

UNDERSTANDING DEPRESSION THROUGH CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS: A CASE OF PHILIPPINE PRIVATE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

Whilst there is an abundance of studies exploring depression, limited researchers focused on the use of qualitative metaphors to trace different faces of depression in college students. The purpose of this study is to describe various images relevant to the characteristics of depressed and not depressed college students through doodling. The subject of this qualitative study was a select group of college students (n=75) identified as depressed using the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) as a screening tool. Data were gathered from a *robotfoto* representing each subject's demographic profile and a box for figurative expressions with a corresponding written explanation. Doodles were analyzed and clustered according to the similarities and differences of categories, and how they were interpreted by the subjects. From a lumpers side of the reduction journey, a not depressed college student represents the *encouraging*, *interacting*, and *refreshing* type. The doodles indicate that they are the academically active one, can connect oneself to others, and has a positive outlook on life. They maintain to be physically and mentally healthy. On the other hand, a depressed college student characterizes as the *masking*, *disengaging*, and *falling* type. They may experience extreme sadness or emptiness, experience unceasing thoughts, prefer to be alone and afraid to show their real feelings. Notably, this study shows the need for school counselors and psychologists to be concerned with improving the mental health of depressed students as articulated from their metaphorical expressions.

Keywords: depressed college students, not depressed college students, doodles, repertory grid

Introduction

While previous studies have explained the impact and common aspects of depression experienced by college students, little is known about how metaphor can help surface the depressive symptomatology descriptions in a tertiary level population. The symptoms of depression can be unnoticed. Therefore, a rigorous effort is needed to use valid and reliable measures to identify and quantify emotional distress (Ali et al. 2017). The area of mental health among university students shows increasing public health concern worldwide (Eisenberg et al., 2007). Depression is the most common reason why students go to a counseling center (Khawaja & Kelly, 2006). Filipinos give high regard toward earning a degree in higher education as it is one of the basic requirements to achieve economic and personal growth. Obtaining a professional degree could be a key factor for lucrative employment and good status in life (Lee, 2013). College students serve as a future pride of the nation when they graduate and are able to apply their profession; however, in the course of their academic journey, individual students may experience pressure to excel, struggle to compete and be overwhelmed with many academic works. They may face multiple factors that pose risks to psychological well-being. Depression is a mood disorder that involves disabling disturbances in emotion (Kring, et al., 2014). It is a state of melancholy, sadness, and low energy level that leads to

anhedonia, feelings of worthlessness, and chronic fatigue (Reynolds & Livingston, 2014). It is an extremely depressed mood state that lasts at least 2 weeks and includes cognitive symptoms (such as feelings of worthlessness and indecisiveness) and disturbing physical functions (such as altered sleeping patterns, significant changes in appetite and weight, or a notable loss of energy) to the point that even the slightest activity or movement requires an overwhelming effort (Barlow and Durand, 2015). The World Health Organization (WHO, 2018) defines depression as a common mental disorder that impairs the ability to function with daily life: it is associated with sadness, lack of interest, guilt, low self-esteem, sleep, and appetite problem, tiredness and difficulty concentrating. Depression is characterized by experiencing at least five (or more) of the symptoms that have been present during the same 2-week period which manifest changes from the previous functioning. These changes represent the characteristics of having no depression to a depressive state or condition. The core criterion is either in a depressed mood or a loss of interest or pleasure (DSM5, 2013).

The Philippines has one of the highest numbers of cases of depression in Southeast Asia (Jacob & De Guzman, 2016). Depression is common, yet it is usually undiagnosed among college students (Moreno et al., 2011). Globally, there are about 264 million people who are affected by this condition (WHO, 2019). In the Philippines, about 3.3 million people are suffering from depression as of 2018. There was an increase of more than eighteen percent from 2005 to 2015. Consequently, there is a growing number of young Filipinos committing suicide. According to the Department of Health (DOH), there are 2, 413 cases of suicide that were recorded in 2016, the majority of which are males (Acuna, 2018). Another negative consequence of depression is evident in its linkage to cardiovascular disease (Kring et al., 2014). College students in the Philippines and other countries are predisposed to depression, anxiety and stress (Clacevillas, 2016; Shamsuddin et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2013; Beiter et al., 2015) which is a problem that could deter the opportunity of college students to succeed or a condition that may impair their academic functioning (Beiter et al., 2015; Hill et al., 2014; Khubchandani et al., 2016; Boukhechba et al., 2018). A systematic review of twenty-four identified articles on depression prevalence from 1990-2010 revealed that university students experience substantially higher rates of depression compared to the general population (Ibrahim, Kelly, et al., 2013). Research (Lee et al., 2013) identified that Filipino university students with greater risk for depression are related to lifestyle, financial condition, and parents and peer relationships. In addition, they emphasized that there is a need to augment the number of surveys to develop more local knowledge about student depression (Lee, et al., 2013). Estanislao (2013) added that only a few data on depressive symptoms among Filipino university students were explored. It is important to note, however, that literature and studies on depressive symptomatology descriptions among university students in the Philippines are quite limited. To work on this gap, this study has been initiated. Recognizing the depressive characteristics of students at the tertiary level population is vital to develop adaptive ways of dealing with their mental health that may affect various academic problems. It could serve as a basis for developing programs that promote mental health in the educational context.

Since there is a significant correlation between suicidal ideation and depression (Mustaffa et al. 2014), Dr. Bautista, a behavioral chief of faculty of medicine and surgery, and child, adolescent and adult psychologist of the University of Santo Tomas (UST) Hospital, shared in her lecture seminar entitled "Promoting Mental Health in Schools: Preventing Depression and Suicide" that mental health programs in schools not only contribute to the betterment of mental health of students, but also promote destigmatization of students who are depressed, or with suicidal tendencies. Dr. Bautista (2017) added that "*Sometimes, depression is conveyed better in their play or their drawings or their paintings than in their conversation*". She encouraged to check the common symptoms among college students (Bautista, 2017 as cited in Celso, et al., 2017).

One of the objectives of the Philippine Mental Health Act of 2017 (Republic Act 11036) is to integrate strategies of promoting mental health in educational institutions, the workplace, and communities. In a modest response to encourage mental health awareness in the educational setting, this study aims to describe self-generated images of depressed and not depressed college students. Doodling is considered a unique and potent qualitative tool in discerning the individual's perspectives. It is not merely an expression of thought; it is a rule for structuring, understanding and articulating the individual experience (Roberston, 2003 as cited in de Guzman, et al., 2008).

Doodling has been used in many studies (de Guzman, et al., 2006; de Guzman, et al., 2007; de Guzman, et al., 2008; de Guzman, et al., 2009) in understanding a particular construct in various fields of study. Hence, a collective description of college students can be figured out through doodling as an evidence-based study.

Method

Research Design

This investigation was conducted among Filipino college students who are enrolled in the academic year 2019-2020. Furthermore, this study employed a metaphorical qualitative design. A single metaphor may not have a distinct meaning unless common characteristics were found between them to evoke meaningful results (Bergant, 2005, as cited in de Guzman, et al., 2007). The use of metaphors in qualitative research brings out information from a unique and creative angle. It provides an opportunity to understand a phenomenon in a new light and to facilitate exploration of emotional content in counseling (Carpender, 2008; Genuchi et al, 2016).

Selection and Study Site

From a total of one hundred eight (108) college students recruited from a private school, only seventy-five (75) qualified to be participants in this qualitative study. Inclusion criteria consist of Filipino college students, age 18-25 years old and screened as depressed from mild to severe using the tool PHQ-9 for adults. Most of the subjects were females (n=52) and in the eighteen to nineteen (18-19) age group. The purposive criterion sampling technique was applied for the selection of respondents since the researcher had set the inclusion criteria. This group was selected in order to gain insights extracted from their personal experiences through metaphorical exploration. The majority of the subjects reported having experienced depression as somewhat difficult and within a mild to moderate level. A university in the metropolitan area was the locus of the study.

Table 1

Participant's Demographic Profile (n=75)

| Variables | count (n) | % |
|----------------------|-----------|-----|
| Age | | |
| 18 | 37 | 49% |
| 19 | 30 | 40% |
| 20 | 5 | 7% |
| 21 | 3 | 4% |
| Level of depression | | |
| Mild | 30 | 40% |
| Moderate | 30 | 40% |
| Moderately severe | 11 | 15% |
| Severe | 4 | 5% |
| Level of difficulty | | |
| Not difficult at all | 9 | 12% |
| Somewhat difficult | 51 | 68% |
| Very difficult | 11 | 15% |
| Extremely difficult | 0 | 0 |
| No answer | 4 | 5% |
| Gender | | |
| Male | 23 | 31% |
| Female | 52 | 69% |

| | | |
|----------------------|----|-----|
| Year level | | |
| 1 st year | 73 | 97% |
| 2 nd year | 2 | 3% |

Instrumentation

There are two instruments used in this study. One is the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) (Kroenke, et al., 2001) that serves as a depression screener. It is a brief instrument for screening, monitoring, and measuring the severity of depression. It consists of nine items and is found useful to clinicians and researchers for rapid administration and identification of results. Kroenke, Spitzer, and Williams (2001) found that PHQ-9 is reliable (Cronbach's alpha of 0.89 and .86) and valid through construct validation with SF-20 mental health scale (0.73). The other instrument is a questionnaire form that consists of two (2) parts: Part I is the *Robotfoto*. It is a Dutch term that means a cartographic sketch of the face or description of the criminal used by the policeman for forensic utility (Kelchtermans and Ballet, 2002 as cited in de Guzman, et al. 2008). In this study, *robotfoto* was used to describe the portrait of the subjects which were obtained from their demographic data. Information collected includes age, gender, academic year level, level of depression, and level of difficulty. Part II is a portion of the questionnaire that asked the respondents to do some doodling inside the box. These were supported by their statements about the figure.

Ethical Consideration

The voluntary participation of the subjects in the study is regarded with high importance. This study adheres to the ethics review committee requirements. The respondents were informed of the purpose of the study and their right to participate or withdraw. Informed consent was secured and explained to the respondents who willingly participated in the study. Anonymity and confidentiality were also ensured.

Data Collection Procedure

A letter of request to gather data was approved by the vice president for academic affairs prior to data gathering. The two-part questionnaire was distributed to the students in their respective classrooms. They were given 20-30 minutes to accomplish the instruments. Students who participated were instructed to fill out the *robotfoto* and create their representation of a depressed college student in a box provided and their concept of a not depressed college student in another box. Thereafter, they were asked to write a brief statement about what they have drawn on the lines provided below each box. The instruments were retrieved, screened, tallied, and coded. Instruments that do not meet the inclusion criteria and with incomplete data were excluded in the phase of data analysis.

Mode of analysis

The information yielded from the *robotfoto* acquired demographic data that were tallied and analyzed according to frequency count and percentage. For a more detailed representation of college students, the doodles were generated. The text and non-text gathered data were scrutinized by collecting, sorting, analyzing, narrowing, and mapping. The data were clustered and divided according to the two categories, the depressed and not depressed college student. The researcher coded the data based on cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects. The repertory grid was established in order to observe the process of cool and warm analysis and be able to group the themes according to their relevance and meaningfulness. The themes that surfaced were validated through the member checking procedure and critical friend technique.

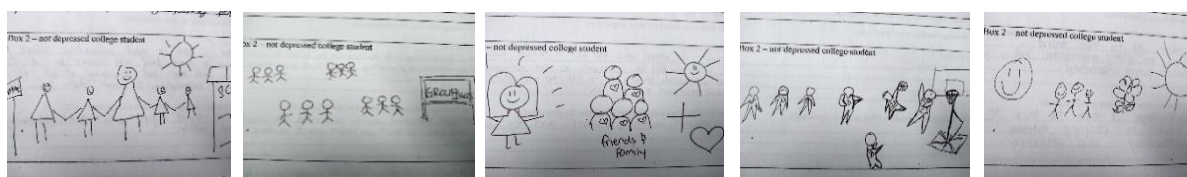
Findings

A wide range of different impressive doodles (see Fig. 1 and 2) were collected from the participants’ responses. They were analyzed according to similarities and relationships of the categories. Several figures were narrowed and map via grouping. Variety of images includes different setting such as school setting (classroom, books, paper, A+ grade, tuition fee, assignment, project, recitation, and exam), home setting (eating together, alone in the room, alone in the dark, a house), dorm setting (building) and social place setting (coffee shop, bar, restaurant, seashore). Object images were also illustrated (money, cellphone, trophy, bulb light), as well as weather and environmental objects (sun, sunny day, rain, rainbow, thunder, flower, sea, tree, water, stars, moon, clouds, and wind). Many of the rain, cloud, thunder, and wind were found in the group of depressed while sun, flower, rainbow, trees, water, and stars were usually seen in the box of not depressed college students. Some images demonstrate being alone, while some images were seen as surrounded by people. There were speech bubbles that contain a question mark or chaotic lines. Objects were drawn from harmful materials such as a knife, blade, rope, dropping blood from the wrist, gun, jumping off the building, and falling down the hole to the religious objects and activity such as the cross, bible, and praying. Capital G, greater than sign, and arrow up and down sign were also observed which according to the participant is expressed as “God is greater than ups and downs”. Symbols like a broken heart and whole heart, negative sign and positive sign, continuous dots which represent “still loading” and a semicolon which symbolizes “a willingness to continue life, that a story is not yet over” were also revealed. Images of a face present an *emoji*, a face divided by emotional tone, blank face, angry face, and a face with a mask. A figure of a man was also shown through a stick figure and whole-body figure with varied emotional expressions such as being sad, happy, annoyed, and confused. Human activities were also presented, i.e. sleeping, not reciting, being present in class, joining group activities, playing, eating, drinking, and having fun with family and friends. Interpretations of doodles were made based on the reflected explanations made by the respondents. Overall, the collective description of a not depressed college student has been characterized by *encouraging*, *interacting*, and *refreshing*, while a depressed college student has a collective description of *masking*, *disengaging*, and *falling*.

The College Students who are not Depressed

Figure 1

Sample Doodles of College Students who are not Depressed



Doodles indicating figures of being enthusiastic (happy face, sun, sunny day, rainbow, genuine smile, happy sun, laughing, bar, strong and active person) optimistic (a person who plans, walks on his dreams, not thinking of any problem, thinking positive) and academically motivated (participate in group work, studying, reciting, always present, getting work done, multitasking-social, academic and, family responsibilities) appeared to be *encouraging*. They have the energy and interest in the things that they like to do as revealed from their text responses:

- Motivated to study and productive.
- I can, I am worth it!
- I just let the problem slide and continue life.
- Has energy every day.
- Enjoy anything, make fun.

Socialization, openness, and a sense of spirituality are other characteristics possessed by a college student who is not depressed. Socialization is expressed by their doodles showing a family, group of people playing together, eating and drinking together, and working in a group. Consequently, openness is expressed in their doodles

representing persons talking to each other through speech bubbles. Sense of spirituality is expressed by their doodles showing a man figure praying, bible, and a sign of a cross. They connect themselves with others; they are not afraid to speak up or share how they feel and give value to their relationship with God. These characteristics defined *interacting* as supported by the following statements:

- Surrounded by loving and good friends.
- Make friends and not afraid to socialize.
- A good relationship with the parent and God.
- Worshipping, reading the bible, praying.
- Hang out with friends, explore, travel.

The third characteristic of a college student who is not depressed is *refreshing*. They are described as having a positive mood, positive outlook, authentic cheerfulness and not experiencing severe tension. These are reflected in their doodles like sun, sunny days, shining stars, blooming flowers, happy faces, bar, and restaurant.

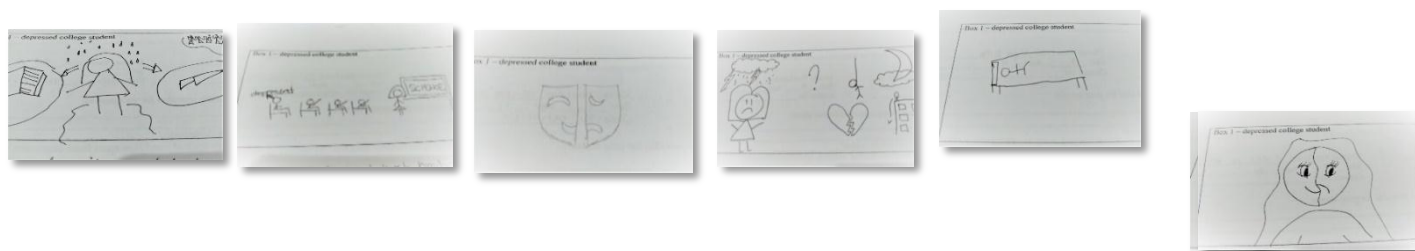
Textual presentations are:

- Blooming, the smile is not fake.
- Look fresh, bright as sunshine.
- A beautiful smile even lacks sleep.
- Not afraid to show real emotion.
- Laugh out loud.
- Confident.

The College Students who are Depressed

Figure 2

Sample Doodles of College Students who are Depressed



Hiding of the real feelings and showing fake strength were identified as descriptions of depressed college students. It was unfolded through their drawings such as a face divided into two (2) sides: one half is sad while another half is happy, a divided mask, a whole mask, a blank face, and a smiling face but with clouded thought shown through speech bubbles. According to a subject’s interpretation, depression has no distinct facial expression because it can be unnoticed. Physical outlook alone is not a guarantee to observe their real emotional state. The college students may mask their heavy feelings or feeling of emptiness just to fit themselves in the group and in order not to draw attention. The term *masking* was identified as a process in which the individual tries to conceal their natural personality to conform to social demands. It is one of the characteristics of depressed college students as reported in their statements:

- Forcing oneself to show that they are ok.
- Not all smiles are real.
- Pretending to be strong, active, and lively.
- Looks happy outside but struggling inside.
- Always look good, strong, and happy outside but broken inside.
- Silent killer but still smiling.
- Showing they are strong even there is something wrong.

Depressed college students isolate themselves from others. Findings indicate that they prefer to be alone and be quiet. These are expressed in their doodles which include a face without a mouth, alone in the corner, alone in the room, alone inside the box, far from others, and sitting alone. These characteristics are portrayed as *disengaging* as implied in the following statements:

No friends.
Always stay in the room.
Go home immediately after class.
Distant herself from other people.
Don't want to go outside.

Finally, the depressed college student is classified as *falling* by having the tendency of suicidal ideation expressed by knife, blade, rope, dropping blood from the wrist, gun, jumping off the building, falling down the hole; sad mood as illustrated by sad face, crying faces, rains, moon, and cloud; irritated is illustrated by angry face and thunder; unmotivated is represented by having low energy or being tired as shown in their figures such as continuous dot, semicolon, and sleeping; confused and overthinking represents the experience of unceasing and chaotic thought. One of the respondents shared that unceasing thought was likened to a ghost that always follows them wherever they go. These are illustrated in their doodles such as a man with speech bubbles of chaotic lines and question marks. These are reflected in their statements below:

It is like a ghost that is always beside you wherever you go.
Want to end life by knife or hanging.
Lack of motivation in life and academics.
Suicidal if they cannot get the expected grades.
Want to be invisible or disappear like a wind.
I want to sleep all day because of feeling tired.
Overthinking negative comments that are hurting.

Discussion

Although the depression construct has been the focus of many studies and explored mostly in a quantitative approach, the power of the qualitative approach cannot be underestimated. Recognition of the characteristics of the college students particularly about mental health is crucial for the school psychologist, counselors, and faculty members. A wide display of respondents' representation of their concepts of a depressed and not depressed college student is a creative approach to identify students who are most in need of mental health services on depressive symptoms.

As shown in the study, the *encouraging*, *interacting*, and *refreshing* types are college students who are self-driven, active, sociable, and happy. This is a portrait of the subject of a not-depressed student. It appeared that students who are not depressed are resilient. Block and Kremen (1996) described resilient individuals as being optimistic, active, emotionally positive, and ready for new experiences. College life can be a time for exciting experiences, enjoyable socialization, and an opportunity to have fun with friends.

On the other hand, the *masking*, *disengaging* and *falling* type characterize the student who is depressed. The manifestation of depression may vary in different groups. It is important to note that depression may not be directly observed but there is a risk or growing incident of suicide among this particular group. Depression is due to pre-existing biological, social, and psychological tendencies which were triggered by a life event. Conde et al. (2017) explained that the diathesis-stress theory for depression states that the impact of stress on the depression risk is associated with the diathesis or vulnerability. This study is associated with this model because of the multiple social roles drawn by the participants which may trigger stress. The Diathesis-Stress Model of Depression model explains that people may carry diathesis or predisposition at different degrees for a particular disorder, which can be biological, psychological, and social, and a trigger or stress to create the disorder (Hoeksema, 2011). Thus, this

study confirms the characteristics of depressed individuals who experience disturbance in their social, mental, physical, and mood state. In addition, the result of this study is similar to previous works of literature and studies concerning depressive symptoms (Reynolds and Livingston, 2014; Barlow and Durand, 2015; WHO, 2018; DSM5, 2013). In contrast, with regard to its expression, the depressed mood or sadness is not much apparent. Their sadness is dormant. Between the two main criteria of depression by DSM5, loss of interest in any activity is more likely to be experienced by the group of respondents than experiencing emotional pains. This is in line with the study of Valdeavilla et al. (2019) which emphasized that the most experience depressive symptoms by university-age Filipinos are low self-esteem and motivation. According to Lee, et al. (2013), depression among Filipino university students could be prevented once the symptoms are identified early.

Conclusion

The study has clearly described how participants perceive and interpret the characteristics of depressed and not depressed college students direct from their own subjective experience and observation with others. Revealed by their doodles and statements, the main qualities of not depressed college student are *encouraging* which are vividly presented by being enthusiastic, optimistic and academically motivated, *interacting* which signifies socialization, openness and sense of spirituality and *refreshing* which shows having a positive mood, good appearance, authentic happiness and having a peace of mind. On the other hand, depressed college students are collectively specified as *masking* which involves showing fake strength and emotion, *disengaging* which emphasize the preference to be alone and isolating oneself from others and *falling* which indicates the characteristics of weakening such as being suicidal or do self-harm, having low energy or unmotivated, confused or overthinking, sleepy or feeling tired and unexplained mood.

In conclusion, not depressed college students are those who can take various responsibilities in school, home, and social life. They are actively motivated despite facing multiple academic and personal challenges. They can plan and pursue their goals. They have a sound interpersonal relationship and capable of being calm and in control. On the other hand, depressed college students present themselves in a deceiving manner because they are afraid to show their real feelings. They appear to be fine, strong, and happy yet vulnerable and broken. This is because they don't want to be the point of attention. They experience extreme sadness, heavy feeling to a feeling of emptiness. They are less motivated and tend to harm themselves or thinking of ending one's life. It is recommended to conduct further metaphorical qualitative studies dominated by male participants or a more diverse gender mix to adequately capture the perspectives of a depressed male college student. The result was only applied to a group of college students. Likewise, it is important to continually assess the mental fitness of college students and be able to extend help to those who need mental health services in the school setting.

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