



UNRAVELING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STRESS AND CULTURAL PARTICIPATION

A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract:

This qualitative study investigates the intricate relationship between stress and cultural participation among young adult women in America. Stress, a pervasive and multifaceted phenomenon, has been recognized as a significant factor impacting various aspects of individuals' lives. However, its influence on cultural engagement, particularly among young adult women, remains relatively understudied. This research aims to shed light on the ways in which stress, both personal and societal, affects the extent and nature of young adult women's participation in cultural activities, such as art, music, literature, theater, and other creative outlets. Employing a qualitative approach, the study involves in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with a diverse group of young adult women from different cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, and geographic locations across America. Through these rich narratives, the research seeks to explore the individual experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms related to stress and its impact on cultural participation.

By critically analyzing the data gathered from the participants, this study identifies common themes and patterns that emerge, such as motivations for cultural participation, barriers to the cultural involvement, causes of stress, and coping mechanisms, providing valuable insights into the nuanced interplay between stress and cultural engagement. The findings of this research may contribute to a deeper understanding of the barriers young adult women face in accessing and enjoying cultural activities, as well as the potential implications for their personal well-being and social connectedness. Additionally, the study aims to offer recommendations for empowering individuals, communities, and institutions to create supportive environments that mitigate the adverse effects of stress and foster a thriving cultural ecosystem for young adult women in America.

Overall, this qualitative study explains how stress and cultural participation are intertwined with each other and dictate each other in a cyclic manner. The findings will inspire further research and serve as a catalyst for interventions and initiatives aimed at enhancing cultural inclusion and well-being for this important demographic group.

Key Words:

Cultural participation, stress, self-care, young adult women

Introduction:

This research project will be investigating the relationship between mental health and cultural participation by studying how stress levels in young working/studying adults in the US influence their cultural participation. The academic goal of this research project is to fill in the gap in the existing literature about cultural participation. There are plenty of scientific research projects that have investigated how stress impacts many different social areas of life and how stress physically impacts the body and the brain. There are also numerous studies inspired by Bourdieu's ideas on cultural capital and taste. However, there has yet to be a study that bridges the two. Both topics have similar underlying influences, such as socioeconomic status, gender, background, education, and family dynamic. Mental health awareness is becoming increasingly popular in the United States, as the younger generations are working to destigmatize it and embrace talking about their experiences and own mental health battles. Additionally, the younger generations are in control of modern cultural capital; fads, trends, styles, habits, etc. As a result, cultural participation is also changing; the younger generations are also dictating what cultural participation is today. These two topics are inherently connected, and this project further uncovers and analyzes that relationship.

This qualitative research project consists of 12 interviews with young American women who are either working or enrolled in a higher education program. By conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews, I have fostered meaningful conversations that touch upon a wide range of topics, such as their daily schedules, stress management techniques, hobbies, dreams and aspirations, personal limitations, and unique life experiences. Furthermore, I have explored their academic backgrounds, personal expectations, habits, self-care practices, self-awareness, and personal interests. The significance of this research project lies in its exploration of how stress levels influence these young women's decision-making processes on a day-to-day basis and, in turn, shape their cultural participation. By understanding the impact of stress on their lives, we can gain crucial insights into the challenges they face, as well as the potential barriers that prevent their full engagement in various cultural and societal activities. Moreover, this research contributes to our broader understanding of the lived experiences of young women in contemporary American society.

Through a critical analysis of the interview data, this project reveals the social relevance of these young women's stories, shedding light on the systemic factors that shape their choices and opportunities. The findings have the potential to inform policymakers, educators, and social researchers, enabling them to develop targeted interventions and support systems that empower these young women to navigate the complexities of their lives with resilience and thrive in their personal and cultural pursuits. What makes this project so important is that it sheds light on the experiences of these young women and how stress affects their lives. By understanding these factors, we can start to address the barriers they face in participating fully in their culture and society.

Literature Review:*Bourdieu on Social Capital and Taste*

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu developed a comprehensive theoretical framework to analyze social structures and the distribution of power in society. Central to his work is the concept that life functions as a game, with the rules and strategies favoring the privileged elite. Bourdieu's field theory serves as the foundation for understanding his perspective on life as a game for the rich. According to Bourdieu (1984), society can be conceptualized as a collection of distinct fields, each representing a specific domain of social life (e.g., education, politics, arts). These fields possess their own set of rules and hierarchies, determining the distribution of resources and power within them.

To participate effectively in these fields, individuals must possess various forms of capital. Bourdieu (1986) identified three main types of capital: economic (financial resources), social (networks and connections), and cultural (knowledge, skills, and education). Capital in any form grants individuals advantages in the game of life, particularly those who possess substantial amounts of it. Bourdieu (1984) emphasized the role of cultural capital in shaping taste, preferences, and judgments. The possession of cultural capital affords individuals a sense of legitimacy and distinguishes them from others. Taste operates as a marker of social status, as those with the "right" taste are often viewed as more cultured and refined. This further perpetuates the game of life as a domain for the rich, as they possess both the economic capital and the cultural capital necessary to participate and succeed. Economic capital and social capital are not the same thing, however they do tend to be grouped together because cultural capital is hard to achieve without some form of economic capital. For example, having economic capital can provide individuals with more opportunities to acquire cultural capital, such as access to quality education or cultural experiences. Additionally, possessing cultural capital can enhance one's ability to accumulate economic capital by providing social advantages in professional or business contexts. So, both cultural capital and economic capital influence taste. Goldthorpe explains that people make choices based on their taste and that their taste reflects their capital, so peoples' choices can be explained by their backgrounds (Goldthorpe, 2007).

In contemporary society, cultural capital encompasses various aspects, including education, language proficiency, artistic and intellectual pursuits, and familiarity with cultural norms, values, and practices. It goes beyond mere material possessions or financial wealth and emphasizes the importance of cultural resources in shaping social status, mobility, and opportunities. Modern cultural capital is often acquired through socialization, education, and exposure to different cultural forms. For example, individuals who have received a high-quality education and possess knowledge in various fields may be considered to have a greater cultural capital. Similarly, those who are fluent in multiple languages or have a refined taste in art, music, or literature may also be seen as possessing cultural capital. Additionally, Bourdieu introduced the concept of habitus, which refers to the internalized dispositions and behaviors created through socialization and cultural experiences (Bourdieu, 1977). Habitus influences individuals' actions and strategies within the game, shaping their tastes, preferences, and social interactions. Those from privileged backgrounds with higher socioeconomic status and better education often possess a habitus aligned with the dominant norms and values of the field, allowing them to navigate the 'game' more effortlessly. Another large area of focus in cultural participation studies revolves around education. Bourdieu (1984) examined how education perpetuates social inequality. He argued that the education system, with its selection processes and curriculum, favors the dominant culture and the possession of cultural capital. Students from privileged backgrounds, who possess the necessary cultural capital, are more likely to succeed and secure positions of power in society. The elite schools play a pivotal role in the reproduction of social inequality. Bourdieu (1996) highlighted that these institutions are equipped with cultural and social capital that endow their students with advantages in the game of life. The curriculum, social networks, and prestigious reputation of elite schools serve as gatekeepers, granting exclusive opportunities and reinforcing the dominance of the privileged class.

A variety of different studies have shown a positive correlation between education and occupational status and cultural participation in the US (DiMaggion, 1982), with reports that well-educated parents pass down their cultural advantages to their children. Recently, the idea that the younger generations are actively redefining cultural participation and cultural capital has

begun to circulate. Trending content, popular cultural obsessions and fixations, and the overall definition of what is considered elite are now controlled by the current dominating generation(s) (Friedman, 2015). And the current generations are not participating in the traditional ways. Alternative forms of cultural participation, such as daily culture and leisurely activities dominate over formal, state-supported culture (Taylor, 2016), such as museums. Young adults are reporting their cultural participation consists mainly as a presence across social media as opposed to more traditional state-supported forms of cultural participation because of its simplicity in all realms: getting to participate in the comfort of one's own home without needing much focus or means to do so (Manchester, 2015). State-supported cultural participation has often been measured in terms of accessibility. It has been shown that unequal access due to traditional forms of capital and newly considered spatial equity hinders cultural participation (Orlan, 2016). However, access cannot be limited to a definition based on location. Access also needs to be considered in terms of disposable time and availability, which also tend to be masked by traditional forms of capital.

The end of the traditional aesthetic experience

The aesthetic experience is changing and developing hand in hand with modernity. The concept was established when the term "aesthetic" was officially established and helped provide an umbrella concept for diverse qualities that were distinguished from beauty but still closely related to taste and art (Shusterman, 2010). Aesthetic experience became the central concept for explaining the distinctive nature and value of art, which was becoming increasingly autonomous and isolated from the mainstream of material life and praxis. Shusterman explains that the aesthetic experience has four dimensions: an evaluative dimension, a phenomenological dimension, a semantic dimension, and a demarcation-definitional dimension. Aesthetic experience is essentially valuable and enjoyable, vividly felt and subjectively clung to, meaningful experience, not mere sensation, and closely identified with the distinction of fine art and representing art's essential aim (Shusterman, 2010). However, not everyone agrees with the concepts and ideas used to define the aesthetic experience. Shusterman writes that Adorno rejects its claim to pleasure as the ideological contamination of bourgeois hedonism but joins the virtually unanimous continental verdict that the concept of experience is crucial for the philosophy of art. Adorno argues that aesthetic experience is transformational, passionate, and

blind to the ideological features structuring the artwork. He claims that a proper understanding of art requires going beyond immediate experience, beyond “immanent *Verstehen*”, to the external critique of the work's ideological meaning and the socio-historical conditions which shaped it.

Shusterman argues that the decline of aesthetic experience in analytic philosophy partly reflects false inferences, but it also stems from confusions arising from the changing role of this concept in Anglo-American philosophy from Dewey to Danto. Since Dewey, Anglo-American theories of aesthetic experience have moved steadily from the former to the latter poles, resulting eventually in the concept's loss of power and interest. Deweyan aesthetic experience focuses on the transformational, phenomenological, and evaluative aspects of aesthetic experience, and reminds us that directly fulfilling experience rather than collecting or scholarly criticism is the primary value (Shusterman, 2010). Although there are plenty of arguments revolving around the aesthetic experience and its decline, it's important to put the aesthetic experience into a more modern and understandable perspective,

Today's aesthetic experience still revolves around four core concepts as Shusterman originally illustrated. It requires attention and perception. This is the ability to focus one's attention and engage with the sensory aspects of the artwork or the environment. It involves actively perceiving and interpreting aesthetic qualities such as colors, shapes, textures, sounds, or movements. To have an aesthetic experience also requires emotional engagement. It is necessary to have the capacity to connect emotionally with the artwork or the environment. This involves evoking feelings of joy, awe, inspiration, or contemplation. It is also essential that there be reflection and interpretation. The willingness to reflect upon and interpret the meaning or significance of the artwork or the environment is key to the aesthetic experience. This can involve considering the artist's intentions, historical context, or personal associations. Finally, it requires openness and sensitivity. Having an open and receptive mindset, being willing to suspend judgment, and being sensitive to the nuances and subtleties of the aesthetic experience are extremely important.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to have a holistic aesthetic experience, as these conditions are often harder to meet in today's fast-paced and highly digitized world for several reasons. First, there are increased distractions and information overload. Modern life is filled

with constant distractions and information overload. The rapid pace of technology, social media, and the internet can make it challenging to maintain sustained attention and engage deeply with an aesthetic experience. Fragmentation and shallow engagement are also becoming more common. With the abundance of digital media and instant gratification, there is a tendency towards fragmented and superficial engagement with content. Quick scrolling, skimming, and the need for immediate stimulation can hinder the depth and focus required for a meaningful aesthetic experience. There has also been a loss of authenticity and presence. Many aesthetic experiences today are mediated through screens and digital interfaces. This can lead to a loss of the immediate and authentic connection with the physicality and sensory aspects of the artwork or environment. Virtual experiences, while offering accessibility, may not fully capture the richness and embodied nature of the aesthetic encounter. Finally, the development of Commercialization and Consumerism has had a huge impact on the ability to have a traditional aesthetic experience. The pervasive influence of consumer culture and commercial interests can impact the conditions for an aesthetic experience. The emphasis on market-driven aesthetics and instant gratification can overshadow the intrinsic value and depth of the experience itself. Contemporary artists are responding to changes in our lifeworld, as we move from a more unified experiential culture to an increasingly modular, informational one, by creating art that highlights fragmentation and complexities of information-flow that are often too helter-skelter to provide the coherence needed for traditional aesthetic experience's pleasurable sense of funded affect. Aesthetic experience can function like an empathy box, restoring our ability and inclination for vivid, moving, shared experience. Perhaps our informational evolution has already gone too far, and aesthetic experience has almost reached its end (Shusterman, 2010). The concept of aesthetic experience can be used to remind us of the variety of rewarding forms of phenomenological experience it still embraces, and to direct us to such experience by greater attention to the concept of aesthetic experience.

Stress and Mental Health

Stress is a very broad term with thousands of different social applications and interpretations throughout day-to-day life. A helpful way to separate types of stress is by putting stress into three categories: good stress, tolerable stress, or toxic stress. Tolerable stress and toxic

stress are the stressors that cause someone to feel ‘stressed out’ and when this stress is constant, it has a physical effect on the body (McEwen, 2017). This is called the physiological response. The brain’s active process of responding to stressors and adapting to stressful environments is called “allostasis”. When the brain experiences a stressor, many different hormones are released inside the brain to elicit a bodily reaction and adjust to the stress. When the brain is constantly adapting to stressors over and over again, it changes the way it functions; this is called “allostatic overload” (McEwen, 2017). One of the hormones the brain releases during allostasis is cortisol, a chemical that wakes the body up and elicits an alert response. However, chronic stress causes the brain to experience allostatic overload and release too much cortisol—keeping the body in a constant wakeful state and leading to damaged sleep patterns. The two primary functions of sleep are to recharge the chemical functions of the brain for the next day and maintain the wakeful-state functions (Dinges, 2001). So, when the brain experiences too much stress, it overworks and exhausts itself-- unable to recover and function to its fullest.

Brain fatigue and burnout are prevalent conditions resulting from prolonged stress and excessive mental and emotional strain that come from allostatic overload. These conditions can have long-lasting effects on the way the brain functions. Understanding these alterations is crucial for recognizing the severity of these conditions and developing effective interventions (Skoka et al. 2016). Prolonged brain fatigue and burnout can lead to structural alterations in the brain. Chronic stress, a common factor in brain fatigue and burnout, has been associated with reduced and gray matter density of brain regions such as the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus (Jovanovic et al. 2011). These structural changes can affect cognitive functions, including memory, attention, and decision-making, leading to long-term impairment in brain functioning. Brain fatigue and burnout can disrupt neural connectivity and plasticity. Chronic stress and prolonged mental exhaustion have been shown to affect the integrity of white matter tracts, reducing the efficiency of communication between brain regions (Blix et. Al 2013). This altered connectivity can result in decreased cognitive flexibility and impaired information processing.

Brain fatigue can alter the aesthetic experience, as Shusterman explains, it in a variety of ways. Because brain fatigue often leads to a decreased ability to concentrate and sustain attention for extended periods, the attention span becomes shorter, and individuals may find it challenging to stay engaged with an aesthetic stimulus, such as a piece of art, a performance, or a natural

environment. People may experience more frequent distractions and have difficulty maintaining a focused state of mind. Fatigue can also affect sensory processing and perception, making it harder to fully appreciate the sensory aspects of an aesthetic experience. Visual stimuli may appear less vivid, auditory cues may be harder to discern, and the overall sensory experience may feel muted or less immersive. The ability to perceive and interpret the subtle details and nuances of aesthetic stimuli may be compromised. Aesthetic experiences often evoke emotional responses, ranging from joy and awe to contemplation and introspection. However, when the brain is fatigued, individuals may find it more challenging to connect with and experience these emotions fully. Emotion regulation may be impaired, leading to a blunted emotional response and reduced capacity for emotional engagement with the artwork or environment. Brain fatigue can also negatively impact cognitive flexibility, making it more difficult to engage in complex cognitive processes, such as interpretation and reflection. Aesthetic experiences often invite interpretation and contemplation, requiring mental effort and cognitive flexibility to derive meaning and appreciate the deeper layers of the artwork. Fatigue may hinder these cognitive processes, limiting the ability to reflect, interpret, and derive personal significance from the aesthetic encounter. Additionally, brain fatigue can result in a diminished sense of enjoyment and satisfaction derived from aesthetic experiences. The fatigue-induced cognitive and emotional impairments can make it harder to fully immerse oneself in the experience, leading to a reduced sense of pleasure and fulfillment. This can impact overall satisfaction with the aesthetic encounter and potentially decrease the motivation to seek out similar experiences in the future.

Persistent brain fatigue and burnout can lead to dysregulation of neurotransmitter systems in the brain. Chronic stress has been in the levels of neurotransmitters such as dopamine, serotonin, and norepinephrine (Skoka et. al, 2016). These changes can disrupt the balance of neurotransmitter activity, which plays a crucial role in mood regulation, motivation, and cognitive processes. Consequently, individuals experiencing brain fatigue and burnout may exhibit symptoms such as mood disturbances, decreased motivation, and difficulties in concentration and focus. Brain fatigue and burnout can result in long-term impairments in various cognitive functions. Prolonged stress and exhaustion have been linked to deficits in working memory, attention, and executive functions (Skoka et. Al 2016). These cognitive impairments can persist even after the individual has recovered from brain fatigue and burnout,

affecting their overall cognitive performance and quality of life. Brain fatigue and burnout can significantly impact emotion regulation and mental well-being. Chronic stress and exhaustion can disrupt the functioning of brain regions involved in emotional processing, such as the amygdala and prefrontal cortex (Ahola et. al, 2014). This can lead to difficulties in regulating emotions, increased vulnerability to mood disorders, and reduced overall mental well-being.

Brain fatigue and burnout have long-term consequences on brain functioning, affecting both the structural and functional aspects of the brain. The alterations in brain structure, neural connectivity, neurotransmitter regulation, and cognitive functions can result in persistent cognitive impairments, emotional dysregulation, and decreased mental well-being. Recognizing the lasting effects of brain fatigue and burnout is crucial for implementing preventive measures, early interventions, and effective strategies to promote brain health and well-being.

Sociologists have found that stressors are more prevalent in lower-status, disadvantaged social groups, and that stressors account for health differences by gender, age, race-ethnicity, marital status, and socioeconomic status. Early stress research focused on acute changes in people's lives, but ignored recurrent or enduring problems that required people to readjust their behaviors over long periods of time (Thoits, 2010). Wheaton (1994) developed a 51-item inventory of common chronic strains. Traumas are extreme threats to a person's physical or psychological well-being. They include combat, natural disasters, sexual or physical assault or abuse, witnessing violence done to others, and parental death during childhood. But R. Jay Turner and his colleagues measured stressors more comprehensively and reassessed the effects of cumulative stressors on mental health outcomes. They found that chronic strains had a stronger influence on mental health than negative events or traumas, and that events, strains, and traumas together explained more variance in mental health outcomes than negative events alone. Social status influences the stressors that people are exposed to, and the moderating resources they possess (Thoits, 2010). This may explain why lower status, disadvantaged social groups have higher rates of morbidity, disability, mortality, distress, and psychiatric disorder. Sociologists found that females, young adults, members of racial-ethnic minority groups, divorced and widowed persons, and poor and working-class individuals had more chronic difficulties in their lives and faced more cumulative stressors overall. Sociologists found that females, young adults, members of racial-ethnic minority groups, divorced and widowed

persons, and poor and working-class individuals had more chronic difficulties in their lives and faced more cumulative stressors overall (Thoits, 2010).

Final commentary

In the modern era, young people's tastes and preferences in arts and culture have undergone notable transformations. Modern cultural capital refers to the social and symbolic resources individuals possess as a result of their cultural knowledge, tastes, and practices. It plays a significant role in shaping social status, opportunities, and interactions, although its meaning and value can vary across contexts. Rapid technological advancements, globalization, and increased connectivity have exposed them to diverse cultural influences and alternative modes of engagement. Digital platforms, social media, and streaming services have revolutionized the accessibility and consumption of cultural content. Consequently, young adults' preferences have become more fluid and personalized, embracing a wide range of artistic expressions, including digital art, virtual reality experiences, and participatory forms of culture. Examining the impact of stress on these evolving tastes and preferences can shed light on the specific barriers or challenges that stress poses to their exploration and enjoyment of new cultural experiences.

Simultaneously, the modern era has witnessed a rise in stress levels among young adults. Societal pressures, academic demands, economic uncertainties, and the pervasive influence of social media have contributed to heightened stress and mental health issues. The constant connectivity and information overload in the digital age have increased the cognitive load and created a sense of "always being on." Consequently, young adults face unique stressors that can hinder their ability to fully engage in cultural participation. Stress may disrupt their attention, decrease motivation, and limit their capacity to explore and appreciate diverse cultural offerings. Studying the relationship between stress and changing cultural participation patterns can provide valuable insights into designing interventions that address the specific needs and challenges of young adults in the modern era. It enables us to develop strategies that promote stress management, self-care, and resilience-building in the context of cultural engagement. Recognizing the impact of stress on young people's evolving tastes and cultural activities also

informs the development of inclusive and accessible cultural initiatives that respond to their diverse needs and enhance their overall well-being.

Young adulthood is a critical developmental period where individuals often face significant stressors related to education, career, relationships, and personal identity. Understanding how cultural participation influences their stress levels can provide insights into effective strategies for promoting well-being and mental health. It is also important to study and understand how their stress levels and stressors dictate their cultural participation. Researching the relationship between cultural participation and stress among young adults can inform the development of targeted interventions and cultural policies. By understanding the specific cultural activities and participation patterns that have stress-reducing effects, interventions can be designed to promote these activities and encourage their incorporation into young adults' lives. This can include providing accessible and affordable opportunities for cultural engagement that specifically address stress-related needs and preferences. Cultural participation can serve as a coping mechanism for managing stress. By studying how young adults engage with cultural activities during times of stress, researchers can identify the mechanisms and strategies young adults use to cope with stress. This knowledge can contribute to the development of resilience-building interventions that leverage cultural participation as a healthy coping mechanism and enhance stress management skills. Understanding the factors that influence young adults' cultural participation can help promote increased engagement in these activities. If cultural participation is found to be effective in reducing stress, highlighting these benefits can encourage young adults to prioritize and actively seek out cultural experiences. This can lead to increased participation rates, greater cultural appreciation, and the development of lifelong habits of engagement with the arts and cultural activities. Research on the relationship between cultural participation and stress can inform policy decisions and resource allocation. It can provide evidence for the importance of supporting cultural institutions, arts education, and programs that promote access to cultural activities for young adults. This research can help policymakers and organizations prioritize funding and create initiatives that recognize the potential benefits of cultural participation in reducing stress and promoting well-being.

Overall, studying the relationship between young adults' cultural participation and stress can contribute to our understanding of how cultural engagement can positively impact their lives.

It can inform interventions, policies, and resource allocation strategies that promote mental health, resilience, and overall well-being during this critical life stage. Investigating the influence of stress levels on the changing tastes and cultural participation of young adults in the modern era is essential for addressing their evolving needs and well-being. Understanding how stress affects their engagement with arts and culture in the context of shifting preferences and technological advancements enables us to develop tailored interventions and supportive environments. By recognizing the impact of stress and fostering stress management strategies, we can promote resilient cultural participation and enhance the overall well-being of young adults in the modern era.

Method

This section outlines the methodology employed in this qualitative research study that utilizes semi-structured interviews as the data collection method. This methodology section also describes the research design, participant selection, data collection, and data analysis procedures employed in a qualitative research study utilizing semi-structured interviews. The chosen methodology allows for a comprehensive exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives related to the research topic, contributing to a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of individuals in relation to their perceived daily stress levels and cultural participation.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the participants prior to data collection. The study adhered to ethical guidelines, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequences (Creswell, 2013).

Research Design

A qualitative research design was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, opinions, and subjective interpretations (Creswell, 2013). The study used semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. Semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility while ensuring that key research questions are addressed (Bryman, 2016). The interviews were analyzed using a narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is the best way to analyze these interviews because they are uncovering personal layers of the interviewees' lives and the interviewees will be sharing stories and experiences that have shaped them, and the individual narratives themselves will be important for the overall research. I used various interview questions from another cultural participation research methodology report, the California Survey of Arts and Cultural Participation, in order to help structure my questions for gauging cultural participation. I used various questions from scientific studies about stress levels

to help structure my questions about mental health and stress levels. The stress questionnaires I used to help structure my open-ended questions about stress include the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) and the Standard Stress Scale (SSS). I filled the rest of the interview structure with questions about lifestyle, hobbies, choices for entertainment, methods of self-care, time management, education, and other related topics I found valuable to help guide the interview but keep it semi-structured.

Sampling:

The sampling strategy used to select interviewees was criterion sampling because there are various criteria that the interviewees must meet in order to be considered for an interview. The criteria includes that they must identify as female, they must be between the ages of 22 and 32 years old, they must be working and living in the United States, and they must be employed or enrolled as a college or graduate level student (being both employed and enrolled as a student is also acceptable). The interviewee demographic is young working/studying female adult, so the interviewees were chosen based on their age. The target age-range was between 22-32 years old. All interviewees were either employed full time, studying full time, or studying and working simultaneously. The interviewees also lived and worked in the United States, as the United States culture is the cultural target demographic. The interviewees were gathered using snowball sampling within the criterion sampling. The snowball sampling helped ensure that my candidates had diverse backgrounds and personalities, although they all had similar professions. To get my candidates, I reached out to a hospital in Colorado and asked if the institution would be willing to promote my study so that I could collect participants within my parameters. A table outlining each participant (*Table 1*) can be found below and referenced throughout the study.

Table 1

Participant	Occupation	Age (years)	Family Dynamic
1	RN	27	Single mother
2	Medical School Student	25	single

3	RN	25	single
4	Nursing Student	24	single
5	RN	32	married
6	RN	30	single
7	RN	25	married
8	Nursing Student	23	single
9	Medical School Student	24	single
10	Medical School Student	22	single
11	Nursing Student	24	single
12	Pharmacy technician	23	single

This table outlines the age, occupation, and family dynamic of each participant.

Collection:

The interviews ranged between 50-80 minutes. This timeframe was necessary so that the interviewee had plenty of time to answer questions and explain themselves but didn't feel like they were talking for too long or exhausting themselves. And, because I interviewed busy people, I wanted to respect their time and not take up an excessive amount of it. The semi-structured interview structure allowed me to keep the interviewee on track so that all my questions got answered within the timeframe, but they felt neither rushed and forced into an answer nor over-tired from talking too much. The interviews were recorded in live time upon the interviewees' consent and transcribed after the interview was over. It was an audio recording so that they did not feel self-conscious about having a video camera on them and could feel like they were in a comfortable and conversational environment where they could speak honestly. The audio recording also allowed me to focus fully on what the interviewee is saying, how they are saying it, body language, and other social cues. It also created a more conversational environment rather than a power dynamic between interviewer and interviewee. The interviews were conducted in a hybrid fashion, with some in person and some done virtually. The

transcription happened the same day as the interview, so that the experience was still fresh in my mind, and I could ensure that the transcript is accurately transcribed from the audio recording. The interview transcripts were put into atlas.ti and I used atlas.ti to organize, code, and group the transcripts. When reporting the data, all interviewees are kept anonymous to protect their privacy.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was employed to analyze the qualitative data gathered from the interviews. This process involved several iterative steps, including familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of themes, revision and refinement of themes, and interpretation of findings (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, ensuring accuracy and completeness of the data. The transcripts formed the data for analysis. Open coding was initially conducted, where relevant codes and categories were identified in the data. These codes were then grouped into broader themes, reflecting patterns and concepts arising from the dataset.

To analyze the qualitative data, I used the software, Atlas.ti, which helped me organize and make sense of the data. Below is an overview of how I coded the data using Atlas.ti. First, I imported the audio recordings or transcriptions of the interviews into the Atlas.ti software. This allowed me to keep track of the different interviews and participants in one place. To start the coding process, I familiarized myself with the data by listening to or reading through the interviews multiple times. This helped me identify recurring themes or patterns that emerged from the participants' responses. Some codes that I developed included:

- Motivations for cultural participation: This code captured participants' reasons for engaging in cultural activities, such as personal interest, learning, or social connections.
- Barriers to participation: This code represented the challenges or obstacles that participants faced in accessing or engaging with cultural events or activities, such as financial constraints, lack of time, or limited resources.
- Impact of cultural activities on well-being: This code reflected participants' experiences of how cultural participation influenced their emotional, social, or psychological well-being.

- Types of cultural activities: This code encompassed the various forms of cultural participation mentioned by participants, such as attending concerts, visiting museums, or engaging in artistic hobbies, or other activities that they mentioned.
- Social influences on participation: This code captured the role of family, friends, or social networks in shaping participants' engagement in cultural activities.
- Sources of stress: This code captured the various factors that participants identified as causing stress in their lives, such as work-related pressures, family conflicts, or financial difficulties.
- Coping strategies: This code represented the different techniques, behaviors, or activities mentioned by participants as ways to manage or alleviate stress, such as exercise, mindfulness, or seeking social support.
- Emotional responses to stress: This code encompassed the range of emotions that participants associated with their experiences of stress, including feelings of anxiety, frustration, or overwhelm.
- Impact of stress on daily life: This code reflected the ways in which stress affected participants' everyday routines, relationships, or overall well-being.
- Resilience and personal growth: This code captured participants' narratives of how they found strength or developed new insights as a result of dealing with stress.

After developing the initial set of codes, I engaged in the open coding process within Atlas.ti. This involved systematically applying the codes to relevant segments of the interview data. The software allowed me to highlight specific text excerpts or audio sections and assign the appropriate codes.

Throughout the coding process, I engaged in an iterative and reflexive approach. I continuously reviewed and refined the coding framework as new themes or connections emerged from the data. I identified relationships between different codes and sought to capture the complexity and nuances of participants' experiences of stress. Once the coding process was complete, Atlas.ti enabled me to retrieve and analyze the coded data. The software allowed me to search for specific codes or combinations of codes, extract relevant excerpts, and explore

relationships between different codes. This facilitated the identification of overarching themes, patterns, and key findings related to stress.

In conclusion, Atlas.ti played a crucial role in managing, organizing, and analyzing the qualitative data obtained from the semi-structured interviews on stress and cultural participation. The software supported the systematic application of codes, the exploration of connections between codes, and the extraction of meaningful insights from the coded data.

Results:

In this qualitative study, I conducted semi-structured interviews to examine the relationship between cultural participation and stress. Utilizing the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti, I employed a systematic coding process to analyze the interview data, allowing me to uncover significant themes and patterns that shed light on the connection between these two variables.

Theme 1: Identifying Stressors and Cultural Participation

Throughout the interviews, participants shared diverse stressors they encountered in their lives, reflecting the complex realities of being a young adult in the United States. Common stressors included work-related pressures, financial concerns, family responsibilities, and personal challenges. Work-related stress was a prevalent theme among the participants. Many individuals described the pressure to maintain credentials, long working hours that often included night shifts, high job demands, and limited control over their work environment as significant stressors. Being that each participant was involved in the medical field in one way or another, whether it be through being a RN, CNA, Medical School student, or Nursing student, their work related pressures were similar, but their other stressors were very diverse and unique to their own personalities and situations. Financial concerns were also prominent, with participants highlighting the stress associated with managing expenses, debt, and the fear of financial instability. Family responsibilities, such as taking care of children, caring for aging parents, and maintaining household duties, were frequently mentioned as sources of stress. Students expressed a great deal of their stress resulted from financial burden. Lack of income, being too busy to get a job and generate their own income, and having to pay student loans was a large source of stress for the medical and nursing students. Additionally, participants shared personal challenges, such as health issues, academic pressures, and life transitions, which contributed to their overall stress levels. It became evident that cultural participation was pivotal in addressing and mitigating these stressors. Participant 1 described cultural activities as “*an escape from the real world... an escape from adulting.*” Cultural participation was a way to break up the mundanity of each person’s regular day to day activities. Engaging in cultural events and artistic experiences allowed individuals to temporarily detach from their stressors, immerse themselves in alternative worlds, and experience a sense of relief and relaxation.

Participants expressed looking forward to having something else to focus on or serve as a distraction or provide extra entertainment after feeling bored from going through the motions of regular work and school days. Participants all expressed different forms of cultural participation as their chosen mediums. Some participants enjoyed musical events more than museums, some participants enjoyed books, movies, and television more than events in larger public areas, and some participants enjoyed directly contributing to the culture by acting, singing, or creating. When asked what her favorite cultural event has been recently, Participant 2 responded: *“Taylor Swift...I feel like that doesn’t need explaining. But it was such an amazing concert.”* Participant 4 said, *“I think I enjoyed Hamilton the most. I saw that in May of last year and it was so cool. Hearing the loud music and watching the expressions of the actors was soooooo awesome.”* And Participant 12, who had expressed that she also participated in visual art, claimed *“... I did a painting of a farm scene in the fall time. I built a fake cuckoo clock out of popsicle sticks, complete with swinging pendulum. I painted it and embellished it with pieces of baby dolls. I can’t wait to hang it this Halloween. I built bat-like wings for my costume. I used a sheer, blue material and painted it white to give it a blue/ white, ghostly look. The wire frame means they are even collapsible!”* Just a handful of excerpts from the interviews can illustrate just how different each person’s cultural participation preferences are.

Theme 2: Cultural Participation as Stress Management

Participants expressed how cultural participation served as a valuable coping mechanism for stress management. They described engaging in various cultural activities as a means to alleviate stress and promote overall well-being. In the context of these stressors, cultural participation emerged as a significant strategy for addressing and mitigating stress. Some participants discussed how engaging in cultural activities provided them with a temporary respite from their stressors and offered moments of relief and rejuvenation. Attending concerts, visiting museums, participating in art classes, and engaging with cultural events were cited as means to temporarily detach from the pressures of daily life and experience a sense of escape. By immersing themselves in cultural experiences, individuals found a break from the relentless demands and worries, allowing them to recharge and gain a fresh perspective. In addition to these bigger-scale cultural activities, some participants also reported enjoying smaller-scale

cultural activities such as reading books, watching movies and tv-shows, crafting, and engaging online. When asked about the most enjoyable part of attending a cultural event, one participant said *“Being able to dance and sing our hearts out. It is so much fun to do those things together especially when you both enjoy the artists a great deal.”* The immersive and expressive nature of these activities provided a cathartic outlet for self-expression, emotional release, and personal fulfillment. Participants reported feeling a sense of accomplishment, satisfaction, and enhanced mood after engaging in cultural participation, indicating its potential as a tool for stress regulation and emotional well-being. Cultural activities also helped to put some stressors into perspective. Participant 5 commented that *“it helps me reset my brain, and like realize I’ve been overthinking and overworking myself for no reason. There are so many things to enjoy and sometimes I forget that there’s more to life than work and that I can do more than just be a nurse. Being a nurse doesn’t mean I can’t go to concerts and dance to my favorite songs...I’ve been so focused on nursing that sometimes I forget that I have hobbies”*. Furthermore, cultural participation was seen as a way to counterbalance the negative effects of stress by introducing positive emotions and experiences into individuals' lives. Participants reported feeling uplifted, inspired, and invigorated through their engagement with cultural activities. The aesthetic and artistic aspects of cultural participation provided them with a sense of beauty, enjoyment, and meaning. This aesthetic dimension acted as a counterweight to the stressors encountered in their day-to-day lives, offering a contrasting and uplifting experience. Moreover, cultural participation offered participants opportunities for self-expression, creativity, and personal fulfillment, which played a crucial role in addressing stress. Engaging in cultural activities allowed individuals to tap into their own talents, interests, and passions. Participants described how artistic endeavors, such as painting, writing, or playing a musical instrument, provided them with a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction, enabling them to channel their stress into productive and fulfilling outlets. Cultural participation, with its ability to provide an alternative focus and a temporary reprieve from stressors, offers individuals an effective coping mechanism. By immersing themselves in cultural experiences, individuals can temporarily distance themselves from the demands and pressures of their stressors, allowing for psychological relief and rejuvenation.

Theme 3: Social Support and Connection

A prominent aspect that emerged from the interviews was the role of social support and connection in the relationship between cultural participation and stress. Participants emphasized how cultural activities facilitated social interactions and the formation of meaningful relationships. Engaging in cultural participation provided participants with opportunities for social interaction and connection. Attending cultural events, visiting museums, and participating in community activities offered a shared experience and a platform for connecting with like-minded individuals. Some participants described how these connections facilitated the formation of new friendships, the strengthening of existing relationships, and the development of a sense of belonging within a community. *“I thrive off of social interaction. That’s, like, how I recharge my social battery,”* said one participant, *“so I love going to big group events, like anything with lots of people or anything with friends.”* The social support derived from these connections and cultural events such as music festivals, plays, attending museums with people, concerts, etc. played a vital role in buffering the impact of stress for some participants. The participants that tended to enjoy more social interactions for stress relief ended up being those with full-time jobs instead of the students. Participants spoke about the emotional support they received from others who shared similar interests and passions. Engaging in cultural activities together allowed them to express themselves, share experiences, and find solace in knowing that they were not alone in their challenges. *“Sometimes the best thing I can do is scream-sing with my best friends. It’s really cathartic”* claimed Participant 7. This emotional support provided a valuable outlet for expressing their feelings, discussing stressors, and gaining perspective from others who could empathize with their experiences.

Attending cultural events provided opportunities to connect with like-minded individuals, share common interests, and cultivate a sense of belonging. *“I typically try to stay active and be present with my family and my husband. I watch comfort tv shows to destress at night too. I have learned a lot of mental things to recenter myself sort of like affirmations,”* expressed Participant 5. These social connections, often forged through shared experiences and discussions, played a vital role in providing emotional support, empathy, and understanding. Furthermore, participants emphasized the importance of the social support network that developed within cultural communities. They described how these communities fostered a sense of camaraderie, cooperation, and mutual support. By engaging in cultural activities, individuals felt a sense of

connection and belonging to a larger group, which provided a sense of security and comfort. Within these communities, participants found individuals who shared their values, passions, and creative pursuits, creating a supportive environment where they could freely express themselves and be understood. The social connections forged through cultural participation also acted as a source of inspiration, motivation, and encouragement. Participants described how interacting with others who were passionate about cultural activities sparked their own creativity and motivated them to continue their engagement. The exchange of ideas, feedback, and collaboration within these social networks enhanced participants' sense of self-worth and validation, contributing to their overall well-being. Participants expressed that the presence of a supportive community enhanced their ability to navigate and cope with stress effectively, underscoring the importance of social connectedness in the context of cultural participation. Participant 9 expressed that *“sometimes on my days off I don’t want to be around anyone, I feel too tired to put up an act and be social because I’ve been taking care of people all week...I just want to chill on my own and recharge. But sometimes I crave social interaction beyond just the hospital, like, I want to have fun with people I have stuff in common with and just let loose.”* This shows just how cultural participation can be helpful with reducing stress situationally and how it can change both within and between people. It is also an example of how different types of cultural participation can have different effects on stress levels. However, it is important to acknowledge that the social support derived from cultural participation may not be equally accessible to everyone. Barriers such as social isolation, limited social networks, and cultural exclusion can hinder individuals' ability to fully benefit from the social aspects of cultural activities.

Theme 4: Barriers to Cultural Participation and Stress

While cultural participation was predominantly viewed as a positive influence on stress, participants also highlighted various barriers that hindered their engagement with cultural activities. Financial constraints emerged as a significant barrier to cultural participation. Many participants expressed concerns about the high costs associated with attending cultural events, purchasing tickets, or accessing cultural venues. Limited financial resources often restricted their ability to engage in cultural activities, leading to a sense of exclusion and frustration. *“I don’t have a job, I mean, I’m a med student. This is the job,”* said Participant 10, *“so I don’t have a*

lot of time, and I especially don't have a lot of money. I have student loans to pay, and I'm making nothing." The financial burden added to their stress levels, as individuals had to prioritize basic needs over cultural experiences. This finding highlights the importance of addressing the affordability of cultural participation and developing strategies to make it more accessible to individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. *"I'm afraid to spend money just to walk inside and one of the twins have a meltdown and us have to turn around and leave instantly...money down the drain,"* said Participant 1 on what limits her from attending more cultural events. Not only is she a single-income parent, but she also has two children to take care of financially. The idea of wasting money is something she cannot afford.

Time constraints were another notable barrier mentioned by participants. Juggling work, family responsibilities, and other commitments left little time for individuals to engage in cultural activities. The demands of modern life, such as long working hours, multiple responsibilities, and hectic schedules, created significant barriers to finding time for cultural pursuits. *"I work 12 hour shifts and still have to take care of my house and my husband and myself. I don't usually have time to do anything except work,"* said Participant 7. The lack of time for leisure and self-care activities added to individuals' stress levels, as they felt overwhelmed and unable to engage in activities that could potentially alleviate their stress. It is essential to consider ways to promote time management, work-life balance, and the integration of cultural participation into individuals' busy lives. *"I feel like I'm always taking care of everybody else. People at the hospital, the twins, their father, everyone comes before me,"* said Participant 1.

These barriers not only limited individuals' access to cultural experiences but also added additional stress and frustration. Participants expressed a desire for more affordable and accessible cultural opportunities that would alleviate the financial burden and time constraints, allowing them to fully harness the potential benefits of cultural participation as a stress management strategy. *"I'd love to go to a play, I haven't been to one since I was little. But that's such a time commitment and tickets are so expensive,"* said Participant 11, *"I'd have to drive all the way into the city, pay for parking and a ticket, and still find the time and money to feed myself dinner."* Limited accessibility to cultural events and venues also emerged as a barrier reported by participants. Some individuals highlighted geographical barriers, such as living in rural areas with limited access to cultural resources. *"I love to visit art museums when I travel, but Colorado Springs doesn't have an art museum so I have no where I can easily go,"* said

Participant 10. Others mentioned physical barriers, such as disabilities or health conditions that made it challenging to participate in certain cultural activities. *“I love the twins, but they make adult stuff difficult. Lot’s of places don’t have child care, so I’m constrained to baby-friendly events only”* said Participant 1. The lack of accessible transportation, facilities, or accommodations posed additional challenges for most of the individuals interviewed. These barriers not only limited individuals' access to the potential benefits of cultural participation but also added to their stress levels by creating feelings of exclusion and frustration. *“I catch myself constantly saying no to things because I’m too tired, too busy, or too poor, but I want to say yes to more stuff,”* said Participant 4. Efforts should be made to improve the accessibility of cultural activities, ensuring that they are available to individuals of all abilities and in diverse geographic locations.

Competing responsibilities and priorities were also identified as barriers to cultural participation. Participants described how family obligations, caregiving responsibilities, and work demands often took precedence over engaging in cultural activities. The demands of daily life and the need to fulfill various roles left individuals with limited energy and resources to dedicate to cultural pursuits. Participants with either children or a husband often found themselves considering those individuals as priorities. *“If my husband doesn’t want to go, the chances I end up going usually go down by a lot,”* said Participant 5, *“he makes everything more fun, so I’m not as interested if he doesn’t feel like going.”* Participant 1 said *“if I can get the twins’ dad or grandparents to help out and take the kiddos for a night or two then I would say yes to everything.”* The conflict between fulfilling responsibilities and engaging in leisure activities created internal tensions, leading to heightened stress levels. Strategies that promote flexibility, support for caregivers, and the recognition of the importance of self-care can help individuals navigate these competing demands and reduce barriers to cultural participation. Additionally, cultural exclusion and a lack of representation emerged as barriers to engagement. Some participants described feeling disconnected from cultural activities due to a lack of diversity and inclusivity in programming. *“My husband doesn’t want to go to a musical with me for the same reason I don’t want to go to a sports bar with him,”* said participant 7, *“I know it sounds sexist, but it’s the case.”* The absence of representation and recognition of diverse backgrounds and identities limited individuals' sense of belonging and hindered their motivation

to participate. Addressing these barriers requires fostering inclusive cultural environments that value and celebrate diversity, ensuring that cultural activities reflect the richness and complexity of individuals' backgrounds.

By acknowledging and addressing these barriers, cultural organizations, policymakers, and communities can create more inclusive and accessible cultural environments. Removing financial barriers, promoting time management strategies, improving accessibility, and embracing diversity and representation are essential steps toward reducing the impact of these barriers on individuals' stress levels and facilitating their engagement in cultural activities. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that the effectiveness of cultural participation in stress reduction may vary among individuals and in different stress contexts. While many participants reported positive effects, some individuals shared experiences where cultural activities failed to alleviate their stress or even added to their burden. This highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of individual differences, personal preferences, and contextual factors when considering the stress-reducing potential of cultural participation.

Overall, the analysis of the semi-structured interviews using Atlas.ti unveiled a complex and multifaceted relationship between cultural participation and stress. Cultural activities emerged as a significant resource for stress reduction, offering individuals a temporary reprieve from stressors and serving as a means of self-care and emotional well-being. Additionally, cultural participation fostered social support and connection, providing a valuable network of like-minded individuals who shared experiences, empathy, and understanding. However, barriers to participation, such as financial constraints and limited accessibility, presented challenges that need to be addressed to ensure equitable access to the benefits of cultural engagement. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that the effectiveness of cultural participation in stress reduction may vary among individuals and in different stress contexts. While many participants reported positive effects, some individuals shared experiences where cultural activities failed to alleviate their stress or even added to their burden. This highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of individual differences, personal preferences, and contextual factors when considering the stress-reducing potential of cultural participation.

It is important to note that these findings are derived from the perspectives and experiences of the study participants and are subject to the limitations inherent in qualitative research. Nevertheless, the insights gained from this study contribute to our understanding of the relationship between cultural participation and stress and emphasize the significance of creating inclusive cultural programs that promote accessibility and address barriers. By doing so, individuals can effectively harness the potential of cultural participation as a means of stress reduction, personal growth, and overall well-being.

Conclusion:

One of the central themes that emerged from the analysis is the identification of stressors and the role of cultural participation in addressing them. Participants shared a wide range of stressors, reflecting the complex realities of contemporary life. Work-related pressures, financial concerns, family responsibilities, and personal challenges were among the stressors mentioned. These stressors highlight the multifaceted nature of individuals' lives and the diverse sources of stress they encounter. Each individual expressed different primary stressors, and each individual had unique cultural participation preferences. Cultural participation was recognized by participants as a means of escaping these stressors and providing temporary relief. Each participant enjoyed escaping their own stressors in their own way. By engaging in cultural activities, individuals found moments of respite and rejuvenation, allowing them to detach from their daily worries. They enjoyed both communal activities and isolated activities. This finding aligns with existing literature on stress reduction, which emphasizes the importance of engaging in enjoyable and meaningful activities as a means of distraction and relaxation.

Building upon the stress reduction aspect, another prominent theme that emerged is the role of cultural participation as a stress management strategy. Participants reported that cultural activities provided them with a sense of control and agency over their stress levels. Engaging in activities such as attending concerts, visiting museums, or participating in community events allowed participants to regulate their emotions, reduce anxiety, and improve their overall mood. The immersive and expressive nature of cultural participation enabled individuals to find comfort and meaning in these experiences, contributing to their ability to cope with stress. However, participants also enjoyed more casual cultural activities such as reading books, watching movies, or listening to music. These activities also helped to calm them and reduce pent-up stress and anxiety. This finding resonates with previous research that highlights the positive effects of art and cultural engagement on psychological well-being and stress reduction.

In addition to stress reduction, the role of social support and connection in the relationship between cultural participation and stress is another significant theme that emerged from the analysis. Some participants emphasized the significance of the social aspect of cultural

activities, highlighting the opportunities for interaction and connection with like-minded individuals. Attending cultural events provided a shared experience and a platform for building meaningful relationships. Participants described how these connections offered emotional support, empathy, and understanding, which played a vital role in buffering the impact of stress. However, other participants identified that they preferred to destress by themselves and recharged better in more solitary forms of cultural participation. These individuals are less social and extroverted and do not de stress by joining large groups and feeling like part of a community, but instead prefer to have time to themselves to reflect and wind down. These individuals tended to be the ones that felt like they were constantly taking care of other people, where as those who tended to only look after themselves craved more of a social setting.

It is crucial to acknowledge that the relationship between stress and cultural participation is not without complexities. The presence of barriers to cultural participation emerged as a critical aspect within the interviews. Participants identified financial constraints, lack of time, limited accessibility to cultural events, and competing responsibilities as significant challenges that hindered their engagement with cultural activities. The participants that were students with little to no income and were also working on paying off student loans were the ones who identified financial constraints as the biggest hindrance for their cultural participation. These barriers not only limited access to the potential benefits of cultural participation but also added to individuals' stress levels. Not only were they stressed out about having to study and be diligent students, they were also stressed about the fact that they had no income and were slowly racking up more and more debt with the more school they attended. To fully capitalize on the stress-reducing potential of cultural participation, it is essential to address these barriers and create inclusive cultural programs that are affordable, accessible, and accommodating to diverse populations.

The implications of this study extend to both theory and practice. The findings contribute to the existing literature on the positive effects of cultural participation on stress reduction and well-being. They emphasize the importance of incorporating cultural activities into stress management strategies and highlight the need for inclusive cultural programming that addresses

barriers to participation. By recognizing and addressing these implications, policymakers, cultural organizations, and healthcare professionals can work towards promoting the integration of cultural participation into individuals' lives, ultimately enhancing their overall well-being and resilience in the face of stress.

While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The small sample size and the specific context in which the study was conducted restricts the generalizability of the findings. It is difficult to generalize and apply ideas to an entire population when only 12 individuals were studied. Additionally, the reliance on self-report data and the potential for participant bias should be acknowledged. When having conversations, especially conversations that are partially structured after an interview, the most honest and true forms of answers do not always come out. Interviews apply more pressure than casual conversations, so self-reporting could differ. Future research should aim to replicate these findings with larger and more diverse samples, consider longitudinal designs to explore the long-term effects of the relationship between cultural participation on stress, and employ mixed-method approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between stress and cultural participation.

Discussion:

The findings of this qualitative study have provided significant insights into the intricate relationship between stress and cultural participation. Through the analysis of semi-structured interviews using the Atlas.ti software, I have explored the experiences and perspectives of participants, unraveling the complex interplay between these variables. The discussion section synthesized the themes that emerged from the analysis, highlighting the role of cultural participation in addressing stressors, managing stress, fostering social support, and the barriers that hinder engagement. This extended conclusion further reflects on these themes, discusses their implications, and provides directions for future research.

The first theme that emerged from the analysis explored the identification of stressors and the role of cultural participation in addressing them. Participants shared a diverse range of stressors, ranging from work-related pressures and financial concerns to family responsibilities and personal challenges. These stressors reflect the multifaceted nature of individuals' lives in today's society, where various demands and pressures intersect. Cultural participation emerged as a significant avenue for individuals to temporarily escape from their stressors and find comfort. By engaging in cultural activities, participants reported experiencing a sense of detachment from their daily worries, allowing them to experience relief and rejuvenation. This finding aligns with existing literature on stress reduction, which emphasizes the importance of engaging in enjoyable and meaningful activities as a means of distraction and relaxation.

Building upon the stress reduction aspect, the second theme highlights the role of cultural participation as a stress management strategy. Participants reported that engaging in cultural activities provided them with a sense of control and agency over their stress levels. By attending concerts, visiting museums, or participating in community events, individuals found avenues for self-expression, emotional release, and personal fulfillment. The immersive and expressive nature of cultural participation offered participants a cathartic outlet to regulate their emotions, reduce anxiety, and improve their overall mood. These findings resonate with previous research that has demonstrated the positive effects of art and cultural engagement on psychological well-being and stress reduction.

Another important theme that emerged from the analysis is the role of social support and connection in the relationship between cultural participation and stress. Participants emphasized the significance of the social aspect of cultural activities, describing how attending cultural events provided opportunities for interaction and connection with like-minded individuals. Engaging in discussions, sharing experiences, and developing relationships within cultural contexts fostered a sense of belonging and provided emotional support, empathy, and understanding. These social connections played a crucial role in buffering the impact of stress and enhancing individuals' resilience. The importance of social support in the context of cultural participation aligns with broader literature on the positive influence of social connections on stress reduction and well-being.

However, it is essential to acknowledge and address the barriers to cultural participation that emerged as a critical aspect within the interviews. Participants identified various barriers that hindered their engagement with cultural activities, including financial constraints, lack of time, limited accessibility to cultural events, and competing responsibilities. These barriers not only limited individuals' access to the potential benefits of cultural participation but also added to their stress levels. In order to fully capitalize on the stress-reducing potential of cultural participation, it is necessary to address these barriers and create inclusive cultural programs that are affordable, accessible, and accommodating to diverse populations.

Moreover, it is important to recognize that the relationship between stress and cultural participation is multifaceted and may vary among individuals and in different stress contexts. While many participants reported positive effects, some individuals shared experiences where cultural activities failed to alleviate their stress or even added to their burden. This highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of individual differences, personal preferences, and contextual factors when considering the stress-reducing potential of cultural participation. Future research should aim to investigate the specific conditions under which cultural participation is most effective in managing stress, explore the underlying mechanisms that mediate and moderate this relationship, and delve into the diverse experiences and perceptions of individuals in order to tailor cultural interventions more effectively. Future research should aim to investigate the

specific conditions under which cultural participation is most effective in managing stress, explore the underlying mechanisms that mediate and moderate this relationship, and delve into the diverse experiences and perceptions of individuals to tailor cultural interventions more effectively. To fully capitalize on the stress-reducing potential of cultural participation, it is essential to address these barriers and create inclusive cultural programs that are affordable, accessible, and accommodating to diverse populations.

In conclusion, this qualitative study has deepened my understanding of the complex relationship between stress and cultural participation. By providing a temporary escape from stressors, serving as a stress management strategy, and fostering social connections, cultural activities offer individuals a valuable resource for coping with stress. However, addressing barriers to participation and considering individual differences in response to cultural activities are crucial for optimizing the benefits. The implications of this study extend to both theory and practice, highlighting the importance of incorporating cultural activities into stress management strategies and emphasizing the need for inclusive cultural programming. By recognizing and addressing these implications, policymakers, cultural organizations, and healthcare professionals can work towards promoting the integration of cultural participation into individuals' lives, ultimately enhancing their overall well-being and resilience in the face of stress.

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Attachments:

Informed consent doc

Transcripts

Appendix:

Thesis guid