

# Innovations

## **Assessing Ways through Research and Augmentation (AWRA): Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on the Mental Health of College Students in the Philippines Phase 2**

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**Abstract:** *The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic changed the overall educational landscape of the country. It shifted the attention to how the students handled the predicaments presented by the situation. This phenomenological study explored lived experiences of college students from both public and private institutions in the Province of Samar, Philippines and how the pandemic impact their mental health. Accompanying the semi-structured interview is the color association technique to best describe their emotions and reactions. Sixteen (16) college students were included in the study. After data analysis, specifically thematic analysis under Colaizzi Process, three themes emerged: (1) ColōremQuaestionis (Colors of Problem); (2) ColōremMarte (Colors of Initiative); and (3) ColōremSpei (Colors of Hope). Colors of problem, represented by red, black, and brown, centered around the danger, negativity, and sadness felt by the college students during the pandemic. It created a feeling of uncertainty among them which led to the development of anxiety and depression. Colors of initiative, represented by purple, blue, and green, focused on intuition, logic, and determination of the college students in seeking good support system. Aside from a good support system, they used innovative alternatives to address challenges felt, overall protecting their mental health in the process. Colors of hope, represented by yellow, orange, and teal, focused on the undying hope, enthusiasm and stability of the college students in traversing over the problems brought about by the pandemic. By slowly incorporating to their psyche that everything changes and slowly moving on to the next normalcy, students adapt and make necessary adjustment. The pandemic had negative implications to the mental health of the college students. To cope with this, institutions and concerned agencies need to develop a good support system accompanied by a well thought out preventative and rehabilitative programs that caters mental health concerns of college students.*

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**Keywords:** *Higher Education, Mental Health, Impact, Phenomenological, Philippines*

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## ***I. Introduction***

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the world, affecting various aspects of our lives, including our mental health. The pandemic has caused significant disruptions to the college experience, including campus closures, the cancellation of in-person classes, and limitations on social interactions. These disruptions have led to increased stress, anxiety, and depression among college students, who have had to adapt to new ways of learning and living.

A number of studies have documented the negative impact of the pandemic on the mental health of college students. In the United States, a study by the American College Health Association (ACHA) found that nearly 90% of college students reported feeling overwhelmed by the pandemic, while 50% reported increased anxiety and 32% reported increased depression (ACHA, 2020). The ACHA also found that college students who experienced financial stress were more likely to report poor mental health (ACHA, 2021). Another study by Son et al. (2020) found that college students in the United States reported high levels of anxiety and depression during the pandemic, with minority students experiencing higher levels of psychological distress.

A study by Li et al. (2020) found that college students in China experienced high levels of anxiety, depression, and stress during the early stages of the pandemic. Similarly, a study by Cao et al. (2020) found that the pandemic has led to increased levels of stress and anxiety among college students in China, with nearly half of students reporting moderate to high levels of anxiety.

In the Philippines, Reyes et al. (2020) found that Filipino college students experienced a significant decline in mental health during the pandemic, with higher levels of anxiety, depression, and stress compared to pre-pandemic levels. A study by Lapeña et al. (2021) found that the pandemic has led to disruptions in the academic schedules of college students, resulting in increased stress and anxiety related to academic performance. The study also found that social isolation and decreased access to mental health services were significant stressors for Filipino college students during the pandemic.

The pandemic has also created new challenges for college students, such as managing online learning, financial stress, and social isolation. These challenges have further contributed to the negative impact on mental health. A study by Kim et al. (2021) found that the perceived lack of social support among college students was associated with higher levels of depression and anxiety during the

pandemic. Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the mental health of college students worldwide. It is important for universities and mental health professionals to provide resources and support to help students cope with the challenges posed by the pandemic.

#### ***a. Effects of COVID-19 to Filipino College Students***

In the Philippines, college students have faced several challenges, including academic and financial problems, social isolation, and mental health issues. The impact of the pandemic on college students' well-being has been a growing concern, with several studies exploring its effects.

**Financial and Academic Challenges:** The pandemic has affected the country's economy, resulting in job losses and reduced incomes for many households. As a result, college students have faced financial difficulties, with some struggling to pay tuition fees and other expenses (Lapeña, Huyco, & Mejia, 2021). The shift to online learning has also posed challenges, with some students struggling to adapt to the new mode of education. A study by Tan (2021) found that online classes have negatively impacted students' academic performance, with many experiencing difficulties in managing their time and staying motivated.

**Social Isolation:** The pandemic has also led to social isolation, with quarantine measures limiting face-to-face interactions. College students have been unable to attend social gatherings, participate in extracurricular activities, or interact with their peers and professors in person (Lapeña et al., 2021). This has resulted in feelings of loneliness and disconnection from the college community, which can negatively impact mental health.

**Social Support:** Social support has been identified as a protective factor against the negative impact of the pandemic on mental health. A study by Kim, Majid, and Jang (2021) found that social support from family and friends was positively associated with mental health among college students in the Philippines during the pandemic.

**Mental Health Issues:** The pandemic's impact on mental health has been a growing concern worldwide, with several studies highlighting its effects on college students. A study by Reyes, Sierra, and Bianzon (2020) found high levels of anxiety and depression among college students in the Philippines during the pandemic. Another study by Lapeña et al. (2021) found that the pandemic has negatively affected students' psychological well-being, with many experiencing stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms.

### ***b. Importance of Mental Health During the Pandemic***

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges to individuals and communities worldwide. With the rapid spread of the virus, governments and health organizations had to take drastic measures such as quarantine and social distancing to prevent the further transmission of the disease. These measures have resulted in significant changes in the way people live, work, and interact with each other. The pandemic's impact on physical health has been well documented, but its impact on mental health is equally significant.

Studies have shown that the pandemic has caused increased levels of anxiety, depression, stress, and other mental health problems among the general population (Holmes et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). The social isolation caused by quarantine and lockdown measures has also been linked to the exacerbation of existing mental health conditions and the development of new ones (Bao et al., 2020). For instance, a study in the Philippines showed that the pandemic had a significant impact on the psychological well-being of college students, which affected their academic performance (Tan, 2021).

The importance of mental health during the pandemic cannot be overstated. Mental health problems can affect individuals' daily functioning, impair their ability to work, study, and take care of themselves and others. Therefore, it is crucial to prioritize mental health during the pandemic and ensure that individuals have access to mental health support and resources.

Studies have shown that interventions such as online mental health services, teletherapy, and peer support groups can be effective in addressing mental health problems during the pandemic (Gupta et al., 2020; Najim et al., 2020). Education and awareness campaigns about mental health and the availability of mental health services can also help reduce stigma and increase help-seeking behaviors (Xiong et al., 2020).

As a whole, the pandemic has highlighted the importance of mental health as an integral part of overall health and well-being. The pandemic's impact on mental health underscores the need for effective mental health services and interventions to support individuals during these challenging times.

This study aimed to examine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of college students enrolled in public state and private universities

and colleges in the Province of Samar, Philippines guided by the following specific objectives:

1. Explore the lived experiences of students under the premise of mental health during the pandemic.
2. Identify colors associated with the lived experiences of the students.
3. Determine the flow of experiences from initial reaction to full conceptualization of the phenomenon.

## ***II. Methodology***

In this study, the two main variables examined were anxiety and depression, which were assessed through a survey questionnaire.

### ***a. Research Design***

This qualitative study utilized a phenomenological approach to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of college students. Phenomenology is a qualitative research method that aims to describe the lived experiences of individuals or groups within a specific cultural or social context (Mills & Birks, 2018). Qualitative research involves an inquiry process that explores social or human problems using distinct methodological traditions (Creswell, 2018). The researcher analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting to build a complex and holistic picture. The phenomenological approach aims to accurately describe the phenomenon without a pre-existing knowledge framework, remaining truthful to the facts (Groenewald, 2014). This method allowed the researcher to connect with participants and understand their experiences from their perspectives (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Overall, this approach provided a comprehensive analysis of the lived experiences of college students and their mental health during the pandemic.

### ***b. Participants and Sampling***

The participants for this study were selected using purposive sampling, a method in which the researcher chooses participants who are best suited to provide the required information (Devers & Frankel, 2020). The researcher identified individuals who met the following criteria: 1) currently enrolled in public state or private universities and colleges in the Province of Samar, 2) experiencing psychosocial disorders such as depression and anxiety, 3) residents of any towns or cities within the Province of Samar, and 4) willing to participate in the study. A total of 16 participants were included in the study, all of whom were career changers.

Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to select participants who were most likely to provide relevant and meaningful information.

### ***c. Data Collection***

To collect the data needed for the study, the researcher utilized semi-structured interviews, a widely used qualitative method of inquiry that combines a set of open-ended questions with the flexibility to explore specific responses further (Kvale, 2018; Rubin & Rubin, 2022). Semi-structured interviews provide the researcher with the opportunity to ask follow-up questions for clarification and to gain a more in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences. To ensure the validity of the interview guide, it was reviewed by three professionals with expertise in psychology, education, and research. The researcher obtained informed consent from participants, ensured confidentiality, and outlined the ethical principles of the study. The researcher took notes and used a dialogic form of interviewing to obtain more detailed responses from the participants.

### ***d. Data Analysis***

The Colaizzi method was utilized for the phenomenological data analysis in this study (Speziale, Streubert, & Carpenter, 2011). The method consists of seven steps with the end goal of having the researcher seek validation of the findings from the participants to compare the descriptive results with their experiences (Panella, 2022a; Panella, 2022b).

### ***e. Research Reflexivity***

The researcher's approach in this study differs from other researchers' perspectives as they have a personal understanding of the struggles and aspirations of college students. This understanding has led to a preconception that frames the study with a positive tone of eventually creating meaning throughout the process. The researcher's background and position may affect the choices made in the investigation, from the angle of inquiry to the methods used to analyze the data, and ultimately to the themes and conclusions drawn from the study. However, preconceptions do not necessarily lead to bias unless they are not acknowledged by the researcher (Malterud, 2017). The researcher plans to share the study results with the participants as a way of validating the findings and giving back to the community.

### ***f. Ethical Considerations***

The study's primary focus was on the lived experiences of college students and their mental health during the pandemic, as well as their self-regard and aspirations. Accordingly, ethical considerations were centered around the situations



depicted solely from the participants' experiences, interactions, and observed actions. The study did not involve issues related to theoretical, theological, situational, critical, or covenantal approaches to research ethics (Tisdale, 2004). It was ensured that the literal transcriptions and summaries used in the narratives were appropriate and did not compromise the confidentiality or privacy of the participants.

### ***III. Results and Discussion***

After data analysis, three themes emerged: (1) ColōremQuaestionis (Colors of Problem); (2) ColōremMarte (Colors of Initiative); and (3) ColōremSpei (Colors of Hope). The themes suggested that college students and their mental health were affected by the ongoing pandemic. Though their wellbeing were jeopardized, they thought of ways of addressing the problem and came up with alternatives and permanent solutions together with their support system. Hope is their driving factor in navigating through this ordeal.

#### ***a. ColōremQuaestionis***

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted the mental health of college students worldwide. A study conducted by Cao et al. (2020) found that college students experienced higher levels of anxiety and depression due to the pandemic, with many reporting feelings of uncertainty and fear. This aligns with the colors of problem identified in the current study, represented by red, black, and brown.

The color red, which is associated with danger and emergency, reflects the severity of the situation and the potential harm posed by the pandemic. The threat of contracting the virus and the risk of spreading it to others created a heightened sense of danger and uncertainty among college students, which in turn contributed to their anxiety and stress levels. The constant news updates and the daily reports of cases and deaths further reinforced the severity of the situation and created a sense of urgency and emergency, which may have contributed to the students' feelings of helplessness and despair.



The color black, which represents negativity, highlights the feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and despair that many college students experienced during the pandemic. The loss of social support systems, such as friends and family, may have also contributed to their feelings of negativity and hopelessness.

The color brown, which symbolizes instability and uncertainty, emphasizes the disruption and unpredictability brought about by the pandemic. College students were faced with sudden changes to their daily routines, such as transitioning to online learning, and had to adapt to new ways of learning and socializing. This disruption to their lives may have contributed to their anxiety and stress levels.

These colors of problem have significant implications for the mental health of college students. According to a study by Nguyen et al. (2021), college students who experienced high levels of stress during the pandemic were more likely to report symptoms of depression and anxiety. It is therefore important for colleges and universities to prioritize mental health support and resources for their students during this time. It is illustrated in the following participants' statements:

- [1] I was seeing dots, red dots flash before my eyes, as if the color red was warning me of the dangers of the pandemic. It created a new fear in me, fear on something outside of my control (pause), I was devastated, since I was not (hesitates) ready to make the transition required from us, I mean, I don't have anything to address the situation.
- [2] Everything went black, as if the negativity of the situation is slowly creeping into to my system (soft sobbing with fist clenching on top of the knees), saying I am sad is an understatement, this situation made me realize something, I am hopeless during the pandemic, when things were forced to change, from face-to-face to online learning (while wiping tears), a certain hint of despair is looming from these restrictions.
- [3] If I could associate why the pandemic was problematic for me as a college student (right hand on the chest, with eyes starting to well up), I would say that it is brown (pause) I mean it was really uncertain, no one predicted this would happen on a global scale and we are not prepared. My stress level went up and it was not a sight to behold since I slowly develop anxiety along the way.

In summary, the colors of problem identified in the current study have significant implications for the mental health of college students during the



pandemic. The severity of the situation, the negativity of the experience, and the instability of their lives all contribute to the stress, anxiety, and depression experienced by college students during this time. It is important for colleges and universities to prioritize mental health support and resources for their students to address these challenges.

### ***b. Colōrem Marte***

Colors of initiative, represented by purple, blue, and green, focused on intuition, logic, and determination of the college students in seeking good support system. Aside from a good support system, they used innovative alternatives to address challenges felt, overall protecting their mental health in the process.

Purple represents intuition, and many college students used their intuition to seek out mental health resources and support during the pandemic. College students who sought help from mental health services during the pandemic were more likely to have lower levels of depression and anxiety (Bruffaerts et al., 2021). This suggests that using one's intuition to seek out support can be an effective way of protecting one's mental health during times of crisis.

Blue represents logic, and many college students used logical thinking to find innovative alternatives to address challenges brought about by the pandemic. Sahu et al. (2021) found that many college students turned to online platforms and resources for mental health support. This demonstrates the use of logical thinking to find alternative solutions to traditional face-to-face mental health services.

Green represents determination, and many college students showed great determination in protecting their mental health during the pandemic. Gallagher et al. (2020) found that college students who engaged in regular exercise and physical activity during the pandemic had lower levels of depression and anxiety. This suggests that determination in maintaining healthy habits can be an effective way of protecting one's mental health during times of crisis.



Colors of initiative, represented by purple, blue, and green, and their associated meanings are illustrated in the following participants' statements:

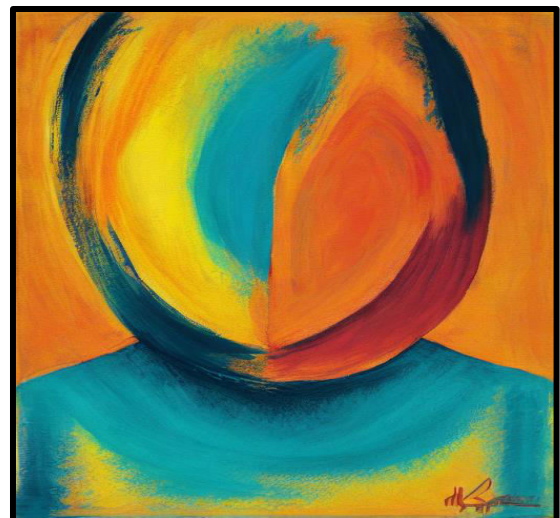
- [1] I have to use my intuition (with eyes beaming with and chest boldly out suggesting confidence) to look for alternatives and be resourceful. It is not good to be stock on what I usually do before the pandemic, everything has to change. I usually associate intuition with purple, it is a regal and intelligent color for me.
- [2] In my case (pause) I would associate the color blue to explain everything that is happening around me, a logical explanation if I may add. Logical thinking helped deduce what works well for me, settling first with alternatives made available and slowly moving toward permanent solutions. It was hard but understanding the situation is key to overcoming it.
- [3] I always associate green with determination (pause). Not just in finding solutions to problems presented by the pandemic but also fighting to protect my mental well-being. It is important for me to maintain healthy habits that not will only affect my academics but my overall health as well.

Overall, the colors of initiative represented by purple, blue, and green highlight the importance of intuition, logic, and determination in protecting the mental health of college students. By seeking out support, using innovative alternatives, and demonstrating resilience, college students can overcome the challenges brought on by the pandemic and maintain their mental health and well-being.

### ***c. ColōremSpei***

Colors of hope, represented by yellow, orange, and teal, focused on the undying hope, enthusiasm and stability of the college students in traversing over the problems brought about by the pandemic.

The color yellow is associated with optimism and hope, highlighting the positive outlook and resilience that many college students have demonstrated in the face of the pandemic. According to a study by Nguyen



et al. (2021), college students who reported higher levels of optimism and hope during the pandemic were less likely to experience symptoms of depression and anxiety. This suggests that maintaining a positive outlook and sense of hope can have a protective effect on mental health.

The color orange represents enthusiasm and creativity, emphasizing the innovative and adaptive solutions that many college students have developed to address the challenges of remote learning, social isolation, and disrupted routines. For example, some students have formed virtual study groups and interests to pursue. These activities have provided a sense of purpose and connection, which can contribute to a sense of stability and well-being.

Finally, the color teal symbolizes stability and balance, highlighting the importance of self-care and stress management in promoting resilience and well-being. College students who prioritize self-care activities such as exercise, meditation, and adequate sleep are more likely to report better mental health outcomes, according to a study by Hammer et al. (2020). This suggests that cultivating a sense of balance and stability in one's life can help to mitigate the negative effects of stress and uncertainty.

It is illustrated in the following participants' statements:

- [1] Every time I see yellow, I always think of positivity and joy. It represented an optimistic outlook for me that at the end of all of this (while hands were waving in at chest level signifying enclosing the situation), I can still make it out alive with sanity intact because I've maintained a sunny disposition. Easier said than done but I need this to keep my mental status in check.
- [2] Orange (pause) is a color that make me look forward to things, be it good or bad, part of life's uncertainties. I have this drive, determination to overcome things that may ruin my mental state. I need to overcome this fear in a logical manner and adjust accordingly.
- [3] What is important for me at this point (thinks for a while)? I think being grounded, level-headed and stable. It is all about the balance (while making a gesture of hugging to signify centeredness), and the color teal represents it well. Prioritizing my self first at this moment and listening and checking how my body is reacting as a whole.

Overall, the colors of hope represent the positive emotions, coping strategies, and behaviors that college students have used to navigate the challenges of the

pandemic. By emphasizing these positive aspects, we can help to promote resilience and well-being among college students.

#### **IV. Conclusion and Recommendation**

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the mental health of college students, creating feelings of danger, negativity, and uncertainty, but also inspiring initiative, hope, and resilience. While the negative implications of the pandemic on mental health cannot be ignored, it is important to recognize the strengths and coping strategies that college students have developed to protect their mental health. To further support the mental health needs of college students during and after the pandemic, institutions and concerned agencies should invest in developing effective and accessible support systems and preventative and rehabilitative programs that cater to their mental health concerns. These efforts can help mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic on the mental health of college students and ensure that they can continue to thrive and succeed in their academic and personal lives.

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