build healthier habits, leading them to feel rejuvenated and more confident.

Engaging in Physical Exercise

Lockdown restrictions meant that students were isolated in their homes, which limited their physical movement. This may have encouraged students to take initiative and compensate for lost physical activity by engaging in physical exercise. Whether alone or in groups, students that exercised felt an increase in motivation and agency.

Committing to Exercise Routines. The added responsibility of being physically active increased a sense of initiative. A student shared that “making a strict workout routine for [himself] helped increase [his] feeling towards physical health” (50). Another stated “it reminded me that this was also a way of taking care of myself” (15). Students cited various benefits from their exercise routines as well. The stated: “I lost a lot of weight, and I managed to tone my physique by myself” (9), “my body became stronger” (10), “I felt more confident in my body” (52), and “I became less prone to getting tired easily” (16).

Exercising with Others. The motivation to perform physical activity seemed to be enhanced in social settings. Positive feelings about physical health came from having a “communal sense of healthy living” (14) with friends, and especially family. Consequently, this “was very contagious and positively motivated everyone in the family to live a healthier lifestyle” (14). Some students witnessed that their peers or family “started working out a lot during the beginning of the pandemic so this inspired [them] to join them as well” (21). Engaging in these shared experiences “helped [them] be accountable to each other” (88) and “allowed [them] to have fun and to have a positive mind during the pandemic” (59).

Practicing a Healthier Lifestyle

Apart from engaging in exercise, students also made it a point to practice a healthier lifestyle through their dietary intake and routines. They felt safer and more confident as they were improving their physical well-being in hopes of mitigating or preventing effects of COVID-19. Many described “getting back into developing healthy eating habits” (35) as a common form of coping mechanism to help them “feel a lot better physically” (81). This healthy consumption involved “[staying] hydrated” (87) and “taking vitamins” (90) which benefited them as they “felt stronger and healthier” (22). Forming new routines also improved confidence in their physical health. Particularly, self-care in the form of “getting lots of rest and sleep [and] listening to [their] body's needs” (106) was practiced. As some shared, a “more regular sleep schedule led to ... feeling much more refreshed” (105) because it “promotes and renews positive feelings” (19). In regard to perceptions of bodily changes as an effect of these new lifestyles, one mentioned that she “cared a lot less about [her] physical appearance” (31), while another “felt stronger and better about [her] health” (86).

Discussion and Conclusion

The use of the PERMA-H framework allowed for a multi-dimensional examination of the various coping behaviors of students during the occurrence phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to each of the domains. Some coping behaviors, such as socializing with loved ones, practicing a healthier lifestyle, and meditation, are similar to those found in existing literature (Ogueji et al., 2021). However, the study also uncovered novel coping behaviors like partaking in service-oriented initiatives, doing non-academic work, and practicing self-reflection. Findings reinforce the notion in positive psychology that individual actions can buffer mental distress and build positive capacity (Waters et al., 2022) amidst negative situations through adaptive coping styles (Valladolid, 2021). They also highlight the connection between well-being and education (for example, feelings of frustration and hopelessness prompted students to organize outreach programs and donation drives, while participating in extra-curricular activities improved self-worth and

motivation.) The various coping behaviors and their effects on well-being through each domain are discussed.

In the domain of positive emotions, students were able to combat the difficulties of hopelessness and anxiety caused by isolation and fear of infection by doing different hobbies (Son et al., 2020). Doing these increased productivity and positivity given their increased time at home. Interestingly, maintaining social connections also arose as a prevalent theme within this domain even though it seems more aligned to the third domain of relationships. However, students reported that because face-to-face interaction was diminished (Waters et al., 2022), staying connected with family or with friends cultivated joy and community amidst physical restrictions. Its inclusion within the first domain emphasizes the integral role of relationships in experiencing joy, pleasure, and satisfaction in spite of challenging circumstances.

Meanwhile, in engagement, students found ways to stay absorbed in creating new daily routines as their prior ones brought about feelings of boredom. Focusing on the self by reading self-help books and practicing self-reflection allowed them to significantly gain agency over their lives amidst the crisis. Consistent with literature, personal hobbies also became an avenue for students to fulfill their interests and maximize their time (Morse et al., 2021). They used this opportunity to find new hobbies and revisit old ones. Lastly, despite physical limitations, students found a notable sense of engagement through extracurricular activities and professional work where they felt more absorbed in their roles and responsibilities.

Amidst limitations in physical interactions, it was a concern that students would have encountered challenges in cultivating relationships as feelings of loneliness and a lack of connection were commonly felt. However, results indicated that despite physical restrictions, students maintained, rekindled, and even strengthened social relationships. This was primarily due to the accessibility of digital communication platforms. This supports the findings of Ogueji et al. (2021) that online interaction with loved ones was a way of coping amidst the stress and anxiety caused by the pandemic. Another significant finding is that quarantine restrictions proved to be a double-edged sword: while it decreased physical interactions among friends, it increased time with family members at home. This was found to both deepen relationships within the family and increase awareness of its importance, supporting existing literature that positive practices within the family can protect and increase well-being in families during COVID-19 (Waters et al., 2022). These behaviors that strengthen relationships with in-groups, in addition to coping behaviors in other domains that were “others-oriented” or communal in nature (for example, exercising with others or working on extra-curricular activities with colleagues), appear to highlight the collectivist culture of the Philippines (Hofstede, 1980).

Within the domain of meaning, the increased time at home made life feel meaningless and yet created opportunities for purposeful initiatives that heightened sense of purpose, and meaningful activities that improved skills and direction in life. While connecting students to causes beyond the self can reduce negative feelings (Chu, 2022), this study expands literature to highlight that pursuing meaningful activities can also positively impact one’s well-being through purpose and insight. Service-oriented initiatives, self-directed activities, and creative endeavors were all reported to boost fulfillment and self-clarity among the students. It is worth noting that self-reflection may have led to the aforementioned coping behaviors, as the increased time for reflection granted students the opportunity to deepen perspectives and rethink positively about their goals and meanings in life. Interestingly, being physically disconnected from the world did not reduce students’ capacity to positively impact it. Rather, it encouraged them to be more critical and proactive by widening their perspectives on various issues and advocacies and finding solutions to relevant problems occurring within their communities.

Due to the sudden shift to the online setting and boredom from the routinary nature of isolation, students felt that their capabilities were being restricted by the limitations imposed by the pandemic (Knight

et al., 2021). Though there was a lack of confidence in academic performance (Son et al., 2020), the results of this study suggest that this self-doubt can also be the source of increased confidence once they disprove their prior apprehensions and perform more positively. The findings suggest that even with this abrupt change, they still persisted and some even reported a higher sense of accomplishment because of milestones like gaining academic excellence in spite of the pandemic context. Moreover, these milestones also consisted of non-academic commitments that students volunteered for, as developing new skills and a sense of progression bolstered confidence in their capabilities. Hence, students are not limited to their academics when it comes to increasing their sense of accomplishment. Consequently, personal hobbies also produced a similar effect through exploration, growth, and passion. This further reinforces literature on hobbies being significant mitigators of negative emotions (Son et al., 2020).

During the start of the pandemic, students were fearful of their physical health (Son et al., 2020). In the Philippines, the lack of collaboration between the government and the healthcare industry intensified these feelings (See, 2021), leading them to seek a sense of control by implementing their own means of mitigating health concerns. However, instead of a decline in physical health, the consciousness of one's own physical health increased. Literature suggested that exercise and healthy eating boosted student well-being during the pandemic (Ogueji et al., 2021). These align with the findings of the study that students exert effort to become healthier in order to cope with perceived dangers. Subsequently, students that felt progress in their physical health experienced positive feelings about their health and the motivation to continue their efforts. This emphasizes that the value and perception of one's physical health significantly contributes to overall well-being (Morgan & Simmons, 2021).

The study also discovered different themes to have overlapped across multiple domains. Firstly, indulging in personal hobbies reoccurred the most among the multiple domains, supporting the idea that actively pursuing one's interests greatly contributes to the betterment of overall well-being (Son et al., 2020). Next, the notion that well-being can also be bolstered by completing complex tasks to achieve one's self-imposed goals despite adverse situations is strengthened (Chu, 2022). Here, the overlap of doing non-academic work suggests that this concept is not limited to academic tasks, but also includes performing extracurricular and professional tasks students voluntarily take on. Lastly, performing self-improvement activities overlapped in the domains of engagement and meaning. This suggests that undergraduates felt more connected to activities that were done with the intention of self-growth, resulting in increased self-purpose that benefited their well-being.

In line with the various coping behaviors performed to manage the stress and mental burden from the COVID-19 crisis, many students adopted an emotion-focused approach to alleviate the "troubled person-environment relationship" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987, p. 147). Given the numerous difficulties faced by students, such as feelings of anxiety, hopelessness, loneliness, and dissatisfaction, many actively committed to healthier habits, learned new hobbies, and cultivated stronger relationships to lessen their emotional distress. This supports the notion that students' growth and educational experiences are not limited to what is cognitively learned in the classroom, but also include the behavioral and psychological strategies developed to enhance their well-being (Kovich et al., 2023).

Overall, the findings are in line with Lewin's (1939) field theory and point to how behaviors that enhance well-being are shaped by the environment and the person (i.e., a person's life-space). That is, how students coped with stressors during the onset of a crisis was a function of their environmental context. This includes difficulties brought about by national restrictions, the government response, and the abrupt shift to online classes. The environment can also pertain to the availability of resources such as technology, online applications and extra-curricular programs, which all helped facilitate coping. Personal factors also provide context to the students' coping behaviors. These include their life stage (such as being in their "prime years" and wanting a "true college experience"), feelings towards the situation, and what they value as students.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to the study. First, the study focused on the onset of a long and uncertain pandemic. As students faced sudden lifestyle adjustments and great emotional impacts, memories of their experiences from this period may be more durable (Williams et al., 2022). Nonetheless, one limitation of the study is that the data was gathered much after the quarantine period; thus, the reliability of the data was dependent on the accuracy of the participants' memory. Given that crises are said to have different phases (Pedersen et al., 2020), further studies can be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of coping behaviors in the subsequent phases of the pandemic, taking into account the adaptability of students and the changing contexts (for example, during the return to face-to-face classes). Second, a limitation of utilizing online surveys is the digital divide that prevents the participation of groups without technological access (Braun et al., 2021). Future research can utilize different data-gathering methods and endeavor to diversify the sample to ensure representation from various groups (for example, regions or socio-economic classes). Relatedly, cross-cultural studies may also be valuable for understanding the different domains in relation to cultural contexts (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020). Finally, researchers can utilize other methods to measure the impact of the coping behaviors on well-being and other related variables.

Implications for Behavioral Science

Given evidence of positive relationships between coping strategies and well-being among students both during (Valladolid, 2021) and prior to the pandemic (Campbell et al., 2022), developing and reinforcing positive coping behaviors in academic institutions will be beneficial for student well-being regardless of the season. The study's findings may be utilized by researchers and policymakers to integrate positive education in schools through programs and policies that support the well-being of individuals (Kovich et al., 2023). Service engagements and volunteer programs may be introduced to deepen students' sense of purpose, while physical education programs may be implemented to promote health (Rodríguez-Romo et al., 2022), and extracurricular activities may be initiated to boost confidence and build interpersonal collaboration (Chapman et al., 2023). The findings may also be used to promote the role of the teacher. As the primary contact points between school and student, teachers implement school-initiated programs while catering to the individual needs of students (for example, Lertladaluck et al., 2021). Given the unique circumstance of each student, teachers may contextualize the behaviors identified in the study, such as encouraging participation in internships among senior students. On the individual level, students can continuously cultivate their coping strategies and capitalize on the helpful resources available (Pedrelli et al., 2014). Simultaneously, students, especially student leaders with the capacity to communicate organizational needs (Wilaphan et al., 2023), may collaborate with their school administrations in developing and evaluating programs aimed at enhancing capacity to thrive in stressful situations (Kovich et al., 2023).

Conclusion

In dealing with crises, undergraduate students find various ways of coping to improve well-being amidst increased stress and anxiety. These coping behaviors can be understood in light of students' personal and environmental contexts. The PERMA-H framework, with its six domains, provides a useful lens for examining these helpful behaviors and their impact on well-being. The inclusion of health as the sixth domain also provided new insights into the value of physical health towards one's well-being, especially in the context of a global pandemic. Lastly, the study highlights the relevance of adopting an interdisciplinary approach within education through the integration of positive psychology. Understanding the levels of well-being in students, including the actions taken to improve mental health and lessen emotional distress within one's context, is integral to identify key areas that can be targeted by university programs (Kovich et al., 2023). The findings support the importance of adopting positive approaches and its potential in helping integrate positive education in universities to promote psychological care and readiness among students.

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