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UNDERSTANDING MOTIVATION LOSS AND BEHAVIORAL DISENGAGEMENT OF TERTIARY STUDENTS IN FLEXIBLE LEARNING: A SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – Flexible learning is a delivery modality associated with positive outcomes, but its use at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic has been associated with dark student experiences, such as poor interest and dishonesty among students. To understand how and why many tertiary students lost their motivation and became disengaged in pandemic-era flexible learning, this qualitative research was designed.

Methodology – A total of 27 tertiary students in five separate groups volunteered to be interviewed. A focus group discussion protocol was developed based on the propositions of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and this protocol produced about eight hours of narrative data in audio form. The researcher performed thematic analysis to make sense of the transcriptions of the data, and the initial codes and themes

were subjected to an external audit for purposes of methodological integrity.

Findings – Eight need-thwarting behaviors of key social agents emerged, such as instructors' rigid and negligent behaviors, peers' indifferent and selfish behaviors, and burdensome behaviors of people at home. These behaviors were tied to participants' cognitive appraisals of psychological need frustration that emerged in eight themes, which comprised having problems balancing school and home obligations, believing that outputs were misevaluated, and feelings of disconnection from peers. These appraisals could be related to seven themes of motivation and engagement issues reported by participants, notably amotivation, poor concentration, low effort, and dishonesty.

Significance – The findings highlight the importance of addressing these need frustrations in order to improve tertiary students' motivation and engagement in academic tasks delivered through flexible learning in higher education.

Keywords: Motivation loss, behavioral disengagement, pandemic-era flexible learning, self-determination theory, qualitative research, Filipino tertiary students.

INTRODUCTION

The Fourth Industrial Revolution has ushered in a transformative era for higher education, with flexible learning emerging as a cornerstone for future educational paradigms (Magsambol, 2021a; CHED, 2022). Numerous studies have extolled the virtues of flexible learning, highlighting its capacity to democratize education, enhance learner autonomy, and facilitate personalized learning pathways (Bernard et al., 2004; Hill, 2006; Lou et al., 2006; Sitzmann et al., 2006; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). These positive aspects are often cited as compelling reasons for educational institutions to invest in the infrastructure and pedagogical shifts required to implement flexible learning models effectively.

However, despite the optimistic narrative surrounding flexible learning, there is a conspicuous dearth of research investigating the challenges and pitfalls associated with this educational approach. Preliminary studies have begun to shed light on some disconcerting

trends. For instance, when flexible learning was implemented at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been reports of tertiary students submitting assignments late, producing low-quality work, and engaging in academic dishonesty such as plagiarism (Bray et al., 2021; Khlaif et al., 2021; Oyendotun, 2020; Rahiem, 2020). Furthermore, a growing body of evidence suggests that students are experiencing a loss of interest in modular flexible learning (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Serhan, 2020) and are grappling with mental health issues like exhaustion, anxiety, and fear (Alibudbud, 2021; Argosino, 2021; Asanov et al., 2021; Baticulon et al., 2021; Godoy et al., 2021; Magsambol, 2021b; Rotas & Cahapay, 2020; Simon, 2021).

Within the realm of educational psychology, academic motivation and behavioral engagement are understood to be functions of the interplay between students' needs and goals and the characteristics of their learning environment (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). One particularly relevant theoretical framework is the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which posits that an individual's adaptive functioning is significantly influenced by the extent to which their basic psychological needs are met or thwarted within a given social context (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Given this theoretical perspective, the current qualitative study aims to address the existing gap in the literature by exploring the socialization practices that may be obstructing tertiary students' basic psychological needs, thereby leading to motivation loss and behavioral disengagement in the context of flexible learning. By focusing on these areas, this study endeavors to provide a more nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in implementing flexible learning strategies and to offer actionable insights for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders.

Research Questions

Flexible learning is a prescribed mode of teaching-learning delivery in higher education. However, when it was used in the midst of the pandemic, many tertiary students seemed to be not happy about it; they were not excited about it, and were failing to meet a lot of teacher expectations (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Bray et al., 2021; Khlaif et al., 2021; Oyendotun, 2020; Rahiem, 2020; Serhan, 2020). This present study has been designed to understand motivation loss and behavioral disengagement.

More specifically, the following research questions were asked:

1. What behaviors of key social agents (instructors, peers, and parents) within the pandemic-era flexible learning were perceived by tertiary students to be need-thwarting?
2. What were the tertiary students' perceptions or appraisals of these need-thwarting behaviors?
3. What consequences on motivation and behavioral disengagement were perceived to result from perceiving need frustration in pandemic-era flexible learning?

Framework

Motivation loss, or amotivation, means loss of valuing for academic tasks (Ryan & Deci, 2017), while behavioral disengagement means committing maladaptive academic behaviors, such as fraud and intentional defiance of teacher authority (Wang et al., 2019). Recent studies indicate that these dark aspects of student functioning occur because of extremely challenging learning conditions (e.g., Aguilera-Hermida, 2020), and this has pointed to the usefulness of self-determination theory (henceforth, SDT) in understanding the phenomenon. SDT is a perspective that takes into account the role of learning environments in student functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

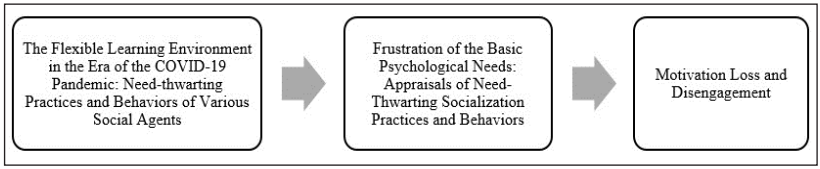
One main tenet of SDT is that human beings have three basic psychological needs, namely autonomy, the need to pursue self-determined actions; competence, the need to feel effective; and relatedness, the need to feel connected and cared for by others (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The satisfaction of these needs lead to optimal functioning, such as active engagement in school and high-quality motivation. Conversely, thwarting the fulfillment of these needs lead to maladaptive functioning, such as disengagement. In addition, another of SDT's main tenet states that human beings are in dialectical interaction with social agents within a given context (Ryan & Deci, 2017). This suggests that there may be socialization practices that are need-supportive and some others that are need-thwarting. Need-supportive socialization practices and behaviors lead to need satisfaction, while need-thwarting socialization practices and behaviors lead to need frustration.

Grounded on these contentions, it was argued that motivation loss and the behavioral disengagement of tertiary students in flexible learning were likely due to a sense of psychological need frustration, and such

psychological need frustration was due to need-thwarting practices and behaviors of various social agents (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

General Framework of the Study



Literature Review

The Flexible Learning Environment

Flexible learning is online education made flexible. It combines aspects of traditional classroom instruction (e.g., use of learning materials, modularized lessons) with educational technology advances (e.g., video conferencing, digital learning management systems) (Hill, 2006). It is important to note that the use of flexible learning in the past (i.e., before the COVID-19 pandemic) has been evaluated favorably. There is strong literature support that flexible modes of learning are more, if not as effective as, classroom instruction (e.g., Bernard et al., 2004; Lou et al., 2006; Sitzmann et al., 2006; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). However, such use of flexible learning could not be equated to how it was used during the pandemic because the recent realities on the ground during the COVID-19 pandemic seem to be reflective of the dark dimensions of student functioning.

It is the contention of researchers that pre-pandemic flexible learning is not synonymous to pandemic-era flexible learning. One reason for this lies on the issue of choice. Students in flexible learning in the past had the choice whether to pursue flexible learning or not (Sidman et al., 2011; 2014). In the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, choice is literally absent. Students and even instructors, are just forced to adopt the new norm and are made to believe that they have no other option except flexible learning. Therefore, pandemic-era flexible learning may be associated with unique student experiences. This contention is consistent with Gurung and Stone (2020), who argued that flexible learning at the height of the pandemic was a unique experience incomparable to previous implementations of flexible learning in the past.

Frustration of the Basic Psychological Needs in Pandemic-era Flexible Learning

Ryan and Deci (2017) believe that the three basic psychological needs (namely autonomy, competence, and relatedness) can either be satisfied or thwarted in any given social context. These needs are experience dependent and are sensitive to affordances (or lack of it) in a given domain of functioning. Vansteenkiste and colleagues (2019) explicated this idea further, saying that need frustration (and need satisfaction) is not caused by the objective reality, but by the subjective interpretation of actions of socializing agents. Therefore, in documenting need frustration, cognitive appraisals are at play; tertiary students who think that the actions of social agents are obstructive of one's need fulfillment experience a state of need frustration.

The existing literature is rich with studies pointing to the following three dimensions of psychological need frustration: autonomy frustration, competence frustration, and relatedness frustration (Chen et al., 2015; Longo et al., 2016). However, the conceptualization of these constructs are domain-generic, which means that they do not capture the unique experiences of tertiary students in pandemic-era flexible learning. To date, no study has yet explored the nuances of need frustration in the educational setting, more specifically in flexible learning. Englund and colleagues (2022) recently explored learning environment uncertainties, which were thought to be detrimental to basic psychological needs. Excessive academic workload on students (Martinek et al., 2022), lost connections (Spinks et al., 2021), and unique relational issues with peers (Fedesco et al., 2009) are just a few of the nuances of academic experience that could be well integrated into the concept of need frustration. In this study, the appraisals of need frustration are based on the actions of key social agents, including instructors, parents, and peers.

Motivation Loss and Behavioral Disengagement in the Context of Flexible Learning

The academic discourse has been increasingly focused on various non-academic factors that contribute to students' academic maladjustment. While studies have attributed behavioral disengagement in educational settings to factors such as substance abuse (Del Toro et al., 2022; Stoddard & Veliz, 2019) and digital inequality (Khlaif et al., 2021), there remains a significant gap in the literature that explores

the role of need frustration in causing motivation loss and behavioral disengagement.

In the context of flexible learning, it is crucial to examine how this educational model may inadvertently lead to the frustration of the basic psychological needs as outlined in self-determination theory (SDT): autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The lack of a structured learning environment in flexible learning may undermine students' sense of autonomy, as they may feel overwhelmed by the plethora of choices and the absence of clear guidance. Similarly, the asynchronous nature of flexible learning can impede the development of competence, as students may lack immediate feedback and opportunities for skill mastery. Lastly, the virtual or remote aspects of flexible learning can thwart the need for relatedness, as students may experience isolation and a lack of meaningful interaction with peers and educators.

By explicitly connecting the frustration of these basic needs to the observed phenomena of motivation loss and behavioral disengagement, this study aims to fill a critical gap in the existing literature. Understanding these connections is vital for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders in crafting interventions and policies that can effectively address the challenges posed by flexible learning environments.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a basic qualitative research design, as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2015), and was guided by a post-positivist approach (Ryan, 2006). This approach emphasizes that the collection and analysis of qualitative data should be deeply rooted in theoretical frameworks, as this will help facilitate a nuanced understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

Participants and Sampling

The study was conducted in a state university located in the northern part of Mindanao, Philippines. Like any other institutions in the country and the rest of the world, it implemented flexible delivery modes for learning continuity amid the threats of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study involved 27 graduating tertiary students who were organized into five focus groups. All participants voluntarily provided their informed consent to partake in the study. The demographic characteristics of the 27 participants are as outlined in Table I.

Table I

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N = 27)

Focus groups (and their academic course)	Sex	Age distribution	Residence at the height of the pandemic	Self-reported family income class
FG1: B. Secondary/ Elementary Ed.	3 = male; 2 = female	22, 21, 22, 22, 22	2 = neighboring islands; 1 = outside city proper; 1 = city proper	2 = poor; 1 = low-income; 1 = middle
FG2: BS Math	4 = male; 2 = female	22, 23, 24, 23, 22, 21	4 = neighboring islands; 1 = outside city proper; 2 = city proper	4 = low-income; 2 = middle
FG3: BS Hospitality Management	1 = male; 3 = female	21, 24, 21, 23	2= outside city proper; 2 = neighboring islands	4 = low income
FG4: B. Tech-Voc Teacher Ed.	1 = male, 5 = female	23, 24, 23, 22, 23, 23	5 = outside city proper; 1 = neighboring islands	3 = low-income; 3 = middle
FG5: BS Information Systems	2 = male; 4 = female	22, 24, 27, 25, 25, 23	2 = neighboring islands; 1 = outside city proper; 3 = city proper;	1 = poor; 4 = low-income; 1 = did not report

The sampling strategy employed was a two-stage process, namely convenience-purposive sampling. Initially, convenience sampling was used due to logistical constraints; only fourth-year students were allowed on campus for in-person on-the-job training during the data collection period in April 2022. The sampling later became purposive to ensure a diverse range of perspectives, and this was carried out by recruiting participants from various academic units.

It is noteworthy that the participants had experienced flexible learning for an extended period, particularly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the context of this study, flexible learning encompassed a blend of asynchronous online modules, synchronous virtual classes, and limited in-person sessions. This multi-modal approach to education provides a rich backdrop for understanding how such environments could lead to the thwarting of the basic psychological needs of students.

Data Collection

The sole method of data collection was focus group discussion (FGD). The FGDs were conducted on the university campus, each lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes. A total of five focus groups were

conducted by the principal investigator, who is fluent in both English and the local dialect. The respondents were allowed to use the local dialect during the discussions to encourage more natural and candid responses. A total of about eight hours of narrative data in audio form was generated from all discussions.

The FGD protocol was structured based on Hennink's (2014) hourglass design and consisted of the following four main segments: 1) Introduction: Preliminary questions to set the stage (e.g., "Are there any questions before we start?"); 2) Opening: Participant introductions (e.g., "Let's each share our first names and where you are from..."); 3) Main Topics: Core discussion around research questions (e.g., "Tell me about your personal experiences of feeling frustrated in flexible learning?"); and 4) Closing: Open-ended concluding questions (e.g., "Any other thoughts on tertiary-level learning before we finish?").

Data Analysis

The process of data analysis was carried out through thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2016). Initially, the audio recordings from the FGDs were transcribed verbatim. This textual data served as the basis for generating initial codes, which were designed to identify recurring patterns, sentiments, and themes evident in the participants' responses. For instance, under the theme of "instructors' rigid behaviors," initial codes such as being inconsiderate, setting tight deadlines, and implementing timers on exams were identified. Similarly, the theme "instructors' negligent behaviors" emerged from initial codes like leaving students to self-study with minimal guidance and devoid of feedback, neglecting student messages, providing non-informational feedback, and assigning unreasonable grades. Under the theme "believing that one's task compliance is unguided," initial codes included feeling unguided by instructors and being confronted with confusing tasks. The theme "feelings of disconnection from instructors" entailed codes such as experiencing disrespect towards instructors, feeling inhibited by instructor authority, suspecting condescension from instructors, feeling oppressed by instructors, and feeling unappreciated by instructors for exerted efforts. Lastly, the theme "low effort" encapsulated codes like not performing to one's fullest potential, exhibiting a lack of urgency, and merely holding back (remaining passive) during online class engagements.

Following the coding phase, these codes were organized into broader categories. The categorization aimed to encapsulate the essence of the participants' experiences and perspectives, thereby providing a more structured framework for interpretation. Subsequently, these categories were synthesized into overarching themes that encapsulated the key findings and insights of the study. To ensure the methodological integrity and rigor of the analysis, an external audit was conducted. The auditor, a PhD graduate in Educational Psychology and Chair of the Psychology Department at a private higher education institution in Region 10, Philippines, reviewed the codes and themes to validate their relevance and accuracy.

It is important to note that the transcribed data was mostly in the local dialect, and the analysis was conducted on this mostly local dialect data. Translation into English was performed by the primary investigator himself only for the exemplars and sample utterances that were included in the final report. This was carried out in order to make the findings accessible to a broader audience.

RESULTS

Thematic analysis of all narrative data resulted in three main findings. The first main finding is that, aside from the actions of instructors, peers and people at home also performed behaviors that were viewed as need-thwarting by the participants. Also, these need-thwarting behaviors were not limited to psychological control, but also to behaviors that could be characterized as neglect and being mean. The second main finding is that the state of psychological need frustration specific to the domain of pandemic-era flexible learning was complex, in the sense that it could be broken down into several specific aspects. For example, relatedness frustration was actually disconnection both from instructors and from peers. Also, this domain-specific state of frustration was heavily dependent on the behaviors of the salient socializing agents. Lastly, the third main finding is that the participants who felt need-frustrated also reported that they disengaged from their academic tasks and that their academic interest was seriously stifled.

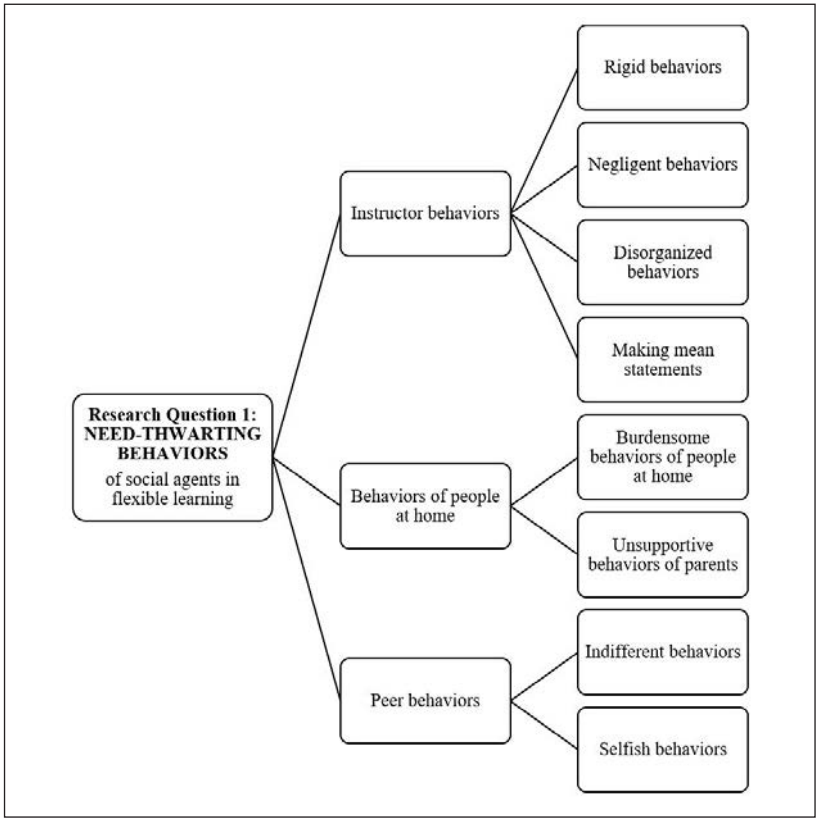
Main Finding 1: Not Only Instructors' Behaviors, But Also Behaviors of Peers and People at Home (Research Question 1)

Figure 2 displays eight behaviors of social agents that were perceived to be need-thwarting, answering Research Question 1. As can be

seen, all three social agents considered manifested behaviors that were perceived as need-thwarting, which indicated that these three social agents were salient in the motivation loss and disengagement of students in pandemic-era flexible learning.

Figure 2

Behaviors of Instructors, People at Home, and Peers Perceived to be Need-Thwarting



Instructors' need-thwarting behaviors emerged in four themes. First, *rigid behaviors* are similar to psychological control, the type of behavior consistently associated with need frustration (Amoura et al., 2015; Bartholomew et al., 2018). Specifically, instructors' rigid behaviors were an outward display of being unbending, stiff, and too strict with the submission of learning and assessment tasks. These behaviors were mainly characterized by inflexibility, as if presenting

an authoritarian image and an imposing stance for students to obey the instructors' commands and follow strictly their instructions. A sample utterance is: *P3: Our instructor won't consider late submissions, he does not… P1: He should understand our situation right now*. Second, *negligent behaviors* were those actions of misconduct of instructors' basic duties as educators and facilitators of learning.

These behaviors were generally characterized by the following actions: abandoning students to study and learn on their own, ignoring their chat messages and inquiries, giving non-informative feedback, and giving unreasonable grades. In terms of students getting abandoned to study on their own, it was more about instructors just plainly giving learning modules, virtually meeting once or twice only for the whole semester, giving minimal or no guidance at all, as well as giving literally no feedback. A sample utterance is: *FG2-P5: Sometimes, he would only check our messages but won't reply*. Third, *disorganized behaviors* were an outward expression of lack of adequate instructional planning. This set of behaviors was like instructors acting on a whim, making random acts like they did not have a concrete instructional plan for their students. A sample utterance is: *FG1-P5: (The instructor) would immediately announce that we would have quiz or exam*. Lastly, *making mean statements* was an outward expression of being unkind and bad-tempered. These behaviors include instructors getting angry, making statements that distrust students' integrity, and expressing no concern for students' feelings, wellness, and mental health issues. A sample utterance is: *FG2: He asked why we still asked questions if in the first place we should already have known those things in our head. It was intense*.

Several people at home, not only parents, but also guardians, siblings, and even neighbors, manifested behaviors that were need-frustrating, i.e., *burdensome behaviors*. This theme encompasses the various ways in which family responsibilities and obligations prevented students from being productive and staying focused on their studies at home. These practices involved actions that gave students additional burdens and obligations that were on top of their academic responsibilities. In general, these burdensome behaviors were believed to cross the personal boundaries of the students, making them feel pressured and obligated to balance home and school responsibilities. These behaviors may have also prevented students from feeling that their actions were self-endorsed. A sample utterance is: *P2: I lived in*

my uncle's house. His wife and my mom would give me orders and assign chores. I would be given more obligations even when I was not yet able to fulfill the previous orders. Another theme, *unsupportive behaviors of parents*, captures need-thwarting behaviors of parents such as being unsupportive and negligent of their needs. Unlike the previous theme that involved various people at home, this theme only includes behaviors of parents failing to provide the necessary support to the students learning at home.

A number of participants shared about financial hardships, for example, that their parents at home could not even provide for mobile load to allow them to access the internet. Other participants also revealed that there were limited resources at home, such as having only one smartphone to be shared by everybody in the family, leading to competition at times among them as to who gets to use the phone first. A sample utterance is from a participant from FG2; she recalled how her father insisted on using the family's phone to watch wrestling shows despite her appeals to use the phone for academic purposes. Her exact words were: *I would get frustrated by my father sometimes. When I had academic tasks that required to use a smartphone, he would not let me use it; he would say "Not now, I am still watching wrestling".* This case of limited material resources clearly exemplied a case of an unsupportive parent. Together, these findings are interesting because behaviors of people at home were rarely considered in understanding psychological need frustration.

Lastly, peers' need-thwarting behaviors were in two themes. These behaviors are generally marked by indifference and selfishness, which may have caused students to feel disconnected and abandoned. The first one, *indifferent behaviors*, is a theme that refers to a display of indifference and abandonment of fellow classmates. These behaviors include ignoring peers' messages and social loafing, which likely alienated the participants from their fellow classmates, preventing them from building positive relationships with peers. A sample utterance is: *FG3-P4: When I reminded my classmates to work already, nobody would come to attend our virtual meeting, and nobody cared*. The other one, *selfish behaviors*, is a display of actions that prioritize oneself. These behaviors include peers betraying their friends by duplicating/copying classmates' outputs without consent, not sharing outputs, and causing undue panic in group chats. Like peers' indifferent behaviors, these behaviors can possibly alienate students from their classmates,

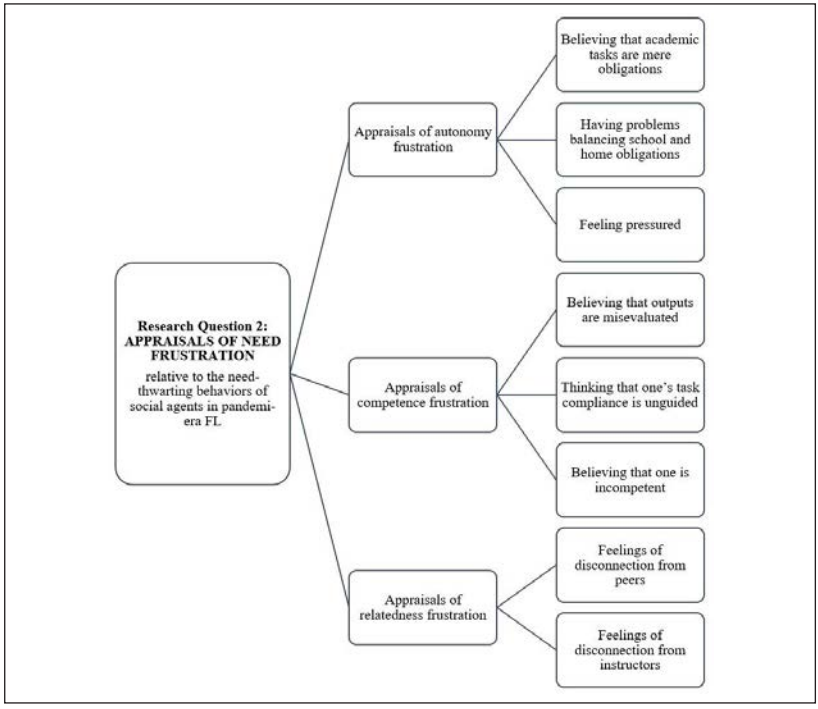
obstructing their efforts to build relatedness-satisfying connections with peers. A sample utterance is: *FG5-P1: …he should have looked for ways so that we would not get caught; it was obvious, the work was mine, it had my name on it, but my classmate copied everything*.

Main Finding 2: The Nuances of Need Frustration Appraisals in Flexible Learning (Research Question 2)

Figure 3 displays the appraisals of tertiary students on the need-thwarting behaviors, answering Research Question 2. As can be seen, there are eight themes and they can be clustered according to the known and widely researched categories of need frustration in the literature, which are autonomy frustration, competence frustration, and relatedness frustration (Bartholomew et al., 2011; Chen et al., 2015).

Figure 3

Need Frustration Appraisals of Tertiary Students on the Need-Thwarting Behaviors of Social Agents



The first cluster of themes relates to appraisals that one's basic need for autonomy is thwarted. *Believing that academic tasks are mere obligations*—the first of the three themes—is an appraisal that involves believing that school tasks are literally obligations imposed by others, instead of opportunities to learn and develop mastery. Viewing school tasks as obligations means that they do not get to make personal choices and pursue personally meaningful learning activities. The sample utterance is from *FG5-P6: I did what I could do. It was hard not to comply it was my school obligation*. The second of the three themes—*having problems balancing school and home obligations*—is believing that household chores and other home-related burdens interfere and compete with one's school-related activities. This theme captures descriptions of demands to do household chores while studying at home. This is another aspect of autonomy frustration as it makes students feel prevented from making self-determined actions. The sample utterance is from *FG2-P2: At my aunt's home, since I was only there as a working student, it was awkward if I would not work. I would wake up at 5 AM to help prepare for stuff related to my aunt's food business. I could hardly attend my Google Meet*. The last theme—*feeling pressured*—captures what the participants believed to be the pressure that originated from flexible learning, where they were pressured to do more and go the extra mile because of connectivity issues, comply with tasks made complicated by additional mini-tasks, overlapping activities and tight deadlines, and to share their answers with peers. The sample utterance is from *FG5-P6: In this arrangement, Sir, this online (flexible) learning, we would find ourselves having a class here, doing another stuff there; we would get so worked up*.

The second cluster of themes relates to appraisals that one's competence need is thwarted. The first theme within the cluster is *believing that one's outputs are misevaluated*. This is interpreted as part of thwarting the competence need because it points to the feeling that one has been obstructed from getting informed about his/her true academic performance by misevaluating one's works. A participant provided a perfect exemplar for this, the sample utterance is from *FG1-P1: I think, Sir, though I'm not sure, but I did not feel that I deserved that grade*. The second theme in the cluster—*thinking that one's task compliance is unguided*—is about participants feeling unguided in the process of task compliance because their instructors did not give them enough guidance, facilitation, and feedback. This is clearly an obstruction of the need for competence, as this means

that one has not been properly guided to develop mastery. A certain recollection of a participant perfectly captures this idea, as can be seen in the sample utterance from *FG1: It did not feel right answering; we were not sure of the answers we were providing because of the instructions of one instructor*. Lastly, the third theme within the cluster is *believing that one is incompetent*, which captures the perceptions that they lacked adequate competence to tackle tasks assigned to them. The sample utterance is from *FG2-P5: Sir, we really did not gain any understanding because the topics were not explained at all*.

The third cluster of themes relates to appraisals that one's basic need for relatedness is thwarted. *Feelings of disconnection from peers* refers to perceptions that they were distanced and detached from their peers. This theme speaks about the absence of caring connections, as well as the absence of active involvement in one's activities, thus constitutive of frustrating relatedness. The sample utterance is from *FG1-P1: In those times where I lost motivation for myself, I still extended favors to my friends and motivated them to do the required tasks. However, my effort would just go wasted because they would still not care about school*. Another theme, *feelings of disconnection from instructors* refers to perceptions that they were distanced and detached from their instructors, believing that some instructors did not deserve to be respected and others were just too harsh. The sample utterance is from *FG2-P6: It's awkward to reach out to the instructor; it felt like we were inhibited by his authority; Moderator: Why was that so?*; and *FG2-P6: Perhaps it's in the way the instructor talked to us*.

Main Finding 3: Motivation Loss and Behavioral Disengagement from Need Frustration Appraisals (Research Question 3)

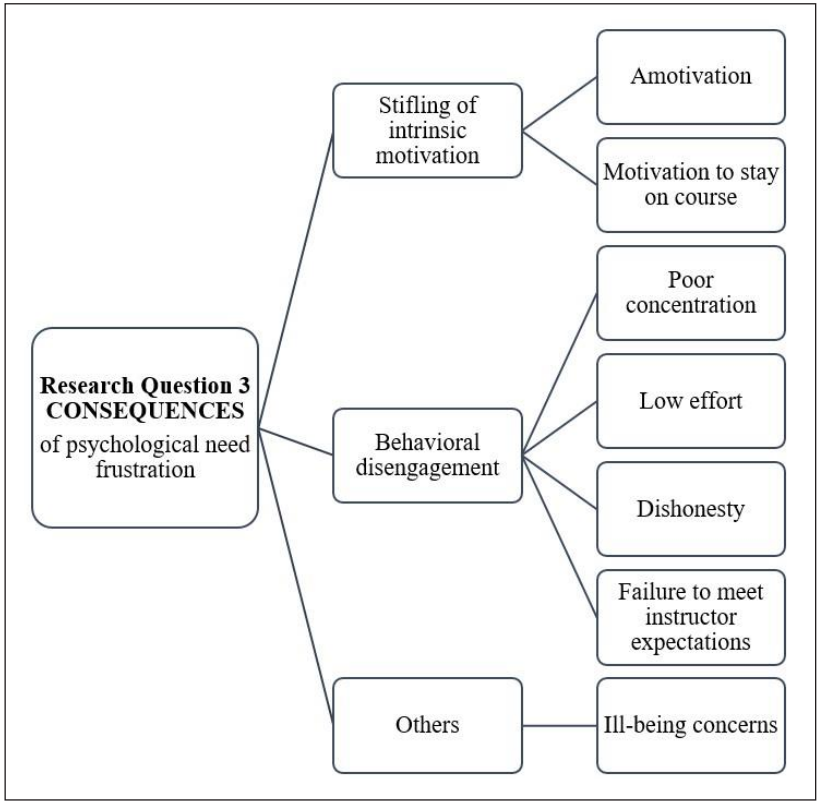
Thematic analysis of participants' narratives about the consequences of the state of psychological need frustration in pandemic-era flexible learning resulted in three clusters of themes, and these themes answer Research Question 3. Figure 4 graphically presents these clusters.

Intrinsic motivation is evident when tertiary students enjoy and are interested in tasks that they are doing (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Among the participants of the present study, intrinsic motivation was not evident at all. Two themes of their narratives support this observation. The first

one, *amotivation* is literally loss of motivation, and the participants had statements about lack of enjoyment, boredom, and loss of interest, among others, that support this theme. A participant in *FG5-P6* said this*: That's why, Sir, it was really difficult, I hardly enjoyed the online learning arrangement*. Another participant in *FG4-P4* said this*: The experience was not worth it for me*. The second one, *motivated only to stay on the course*, captures the narratives of participants about their possessing some energy and motivation to still perform and do their part as students, but their actions were not really self-determined, but controlled by external forces, mainly by their instructors. The sample utterance is from *FG1-P1: Sir, I felt that it was useless to exert effort. So, what I did was "mema" or "mema-pasa lang" (slang for giving only the bare minimum).*

Figure 4

Perceived Consequences of Need Frustration Appraisals



Behavioral disengagement refers to actions that are maladaptive (Wang et al., 2019). Based on the narratives of the participants, disengagement was evident in expressions that they failed to meet expectations of their instructors and that they had been dishonest. Four themes of behavioral disengagement emerged. The first theme—*poor concentration*—reflects the experiences of the participants in being distracted and lacking in focus, thus being unable to work on their school-related tasks. The sources of distractions were not limited to social media use and movies, but also household chores. This idea is well captured by a participant in *FG5* who said*: I feel like I could not focus, like what [name of peer] said. I could not focus when I study at home because I would be asked to do chores. I could focus as well when I am already tired of doing the chores*. The second theme—*low effort*—speaks of behaviors that reflect lack of urgency and not doing one's best. The sample utterance is from *FG1-P2: To tell you honestly, Sir, when we do presentations in this current learning modality, we use scripts. It is so different from what we used to do in face-to-face classes because during those times, we would really take the necessary effort to memorize and study hard to prepare for questions*. The third theme—*dishonesty*—speaks of cheating behaviors, mostly by relying fully on Google and peers for answers. This also includes behaviors that trick or outwit instructors, such as lying about poor internet signal and leaving the online class before dismissal. A participant in *FG4-P2* provided the context for this*: … I rely on Google and it's true, just real talk here. I also have visual aids (cheat sheets or notes) by my side every time there was a test*. The last theme—*failure to meet instructor expectations*—represents a small collection of narratives about failures of the participants to submit their outputs on time and failure to attend their classes. These few narratives are separated from the first three themes because these may constitute non-deliberate actions to disengage. The typical reasons of the participants for the failure to submit their outputs on time was the lack of resources, such as mobile load. One participant explicitly made a statement as to why his submissions were late, and it was due to lack of mobile load. The exact statement was from *FG3-P2: …sometimes my submissions were late because I had no mobile load*.

There was a single theme that was not clustered with motivation- and disengagement-related themes because it constituted a wellness issue, an important aspect of SDT. This theme represents the negative mental health struggles reported by some of the participants, and these issues

include getting a panic attack, thinking of committing suicide, and feeling hopeless. The sample utterance is from *FG2-P6: I would be feeling so tensed when she assigns a new activity. It's unlike other instructors who would only give an update or check up on us*.

Summary of Qualitative Findings

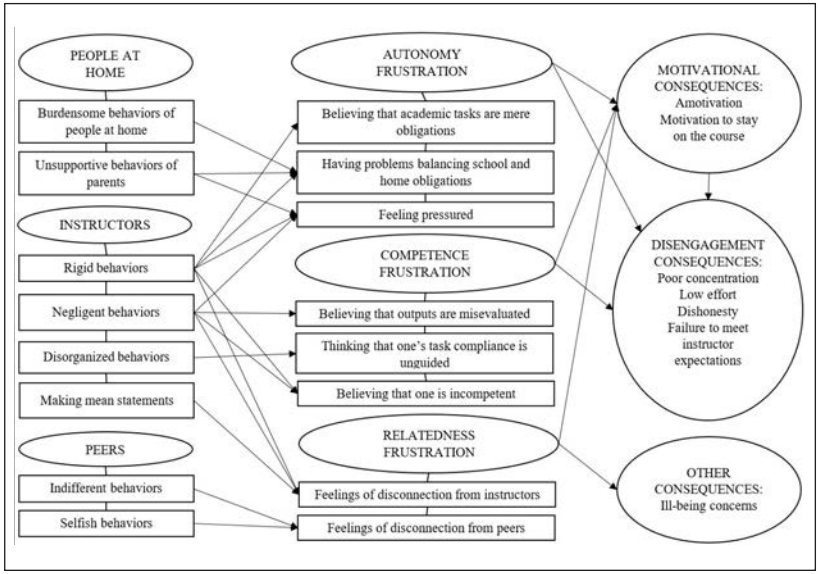
Consistent with the recent extant literature, the researchers learned that the participants indeed experienced a stifling of their intrinsic motivation, which was mostly felt as lack of enjoyment, boredom, and loss of identity as a student. Some participants, however, reported a sense of still having some motivation for school, but such motivation was only to avoid failure. Thus, the motivation was no longer from within, but from the outside.

This stifling of motivation was related to participants' recollections of behavioral disengagement. These behaviors, which include poor concentration, sleeping during online classes, lying and inventing alibies, cheating by relying on Google for answers, among other things, were pretty much due to their loss of motivation in the prevailing state of affairs in school. That is, because they lost interest in school, they were not attentive. This link between stifled intrinsic motivation and behavioral disengagement is depicted by a one-directional arrow (see Figure 5).

In addition, the motivation stifling experience could be well attributed to participants' appraisals of several need-thwarting behaviors of instructors, peers, and folks at home. Firstly, the participants had appraisals that their actions were not at all self-determined activities, as all the things they did were just obligations and external pressures from their instructors and their folks at home. This appraisal, which literally means autonomy frustration, was dependent on behaviors of two socializing agents, namely the students'instructors and people at home. The behaviors of instructors related to this were rigid behaviors (e.g., being inconsiderate) and disorganized behaviors (e.g., having irregular/unpredictable class schedules); the behaviors of people at home related to this were actions that cause burden (e.g., assigning responsibilities/chores at home). The connections between these behaviors of instructors and people at home and perceived autonomy frustration are depicted by arrows in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Summary of Findings



Secondly, the participants provided appraisals that they had not developed mastery; they felt incompetent, had been unguided, and thought their outputs were misevaluated. These appraisals could easily be considered competence frustration, and that these were all related to the rigidity, neglect and chaos/disorganization caused by instructors. Among these three, however, the most relevant was neglectful behaviors (e.g., leaving students to learn on their own) as this was seen to be related in all three appraisals of competence frustration, thus the arrows as depicted in Figure 5.

Lastly, the participants had appraisals of disconnection from their instructors and peers, the latter was mostly verbalized as feeling ignored and social loafing and the former was mostly expressed as having feelings of disrespect towards the instructors and feeling inhibited by them. Needless to say, these feelings of disconnection arose from the feeling that the instructors were being mean (e.g., getting angry) and peers being indifferent (e.g., peers ignoring messages) and selfish (e.g., peers not sharing answers) behaviors. The connection between these behaviors of the instructors and the peers and the appraisals of relatedness frustration is well depicted by arrows in Figure 5.

It may be noted in Figure 5 that the actions of the instructors remain very salient in the internal experience of psychological need frustration (i.e., many arrows lead to several aspects of need frustration appraisals), and this is consistent with the findings in extant literature (Adigun et al., 2022; Amoura et al., 2015; Burgueño et al., 2022). However, an apparent value added to the present study is its showcase of the role of people at home in autonomy frustration, and of the role of peers in relatedness frustration.

DISCUSSION

Prior to this investigation, SDT-based models of student disengagement have focused solely on the role of teachers, particularly their controlling behaviors (e.g., Adigun et al., 2022; Amoura et al., 2015; Burgueño et al., 2022; Leo et al., 2022; Moreno-Casado et al., 2022; Santana-Monagas & Núñez, 2022). In addition, the conceptualization of need frustration as a mechanism that underlies the dark sides of student functioning has mostly covered domains that are generic, rather than specific and contextualized (Chen et al., 2015; Longo et al., 2016). The nuanced model of behavioral disengagement that emerged in the present qualitative study presents a detailed look where it asserts the idea that not only instructors are important, but peers and people at home as well. In addition, it was found that not only controlling behaviors were influential, but neglect and disorganization as well. Furthermore, as the internal experience of need frustration has always been described at the level of basic psychological needs (i.e., autonomy frustration, competence frustration, and relatedness frustration), the experientially-nuanced model of the study has been able to provide a detailed perspective where context-specific appraisals of need frustration may be complex, and such complexity should be a welcome idea, as it fits well with the dialectical interaction and experience dependence assumption of the SDT.

Five contributions of the findings to the ongoing conversation of psychological need frustrations are discussed further. First, they support the salience of instructors' interpersonal behaviors in the functioning and well-being of learners. In a study by Leo and colleagues' (2022), they tested a model of student engagement in physical education classes, and the contention was that students' motivation and engagement could be explained by teachers' interpersonal styles

only. In another research, Aelterman and colleagues (2019) proposed a fine-grained model of motivating styles of teachers, adopting the view that teachers take a central role in the motivation, learning, and development of students (Wentzel, 2009, 2016).

Second, the findings contribute to the growing body of research which has pointed out that psychological control is not the only teacher behavior that is need-relevant, but there are other behaviors as well. In SDT, Ryan and Deci (2017) made it clear that "controlling contexts and events can disrupt not only autonomy satisfactions, but relatedness and competence need fulfillments as well" (p.247). Consequently, it was noted that this SDT proposition has in fact stimulated a number of studies that only focused on psychological control (and poor autonomy support) in explaining psychological need frustration (e.g., Charlot Colomès et al., 2021; Tilga et al., 2019). However, there are recent works that have explored other teacher behaviors that are potentially attributable to need frustration. The perfect example is the work of Englund and colleagues (2022) where, through a qualitative investigation, they found that there were teacher behaviors that could obstruct students' basic psychological needs despite being not related to psychological control. These behaviors were being incoherent, giving excessive workload, being unclear in their performance standards, having favorites, and being relationally distant.

Third, the findings have shed light on the roles of peers and people at home on need frustration. As noted, there was a dearth of studies about peer and parental influences on students' need frustration, but it should not mean that these two socializing agents should be overlooked, especially in the context of flexible learning. Previous works, though very few, have already hinted at the important influence of these two factors. There was the work of Charlot Colomès and colleagues (2021), where the mother's autonomy support was tested together with the teacher's autonomy support for their contributions in middle school students' psychological need frustration. They found that a mother's autonomy support was negatively associated only with autonomy frustration and relatedness frustration. There was also the study of Moè and colleagues (2020), where they found that students homework produced parental need frustration, which in turn, led to parental stress, and which in turn, led to the child's need frustration. Lastly, there was the work of Adigun and Adams (2021), where peer relational climate factors (e.g., bullying) was found to be significantly associated with students' need frustration.

Fourth, the findings provide a picture of how domain-specific need frustration was so nuanced, challenging the dominant tradition in the extant literature of conceptualizing and measuring it as a domain-generic state. Milyavskaya and Koestner (2011) already established early on that need-based experiences may be situation-specific, and that these would exert upward or bottom-up effects on domain-generic feelings of need satisfaction (and frustration). However, it has been a decade since their work was published and, to the best of our knowledge, this current study is the first one to ever explore the contextual and experiential nuances of need frustration appraisals in the school setting and more specifically, the context of flexible learning among tertiary students. The lack of research on this area is surprising because SDT has always been so direct on the assumption of the experience dependence of need-based experiences (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Lastly, the present study's findings on stifled interest and enjoyment and subsequent disengagement have corroborated the findings in other studies that have established a link between need frustration and the dark side of student functioning. This dark side includes poor qualities of motivation, low engagement and high disengagement, as well as negative emotions. In Leo and colleagues' (2022) work, perceived thwarting of all three basic psychological needs was found to increase the chances of primary and secondary school students losing their motivation. In Adigun and colleagues' (2022) work as well, it was found that a global sense of psychological need frustration increased the probability of middle and high school students to disengage in school. Finally, in Behzadnia and colleagues' (2018) work, a global sense of need frustration was a significant contributor in understanding the negative effects on tertiary-level physical education students.

In closing, the future of research on psychological need frustration (and need satisfaction as well) shall now see the value of uncovering the experiential nuances of the phenomenon. As pointed out in the foregoing discussions, unearthing these nuances is insightful because we get to expand our understanding of the key socializing agents involved, as well as witness how broad need-based appraisals could be.

CONCLUSION

This study was aimed at understanding why many tertiary students disengaged and lost their valuing for flexible learning. Grounded on

the theoretical proposition of SDT that individuals are in dialectical interaction with social context, it was argued that the potential reason for motivation loss and disengagement was that the pandemic-era flexible learning environment was a need-thwarting social context. Specifically, it was thought that there were socializing agents, namely the instructors, peers, and parents, whose behaviors were appraised by tertiary students as need-thwarting, resulting in poor qualities of motivation and then disengagement.

The present qualitative investigation has revealed that the three socializing agents indeed demonstrated a number of behaviors that were perceived as need-thwarting. These behaviors were identified as instructors' rigid behaviors, neglectful behaviors, disorganized behaviors, and being mean; peers' indifferent and selfish behaviors; and burdensome behaviors of people in the household. As 27 consenting research participants recalled these need-thwarting behaviors, they also had complex appraisals of these behaviors, which clustered around three psychological need frustrations, namely autonomy frustration, which comprised of believing that academic tasks are mere obligations, having problems balancing school and home obligations, and feeling pressured; competence frustration, which comprised of believing that outputs were misevaluated, thinking that one's task compliance was unguided, and believing that one was incompetent; and relatedness frustration, which comprised of feelings disconnected from instructors and from peers. These appraisals were tied to participants' thematic recollections of motivation loss and behavioral disengagement, notably amotivation, motivation to stay on the course, low effort, poor concentration, dishonesty, and failure to meet instructor expectations.

These findings highlight the importance of addressing these need frustrations in order to improve tertiary students' motivation and engagement in academic tasks. This could involve creating more opportunities for student autonomy in academic tasks, providing adequate guidance and support for students, and fostering a sense of community and connectedness among students and instructors. Additionally, instructors and peers could be trained on ways to create a supportive and inclusive environment that promotes student well-being and motivation.

In the context of the Philippines, where flexible learning has been widely adopted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, understanding the

roles of various socializing agents becomes particularly crucial. The study provides a nuanced understanding, revealing that instructors, peers, and family members all contribute to the qualities of motivation and subsequent engagement among tertiary students. This insight is critical for educational stakeholders in the Philippines as they navigate the challenges of flexible learning environments, which continue to be prevalent in many parts of the country.

Future research may look into doing confirmation of the findings of this qualitative investigation to ensure their generalizability to the general population. For example, scale development research may be done to establish new constructs related to the psychological need frustration in flexible learning. In addition, structural model tests involving psychological need frustration, various forms of low-quality motivation, and several indicators of school disengagement may be examined to confirm the framework established and claims made in the present study.

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