



Staying Anxious or Being Optimistic? Understanding Apparel and Merchandising Students' Psychological Well-being during the Pandemic of COVID-19

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Introduction and Purpose In March 2021, university campuses across the United States had to close due to an unprecedented challenge caused by the pandemic of COVID-19. College students have been under higher levels of stress due to unexpected changes in their schools and limited social interactions with peers. A survey indicated that 32% of college student participants knew a close family member or a friend who had been sick with COVID-19, and 60% of them had lost incomes (Whilans, Giurge, Macchia, & Yemiscigil, 2020). The purpose of the study was to understand how university students managed their personal and school lives while facing the pandemic. Specifically, the study had two specific research questions: (1) what were the common environmental stressors for university students during the pandemic and (2) how did the university students respond to the pandemic and manage their school, work, and social lives while maintaining personal well-being during the unexpected shift in their routines?

Theoretical Background and Literature Review This study incorporated the theory of psychological well-being (PWB) proposed by Ryff and Singer (2008). PWB is a multifaceted concept that consists of six dimensions: *self-acceptance, positive relations with others, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, and autonomy* (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Singer, 2008). The combined function of these dimensions provides a holistic analysis of one's PWB. PWB has been found correlated with one's psychological constructs, such as personal goals (Riediger & Freund, 2004), emotion regulation (Gross & John, 2003), and coping strategies (Kling, Seltzer, & Ryff, 1997). Higher levels of PWB can lead to better immune functions, better neuroendocrine regulations, lower cardiovascular risks, and better sleep (Ryff & Singer, 2008). The theory enables the researchers to explore college students' psychological well-being from a comprehensive perspective, considering the wide impacts of the pandemic on their lives.

Method The modified critical incident technique (Ingaldi & Brozova, 2020) was utilized to collect qualitative data through an open-ended questionnaire. University students enrolled in three apparel and merchandising-related courses at two western universities in the United States were recruited to participate in the study. The questionnaire included demographic-related questions and 11 questions regarding environmental stressors, feelings, daily routines, and social relationships. Data were analyzed using the R software. The R package for Qualitative Data Analysis (RDQA) can assist in the analysis of textual data and support the character-level coding (Huang, 2011). Data coding was employed to categorize and assign a short phrase that represented the category related to the questions. Themes were then identified and connected with the six dimensions of psychological well-being theory utilized in the study. The three researchers discussed the themes and resolved disagreements to develop cohesive schemes.

Results A total of 140 university students ($age_{mean} = 21.4$; 84% female) participated in the study. Built upon the theory of Psychological Well-Being (PWB), the study identified themes that connected to the

core dimensions of the theory. To answer RQ #1, the common environmental stressors for the participants included school, health, and finance as indicated in the framework of consumer responses to threats. Sometimes the stressors were combined (e.g., family and school). For instance, a participant shared, “I find myself consistently stressed because being back home with my family puts a lot of pressure on my school life... I am responsible for making them food, cleaning the house...By the time I am ready to do my schoolwork, I am tired and unmotivated.” (P #74). To answer RQ#2, data analyses showed that most participants demonstrated many negative feelings (e.g., frustration, sadness, anxiety) and few participants reported some positive feelings (e.g., thankful, optimistic). The positive feelings can be explained by the terror management theory which proposes that people are more likely to experience gratitude to what they have and help other people when they are made aware of the limitations of life (Greenberg & Arndt, 2011). The different feelings consequently triggered the participants to adopt new behaviors (e.g., cooking) or adjust their existing behaviors (e.g., sleeping more). Further, results showed strong connections with the four dimensions from PWB: (1) positive relationships with others, (2) personal growth, (3) environmental mastery, and (4) purpose in life were well reflected in the data. Most participants reported that they had strong social support from family members, peers, schools, and churches and utilized different electronic means to stay connected. The *personal growth* dimension was witnessed mostly through the participants’ better time management and choices to try new behaviors such as cooking and reading. Several themes emerged from the data that reflected the *environmental mastery* dimension, such as maintaining personal health (e.g., wearing masks and washing hands frequently), improving living situations (e.g., working on home improvement projects), and developing new habits (e.g., shopping online or frequent take-out orders). The results mirrored the dimension of *purpose in life* on the lower end of the continuum, however, meaning that many participants reported a lack of motivation, losing focus in life, and feeling distracted. Further, while data analyses did not reveal many themes related to the dimensions of *self-acceptance* and *autonomy*, few participants reflected on themselves in the challenging situations and found positive aspects in their “pandemic” lives, such as this quote “I have become more disciplined ... now that I am not in school, it feels like I had to buckle down and create my own schedule...” (P #69).

Discussion and Conclusions This study aimed to understand university students’ environmental stressors and how they maintained their psychological well-being while managing school, work, and their social lives. Qualitative data revealed that most participants found ways to manage their lives and social relationships through the pandemic, which mirrored the theory of Psychological Well-Being. Particularly, the study identified four dimensions of PWB that participants had undergone during the process: (1) positive relationships with others, (2) personal growth, (3) environmental mastery, and (4) purpose in life. As the pandemic has continued to impact individuals’ lives at different levels, the results of the study suggested different areas that could be prioritized with further management and assistance from university administrators. It is beneficial for universities to develop coping programs that help motivate students and promote positive thinking and optimistic outlooks through the life of the pandemic. Limitations of the study included the samples from mostly apparel design and merchandising students.

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