

Coping psychologically with social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic: Women's accounts on Instagram

การรับมือทางด้านจิตใจกับการเว้นระยะห่างทางสังคมในช่วงการระบาดของโควิด-19: คำบอกเล่าของผู้หญิงบนอินสตาแกรม

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting need for social distancing have spawned psychological challenges to people across the world. During this time of global crisis, women have been found to be more vulnerable to the negative psychological impact of the pandemic than men. This research explores how coping with social distancing is represented on Instagram by women. Data were collected using Instagram search function with the hashtags relevant to coping with social distancing. A total of 320 posts, including both texts and images, posted by female users between March and August 2020, were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis. The findings of this study demonstrate the women's coping efforts to regulate negative emotions and generate positive emotions during social distancing. Such coping efforts include seeking social interactions, spending good times with close others, connecting with nature, finding pleasure at home, and regulating emotions. These findings suggest that therapeutic interventions that target flourishing through suffering may have the potential to promote psychological well-being and adaptive coping in times of anxiety and isolation, such as this pandemic.

Keywords: coping, social distancing, COVID-19, Instagram, reflexive thematic analysis

บทคัดย่อ

การระบาดของโควิด-19 ซึ่งส่งผลให้มีความจำเป็นต้องใช้มาตรการเว้นระยะห่างทางสังคมได้กลายมาเป็นความท้าทายทางจิตใจสำหรับผู้คนทั่วโลก ในช่วงเวลาแห่งวิกฤตนี้ มีการรายงานว่าผู้หญิงเผยแพร่กับผลกระทบทางลบ ด้านจิตใจมากกว่าผู้ชาย งานวิจัยนี้มีจุดมุ่งหมายเพื่อศึกษาว่าผู้หญิงนำเสนอวิธีการรับมือกับการเว้นระยะห่างทางสังคมบนอินสตาแกรมอย่างไร ข้อมูลวิจัยถูกเก็บรวบรวมมาจากการโพสต์ในอินสตาแกรมที่มีรูปภาพและข้อความบรรยายเกี่ยวกับการรับมือกับการรักษาระยะห่างทางสังคมของผู้หญิงซึ่งถูกโพสต์ระหว่างเดือนมีนาคมถึงเดือนสิงหาคม 2563 ข้อมูลวิจัยถูกนำมาวิเคราะห์เชิง

คุณภาพโดยใช้การวิเคราะห์แก่นสาระเชิงสะท้อน ผลการวิจัยแสดงให้เห็นถึงความพิจารณาของผู้ที่ปฏิบัติในการลดารมณ์ทางลบ และคงไว้ซึ่งารมณ์ทางบวกในช่วงเวลาของการเว้นระยะห่างทางสังคม ไม่ว่าจะเป็นการแสวงหาปฏิสัมพันธ์เชิงสังคม การใช้เวลาคุณภาพกับคนสำคัญ การเชื่อมโยงกับธรรมชาติ การหากิจกรรมที่เพลิดเพลินภายในบ้านและการกำกับารมณ์ ผลการวิจัยเสนอแนะว่าวิธีการบำบัดทางจิตใจที่มุ่งเน้นความองอาจผ่านความทุกข์อาจมีศักยภาพในการช่วยส่งเสริมสุขภาวะทางจิตและการรับมือทางจิตใจที่เหมาะสมในห้วงเวลาแห่งความกังวลและโดดเดี่ยวดังเช่นในช่วงของโรคระบาดนี้

คำสำคัญ: การรับมือ, ระยะห่างทางสังคม, โควิด-19, อินสตาแกรม, การวิเคราะห์แก่นสาระเชิงสะท้อน

Introduction

Since the beginning of 2020, people around the world have been battling against the unprecedented pandemic. Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), which first emerged in China in late December 2019, has continued to rapidly spread across the globe. This new infection is mainly transmitted through respiratory and close contact. To ameliorate the rapid spread of COVID-19, social distancing measures, such as lockdown, quarantine, isolation, and travel restrictions, have become the major global public health interventions to reduce human close contact and movement. The term “social distancing” is used in this article to refer to the practice of “staying-at-home” to avoid close physical contact to other people. This term is also used interchangeably with “home quarantine”. Social distancing, albeit not a new measure for controlling pandemics, is a novel phenomenon in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic where millions across the globe have been required to quarantine in their homes. It can be said that social distancing which has been introduced to manage the physical risks of COVID-19 infection has come with not only socioeconomic, but also psychological costs for the large population worldwide. A recent review by Serafini et al. (2020) concluded that home quarantine has adverse effects on mental health, causing post-traumatic stress symptoms, boredom, distress, frustration, and loneliness, and these psychological responses seemed to come from the interruption of daily activities, the restriction in social mobility, as well as the lack of face-to-face social interactions.

Based on emerging evidence, it is evident that the social distancing policies enforced to control the COVID-19 pandemic have had profound mental health impacts on the general population globally, and especially on women, who were consistently found to be more vulnerable to the negative psychological impact of the pandemic than men (e.g., Gurvich et al., 2020; Rossi et al., 2020). It has also been well-documented that men and women cope with stressful events differently and women are more likely than men to seek social support and use emotion-focused coping to cope with stress (Salfi et al., 2020). From a biobehavioral perspective, in responding to stress, women are more likely to adopt a “tend and befriend” reaction, rather than a “fight-or-flight” one, as more typically adopted by men (Taylor et al., 2000).

Coping refers to “thoughts and behaviors that people use to regulate their emotions and address underlying problems” (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2007, p. 193). Coping research has widely suggested the significant effects of coping on emotional and behavioral outcomes (Frydenberg, 2014). Developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), the transactional theory of stress and coping proposes that an individual’s reaction to life stress is mediated by two significant processes: cognitive appraisal and coping. According to

this theory, when individuals appraise a situation to be harmful, threatening, or challenging (primary appraisal), they further assess the adequacy of their coping resources (secondary appraisal) and determine the use of coping strategies (coping). Situations that are appraised as endangering well-being and exceeding the individual's resources for coping are perceived as stressful. The theory initially proposed two types of coping. The first type is “problem-focused coping”, in which the person makes attempts to directly deal with stressful events. The second type is “emotion-focused coping”, in which the person engages efforts to regulate negative emotions triggered by perceived stressors. A third type of coping, “meaning-focused coping”, was later introduced to address the person's efforts to regulate positive emotions (Folkman, 1997, 2008). Dealing with stressors effectively requires the use of different coping strategies that match the appraised controllability of the situation (i.e., the goodness-of-fit hypothesis). Problem-focused coping is believed to be more adaptive in the face of perceived controllable situations. In contrast, emotion-focused and meaning-focused coping are proposed to be more helpful in situations perceived to be uncontrollable (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Roubinov, Turner, & Williams, 2015).

Understanding the coping efforts is crucial as this understanding can guide therapeutic resources and interventions for enhancing adaptive coping during this ongoing pandemic and beyond. Despite the significance of this topic, there remain limited studies that address coping behaviors of the public during the COVID-19 outbreak (e.g., Fullana, Hidalgo-Mazzei, Vieta, & Radua, 2020) and the existing studies are mostly quantitative, using online survey.

During this time of epidemic, where social distancing is required, it appears that more people have been turning to social media for social interactions as well as for portraying and making sense of their life during the pandemic (Chen, Lerman, & Ferrara, 2020). Compared to men, women showed a greater usage of social networking sites (Kimbrough, Guadagno, Muscanell, & Dill, 2013) and were more likely to use social media to cope with the social isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic (Prowse et al., 2021). Instagram, one of the most popular image-based social media platforms, is a valuable site for understanding the resources people use to respond to social distancing.

Given the integration of online social media in people's lives, the potential of social media data for qualitative studies has been highlighted in the literature. McKenna, Myers, and Newman (2017) pointed out that “the emergence of social media on the Internet provides qualitative researchers with a new window into people's outer and inner worlds, their experiences and their interpretation of these” (p. 87). Similarly, Morison, Gibson, Wiggington, and Crabb (2015) suggested that online spaces are valuable for “exploring how social realities are constructed through textual and visual processes” (p. 5). The literatures reviewed revealed that there is limited research examining how women, who were identified as more vulnerable than men to the negative psychological impact of the current pandemic, cope with social distancing during the COVID-19 epidemic. The pervasive use of online social media among women was also reported. Additionally, much relevant research to date has relied on quantitative survey methodology. This research thus aimed to address these gaps by qualitatively investigating how coping psychologically with social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic is represented by women on Instagram. The findings of this

study could provide insights that may inform psychological interventions that meet the unique needs of the individuals in times of this and future pandemics.

Methods

Data collection

This study obtained ethical approval by the Institutional Review Board for Burapha University. Careful attention was paid to ensuring that the participants' anonymity was maintained. The hashtags used to gather the data are not identified in this paper. Photos from posts were not presented and only descriptions about the photos were provided. The selected quotes are supplemented with a randomly assigned number.

In this study, both textual and visual data were collected as they together contribute to the overall communicative meaning, thus enhancing an understanding of the phenomenon under study (McKenna et al., 2017). The data for this study were messages and images posted on Instagram between March and August 2020 (the most intense period of social distancing) by women describing how they were trying to cope with their home quarantine life. The data were gathered using Instagram search function with the hashtags relevant to coping with social distancing. Posts were included in the analysis if they: 1) were from a different woman (one post for one woman); 2) provided some detailed descriptions about how she was trying to cope with social distancing; and 3) were in English. Comments from individual followers in response to the post were excluded. The total of 320 posts that best met the inclusion criteria was included in the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Data analysis

The data were analyzed within a social constructionist framework (Burr, 2015), following the version of reflexive thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013, 2019). The analysis was based on an inductive approach, where the analysis is conducted in a bottom-up fashion, enabling fidelity to the data. The focus of the analysis is largely on semantic meanings, with the aim to get close to the meanings attached to both textual and visual data as well as to gain a deeper understanding of some underlying meanings of the data. Textual content and its incorporated image from each individual post were treated as the same dataset and analyzed simultaneously.

The analysis began with reading and re-reading each post. In this initial stage, careful attention was paid to both textual and visual meanings and notes made of anything that appeared to be relevant to the research question. Within each dataset, codes that captured both explicit and implicit meanings of the textual and visual data were identified. After that, all codes were compiled into a long list of codes. Codes relating to a particular concepts or meanings were clustered together to develop a table of candidate themes with associated codes. These themes were further refined before the final set of themes was developed, defined, and named for writing up the analysis. From this analysis, five themes related to coping with social distancing were identified and are presented in this paper.

Results

Reflexive thematic analysis of the data identified five common themes that represent the way in which the women in this study tried to cope psychologically with social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Seeking social interactions: “We are all human and need interaction”

Many posts disclosed a struggle with social distancing and a desire for social connectedness. One example of this is a post of an image of a woman hugging a big teddy bear with the caption: “when you are not allowed to hug people...” (21). The need for the sense of connectedness to others appeared to be remarkable during the time of required social distancing.

“I’m definitely shy and an introvert by nature (despite what people think), but I never realized the psychological impact of literally not seeing another human being physically for 3 to 5 days at a time.” (29)

This message demonstrates that the emotional impact of home quarantine was so obvious that even individuals who are not normally sociable can recognize the psychological impact of the lack of social closeness. The absence of “normal” social interactions during home quarantine was viewed as “abnormal”, reflecting the loss of a sense of normalcy which is prevalent in a time of social isolation, as described by Walsh (2020). Normalcy, in this sense, seems to be something Banerjee and Rai (2020) referred to as “unlimited social interaction”. The unexpected experience of “limited” or “restricted” social interaction led to a realization that “we are all human and need interaction, touch, and compassion” (29). A desire for actual human interactions appeared to be frequently presented on Instagram in a form of nostalgia. For example, there was an attempt to get close to pre-pandemic times by engaging in pretend play.

“[Name of friend] and I are pretending that I’m going to her place for a barbecue. I don’t ever remember playing pretend without dressing up so I did!” (65)

The photo that accompanies this caption is a mirror selfie of a woman wearing a long dress. Pretending to dress up for a party in the time that social events were inhibited clearly reflected a strong desire for social gatherings. It seems that the feelings of nostalgia were triggered by loneliness, and that engaging in nostalgic memories recreated a sense of social connectedness and offered a sense of meaning in life (Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge., 2008).

Technology was also viewed as helpful for staying connected to loved ones. For example, one woman posted a photo of herself with a blossom background and wrote:

“This picture made me so happy. We’ve been sending our fam pictures from our daily life (mostly walks) to show them that we are doing good” (150).

There is also a noticeable pattern of the self-photography postings. Posting a photo of oneself on Instagram is in itself a means of connecting oneself to others, which represents an attempt to seek social connectedness in the time of social isolation. Also, a frequent ending of postings after sharing one’s own ways to cope with social distancing appeared to be in a form of questions. Some examples of the questions are “How are you coping with SOCIAL DISTANCING!?” (132) or “What’s making you feel more at ease?” (215). Such questions, aiming to seek shared experiences of struggle and coping with social distancing, may

be viewed as a way of seeking a sense of commonality and connectedness. The overall account of this theme indicates the women's attempts to seek social connection and support to gain a sense of normalcy and connectedness, and such attempts reflect the use of emotion-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Spending good times with close others: “Love is stronger than fear and death”

People basically need to feel a sense of belonging and security especially in the face of insecurity and uncertainty such as this COVID-19 pandemic. It is, thus, not surprising that spending good times with close others was pervasively presented on Instagram as a significant source of support and resilience, which is aligned with the results of prior research (Evans et al., 2020)

A selfie of a couple and family members with smiles and positive captions appeared to be presented pervasively. For example, one woman presented a photo of a smiley couple selfie with a dry landscape in the background and wrote “*love is stronger than fear and death*” (69). It seems that a selfie of a happy couple represents “love”, and a background of dry landscape reflects “fear and death”.

Photos of family engaging shared activities not only indoors, but also outdoors were also widespread. Spending time with significant others in beautifully relaxed environment appeared to be commonly seen as a helpful way for dealing with the stress and boredom of home quarantine. One woman, for instance, shared a photo of a smiley couple selfie with a flowery and sunny background, together with the following caption:

“*We decided walking around and enjoying this beautiful sunny day. The Coronavirus can't avoid this beautiful sunny day.*” (261)

Time engaging with family outdoors was seen as relaxing and relieving the tension of home confinement, as further shown in the next example.

“*Been feeling that quarantine funk lately so I decided to take the girls to the park for a picnic. The fresh air and a change of scenery were exactly what I needed, plus the girls were able to let their crazies out.*” (192, a photo of two girls sitting on a picnic blanket and hugging each other.)

A quality time spent with their significant others during social distancing was viewed as “*a little bit of light pushes away a lot of darkness*” (300) and as “*a great escape*” (175). In addition, several women expressed a sense of appreciation of such together times. For instance, a selfie shot of a woman and her child smiling was posted with the caption “*I'm learning or being reminded rather, how special these moments are*” (320). Another example is a couple selfie with the caption “*Feeling super grateful for my quarantine silver lining. Thanks for all you do to get me laughing and put a smile back on my face*” (11). These accounts suggest that the women made efforts to remind themselves of the benefits they gained from the stressful time of home quarantine. Such accounts point to “the notion of co-occurrence of negative and positive state” (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2007, p. 202) and mirror the concept of benefit reminding which is a form of meaning-focused coping (Folkman, 2008). The overall account of this theme is similar to the concept of family resilience wherein Black and Lobo (2008) identified family time and shared recreation as significant not only for surviving a crisis, but also for growing stronger mind and family ties.

Connecting with nature: “Nature is a wonderful thing”

Connecting with a natural environment in various forms, including undertaking nature-based recreation outside, either in public or private spaces, as well as being around natural objects indoors, was presented by several Instagram users as ways for coping with home quarantine during the COVID-19 pandemic. In other words, there was an attempt at “*getting the outside in*” (8) by bringing nature, such as plants and flowers, inside the house. For example, one woman posted a snapshot of an orchid with the caption “*simple pleasures in these strange times, nature is a wonderful thing, I love looking at this beautiful orchid*” (212). Another attempt was “*bringing inside out*” (8) by undertaking nature-based activities such as walking in a park or having a cup of coffee in the backyard.

Undertaking outdoor activities in a natural environment was seen as helpful by a number of women for coping with home quarantine during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fullana et al., 2020). Common images depicted are the landscape of mountains, lakes, trees, flowers, garden, sky, and sunshine. These photographs are often accompanied by positive descriptions. For instance, a woman posted an image of blue sky together with its caption “*nice to go out on a local walk and take in the views*” (25). Undertaking enjoyable activities in the presence of nature, which represents the use of emotion-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), was often depicted in ways that help maintain sanity during home quarantine, such as “*space to breathe*” (111), “*therapeutic*” (133), “*a lifesaver*” (198), as well as “*such a treat*” (55). For example, a woman shared a photo of her sitting on a stone bench with a dog near a beautiful lake, with the accompanying caption:

“*I was getting irritable and frustrated being at home all day, but it was also too easy and tempting to hang out on the couch or work all night on the computer. Now my outside time feels like I've gone on a trip, such a treat*”. (55)

A comparison of going outside with going on a trip indicates a sense of pleasure gained from such activity. Why might the women find connecting with nature helpful? Drawing on three concepts of biophilia, attention restoration and stress reduction, Capaldi, Passmore, Nisbet, Zelenski, and Dopko (2015) explained that the need to connect with nature is an innate part of human nature; in order to survive, humans need to rely on nature. Additionally, engaging in nature requires effortless attention, allowing individuals to act freely, and leading to a reduction in psychophysiological stress. This means that engagement with nature helps generate positive emotions or “*the feeling good component of wellbeing*” (p.3) and promotes a sense of meaningfulness, autonomy, and vitality or “*the functioning well component of wellbeing*” (p.5).

Finding pleasure at home: “Adding colors to my quarantine home”

Engaging in favorite and pleasurable indoor activities (e.g., cooking, decorating home, drawing, and listening to music) was another coping resource commonly presented on Instagram. Among the indoor activities presented, cooking and baking, spending time with pets, as well as reading and writing seem to be most popular. One woman, for instance, showed a photo of her holding a dish of food, with the caption “*throughout this quarantine, I've really been leaning into my love of cooking to stay sane*” (57).

Time with pets appeared to be another popular indoor activity during home quarantine. Pets, mostly dogs and cats, were seen as “*so soothing and calming*” (13, a photo of a cat sleeping), as “*it would*

just make me feel better because having any sort of furry companion can make anybody's day better" (61, a photo of a dog and a rabbit sitting nearby). Photos of pets often presented with positive narrative, for example, the description that "*I will be fine at home during quarantine, I have my cat*" was presented with a photo of a cat lying on a bed (10). Other different activities were also presented, such as decorating home with flowers "*adding colors to my quarantine home*" (39, a photo of flowers) and taking a bath during mid-day captioned "*mid-day bath. Because why not?*" (3, a photo of feet in a bathtub).

Although the women reported using different activities to find pleasure at home, they seemed to use those activities with a shared purpose, which was to reduce boredom and loneliness of social distancing, and this reflects the use of emotion-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This is relevant to what has been documented in recent studies, indicating the pervasive use of leisure in the time of social distancing as an "escape from stress of the disease, unemployment, and boredom of home confinement" (Stodolska, 2020, p.4).

Regulating emotions: "Be gentle with your heart space in the meantime"

Efforts to regulate emotion to remain positive about oneself and life during social distancing were widespread on Instagram. Often, quotes speak to the significance of being happy, which can be achieved through personal agency, being able to exercise control over their circumstances. Many women expressed their attempts to regulate their emotions by paying attention to the positive aspects of social distancing, as illustrated in the fairly long description below:

"There are many things to feel worried or stressed about. We have been trying to look at the positive. We nap when we want, we can stay in our pajamas all day long, and we have this time to be together and bond with our baby. I won't lie that I'm not a little sad that our families are missing out on her being so little, but I know that there will be many more memories to make when it's safer" (6, a photo of a baby sleeping).

It is apparent that there is a mixture of both negativity and positivity presented in the above caption, indicating the woman's effort to counterbalance the negative sides of social distancing with the positive sides of it. Her account resonates well with the concept of the positive side of trauma as described by Janoff-Bulman and Berger (2000), the experience of trauma survivors "is not a case of either-or, of losses versus gains, but rather of losses and gains coexisting" (p. 32). Similarly, Folkman (2010) indicated that "positive emotions occur alongside negative emotions throughout intensely stressful period" (p. 902), and these positive emotions play a critical role in sustaining coping efforts over time.

"Positive" music and books, meditation, as well as some physical efforts, such as exercising or putting on make-up and dressing up while staying at home, were also drawn upon to experience some positive emotions. For example, one woman posted a selfie snapshot of her wearing a red top and pink make-up on her face, with the corresponding caption:

"It's a #workfromyourcouch kind of day. Got my workout in this morning, put my make up on and I feel like a new person! It's crazy how little things can change your day for the better! What do you do to make your day better?" (54).

For this woman, maintaining her good appearance means maintaining her good mental health. Such practices appeared to be drawn upon by the women purposefully, not for entertaining and relaxing, but for soothing and healing. Emotional regulation was also presented in the form of an effort to be more realistic. To be realistic is to accept that “*it’s okay to not to be okay*” (215), “*to control the controllable*” (27) and “*to reinvent yourself and NOT get lost in a false reality*” (29).

This final theme represents the attempts of women to reappraise the meaning of the stressful event and infuse ordinary events with positive meaning in order to generate positive emotions. These attempts reflect the desire to feel good and the use of meaning-focused coping (Folkman, 1997, 2008). Overall, the women’s various efforts to regulate their emotions indicate their struggles, and, at the same time, their attempts to actively take control of their emotions. Such emotional regulation is significant in this unsettling time of the current pandemic, as Folkman (2008) indicated that “the desire to feel good takes on critical importance for maintaining mental and physical well-being during difficult times” (p. 11).

Concluding Discussion and Implications

The overall findings of this study indicate that the women appeared to draw upon common resources to mitigate negative impacts and bolster positive emotions, which are in close alignment with the notion of “ordinary magic” (Masten, 2015). According to this notion, resilience does not depend on extraordinary resources, but only requires ordinary resources such as a close and good relationship with significant others, interacting with nature, pursuing leisure activities, and regulating emotions, as represented by the women in this study. The women appeared to hope that drawing on those ordinary resources would help them get through this extraordinary time of social distancing. The findings also support the view that women typically use the “tend and befriend” response to cope with emotional stress (Taylor et al., 2000). The tending response of women in this study involved connecting with nature, finding pleasure at home, and emotional regulation. Seeking social interaction and spending time with significant others reflected the befriending response of the women.

Although some accounts of the women reflected the use of problem-focused coping, such as making fabric masks or following the social distancing rules when going outside, the overall findings represent more common use of positive emotional-focused and meaning-focused coping to manage the negative psychological impact of social distancing. These findings were broadly in line with those of other recent studies indicating that women were more likely to cope with the social isolation of COVID-19 through seeking social connection and emotional support using social media than men (Prowse et al., 2021), and that meaning-focused coping was a common coping strategy that has been used to maintain positive emotions during the COVID-19 outbreak (August & Dapkewicz, 2020). The use of such positive coping strategies reflects “the desire to feel good” in the midst of a difficult time (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2007) and was found to be strongly associated with a decrease of negative psychological symptoms, such as stress, anxiety, and depression (Eisenbeck, Pérez-Escobar, & Carreno, 2021).

Drawing upon the transactional theory of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the psychological struggles of women suggest that they perceived social distancing following the COVID-19 outbreak as harmful to their normal way of living (primary appraisal), and the women seemed to appraise

the situation as uncontrollable. This cognitive appraisal led the women to look for personal and social resources (secondary appraisal) and use the available resources they had for the shared therapeutic purpose (coping). It should be noted that the findings of this study, which represented the overall positive coping, are not a reflection of what the women did or achieved, but rather only one possible representation of what they believed to be helpful and, therefore, tried to achieve.

The findings of this study point to the importance of therapeutic interventions that address existential concerns and aim to cultivate meaning and promote human flourishing in time of suffering. During time of crisis, such as this COVID-19 pandemic, counselors (as well as other therapeutic practitioners) are likely to encounter more existential issues in their therapeutic work, such as loneliness, anxiety, and boredom. As such, it is essential for counselors to prepare themselves well for working with such issues. In working with the existential issues, based on the findings of this and other studies (e.g., Eisenbeck et al., 2021), therapeutic work should focus not only on exploring and understanding suffering (to reduce negative emotions) but also on reappraising meanings and facilitating personal flourishing (to promote positive emotions). Interventions based on the more integrative framework of existential positive psychology (e.g., Wong, 2020), which emphasizes working on both negative and positive aspects of existential concerns, seem to be especially relevant to this current time of global crisis. In addition, as indicated in this and previous research (Prowse et al., 2021), social media has become a significant coping resource for women during this COVID-19 pandemic, it would, therefore, be useful to use social media as a means of disseminating adaptive coping-related knowledge to a wider (female) audience online.

In terms of the limitations of this study, it should be first noted that, due to the nature of social media data, there was lack of individual and contextual information of the women in this study. Such background information may help develop a deeper understanding of the underlying meanings of the data. In addition, the posts included in the analysis were limited only to female users and to different women, the findings thus provided a broad representation of the women's accounts. Future research may wish to explore accounts of psychological coping of different groups of people, especially vulnerable groups who are likely to be at high risk of negative psychological effects.

Despite those limitations, this research makes a significant contribution in being the first qualitative study that investigated how coping with social distancing is represented by women on Instagram. This study thus contributes to the limited existing literature in psychology that used Instagram as a qualitative data source, and to the emerging literature on coping with the psychological impact of social distancing in the time of the current pandemic. The overall findings, which demonstrate the women's coping efforts to maintain positive emotions through the use of ordinary psychological resources, suggest that therapeutic interventions aimed at flourishing through suffering may offer adaptive promise for promoting psychological well-being and adaptive coping in times of anxiety and isolation, such as this pandemic.

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