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The Experience of Dispositional Optimism among female African Americans, Hispanics/Latinas, and Caucasians In Generation Z: An Existential Phenomenological Investigation

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in Exercise Science.

By

Katie A. Kennedy

Under the mentorship of Dr. Daniel Czech

ABSTRACT

Mental health is becoming an increasingly important topic within Generation Z. 39% of college students in the United States reported experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety (Burwell, 2018). Conversely, researchers have shown an inverse relationship between high levels of optimism and depression, as well as optimism and suicide ideation (Chang, Martos, Sallay, Change, Wright, Najarian, & Lee, 2016). Additionally, Optimism has been negatively correlated with negative psychological outcomes (Chang, et al., 2016). The purpose of this study will be to examine dispositional optimism within female Generation Z students at a southeastern university. Researchers will use a qualitative interviewing process to capture the full essence of an individual's experience with optimism by asking the singular question "when you think of the word optimism, what comes to mind?" Further probing questions will be asked to gather the most complete and detailed experience from the individual. The interviews will then be analyzed using a phenomenological analysis technique. From this, a thematic structure on the lived experience of Optimism will be created. Discussions of Optimism and future directions of optimism research will take place.

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Optimism has recently become an important aspect of living a healthy lifestyle. Optimism is defined as having positive expectations about the future (Carver & Scheier, 2014). It has been found to be related to positive social interactions, positive relationships, positive health, and overall positive well-being (Lee & Mason, 2013). In turn, optimism has been found to have a negative relationship with negative psychological outcomes, such as depression (Chang, Martos, Sallay, Chang, Wright, Najarian, & Lee, 2016). More optimistic individuals are more likely to actively cope with their stressors, which includes seeking help, planning, and using positive reinforcement strategies (Odom & Vernon-Feagans, 2010). Higher levels of optimism have been found in people who have more education and are more religious (You, Fung, & Isaacowitz, 2009). Additionally, optimism may be shaped by different cultures and what the culture emphasizes as important (You, Fung, & Isaacowitz, 2009, Lee & Mason, 2013). The current study examined the lived experiences of optimism in Generation Z college students at a southeastern university. Specifically, the study analyzed the lived experience of optimism within three different female groups in Generation Z: African Americans, Hispanics/Latinas, and Caucasians. The purpose of this study was to describe the lived experience of optimism of each of these three female groups within Generation Z through phenomenological analysis.

Optimism in College Students

College students are at high risk for negative mental health outcomes. Researchers have found that 44% of college students have had serious thoughts about suicide (Chang et al. 2016). Additionally, it has been shown that there is an inverse relationship between optimism and suicide ideation, and optimism and depression (Chang et al, 2016).

Therefore, since college campuses today are plagued with depression and suicide ideation, teaching college students about the importance of optimism could have positive implications. Optimism is correlated with an easier ability to navigate stressors in their lives, which is important for college students as most students experience an increase in their daily stressors as a result of their new environment and workload (Kapikiran & Acun-Kapikiran, 2016). Also, optimism is associated with an increased ability to persevere when faced with extreme adversity, a challenge often faced by college students (Odom & Vernon-Feagans, 2010). College is often a time when students engage in risky sexual behaviors, but high optimism has been shown to have a positive relationship with health protective sexual behaviors (Mattis, Fontenot, & Hatcher-Kay, 2002). A study consisting of Turkish college student participants found a positive relationship between self-esteem and optimism (Kapikiran & Acun-Kapikiran, 2016). Additionally, a study done by Yulan Yu and Jun Luo (2018) done with Chinese college students found positive correlations between optimism and self-efficacy and optimism and well-being. Additionally, optimism has been shown to correlate with high academic achievement (Akram & Suneel, 2018). However, there is conflicting research regarding the effects of optimism on college students. Dosedlova, Klimusova, Buresova, Jelinek, Slezackova, & Vasina (2014) found that in Czech university students, levels of optimism did not predict health behaviors, but it did have a positive effect on mental health as more optimistic students were more likely to have a positive mindset and attitude.

Optimism trends in African Americans

African Americans often place a high priority on religion (Hirsch & Nsamenang, 2014). They are highly likely to be a part of a religious organization, and it has been

shown that African American women often use religion as a way to cope with mental health problems (Hirsch & Nsamenang, 2014). It is important to consider spirituality and religion when looking at optimism among African Americans, as it has correlated with higher levels of optimism and lower levels of depression and pessimism (Hirsch & Nsamenang, 2014, Mattis et al. 2002). However, research has found that church attendance and involvement were not correlated with optimism, while having a positive relationship with God was positively correlated with optimism (Mattis et al. 2002). It was also found that older African Americans with a positive relationship with God had higher optimism levels than younger African Americans (You, Fung, & Isaacowitz, 2009). Additionally, research has shown that sociocultural factors can affect the expression of optimism, which emphasizes the importance of looking at how religion and spirituality affect optimism as they are a large part of the African American culture (Mattis et al. 2002). Researchers have found that optimism may be important in overcoming socioeconomic status or racial/minority barriers (Webber & Smokowski, 2018). A large barrier that African Americans experience daily is racism. Racism was found to be a very important indicator of optimism in African Americans, as even low exposure to everyday racism was found to be associated with lower optimism scores (Mattis et al. 2002, Odom & Vernon-Feagans, 2010). It is important to note, that even while experiencing everyday racism, participants the Mattis, Fontenot, and Hatcher-Kay (2002) study had relatively high optimism. However, a study found that about 38% of African American respondents were considered more optimistic, whereas about 61% of respondents were considered less optimistic (Lee & Mason, 2013). In contrast, in a study examining African American youth, Native American youth, Caucasian youth, and Hispanic/Latino youth found

African American to have the highest reported levels of optimism (Webber & Smokowski, 2018). Additionally, a study involving African American mothers found that mothers who were more optimistic were less likely to be depressed than those who were less optimistic (Odom & Vernon-Feagans, 2010). A study involving African American college students found a very strong correlation between optimism and low levels of suicide ideation (Yu & Chang, 2016). In a study of adolescent youth, African American adolescents reported higher levels of optimism over Caucasian, Hispanic/Latino, and Native American youth (Webber & Smokowski, 2018).

Optimism Trends in Latino/Hispanics

It was found that there was a very strong correlation between optimism and low levels of suicidal ideation in Latino American college students (Yu & Chang, 2016). A study consisting of participants from Chile and Colombia found that optimism had a positive effect on health, but religion did not affect optimism levels (Vera-Villaruel, Urzua, Contreras, Lillo, Oyarzo & Sanin-Posada, 2017). When comparing Latinos from Argentina, Mexico, and Chile, no differences were found in optimism levels (Lavarello, Guerrero, & Larranaga-Vergara, 2017). A study analyzing Native American, Caucasian, African American, and Latino adolescents found African Americans to have much higher levels of optimism than Latino adolescents (Webber & Smokowski, 2018). There is a clear research gap in this area.

Optimism Trends in Caucasians

A study comparing optimism levels found that within Caucasian Americans, about 57% of respondents were very optimistic compared with 42% as being less

optimistic (Lee & Mason, 2013). When predicting Caucasian college student optimism levels, researchers found that academic problems and parental modern values were the best predictors (Chang, 1996). Additionally, when looking at how well Caucasian Americans adjusted to college, it was found that pessimism often predicted maladjustment (Chang, 1996). Optimism was found to be negatively associated with suicidal ideation for Caucasians (Yu & Chang, 2016). Researchers have found that Caucasian Americans become more optimistic as they get older (You, Fung, & Isaacowitz, 2009). A study examining African American, Native American, Latino, and Caucasian youth found that Caucasian youth reported lower levels of optimism when compared to African American youth (Webber & Smokowski, 2018).

Defining Generation Z

Generation Z has a few different ways of being defined. A broader range begins at the year 1990 and continues until the present day (Puiu, 2017). Another range splits Generation Z into two parts, Generation Z1 and Generation Z2. Generation Z1 is from 1995-2005 and Generation Z2 is from 2005- present day (Puiu, 2017). The main characteristic that defines Generation Z is that they are extremely tech-savvy, having grown up in a world that always had the Internet (Puiu, 2017). Along with technology, there are 8 other defining characteristics of Generation Z: innovation, speed, fun, customization, integrity, freedom, scrutiny, and collaboration (Desai & Lele, 2017). Generation Z is often dependent upon technology to learn and uses social media as a way to obtain information (Puiu, 2017, Desai & Lele, 2017). Additionally, Generation Z likes frequent, short communication, such as text messages, and likes to receive feedback (Puiu, 2017). Generation Z thinks and acts quickly, without as high of a value placed on

accuracy. They are great at multitasking and absorbing lots of information simultaneously. Within a workforce they want things to be flexible, with the opportunity to experiment with unconventional opportunities (Puiu, 2017). Generation Z is very open-minded and confident in their abilities to achieve their personal goals (Puiu, 2017). They are responsible and determined while also being loyal and compassionate (Puiu, 2017). Members of Generation Z are self-learners and like to learn alone at their own pace rather than with others (Puiu, 2017). They are also very engaged and like to be active, creating an entrepreneurial mindset (Puiu, 2017). As a whole, Generation Z is described as being more realistic than optimistic or pessimistic (Puiu, 2017). Rather than blindly following rules, Generation Z is open to challenging rules and creating new ones, making them less obedient than former generations (Puiu, 2017). Education is very important to Generation Z, as they are the most educated generation yet, started school younger than any generation, and will most likely stay in education longer than previous generations (Desai & Lele, 2017). Generation Z grew up in small families with the least number of siblings of any other generation (Desai & Lele, 2017).

Methods

Pilot Study

To ensure validity of the interview questions and for the researcher to become more comfortable with the qualitative interview process, a pilot study was conducted. Two tape recorded interviews were conducted and transcribed with colleagues. An interview guide was utilized in the beginning of the process but was used decreasingly as the researcher became more comfortable with the process. Colleagues were asked to provide feedback and critiques on the interview process.

Participants

To select participants, a convenience sample was used. All participants were chosen by voluntarily filling out a Google Form survey, and all attended a Southeastern United States University. This survey asked name, gender, race, birth year, email, phone number, and availability. All selected participants were females born during Generation Z1 which is defined as from 1995-2005 (Puiu, 2017). Participants were disqualified from possible participation if they were male, did not report race or were not African American, Latina/ Hispanic, or Caucasian, or were born outside of 1995-2005. Additionally, participants with availability that did not coincide with the availability of the researchers were disqualified. From this pool, 6 self- defined African American students, 6 self- defined Latina/Hispanic students, and 6 self- defined Caucasian students were chosen. This low sample size is common in qualitative studies, as qualitative studies choose a sample sized based upon whether it matches the purpose and rationale of the study (Patton, 1990).

Procedures

Before selection, participants were informed that all demographic data would be kept confidential. Once selected, participants were ensured that there would be no identifying information on the interview transcripts, participation is voluntary and can be stopped at any time, they would be allowed to review the transcript once processed to ensure data validity, and the tapes and transcripts would only be viewed by the researchers. They were then sent an informed consent form and cover letter.

Data was collected in the form of in-depth interviews. These interviews were designed to extract a phenomenological experience from the participants. Phenomenological methodology is an attempt to describe lived experiences by gaining a rich description of the meaning of existence from the individual (Czech, 1996). In this study, the act of being optimistic is described as a phenomenon.

To ensure comfort, the participants were interviewed at a time agreed upon by the researcher and participant (Patton, 1990). The interviews were conducted over the online video conferencing platform Zoom. Each interview was recorded, and the participant was made aware of this before the interview began. During the interview, the researcher made written notes to help provide further clarification. Interviews were conducted according to recommendations made by Patton to develop a comfortable interviewing environment and the most accurate interviewing technique: Confidentiality was ensured to the participant, before the interview the researcher made small talk with the participant to develop a rapport, moments of silence were allowed during the interviews to allow the participant to gather their thoughts, and clarifying and probing questions were asked to gain a deeper phenomenological description (Patton, 1990).

The participants were asked a single, open-ended question: “When you think of the word Optimism, what comes to mind?” From this question, probing questions were then asked such as

“Can you tell me a specific experience when you were Optimistic?”

“How did you feel during this experience?”

“You said _____ about your experience, can you elaborate on that?”

“You said _____ about your experience, what did you mean by _____?”

“Just to clarify so I can understand correctly, can you elaborate on _____/ give me another example of _____?”

“So I can understand correctly, can you explain _____ in another way?”

Leading questions were not used in order to eliminate researcher bias (Patton, 2002).

Additionally, it was made clear to the participant that lack of understanding was the fault of the researcher, and not the fault of the participant, which gives comfort to the participant (Rapp, 2004).

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using phenomenological analysis. The goal of phenomenological analysis was to extract the meaning, essence, and structure of the lived experience of a phenomenon (Patton, 1990). It discovered themes and patterns to determine what was experienced and how it was experienced by a group while keeping the individuality of the participant and explaining what the experience meant to the

participant (Czech, 1996). Using a combination of phenomenological analysis from Moustakas (1994) and Czech (1996.), the following analysis was implemented.

1. Approaching the interviews

-Epoche

- Understanding the interview

2. Focusing the Data

-Reduction

-Creating meaning units

3. Summarizing the interviews

- Creating a summary

- Verifying the summary

4. Synthesis of text and structure

- Forming themes

Approaching the interviews.

Epoche.

Epoche is a Greek word meaning to refrain from judgement. This step was critical to eliminating researcher bias. During this process, the researcher analysed themselves to identify any personal bias pertaining to the topic and eliminate it (Patton,1990).

Eliminating personal bias is important to achieve an accurate description of a

phenomenon. *Epoche* focuses on the evidential, empirical, and data- based research of phenomenology (Patton, 1990). In order to do this, a bracketing interview was performed. Bracketing interviews serve to guide the researcher into talking about their own presuppositions about the phenomenon which they then identify and recognize how they could affect their own study (Czech, 1996). Thus, the researcher can experience the interview process for themselves and gain a thematic description of their experience with the phenomenon, along with an awareness of how to prevent these themes from influencing their own study (Czech, 1996). This process of avoiding personal bias was ongoing throughout the study, which allows the researcher to approach each transcript with an open mind (Rapp, 2004).

Understanding the interview.

To fully understand each interview in the fullest, it was important for the researcher to read and listen to each interview before analysis had begun. In relistening and rereading, I was able to find inconsistencies and understand the experience while eliminating my personal bias (Czech, 1996).

Focusing the data.

Reduction.

Each transcription was copied into a separate document. Non-meaningful units were then cut out from the document. Following Henderson (1992) and Hawthorne (1988), data was reduced to eliminate the following:

-coincidental utterances

-asides

-Any text not essential to understanding the conversation

-Repeated statements

-Any statements from the interviewer

Eliminating these from the transcript allowed the meaning of the conversation to be made clearer with a better ease of understanding (Czech, q996).

Creating meaning units.

Once filtered, meaning statements were highlighted different colors, a set of colored significant statements was then left behind. This reduced the phenomenon to colored, individual experiences, called meaning units (Rapp, 2004). This was done in each individual transcript without any regards to the other transcripts, which reduced personal bias (Rapp, 2004). The process of identifying meaning units was clear to the researcher after previously understanding and divulging themselves in each individual's experience (Rapp, 2004). Thus, each individual's experience was clearly represented (Czech, n.d.).

Summarizing the interviews.

Creating a summary.

This step condensed the interview further while keeping the significant ideas from the participant. All meaning units was seen as equal and examined, and irrelevant and repeating units were eliminated (Rapp, 2004). In using Hawthorne (1988), the researcher marked the beginning and end of each topic of discussion within the meaning units. The

remaining meaning units with similarities were then grouped together (Rapp, 2004). These similar meaning statements may be grouped based upon similar specifics with the experience or general comments with the experience (Czech, 1996.). The groups were edited to combine or shorten sentences (Hawthorne, 1988). These groups represented preliminary, expanded themes that may be emerging (Rapp, 2004). This process selected and reordered meaning units while keeping the words of the participant, which created the basic meaning of the interview in a shorter version (Czech,1996).

Verifying the summary.

To verify the summaries, participants read and modified them to protect their meaning and ensure that their experiences were being accurately represented (Czech, 1996). Researchers ensured that the participant felt welcomed to disagree with the summary (Czech, 1996). This prevented the researcher from agreeing to the summary out of guilt and ensured a truthful representation of their experience (Czech, 1996). To do this, the researcher told the participants to ensure that the summary included each point that they made and did not change the meaning of what they were expressing (Czech, 1996).

Synthesis of text and structure.

Forming Themes.

Phenomenological analysis uses a structural description that understands how participants in a group experience a phenomenon (Rapp, 2004). To form structure, overlapping meaning units were removed if it has already been represented by a meaning unit from a different participant (Rapp, 2004). The different colored meaning unit

statements helped to ensure that each individual's experience was accurately represented in a meaning unit group (Rapp, 2004). The statements remaining were understood as the themes of the experience of the phenomenon of the group as a whole (Rapp, 2004). The themes captured the shared experiences of each individual and how they compared across the group. Differentiation within these themes were then described as subthemes, which occur in some, but not all, of the participants.

Themes were described as when 3 or more participants in a group had the same theme occur in their individual interviews. To describe themes in Generation Z females, a theme was described as 6 or more participants having that same theme in their interview. Subthemes were created when 2 participants in a group had that specific theme in their interview, and when 5 total Generation Z females included a certain theme in their interview.

Results

After analyzing the interviews of African American, Hispanic/Latina, and Caucasian Generation Z females the experience of each individual was told through the development of themes and subthemes. Of 18 total interviews completed, two interviews per group were discarded due to lack of usable content. This left a total of 12 complete interviews from 12 participants, 4 African American, 4 Hispanic/Latina, and 4 Caucasian females.

Themes in Generation Z African American Females

An analysis of the interviews from African American participants revealed 3 total themes. These themes include: Positivity, Perspective, and Spirituality/Religion. These three themes formed the structure of the lived experience of optimism for African American females. The described experience of each theme for African American females, comprised of a summary of their direct interview quotes is included under each sub-heading.

Positivity

“Positivity is important in situations where it is hard to not be negative or to have an optimistic outlook. If you try to see the positive in everything you will be optimistic, and positive things will come your way. Putting out positive thoughts and attitudes into the world will help you attract more positivity. You have to find the positive in everything, that way the negative won’t weigh down on you. When you focus on the positives, you will always get a good outcome because you will see the good outcome over the bad outcome. This helps you get through the bad times because you are able to focus on what you can do to help in a hard situation, and what positives could come out of the situation.”

Perspective

“I try to remind myself that whatever hard thing I am going through right now is only temporary, and that it will get better. Or when I’m doing something I don’t really want to do I try to think like I get to have this opportunity instead of that I have to do this. This helps me realize that I am very blessed, and I get to do all of these opportunities that so many other people are fighting for or don’t get to have. I try to think of everything as a

gift so I am more open to whatever comes my way. I just try to tell myself and the people around me that everything will be okay in the end, and we just have to remember that there is a light at the end of the tunnel, that this won't last forever. “

Spirituality/Religion

“If you put good energy out in to the universe, you will get good energy back. So, if you put positive energy out you will get a blessing or good outcome back. Being an optimistic person will cause you to receive more positive than negative energy. I am a Christian, and I know that I can do all things through Christ. The Bible says that if you live a good life when you're on Earth, you will get good things back in return just like putting out good energy and receiving good energy. The Bible keeps me motivated because I know that Christ has a purpose for me and he will give me the tools to reach that purpose. It just makes me more optimistic because I know that God has a purpose so what is supposed to happen, will happen. You have to meet God halfway, but it makes you optimistic because if you do meet him halfway, he will get you the other half of the way there. It makes you feel secure and calm because you know everything will turn out alright. “

Subthemes in Generation Z African American Females

The analysis of African American Females revealed 3 total subthemes, which were included in 2 of four interviews. These subthemes include: Helping/Impacting Others, Mom, and the COVID-19 Pandemic. These subthemes were still relevant to the experience of African American females but are not as prominent as themes. The described experience of African American females through their subthemes comprised of a compilation of interview quotes is included under each subheading.

Helping/Impacting Others

“When things get hard and I question what I do, I think what if I reach that one person and impact and change their life for the better. I think it is always important to go for it if it is something that can bring you joy or worth because it could also be giving someone else joy and worth. I try not to be afraid because I could change someone’s life, and if I am too scared to do something then I might not get the chance to help that person. So I always go for it and helping others helps me to do things I might not be confident in doing. I feel like my purpose is to help others and help them feel better about themselves, so I try to always be smiling and cheerful because then they leave happy with a smile on their face. I always try to be there for others even if it is just to listen.”

Mom

“My mom taught me to be optimistic. She told me that speaking positive things helps you attract positive things, and to always look for the positives. She taught me that a positive mindset will encourage me to look for the positives, and not to dwell on negativity.”

The COVID-19 Pandemic

“The pandemic has created a lot of adversity, and it is hard to still make good grades. People are struggling, but I just try to tell them that it will get better and that I will do whatever I can to support them. I just try to know that things will get better, and that you still can do things just with some creativity. It has been really hard to stay

optimistic, and I think people have shifted to becoming overall pessimistic. You just have to focus on the good and know that it will get better, we just don't know when yet.”

Themes in Generation Z Hispanic/Latina Females

An analysis of the interviews from Hispanic/Latina participants revealed 2 total themes. These themes include Positivity and Family. These two themes form the structure of the lived experience of optimism for Hispanic/Latina females. The described experience of each theme for Hispanic/Latina females, comprised of a summary of their direct interview quotes is included under each sub-heading.

Positivity

“I try to always be looking for a solution to my problems. If I am positive I can always be happier and see how I can make a situation better instead of only looking at the negatives. Being positive helps me tell myself that things will get better and there will be some light at the end. I try to have a positive mindset and look at every problem from the positive side, which helps you know that it will be okay. Creating this positive mentality is a relief because I always know that I will be able to see the good out of even the worst situation.”

Family

“My parents have taught me to be optimistic and positive since I was little. They have both influenced how I see optimism, because they were always working their hardest to give us a good life. They taught me that being optimistic will always lead to something good, and that being negative all the time won't get you anywhere. My family

has always been supportive and pushed me to work hard and stay optimistic during the process. I am who I am because of them.”

Subthemes in Generation Z Hispanic/Latina Females

The analysis of Hispanic/Latina Females revealed 1 subtheme, which was included in 2 of four interviews. This subtheme was Perspective. This subtheme is still relevant to the experience of Hispanic/Latina females, but is not as prominent as themes. The described experience of Hispanic/Latina females through their subtheme comprised of a compilation of interview quotes which is included under the subheading.

Perspective

“When something bad happens I try to put it in perspective, like it really is not that big of a deal because in 5 years it won’t matter. My life could be way worse than it is now, so I should be grateful that I am here and not in a worse situation. I try to take everything that happens and see what I can learn from it, which makes me optimistic because I know that by shifting my perspective I can learn from a bad situation. Something good can always come out of something bad if you choose to see the positives. It helps you focus on what really matters in life instead of the side stuff that isn’t as important, like money or material things. Optimism is choosing to see the good side of a bad situation.”

Themes in Generation Z Caucasian Females

An analysis of the interviews from Caucasian participants revealed 3 total themes. These themes include: Mindset, Family, and Helping Others. These three themes formed the structure of the lived experience of optimism for Caucasian females. The described

experience of each theme for Caucasian females, comprised of a summary of their direct interview quotes is included under each subheading.

Mindset

“Having a good mindset is seeing the glass as half full rather than half-empty. You can create a self-fulfilling prophecy for yourself. If you think optimistically and have a positive mindset, you can create good outcomes for yourself. Your thoughts and mindset control your optimism, and therefore your destiny. You can choose to wake up every morning and put yourself in a good mindset, and those positive thoughts will help you achieve your goals. Realizing that you can't control everything, but you can control your mindset in a situation. This can help you feel good about a situation because you know you were being positive and optimistic no matter what happened. “

Family

“Family is a huge value. My family and parents taught me to be optimistic and positive, and to have a good mindset in every situation. They raised me to be high-achieving and to view everything as an opportunity, even a bad situation. They have done everything they can to be supportive of me, and to build a good life for our family. My parents are often a calming presence, helping give me advice in situations where I might not be very optimistic. Therefore, I want to make them proud, and I feel more optimistic if I am doing everything I can to make them proud.”

Helping Others

“When people close to me are struggling, I try to take their burdens upon myself and I feel compassionately towards them. I feel optimistic that they will get through their situation, but also it makes me optimistic about my own situation, because there is always

someone struggling more than me. I feel as though I can't bring myself up and be a good leader and person without lifting up those around me as well. When those around me are reaching their goals, it makes me feel optimistic that I can reach my own goals too. Always having these people there to support and knowing that they will support me back makes me optimistic that I can get through any situation.”

Subthemes in Generation Z Caucasian Females

The analysis of Caucasian females revealed 1 total subtheme, which were included in 2 of four interviews. The subtheme is Control. This subtheme is still relevant to the experience of Caucasian females in Generation Z, but is not as prominent as themes. The described experience of Caucasian females through their subtheme is comprised of a compilation of interview quotes which is included under each subheading.

Control

“I feel more optimistic when I am in control of a situation. I plan so I know what is coming which makes me feel like I can tackle anything going on. However, when things pop up spontaneously or I feel out of control, I feel nervous and overwhelmed. In these situations, I try to focus on what I can control, and it makes me feel more optimistic about it when I realize what I can actually do in a crazy situation.”

Themes in Generation Z Females

An analysis of every interview participant revealed 3 total themes which apply to the lived experience of females in Generation Z at a whole. These themes included: Positivity, Family, and Helping Others. These three themes formed the structure of the lived experience of optimism for Generation Z females. The described experience of each

theme for Caucasian females, comprised of a summary of their direct interview quotes is included under each sub-heading.

Positivity

“Positivity is having a positive outlook in a situation where it is hard to be positive. You have to walk around thinking positive thoughts and be constantly seeking positivity wherever you go. When you have a positive mindset about a situation, you are able to see the good in a situation and seek out a solution. It is the opposite of negativity, thinking negatively all the time will bring you negativity, but thinking positive thoughts will bring you positive outcomes. It allows you to not let the negative thoughts take over your life, because you are more likely to attract positive actions and outcomes by being a positive, optimistic person.”

Family

“My family is very important to me. My parents taught me how to be optimistic and how to be positive and have a good mindset. They taught me that having a positive mindset will always lead me to seeing the positives in a situation, and that being negative won't do you any good. My parents and family have always supported me in everything I do, and having their support makes me optimistic about achieving my goals. Seeing my parents work so hard to make a good life for me and my family is really inspiring. They taught me to be hard working and to view everything as an opportunity.”

Helping Others

“When life gets hard and I start to question if I am doing the right thing, I think what if I reach out to that one person and impact their life? What if I can help them? So

when I know that someone else is in a difficult situation I try to let them lean on me and give them support and positive vibes. I try to help them see that everything will be okay, and it may seem hard now but it will get better. I worry for them, and I am optimistic for them but sometimes it can be hard. Sometimes, I am able to gain optimism from helping a friend because I see how they are pushing through something and it makes my own problems seem not so bad. People motivate me to be a leader and to be an optimistic person, because I feel like I can't be a good leader without helping bring up the people around me too. Helping other people through a situation or helping them reach their goals makes me more optimistic about my own situation."

Subthemes in Generation Z Females

The analysis of each interview revealed 1 total subtheme, which were included in 5 of 12 interviews. The subtheme is Perspective. This subtheme is still relevant to the experience of Generation Z females as a whole but is not as prominent in the population as themes. The described experience of Generation Z females through their subtheme is comprised of a compilation of interview quotes which is included under the subheading.

Perspective

"I feel better when I change my perspective from being "I have to do something" to "I get to have this opportunity." I try to view everything as an opportunity, no matter whether it is a good or bad situation. That way, I can make myself always see the good in a situation or I can always learn something from what has happened to me. This helps me to focus on what is important in life, instead of materialistic distractions. When something bad happens, I try to focus on what I can do to change that situation for the

better. I remind myself that whatever is happening is only temporary, and if I think of it as temporary it is much easier to see how things will turn out okay in the end.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experience of Optimism among female African Americans, Hispanics/Latinas, and Caucasians in Generation Z. The study was successful in determining these themes and being the first of its kind can provide much insight to future researchers who want to look at Optimism within Generation females.

Within African American Generation Z females, the emerging themes and subthemes included Positivity, Helping/Impacting Others, Perspective, Mothers, the COVID-19 Pandemic, and Spirituality/Religion. Previous studies have shown that spirituality and religion are often valued highly by African Americans, therefore Spirituality/Religion appearing as a theme in African American’s lived experience of optimism was expected (Hirsch & Nsamenang, 2014). However, studies have shown that older African Americans often value religion more highly than younger African Americans (You, Fung, & Isaacowitz, 2009). This could imply that Generation Z is changing the way that younger African Americans value their Religion and Spirituality and may be placing a higher value on it than previous younger generations. Additionally, a study by Paithis, Jackson, Diaz, Stepanova, and Herrera (2019) said that African American college students indicated high levels of secure attachment to their mothers and were more likely to remember their mother’s love in childhood than white students. This could be a reason why the influence of the Mom showed up as a subtheme in African American’s lived experience of optimism.

Surprisingly, African American females were the only group where the COVID-19 Pandemic popped up as a subtheme. The COVID-19 pandemic began sweeping the nation in December of 2019, and has since drastically altered the lives of nearly every individual in the world. It has taken the lives of over 500,000 people in the United States and infected over 30,000,000 (CDC). College students have been drastically affected, with quarantines and completely online classes proving to be a challenging adjustment to make along with the loss of a normal society and social life. Hence, it was expected that the COVID-19 Pandemic would appear in nearly every participant's interview analysis. COVID-19 showing up as a subtheme solely with the African American females could be due to COVID-19 disproportionately affecting people of Black or African American descent (The Covid Tracker Project). According to The Covid Tracking Project, in the United States Black people have died of COVID-19 or complications due to COVID-19 at 1.4 times the rate of white people (The Covid Tracker Project). Black people make up 15% of all COVID-19 related deaths and have the highest death rate of any race or ethnicity (The Covid Tracker Project). Therefore, Black and African American communities and families have been hit harder by the pandemic than any other race or ethnicity. This may explain why this subtheme was only shown in African American participants.

The emerging themes and subthemes in an analysis of the interviews of Hispanic/Latina participants revealed themes and subthemes consisting of Positivity, Family, and Perspective. Currently, there is a large gap in data regarding optimism trends for Hispanic/Latinas in Generation Z. Hispanic and Latina participants shared two themes with African American participants, Positivity and Perspective. This is important,

because although previous research has shown that African Americans have much higher levels of optimism than Hispanics/Latinos, the current study suggests that their lived experiences of optimism may be more similar than different (Webber & Smokowski, 2018). Additionally, Latino and Hispanic families often place a very high value on family and family connections (Lazarevic, Shapiro, Crovetto, & Nguyen, 2020). Latino and Hispanic families often value loyalty and interdependence on family members which includes having lots of familial support (Lazarevic, et. al, 2020). Therefore, the high value of family and support from the family in Latino/Hispanic culture may account for Family appearing as a theme in the lived experience of Hispanic/Latino females in Generation Z.

In the analysis of the interviews from Caucasian participants revealed 3 themes and 1 subtheme. These included Mindset, Family, Helping Others, and Control. Caucasian participants share the Family theme with Hispanic/Latina participants, and the Helping Others theme with African American participants. Previous studies have shown that parental values are often a large predictor of Caucasian optimism (Chang, 1996). This could serve as the reason why Family appeared as a theme in the lived experience of Optimism of Caucasian participants.

The interviews of all participants revealed three major themes and one subtheme that define the lived experience of Optimism within females in Generation Z. These themes included Positivity, Family, Helping Others, and Perspective. One of Generation Z's defining characteristics is collaboration (Desai & Lele, 2017). They like to be around people and work with people, which could explain the frequent occurrence of the Helping Others Theme (Desai & Lele, 2017). Generation Z is also flexible and can absorb much

information in a quick manner as well as thinking and acting at high speeds (Puiu, 2017). These important traits could contribute to their ability to change perspectives and see things from multiple angles, leading to their theme of Perspective. Previous studies also indicate that Generation Z has the smallest family size of any of the previous generations (Desai & Lele, 2017). This may be the reason for the theme of Family in the lived experience of Generation Z. There is a possibility that Generation Z places a high value on family because their families are so small.

This current study is important because of the implications that it has for future mental health research within Generation Z. Depression, suicide ideation, and other negative mental health outcomes are an epidemic currently sweeping the population of Generation Z college students. Previous studies have estimated that 44% of college students seriously thought about suicide, and that 1 in 5 students have a diagnosable mental illness (Salimi, Gere, Talley, & Iriogbe, 2021, Chang et al. 2016). Additionally, researchers have found that 58.3% of participants in a study regarding mental health and COVID-19 reported moderate to severe psychological outcomes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Salimi, et al. 2021). Females and those previously struggling with mental health reported higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Salimi, et al. 2016). Optimism has been found to have a negative relationship with negative psychological outcomes, including suicide ideation and depression (Chang, Martos, Sallay, Chang, Wright, Najarian, & Lee, 2016). Therefore, having higher levels of optimism may help reduce the mental health crisis on college campuses today.

The data from this study shows what has influenced Generation Z's views of optimism through their individual lived experiences. Knowing how Generation Z, and

how individual groups within Generation Z, view optimism can play an important role in creating a more optimistic generation. The results from this study can be useful in the teaching and implementation of optimism within Generation Z and within separate groups of Generation Z females. The teaching of optimism can be tailored to Generation Z females through the themes discovered in this study. This can create a more effective and efficient way of promoting and teaching optimism within Generation Z. More efficient means of promoting optimism may lead to higher levels of optimism within Generation Z. These higher levels of optimism may play a key component in the reduction of negative mental health outcomes within Generation Z.

The results of this study are useful for the beginning of research regarding optimism within Generation Z. Generation Z is the second youngest named generation to date, with the youngest of the generation being born in 2010. There is still much research to be done in regard to optimism within Generation Z. This is largely because much of Generation Z is still very young, but as the generation is becoming older more research is becoming available. There is also a clear research gap regarding optimism within African Americans and Hispanic/Latinas in Generation Z, and this study helps to close that gap. This current study contributes to the growing available research about optimism within Generation Z, as well as optimism within separate Generation Z groups.

COVID-19 proved to be a major limitation in this study. The change from in-person to online interviews was tedious and may have been stressful to the participant. The online interview process did not allow for a controlled, private environment for the participant to speak their thoughts, and therefore may have influenced what they said. The lack of face-to-face interviews also did not allow for researcher to examine important

physical cues, such as body language in response to stressors. Additionally, the researcher had personal relationships with some participants, which could have made them more or less comfortable with speaking about the subject and may have influenced their interviews. However, data collecting during the COVID-19 pandemic also provided valuable insight into how Generation Z included optimism in their lived experience despite living through a traumatic pandemic. The reduction of total participants from 18 to 12 limited the amount of data that was able to be collected. The addition of these participants may have strengthened or provided new insight into the described themes and subthemes. Additionally, the lack of similarly structured studies regarding optimism created difficulties when comparing and validating data.

Future research might expand upon Generation Z as a whole, rather than solely Generation Z1 college students. This study solely looked at females, and future research should look at the lived experience of optimism within males as well. This may provide a way to compare the lived experiences of optimism between males and females. Future studies may also want to expand upon the racial and ethnic groups included in this study to provide a further analysis between different groups. An interesting comparison with this study may be to repeat the study with in-person interviews instead of online interviews to see if the method of interviewing affected the lived experiences of optimism. Future studies should further analyze the affects of optimism on mental health within Generation Z. This may include a similar study asking participants about mental health and if they feel that optimism has played a role in their mental health.

The results from this study are meaningful and impactful. They help to close a wide research gap regarding optimism trends within Hispanic/Latina college students, as

well as adding to the available information about optimism in regard to African American and Caucasian females. These results help to create a base for further research with looking at the lived experiences of optimism of Generation Z females. Most importantly, this research may serve as the basis for tackling the mental health crisis within Generation Z college students.

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