

# MENTAL HEALTH AND ESCAPISM THROUGH TV SHOW CONSUMPTION AMONG FILIPINO UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS WHILE ON COVID-19 COMMUNITY QUARANTINE

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## Abstract

**Background:** As COVID-19 continued its growth, two factors also experienced its surge - the number of people with mental health problems and the number of individuals who consumed television shows. The Philippines was not exempted as these 2 factors were evidently found as the country experiences one of the world's longest community quarantine.

**Purpose:** The current study aimed to assess the association between the mental health status of enrolled Filipino undergraduate accounting students in Metro Manila while they are on community quarantine and their levels of escapism via TV show consumption.

**Methods:** A total of 55 participants responded to the Google Forms questionnaire. DASS-21 and Escapism Scale were used to assess the variables. The correlation between stress, anxiety, depression and escapism were analyzed using Pearson correlation analyses.  $p < .05$  was considered statistically significant.

**Results:** When evaluated using DASS-21, almost half of the participating students ( $n = 20$ , 36.36%) were experiencing extremely severe depression and severe stress, while 67.27% ( $n = 37$ ) of the total participants were having extremely severe anxiety. It was identified that the numbers of students who have seen at least one TV show (87.27%) were greater than those who did not (12.73%), and the responses reflected a high level of escapism ( $m = 3.22$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ).

**Conclusion:** It was concluded that depression ( $r = 0.301$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ) and stress ( $r = 0.398$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ) were significantly and positively related to escapism. Whereas, anxiety ( $r = 0.263$ ,  $p = 0.071$ ) was found to be statistically non-significant.

**Keywords:** Mental Health, Television, TEBOTS, Pandemic, Young Adult.

## Background

As COVID-19 continuously to spread across the world, two other factors also experienced its surge. First, an alarming rise in the number of people experiencing anxiety and depression can be noticed as the pandemic lingers (Tenorio Jr., 2020) [40]. The Philippine Department of Health (DOH) reported that the National Center for Mental Health (NCMH) encountered a spike on the number of received calls regarding mental health concerns during the pandemic (Baclig, 2022) [4]. Studies have shown that younger individuals (ages 15-20 and 21-30) showed to be more vulnerable to COVID stress and its mental health implications - higher amount of anxiety, stress, and depression. This phenomenon is particularly noticeable to college students and young adults who have just started in their careers (Montano & Acebes, 2020) [29]. Second, the use of streaming platforms or video-on-demand (VoD) services greatly increases during the lockdowns caused by the coronavirus pandemic (Boursier et al., 2021) [8]. In Southeast Asia, according to a report, the total mobile video consumption on a weekly basis in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines reached 58 billion minutes by April 2020 versus 36.4 billion on January 2020 (Brzeski, 2020). There is an increase in the number of individuals who watch online movies or series every day during the pandemic (Drianda et al., 2021) [15].

The Philippines' community quarantine or "stay-at-home" order is said to be the longest in the world (Argosino, 2021 [2]; Yee, 2020 [45]; See, 2021 [34]). According to the Omnibus Guidelines on the Implementation of Community Quarantine in the Philippines (2021), community quarantine can be described as "the restriction of movement within, into, or out of the area of quarantine of individuals, large groups of people, or communities, designed to reduce the likelihood of transmission of an infectious disease among persons in and to persons outside the affected area." According to studies, this restriction in movements and social interactions affects the mental wellbeing of

individuals, particularly college students who are transitioning into adulthood (Cleofas, 2021) [11]. These effects on the wellbeing of an individual can be said to be caused by their loss of autonomy, isolation away from their loved ones, uncertainty and boredom, and loss of sense of meaning (Camitan IV, & Bajin, 2021 [10]). Once a person experienced challenges to their sense of self or feel inadequate with respect to whom he or she wants to be, there will be an increased motivation to seek temporary relief or escape to ease the perceived threat to their sense of who they are (Khoo et al., 2021 [25]; Slater et al., 2014 [35]).

Escapism has been used in psychological research as a term to describe emotion-focused coping with stress and a sort of defensive mechanism, which disregards external stressors responsible for stress or those that threatens individual's identity and self-control (Mičić & Musil, 2020 [28]). Theorists suggest that escapism can be both cognitive narrowing, which literatures and studies described in escapism experiences in suicide attempts, binge eating, and drug abuse, and as well as provide optimal experiences in connection with activity engagement (Stenseng et al., 2012 [37]; Baumeister, 1990 [5], 1991 [6]; Czikszentmihalyi, 1990 [13]). Furthermore, as suggested in the Regulatory Focus Theory (RFT: Higgins, 1997 [22], 1998 [23]), one of the viewpoints which motivate people in escape-facilitating activities is promotion focus. Promotion focus directs individuals towards activity engagement that promotes achievement of prospective positive experiences and nurturance of the self. This type of activity engagement can be defined as self-expansion which is known to facilitate optimal functioning (Stenseng et al., 2012 [37]). To achieve this expansion, one escaping activity that is readily available and easily accessible to students and others is through television shows consumption (Slater et al., 2014 [35]; Wu & Holsapple, 2014 [44]; Panda & Pandey, 2017 [32]).

Studies have shown that individuals with depressive symptoms tend to enjoy consuming more TV shows as it distract them from negative emotions, give them happiness, and forget about difficult situations (Sriana et al., 2022 [36]). Even though most studies imply that "binge watching" is addictive and dangerous to one's health, according to a report, some students perceived it as a restorative experience (Panda & Pandey, 2017 [32]). Slater and colleagues (2014) proposed that story engagement has the capacity to temporarily expand the boundaries of the self (TEBOTS). The TEBOTS model's key premise is that our identities, self-concept, and image require constant effort to develop, maintain, defend, and enhance. During the COVID-19 pandemic when an

individual's identity is threatened, immersing ourselves in stories and consuming narrative entertainment, such as TV shows, offers another alternative in maintaining the self and promote coping with the source of the threat (Khoo et al., 2021 [25]). Temporary expansion of the boundaries of the self is a proposed explanation for our basic desire for narratives (Slater et al., 2014). Several theorists explained that narrative experience is said to be used to escape from self (Green, 2005 [20]), even likening it as a kind of vacation which is usually a break from a routine that has become tedious. It is compared to a mental simulation of entering different worlds in the mind of the reader or viewer which are inherent when entering into a narrative such as a book, play, movie or even television shows (Oatley, 2002 [31]). The act of watching TV or television shows consumption provides people with pleasurable experiences lived through a story (Woodside, 2010 [43]). Given the limitations imposed by COVID quarantine measures, when immersed deeply in a story it can transport people across various times, places, and social situations allowing temporary escape and satisfaction of their autonomy needs (Van Laer et al., 2014 [41]; Slater et al., 2014 [35]; Irimiás et al., 2021 [24]). Furthermore, narrative experiences through TV shows can fulfil their need for competence and agency by relating and identifying to story characters through simulated social relationships and can even provide individuals with prestige if identified with successful characters. This vicarious personal and social experience through narrative engagement by watching TV shows not only contribute to recovery from stress with its escapist motivation but even provide potential personal growth as it allows individual to explore new ideas, increase knowledge, and enrich one's perspective on contexts and situations (Slater et al., 2014 [35]; Halfmann & Reinecke, 2021 [21]; Khoo et al, 2021 [25]; Boursier et al., 2021 [8]).

Although there are studies revealing that escapist entertainment use helps to reduce emotional and cognitive strains and promotes expansion beyond the borders of self, studies mentioning its beneficial effects, particularly TV shows consumption, is still lesser than those with the negative view that tend to classify escapist media use as dysfunctional (Halfmann & Reinecke, 2021 [21]). However, recent studies have shown that during the time of pandemic, people, especially college students, cope more through watching TV and that those who felt greater identity threat from the COVID pandemic experienced greater boundary expansion when consumed TV shows, regardless of genre, which in result encouraged them to find more positive meaning in the pandemic (Boursier et al., 2021 [8]; Vitales et al., 2021 [42]; Khoo et al., 2021 [25]).

This study sought to identify the mental health status of young adults, specifically Filipino undergraduate accounting students, while on community quarantine during the COVID-19 pandemic and its association with escapism through TV shows consumption. Through this study, the researcher aspired that it can add to the literature, studies, and bodies of work of other researchers on the beneficial effects of television consumption in coping from mental health concerns.

## Methods

### Research Design

The study employed a quantitative descriptive/correlational design as it tried to find the association between the mental health statuses of young adults while on community quarantine and their levels of escapism through TV show consumption. In this design, only the association between the two variables were measured and described and information about variables were collected without changing the environment or manipulating any variables to prevent assessing cause and effect (Drummond, & Murphy-Reyes, 2018 [16]).

### Respondents of the Study

A total of 55 enrolled Filipino undergraduate accounting students in Metro Manila participated in the study, which exceeded the determined minimum sample size of an unknown population based from n-omega or Multistage Non-finite Population method (MNP: Louangrath, 2014 [26]) which is approximately at 34 with 95% confidence level and 0.05 allowable error. Majority of the sample comprised of female students (69.1%) with sixteen males (29.1%) and one who opted not to say their sex (1.8%). Population size for the research is unknown as no data was available on the precise number of enrolled Filipino undergraduate accounting students in Metro Manila. This location was chosen as it is one of the defined metropolitan areas in the Philippines and for a number of educational institutions offering the program in this particular area.

Snowball sampling technique was implemented by sending a link of the Google Forms questionnaire through social media accounts of various accounting students enrolled in Metro Manila. Respondents were encouraged to share the link to their fellow students as many as possible to assist in gaining the maximum number of respondents. The online survey accepted responses for 5 days during the latter part of February 2022.

### Research Instrument

The researcher utilized two different types of questionnaires for the study. First, the respondents' mental health status was measured using Lovibond & Lovibond's Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale - 21 items (DASS-21). This scale has been demonstrated to be a reliable and valid measure in assessing mental health in Filipinos and was previously used in research related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Tee et al., 2020 [38]; Tee et al., 2021 [39]). DASS-21 is a set of three self-report scales with 7 items in each scales designed to determine the emotional states of depression, anxiety and stress (Coker et al., 2018 [12]). Respondents were asked to use 4-point severity/frequency scales to rate the extent to which they have experienced each state, then scores for Depression, Anxiety and Stress were calculated by summing the scores for the relevant items. Recommended cut-offs for conventional severity labels (normal, moderate, severe) were also identified through DASS-21. In a study conducted in the Philippines by Bello et al. (2011) [7], the internal consistency of this scale has an estimate value of 0.95. Also, in a study by Coker et al. (2018) [12], it showed its reliability with an excellent Cronbach's alpha values of 0.81, 0.89 and 0.78 for the subscales of depressive, anxiety and stress respectively.

Second, Escapism Scale (Wu, & Holsapple, 2014 [44]; Gao et al., 2017 [19]) was used to measure the level of escapism. As there is still no established measure of escapist media use in general, through review of literature, this scale was found to be used to measure escapism in earlier researches dealing with escapism from real-world life events using internet services such as VoD (Meier et al., 2018 [27]; Fernandes et al., 2020 [18]; Fernandes et al., 2021 [17]). This short scale consists of four items which are to be rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly disagree = 1" to "Strongly agree = 4" (Fernandes et al., 2021 [17]). A higher score in the scale indicates higher level of escapism (Atış Akyol et al., 2021 [3]). In a recently conducted study with Filipino participants, this scale was found to have strong internal reliability with Cronbach's alpha value of 0.92 (Fernandes et al., 2020 [18]).

### Statistical Treatment of Data

The results were processed using IBM® SPSS® Statistics version 17. In order to address the research questions, descriptive statistics were calculated in the form of means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages of all the scales and subscales. The correlation between stress, anxiety, depression and escapism were analyzed using Pearson correlation analyses.  $p$  value  $< .05$  was considered statistically significant.

## Ethical Considerations

The voluntary consent statement was obtained as it was presented on the first screen of the Google Forms questionnaire. There were no serious risks identified in participating in this study and the respondents had an option to withdraw anytime from the study without any obligations. The identity of the respondents, if mentioned and all pertinent information will be kept private and confidential. Further, the study made sure to adhere to the Philippine Data Privacy Act of 2012.

## Results

Recent literature and studies have shown that the continuous “lockdown” and quarantine mandates due to the coronavirus pandemic had a great impact with people’s mental health, specifically to young adults (Tenorio Jr., 2020; Baclig, 2022; Montano & Acebes, 2020). As the country with one of the longest “stay-at-home” orders in the world, the Philippines is not exempted to this phenomenon (Yee, 2020; See, 2021). The study’s survey questionnaires were disseminated during the latter part of February 2022 when Metro Manila, the selected sample’s locale was under the country’s community quarantine classification of alert level 2. Even though this quarantine classification is less strict and allows intrazonal and interzonal movement provided that persons are vaccinated, prohibitions in terms of venue capacity are still

being observed and educational institutions in the country are still conducting online classes. These kinds of limitations result to disruptions in people’s daily lives and to their psychological state with the unmet needs, particularly to college students (Khoo et al., 2021), which reflected in the results of this study.

**Table 1** illustrated that majority of the participants, who are undergraduate accounting students enrolled in Metro Manila, were experiencing mental health concerns. Almost half or 20 over 55 undergraduate accounting students (36.36%) were having extremely severe depression and severe stress when assessed through DASS-21. While, 37 (67.27%) of these students were experiencing extremely severe anxiety. It can also be noted that there were still participants who fell under the normal level, albeit lesser frequency compared to those who were identified with other higher severity levels. This result is congruent with the recently conducted studies that Filipino college students or younger individuals were more vulnerable to mental health implications like higher amount of anxiety, stress, and depression due to the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic and the continuous quarantine measures that disrupts the known normal routine which then produce threats to their individual identity (Montano & Acebes, 2020; Cleofas, 2021; Khoo et al., 2021).

**Table 1: Mental Health Status of The Participants Using DASS-21**

Interpretation	Depression		Anxiety		Stress	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Normal</b>	6	10.91	5	9.09	10	18.18
<b>Mild</b>	1	1.82	1	1.82	9	16.36
<b>Moderate</b>	17	30.91	8	14.55	6	10.91
<b>Severe</b>	11	20.00	4	7.27	20	36.36
<b>Extremely Severe</b>	20	36.36	37	67.27	10	18.18
<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>99.99</b>

Studies have shown that when an individual’s identity is threatened or they feel inadequate with respect to whom they want to be, there will be an increase motivation to seek temporary escape (Khoo et al., 2021). One escape-facilitating activity that college students or young adults engaged more with is through watching TV shows (Khoo et al., 2021; Srianan et al., 2022; Panda & Pandey, 2017; Boursier et al., 2021). Results in this study provided in **Table 2** agreed with the previous researches, as 87.27% (n = 48) of this study’s participants have seen at least one TV show in the past month while they are in community

quarantine, whereas only 12.73% (n = 7) of them have not seen any and performed other activities. In a study conducted by Vitales and colleagues (2021), it has also been found out that majority of Generation Z Filipinos’ main psychological-spiritual coping strategy to cope with COVID stress is through watching TV. One possible factor that affected this result might be the easy access, availability, and the variety of contents that watching television shows provide while inside one’s homes (Panda & Pandey, 2017; Boursier et al., 2021; Wu & Holsapple, 2014).

**Table 2: TV Shows Watched in The Past Month While on Community Quarantine**

TV Shows Watched	Frequency	Percentage
One or more	48	87.27
None	7	12.73
<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>100.00</b>

As watching television shows and consuming narrative entertainment offers a temporary escape, as shown in **Table 3**, it has been found out that the average responses of the participants who consumed television shows yielded high level of escapism ( $m = 3.22$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ) when measured through the Escapism Scale. Since the computed SD value is less than 1, the responses from all items were homogenous and that the participants had common view regarding the given statements in the Escapism Scale. This provides that people with unstable mental health would watch television shows more as its narrative experience provides

them with pleasurable experiences lived through a story and relieves the perceived threat to their sense of self (Sriana et al., 2022; Slater et al., 2014; Khoo et al., 2021). Escapism is said to either provide cognitive narrowing or self-expansion (Stenseng et al., 2012); however, in this study, one possible factor with the result's high level of escapism is because it allows individuals to escape and expand through their imagination via TV shows as a form of probable mobility because of the limitations given by the prolonged lockdowns or quarantines, as Filipinos are known to have continuous desire to be transported in their imaginaries (Sanchez, 2014).

**Table 3: Escapism Scale**

Description	Mean	Standard Deviation	Verbal Interpretation
1. Watching TV show/series helps me escape from the world of reality.	3.31	0.69	Strongly Agree
2. Watching TV show/series helps me escape from problems and pressures.	3.19	0.82	Agree
3. Watching TV show/series helps me escape from things that are unpleasant and worrisome.	3.25	0.70	Agree
4. Watching TV show/series makes me feel as if I am in a different world of reality.	3.14	0.82	Agree
<b>Average</b>	<b>3.22</b>	<b>0.70</b>	<b>High Level of Escapism</b>

The TEBOTS model proposed by Slater et al. (2014), explained our basic desire for narratives such as immersing ourselves in stories and consuming narrative entertainment like TV shows. Escaping through watching television shows offers another alternative in maintaining the self and coping with the threat while our movements are limited brought about by the COVID-19 situation. In the present study, the TEBOTS model can be reflected in the data at **Table 4** as it confirmed that there is a correlation between the status of mental health – depression ( $r = 0.301$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ) and stress

( $r = 0.398$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ), with the level of escapism through TV shows consumption among enrolled Filipino undergraduate accounting students in Metro Manila. Since the p value computed is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis was rejected. Whereas, anxiety ( $r = 0.263$ ,  $p = 0.071$ ) was found to be not statistically related. Young adults, especially college students who are experiencing identity threat and mental health concerns brought by the effects of COVID-19, cope more through watching TV shows as they escape and expand while the pandemic continues.

**Table 4: Correlation Values Between The Mental Health Status and Escapism Through TV Shows Consumption of Filipino Accounting Students.**

		<b>Depression</b>	<b>Anxiety</b>	<b>Stress</b>	<b>Escapism</b>
DEPRESSION	Pearson Correlation	1	.797**	.719**	.301*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.038
	N	55	55	55	48
ANXIETY	Pearson Correlation	.797**	1	.688**	.263
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.071
	N	55	55	55	48
STRESS	Pearson Correlation	.719**	.688**	1	.398**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.005
	N	55	55	55	48
ESCAPISM	Pearson Correlation	.301*	.263	.398**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.038	.071	.005	
	N	48	48	48	48
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).					

### Conclusion

In the present study, it showed that the mental health status of undergraduate students, particularly those who are experiencing stress and depression, was associated with high level of escapism through TV shows consumption. As provided by previous literature and studies, those who are depressed and experiencing threat to their self-identity tend to consume narrative entertainment or watch television shows more to escape and expand because of the limitations imposed by the quarantine measures due to COVID-19. Educators and health care providers should look at watching TV shows in a positive note and look for ways to fully utilize this technology as majority of young adults and students consume this kind of activity whenever they are experiencing mental health problems.

One of the identified limitations of this study is its sample. The sample is focused only in one specific locale and the different provinces and regions of the Philippines have been differently affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, therefore limiting the generalizability of the present results.

One of the researcher's goals is to support earlier studies that escapist media use such as consuming TV shows can be beneficial in improving one's mental health, most especially as it is economical, accessible, and readily available for mass consumption. As the study presented how the level of escapism is connected with two primary mental health concerns of Filipino young individuals in a limited time frame, it is recommended that a longitudinal study be conducted in order to fully analyze their association. Also, as the researcher only sought for the association between the mental

health status of those who are in community quarantine and the level of escapism through TV shows consumption and not the cause and effect of the two variables, the researcher highly suggests future researches to expand the limitations of this study for us to fully identify the possible benefits of escapist media use.

Lastly, using the TEBOTS model in escapist media use could break the stigma that coping through watching TV shows is dysfunctional. In the case of Filipinos, it is possible with our culture that engaging in escape-facilitating activities such as watching television shows is not entirely cognitive narrowing but as our means to expand. This study could be a stepping stone in future researches to fully use the TEBOTS model, specifically in the Philippine settings, given the fact that we are one of the countries in Southeast Asia who greatly consumes narrative entertainments and television shows.

Despite the limitations of the present study, the present findings will add to the literature, studies, and bodies of work implicating the possible beneficial effects of consuming television shows in a person's mental wellbeing and hopefully help in decreasing the stigma of coping thru watching TV.

### Conflicts of Interest Disclosure

The authors declare there are no significant competing financial, professional, or personal interests that might have influenced the performance or presentation of the work described in this manuscript.

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