

Challenges and Opportunities Faced by Working Students Amidst Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic brought drastic changes in various institutions worldwide. It catalyzed the implementation of new-normal learning through alternative learning modalities. This descriptive phenomenological study aimed to explore the challenges and opportunities encountered by working students during the pandemic. Using criteria, the researchers have purposively chosen nine (9) working students from a public state university. A written interview questionnaire was utilized to gather data, which the researchers sent to the informants through the Messenger application. The informants were instructed to answer the question using Gibbs' Reflective Model as a guide, where they needed to elaborate the description of their experience, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and action plan. The gathered data were analyzed using thematic data analysis. The results included themes such as themes (1) challenges perceived and (2) opportunities gained while working and studying. Further, the researchers generated six (6) categories from the analyzed data. It revealed that working students during the pandemic encounter challenges since they (1) recognize emotional and physical limitations and (2) experience lesser in-person connection and mobilization. Regardless, they gained opportunities (3) to develop character and skills, (4) in their finances, (5) to establish a positive outlook, and (6) to develop coping mechanisms. Thus, working students encounter obstacles in this new normal yet obtain benefits integral to their education and personal development.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, working students, challenges, opportunities, public state university

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the status quo since March 2019, which affected institutions like schools and the economy. The learners, specifically working students, encountered

opportunities and numerous challenges posed by the new modality utilized to resume classes in the new normal (Singh et al., 2021). Furthermore, working students, as self-sustaining, persist in earning despite additional challenges because of motivations like their socio-economic problems, academic fees, and an opportunity for personal development (Lessky & Unger, 2023).

The challenges that are faced by working students amidst the pandemic have distinct factors compared to the pre-pandemic situation. According to (Plakhotnik et al., 2021), the number of working students has significantly decreased since the onset of the pandemic. However, some students still choose to work despite the threats of the virus. The changes in the academic environment and working conditions affected several factors that can become a challenge or an opportunity for working students. The study of (Javornik & Klemenčič Mirazchiyski, 2023), reveals diverse results from different schools with numerous determinants. It conveys that the challenges and opportunities differ at varying locations and have established specific solutions. Consequently, having a specified set of informants could garner a discrete result to determine precise conclusions.

The existing pandemic's accounting, social, and psychological health implications have greatly challenged students and further emphasized their strengths (Acoba, 2024). In some marginalized locations, acquiring a job is a necessity rather than a choice (Curtis et al., 2019). They must work to save and raise finances. Working students spend money efficiently and work incredibly hard for the things required. Students must pay for the necessities of being a student, such as rent, buying books and food, and paying for transportation and social activities, in addition to contributing to their learning experience. In contrast to the benefits of working while studying, college students face numerous challenges in achieving their best academic performance.

A variety of issues, such as time management, financial struggles, insufficient sleep, social activities, and, for some students, caring for their families, can jeopardize a student's academic performance (Ng, 2020). Students also face financial hardships that can risk their education, a new living environment that creates learning difficulties, and a lack of resources for online classes. Working in college is one of the ways to pay off debt since personal income is one factor that affects financial accountability.

Apart from this, studies show that students who operate up to thirty (30) hours per week perform just as well or greater academically: excellent time-management skills are required for future accomplishment, decrease the necessity for education loans and the resulting indebtedness, generate career-related expertise in the field as one clarifies objectives, obtain self-responsibility, and build connections. Furthermore, the positive outcome of working while studying is improved independence, the ability to budget, organize schedules, and develop some soft skills in terms of communication and problem-solving skills. Moreover, students can acquire specific skills in the workplace that they cannot obtain in school. Distinct challenges and opportunities faced by working students have been identified. Several studies showed how students perceived their decisions and what they encountered as an opportunity or challenge (Farhi et al., 2023); (Amerstorfer & Freiiin Von Münster-Kistner, 2021); (Montenegro-Rueda et al., 2023). Authorities implemented restrictions and several safety protocols during the pandemic, which could be a challenge for working students to find a job and manage their time in balancing their school work. Despite the experiences, one could perceive it as an opportunity to develop new skills and widen their knowledge. These challenges are anchored in the Zero-Sum Theory which suggests that employment could worsen a student's academic performance because of the time spent on working hours. Opportunities, on the other hand, are anchored in the Human Capital Theory, which suggests that the employment of a student can be supplementary to the added skills and knowledge that they can obtain while working (Mainga et al., 2022).

With the literature and theories presented, the researchers assumed that working students face various challenges and opportunities during the pandemic. Thus, the study intended to answer the query about the experiences of working students amidst the pandemic. Specifically, it aspired to answer the questions (1) what are the challenges encountered by working students amidst the pandemic and (2) what are the opportunities encountered by working students amidst the pandemic?

It will shed light on the challenges and opportunities encountered by working students during the new-normal education and working environment. The results will present a recourse for universities to acknowledge the impact of the mentioned predicament. Additionally, it may recommend updates to existing school policies and propose interventions that universities could administer to address or alleviate the dilemma of working students.

Methodology

Research Design

The research design used in the study is Descriptive Phenomenology. Descriptive Phenomenology is appropriate to use in the study because the researchers aim to describe the subjective experiences of working students.

Informants

The researchers utilized purposive sampling to select their informants. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that allows the proponents to deliberately choose informants who can shed light on a particular theme, topic, or phenomenon (FormPlus, 2022). The researchers selected nine (9) informants in this method. Specifically, the qualified informants are (a) a Bonafide student of a public state university, (b) a working student for at least four months during the distance learning, (c) male or female, (d) at least eighteen (18) years of age, and (e) undergraduate student. Furthermore, the researchers will note the profile of the informants to provide a profound background.

Data Gathering Instrument

The researchers used a semi-structured form to collect open-ended qualitative data. Semi-structured is an appropriate approach to help researchers further develop their understanding of the answer from the informants (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The researchers utilized an electronically produced interview form following Graham Gibbs' reflective cycle to gather data created through Google Docs. The questionnaire specifically assessed working students' views on challenges and opportunities amidst the pandemic by inquiring about their descriptions, feelings, analysis, evaluation, conclusions, and actions regarding their experience (The University of Edinburgh, 2020). Questions were modified and adjusted accordingly, which enabled the researchers to retrieve the needed data effectively.

Data Collection Procedure

The researchers sent formal consent to the chosen informants through the Messenger application to notify and confirm their participation. Further, the informants and the researchers discussed queries and concerns in this communication platform, which is convenient to utilize and navigate because of its familiarity. Subsequently, a document file that contained the interview questions was sent to their messenger accounts. Then, the informants were given ample time to answer the questionnaire while using Gibbs' Reflective Model. Moreover, the researchers instructed the informants to return their answered documents through Messenger to any of the researchers before or on the provided deadline. Additionally, the researchers directly messaged the informants through their Messenger accounts. This method allowed researchers to verify the data they received, inquire for clarification, and provide additional questions to address the research problem thoroughly.

Data Analysis Procedure

The researchers used thematic data analysis to analyze and investigate the data gathered from the working students. Thematic is a qualitative method analysis that interprets patterns that

will answer the research questions (Chawla & Wood, 2021). The procedure was based on Caulfield's (2022) steps on thematic analysis. The researchers first thoroughly reviewed the data through in-depth reading. After which, the data is coded and highlighted into sections, each having a label to describe the content. The codes were then used to generate themes, which enabled researchers to define and formulate conclusions. After this, researchers grouped the data into patterns to help answer research questions. Further, the identified and organized patterns were displayed in textual type. The data gathered verification, implications, and conclusion were made from the findings.

Reliability

To ensure the reliability of this qualitative research, the researchers have observed specific actions. The researchers utilized credible data from existing literature found on the internet to build the background of the study, which resulted in a well-established research foundation. Further, the proponents checked the reliability and validity of the research instrument by consulting research advisers and credible professionals. Moreover, the researchers dismissed their biases in interpreting the data to uphold the objectivity of the results.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers sought the approval of concerned academic authorities for the proposal of collecting data and instruments to be used in data collection. Furthermore, the proponents have adhered to ethical standards and secured consent in selecting informants and collecting data. The researchers provided informed consent for the purposefully chosen informants of the study through a Word Document. Specifically, the informed consent contained the background of the study, the data collection protocol, and the rights of the participants. First, it elaborated on the nature of the research study to shed light on the opportunities and challenges of working students amidst the pandemic. Second, it discussed the data collection method to orient the informants about the process they will undergo. And lastly, it conveyed their right to withdraw at any time and their right to confidentiality throughout the study about the Republic Act No. 10173 or the Data Privacy Act. Further, the researchers solely used the data they collected for academic and research purposes.

Results

The experiences of the public state university working students amidst the pandemic were brought to light. Two (2) significant themes were identified from the written interview documents of nine (9) informants. The categories generated were the (1) challenges perceived, and the (2) opportunities gained while working and studying.

Challenges Perceived

Working students' experiences amidst the pandemic have distinct grounds for how they perceive and deal with their current situation. There were two (2) categories identified that are relevant to the challenges perceived, namely (1) recognized limitations on emotional and physical self and (2) lesser in-person connection and mobilization.

Recognized Limitations on Emotional and Physical Self

There are two (2) subcategories identified about the recognized limitations on emotional and physical self, namely (1) physical constraints and (2) emotional constraints.

• Emotional constraints

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged working students' capacity to handle their emotional being. Working students have experienced strong demands on their time, resulting in conflicts of priorities, which then creates emotional suffering and risks their physical health (Dias, 2021). The informants unveiled their emotional challenges in working while studying, saying:

JM: *"...it was hard for me to take things easily and sometimes I ended up so stressed and easily angered because of tiredness"*

Gay: *"Most of the time I feel pressured and anxious since I have to attend my classes from morning until afternoon then I have to finish everything so that I can have free time to freshen up and be ready for work".*

• Physical Constraints

According to the study conducted by (Stores et al., 2023), working students believed that sleep deprivation and lesser time consumed by their work heavily impact their physical health and performance in school. This result has also been reflected in the informants saying:

Jam: *"I slept late I would wake up late. Reason why I can't attend online classes in the morning...I am really tired because I was sleep-deprived for how many weeks of cramming, the reason why I haven't passed it on time."*

LM: *"As a working student, one of my greatest challenges is having less time to study my lesson. Thus, I find it difficult to accomplish my paperwork because I usually go back home tired and exhausted"*.

Lesser in-person Connection and Mobilization

There were two (2) subcategories identified about the lesser in-person connection and mobilization, namely (1) pandemic constraints and (2) social constraints.

• Pandemic Constraints

The pandemic brought limitations to the options and opportunities of students for development, given the closing of establishments and institutions. Due to restrictions and situational changes happening amidst the pandemic, working students have faced significant experiences in working and finding a job. The global pandemic has added additional labor to students' access to their school responsibilities and work situation (Tadesse & Muluye, 2020). One of the informants revealed his experience saying:

Tony: *"I feel stressed because I am confined in one place, then the most difficult situation in my work is that we travel from different places, which is very hassling to finish the task."*

• Social constraints

The pressure of time management is one of the sought struggles of working students finding the balance between their school, family, and work (Alyami et al., 2021). Working students' responses revealed how they sacrificed their social and social media lives because they considered their work and rest.

Jam: *"I also wanted to join some extracurricular activities at the university. Or join some organization. But I would always consider my job because if I joined them, my time for rest would be decreased...Another bad experience is having no social life. My friends would always ask me to hang out"*

Informants also revealed their experiences with their peers, teachers, and work colleagues

saying:

MF: *"There was an instance when I was still new and starting to learn, I was scolded a lot of times and people talked about me behind my back"*

Jam: *"I am anxious about what they would think about me. But I also think that it is their duty sometimes to know the reason first before they say harsh things...they admired me for being an independent person and they're also the ones that motivate me to go on"*

Opportunities Gained

Regardless of the challenges that these working students face in their daily responsibilities and obligations; during this pandemic, they encounter opportunities that complement their adversities. These opportunities are identified into four (4) categories, namely, (1) character and skills development, (2) financial opportunities, (3) establishing a positive stance, and (4) creating constructive coping mechanisms.

Development of Character and Skills

There were two (2) significant subcategories of character and skills development, namely (1) self-development and (2) self-fulfillment.

• Self-development

According to (Sato et al., 2023), the flexibility and adoption of new normal situations is a way to enhance working students' strategies in self-paced training and practices. The opportunity of having a job provided these working students to develop new skills and character development.

Gay: *"I know how to multitask and prioritize responsibilities."*

RJ: *"I learned how to bike, for me to be able to go to my tutee's house even though I have no "sugar" [accompany]."*

• Self-Fulfillment

Overcoming the mentioned challenges provides a sense of fulfillment for working students. It makes them pleased and proud, as reflected by their responses.

Ed: *"The sense of fulfillment every time you receive your paycheck is unique and non-existent when you are a full-time student"*

One of the informants also learned self-discipline to become more efficient saying:

JM: *"Believing that I can have myself disciplined and good time management, I am now earning on my own."*

Financial Opportunities

There were two (2) subcategories of financial opportunities, namely (1) economic freedom and (2) self-support.

• Economic Freedom

Apart from personal opportunities, it is evident that working students enjoy economic freedom while studying in the new normal mode of education. Financial support is an essential part of working students to continue in college (Qi et al., 2022). The online and flexible learning modality, which the pandemic catalyzed, positively contributes to this experience.

Gay: *"There are a lot of opportunities because we are in an online class, I earn money and study at the same time."*

JM: *"It was overwhelming that despite the pandemic, I was allowed to earn money at an early age and help a community."*

• Self-Support

According to (Ferreira et al., 2021), one of the driving forces of students to work is the desire to support themselves financially and be independent. The main reason why students work is because of money. This is reflected in the responses of the informants saying:

MF: *"I was able to support myself financially and I was able to learn how to be independent."*

LM: *"I receive enough income intended for my monetary needs."*

Established a Positive Stance

The new normal education significantly differs from traditional face-to-face learning, which manifests changes and requires adjustment, especially for students. Undeniably, these working students revealed the serious reasons they have to enter jobs while studying. There were two (2) identified subcategories for establishing a positive stance, namely (1) intrinsic motivation and (2) extrinsic motivation.

• Intrinsic Motivation

The responses of the informants revealed that they have the intrinsic motivation to work while studying. This kind of motivation is when a person does something because they consider it personally fulfilling.

Gay: *"I am committed to my studies as well as my work and it is this passion that keeps me inspired and enthusiastic to do my excellent efforts."*

Tony: *"I need to continue being me, and sacrifice if needed to attain a goal."*

An informant added that the privilege of studying at a public state university and serving a community is her inspiration.

JM: *"But I always had in mind that this job and the chance of being in a prestigious university ... I was inspired by the Lord to help the church where my spirituality grew."*

• Extrinsic Motivation

Informants included that they also have the extrinsic motivation to apply as working students. Extrinsic motivation refers to completing a task or behaving in a certain way for reasons other than avoiding punishment or earning a reward.

Tony: *"... this pandemic brings advantages... I'll never be a burden to my family... a blessing not just for me, as well as to my family."*

Ed: *"It is also nice to have a feeling of independence and self-reliance because you are earning the money that you are spending."*

Further, one informant emphasized the case of poverty and dreams.

Jam: *"We have dreams. The reason may be poverty or familial issues, or you're living alone, or you just don't want to rely on your parents. That left us with no choice. We need to be those independent and hardworking students to provide for our own needs. We are trapped."*

Additionally, the flexibility of online classes is another reason mentioned by the informant.

JM: *"I decided to have this job because during the pandemic we all had these online Classes."*

Created Constructive Coping Mechanisms

The various challenges and dilemmas faced by the informants encourage them to cope. Their coping mechanisms were identified into two (2) categories, namely (1) physical coping methods and (2) cognitive coping methods.

•Physical Coping methods

There are different strategies for how working students cope depending on their situations, social support, and personal resources. This enabled them to create a plan to achieve their goals (Chen et al., 2023). To ease and detach themselves from their responsibilities, pressure, and challenges, one revealed that she travels and pampers themselves.

Gay: "My coping strategies are traveling, drinking coffee, sleeping, and watching K-Drama." Additionally, resting and taking care of the body help the informants to cope.

JM: "And the most important thing is giving my body rest when I have time because a healthy body is a productive one."

LM: "... taking care of my health as well."

•Cognitive Coping Methods

The coping mechanism also involves cognitive resources to adhere to the demands of work to reduce the pressure on their tasks (Bakker & De Vries, 2021). The informants revealed that they find initiative, multitasking, and managing their time effectively to cope with the challenges. Additionally, they adopt cognitive reframing or positive thinking to pursue their tasks and goals regardless of the difficulties.

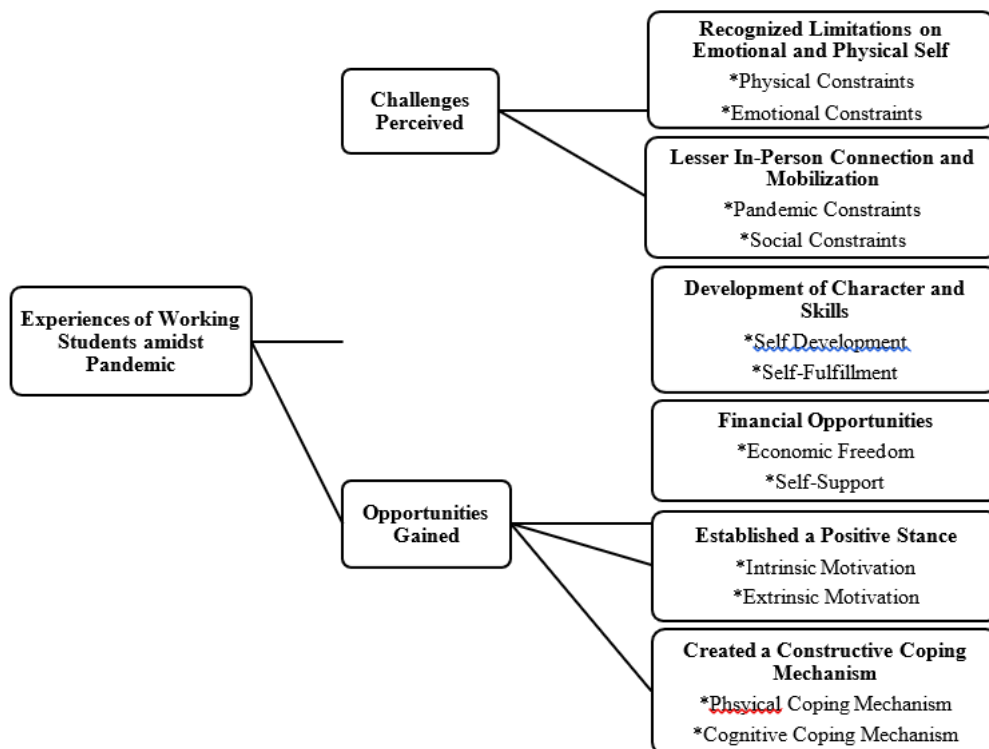


Figure 1. Demonstration of meaningful categories of the study

LM: *"I decided to manage my time and use it wisely. I use my [free] time in studying my lesson so I won't be piled up. Lastly, I am sure to handle stress positively."*

Rose: *"... coping with difficulties and challenges might be tough, we need to always think positive, and never forget to pray for guidance and peace of mind as we live our lives to the fullest."* Ed: *"If there is one thing that I learned from this experience, it will be: be always prepared to get out of your comfort zone, because there will be times that you will be forcefully dragged by fate or by choice."*

Discussion

This study aimed to determine the experiences of public state university working students amidst the pandemic. Specifically, this study aims to answer questions: (1) What are the challenges working students encounter amidst the pandemic; and (2) What are the opportunities encountered by working students amidst the pandemic? Working students' experiences amidst the pandemic were elaborated into two (2) significant themes: opportunities and challenges. After carefully reviewing the written interview, six (6) major categories were selected from the data collected. The researchers carefully analyzed the set of findings of this research in the context of related literature and its earlier studies.

The pandemic disrupted our status quo and changed the whole course of the systems in the world, especially in the education (Broadbent et al., 2023). Specifically, it urged the education department to systemize curricular responses based on evidence and implement comprehensive online resources (Tan & Chua, 2024). It is in response to the discrepancies in the requisites for the implementation of education: internet speed, cost of materials, and mode of delivery. Ordinary students have their learning experience altered; working students also encounter new circumstances that serve as their perceived challenges and opportunities.

The findings of this study implied that the informants encounter emotional and physical limitations and reduced interaction with the world due to the pandemic added to the constrictions they experience as they work and study. Demands from their work and studies physically and emotionally exhaust students, influencing their situation and performance. It supports that students are mostly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The result could trigger their foreground stressors, and even new ones will be added.

Further, some informants narrated that they experienced discrimination from their fellow students and professors. Working students during the pandemic experience stressful lives, lacking sleep, learning difficulty, anxiety, and burnout. Additionally, the health restrictions caused by the pandemic further distanced them from peers and activities they deemed significant in their lives and even caused further constraints as they traveled to work. It supplements the ZeroSum Theory stating that working could adversely affect the academic performance of working students because of the time spent on working hours, which the pandemic restrictions worsened. Thus, research articles and a theory support one of this study's themes, which emphasizes that working students face adversities unique to their situation as employers.

The analyzed data revealed that working students experience various benefits from their affiliation to a job while studying despite the pandemic. It includes the self-development and financial opportunities that drive their motivation. First, they obtain development opportunities where they enhance their time management, confidence, decision-making, multitasking, and communication skills. Study shows that working students gain better skills such as time management and confidence in their work and university. Moreover, working reinforces such competencies and responsibilities to students in school.

Consequently, the informants narrated that these improvements catalyze personal fulfillment as they exemplify self-discipline and a sense of identity. Working while studying

catalyzes a progressive effect on the skills and autonomy of students. Second, the experiences highlighted the financial opportunities they enjoy while working, where they possess economic freedom and self-support as they continuously earn while attending school. It reflects the motivation of students to apply for work, which will provide for their financial necessities and help them. It delivers a positive reflection of the financial disposition of students as they emphasize the opportunity for financial security amid distance learning during the new normal. These opportunities synchronize with the Human Capital Theory, which states that working students can supplement their potential to gain new skills and information while working.

Additionally, the purpose of the informant's work varies from intrinsic to extrinsic motivations. It includes their commitment to education and financial independence, spiritual inspiration, the pride of being a public state university student, and the opportunity to help with financial needs inside the household. Moreover, their experiences in finding jobs vary. Most informants emphasized that providing their personal needs and wants or financial independence is their significant motivation to commit as a working student despite the crisis brought by the pandemic. There is limited literature supporting students' motivation to work while studying, which is a compelling phenomenon to create further research.

The informants strategize as they deal with their adversities by applying physical and cognitive coping mechanisms, including strolling, self-pampering, tasks and time management, and cognitive reframing. It significantly helps them refresh, restart, and organize themselves as they juggle their responsibilities. Working students find time for leisure activities, have a positive outlook, and manage daily routines to cope with school and work responsibilities pressure, and stress. The study also implies that students with a deeper intrinsic motivation tended to perceive positive beliefs and the other way around for students with low intrinsic motivation. Further, their resilience and mentioned motivations encourage them to cope through activities that are beneficial to them. Working students have experienced both negative and positive impacts. The positive side includes earning money, developing skills, gaining social connectedness, and experiencing different cultural working conditions in which they can adjust and explore. The researchers' acquired result was almost similar to the above statement. However, the difference was in terms of their social and mobility constraints. Some informants work from home amidst the pandemic in which certain restrictions were implemented, limiting them to one place. Furthermore, the negative impacts were also similar to the physical and emotional stress because of the demand for physical responsibilities in the workplace and school; however, the informants pointed out that they have the freedom to control their time and tasks and develop their skills.

Indeed, working students benefit significantly as they hustle during the pandemic. However, it is undeniable that they struggle, especially with balancing their responsibilities in school and work. So, these findings of the research support the hypothesis that working students experience challenges and opportunities during the pandemic. Thus, the researchers recommend that the university where the informants are affiliated implement interventions that would address the urgent challenges that the working students encounter, especially in the cases of mental support and scheduled deadlines and classes during the pandemic and with the perceived limited face-to-face classes.

This current research has various limitations and gaps that future researchers should acknowledge and address. First, this is qualitative descriptive phenomenological research with a limited number of undergraduate working student informants from a public state university. It creates a limitation upon the experiences shared by the informants and the result of the study that is related to the institution. Second, the socioeconomic status of the informants was not specified as

well as their earnings, which could have further shed light on the findings. Future researchers may include the socioeconomic status of the informants in the demography could have specified or brought more insights about their financial experiences. Thirdly, the researchers utilized a written interview, which might have caused the distinction of the results through self-reported bias. Nonetheless, the mentioned limitations in this study did not hinder the researchers from acquiring the needed information to answer the research questions.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.”

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