

Beyond the Numbers: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Coping Strategies among BSBA-HRM Students facing Feasibility Study Pressures

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ABSTRACT

Academic stress among university students has emerged as a global phenomenon of unprecedented magnitude, with widespread implications for student well-being, academic performance, and institutional outcomes (Barbayannis et al., 2022). This interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) explored how fourth-year BSBA-HRM students make sense of their lived experiences with stress related to conducting feasibility studies. Using semi-structured interviews with 12 participants, the study investigated students' meaning-making processes, coping strategies, and professional identity development during this challenging academic milestone. Through Smith, Flowers, and Larkin's (2009) six-step analytical framework, three superordinate themes emerged: "The Weight of Academic Expectations," "Navigating the Maze of Coping Strategies," and "Transformation Through Adversity." Findings revealed that students construct complex meanings around feasibility study requirements, interpreting them simultaneously as overwhelming academic burdens and comprehensive assessments of professional readiness. Participants employed diverse coping mechanisms, with varying effectiveness based on individual differences in meaning-making capacity and contextual factors. Significantly, many students demonstrated sophisticated meaning transformation, reframing stress experiences as catalysts for professional identity formation and personal growth. The study provides empirical support for Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping and Park's Meaning-Making Model, while extending understanding of how academic challenges can facilitate professional development. Results suggest need for individualized, multi-tiered support systems that recognize diverse student coping preferences and meaning-making processes. Recommendations include specialized capstone support programs, faculty development initiatives, and curriculum redesign incorporating progressive stress management and professional identity development throughout BSBA-HRM programs.

Keywords: interpretive phenomenological analysis, academic stress, feasibility study, coping strategies



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INTRODUCTION

Academic stress among university students has emerged as a global phenomenon of unprecedented magnitude, with widespread implications for student well-being, academic performance, and institutional outcomes (Barbayannis et al., 2022). Recent systematic reviews and meta-analyses across multiple continents reveal that perceived stress affects a substantial proportion of higher education students worldwide, with recent African research demonstrating that 64.72% of university students experience significant levels of perceived stress (Fentahun et al., 2025). This alarming statistic reflects broader patterns observed across diverse educational systems, where academic pressure, performance-related concerns, workload demands, and uncertainties about future career opportunities constitute primary stress

sources that transcend geographical and cultural boundaries (Barbayannis et al., 2022).

European research examining stress perception and coping strategies among students reveals significant cross-cultural variations in stress management approaches (Shpakou et al., 2022). Studies conducted across Belarus, Poland, and the Kaliningrad region of Russia demonstrate that students most frequently employ active coping strategies, including taking direct action to improve situations, strategic planning for problem-solving, and acceptance-based approaches to managing challenging circumstances (Shpakou et al., 2022). The Polish and Russian students exhibited greater utilization of action-oriented coping mechanisms, while Belarusian students demonstrated higher reliance on

avoidance-focused strategies and denial patterns (Shpakou et al., 2022). These findings underscore the critical importance of cultural contexts in shaping how students interpret and respond to academic stressors, suggesting that coping mechanisms are heavily influenced by sociocultural factors, geographical locations, social group dynamics, and historical experiences (Alkhawaldeh et al., 2023; Shpakou et al., 2022).

Asian Pacific research provides compelling evidence of the complex relationship between academic stress and student outcomes across diverse educational contexts (Haruna et al., 2025). Recent longitudinal studies examining the relationship between stress and academic burnout in college students indicate a significant positive correlation between academic stress faced by college students and their level of academic burnout, with stress significantly negatively predicting students' perceived social support (Zhang et al., 2025). Southeast Asian university research indicates that financial constraints, educational uncertainties, and institutional support deficiencies represent primary contributors to negative mental health outcomes, particularly affecting anxiety and stress levels among student populations (Haruna et al., 2025). The hierarchical nature of educational systems, combined with high parental expectations and intense social performance pressure, creates unique stressors that distinguish Asian educational contexts from other global regions (Zhang et al., 2025).

North American and Oceanic research demonstrates that academic stress continues to significantly impact university students, with recent studies revealing that as many as 87% of college students surveyed across the United States cite education as their primary source of stress (Barbayannis et al., 2022). College students are exposed to novel academic stressors, such as extensive academic course loads, substantial studying requirements, time management challenges, classroom competition, financial concerns, familial pressures, and adapting to new environments (Barbayannis et al., 2022). Academic stress can reduce motivation, hinder academic achievement, and lead to increased college dropout rates, making it a critical area for research and intervention (Barbayannis et al., 2022).

South American studies examining psychological impacts during challenging periods reveal significant cross-national differences in stress perception and academic outcomes (Marques-Pinto et al., 2025). Comparative research across Portugal, Spain, and Brazil indicates that Portuguese students demonstrate higher levels of well-being and academic engagement, while Spanish students report the lowest levels of personal well-being and academic engagement (Marques-Pinto et al., 2025). Brazilian students exhibit greater emotional distress compared to Portuguese students, alongside lower academic performance rates relative to both Portuguese and Spanish cohorts (Marques-Pinto et al., 2025). These findings highlight how cultural attitudes toward education, societal expectations, socioeconomic disparities, family structures, and access to support

systems vary significantly across countries, influencing how academic demands are experienced and reported (Marques-Pinto et al., 2025).

Within the Philippine higher education context, business administration students, particularly those majoring in Human Resource Management (BSBA-HRM), face unique academic pressures that distinguish their educational experience from other academic disciplines (Akram et al., 2022; Lopez et al., 2024). Research conducted among Pakistani business students reveals that academic workload and institutional policies represent the most dominant stress-inducing factors, with students expressing anxiety about extended working hours and insufficient time for task completion (Akram et al., 2022). The post-pandemic educational environment has intensified these challenges, as students navigate hybrid learning modalities, technological constraints, and evolving assessment methodologies while maintaining academic performance standards (Akram et al., 2022). Recent Philippine research examining stress levels among BSBA-HRM students found significant variations in stress experiences, with academic workload and performance expectations serving as primary stressors (Lopez et al., 2024).

The capstone feasibility study requirement for BSBA-HRM students represents a particularly demanding academic milestone that integrates theoretical knowledge with practical application, requiring extensive research, market analysis, financial projections, and strategic planning capabilities (Santos et al., 2025). This complex academic undertaking demands high-level analytical thinking, project management skills, and the ability to synthesize multidisciplinary business concepts into coherent, professionally viable proposals (Santos et al., 2025). Students must navigate market research methodologies, financial modeling techniques, regulatory compliance requirements, and industry-specific knowledge while managing competing academic, personal, and often professional responsibilities (Santos et al., 2025). Recent feasibility study research in the Philippines demonstrates the complexity of these projects, which require comprehensive market analysis, technical assessment, management evaluation, and financial viability studies (Santos et al., 2025).

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) has emerged as a particularly valuable methodological approach for understanding the lived experiences of students facing significant academic stressors (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013; Gilbert et al., 2025). This qualitative research methodology focuses on how individuals make sense of their experiences, emphasizing the subjective interpretation of phenomena and the meaning-making processes that individuals employ when confronting challenging situations (Gilbert et al., 2025). IPA's emphasis on phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography makes it especially suitable for exploring complex psychological experiences such as stress and coping, as it captures the rich, nuanced nature of individual experiences while identifying common

themes across participants (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013; Gilbert et al., 2025).

Recent IPA research examining stress and coping among university students has identified several critical themes that characterize the student experience, including significant life transitions, changing expectations, academic focus pressures, evolving support networks, and various difficulty management strategies (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013). Studies utilizing IPA methodology to explore stress among medical students have revealed sophisticated coping phase progressions, including self-effacement, self-awareness, self-weariness, self-attentiveness, self-equilibrium, and self-mastery phases, collectively representing a comprehensive framework for understanding how students navigate academic stress over time (Garan-Giller, 2019).

The application of meaning-making theory within IPA research has demonstrated that individuals facing stressful situations engage in complex cognitive processes to reappraise circumstances and assign meaning as a form of coping mechanism (Gilbert et al., 2025). This theoretical framework suggests that when situational meaning does not align with global meaning systems, individuals experience stress and subsequently engage in either situational meaning modification or global meaning adjustment to reduce incongruity (Gilbert et al., 2025). Students frequently employ sense-making and benefit-finding strategies as core components of their meaning-making processes, seeking to identify positive outcomes from stressful experiences while simultaneously working to understand the circumstances they face (Gilbert et al., 2025).

Despite the extensive global research on academic stress and the growing body of literature examining coping strategies among university students, a significant research gap exists in the specific exploration of BSBA-HRM fourth-year students' experiences with feasibility study-related stress (Deng et al., 2022; Lopez et al., 2024; Santos et al., 2025). While numerous studies have examined academic stress among business students broadly, and others have investigated stress among various student populations, there remains a notable absence of in-depth, phenomenologically-oriented research that specifically focuses on the lived experiences of BSBA-HRM students as they navigate the complex demands of capstone feasibility study requirements (Lopez et al., 2024; Santos et al., 2025). This gap is particularly pronounced in the Philippine educational context, where cultural, economic, and institutional factors may create unique stressors and coping patterns that differ from those observed in other global contexts (Garan-Giller, 2019; Lopez et al., 2024).

Furthermore, existing research has predominantly utilized quantitative methodologies or mixed-methods approaches that, while valuable, do not capture the rich, subjective experiences and meaning-making processes that characterize individual student journeys through high-stress academic periods (Deng et al., 2022; López

et al., 2024). The lack of interpretive phenomenological analysis specifically examining how BSBA-HRM students construct meaning from their feasibility study experiences, develop coping strategies, and navigate the complex interplay between academic demands and personal resources represents a significant limitation in current understanding of this population's needs and experiences (Gilbert et al., 2025; Denovan & Macaskill, 2013).

This research gap is further compounded by the absence of studies that examine the specific intersection between feasibility study requirements and student stress within the BSBA-HRM context. Feasibility studies represent a unique form of academic work that combines theoretical knowledge with practical application, requiring students to engage with real-world business scenarios while maintaining academic rigor and meeting specific institutional requirements (Santos et al., 2025). The complexity of this academic undertaking, combined with its significance as a capstone experience that often influences career opportunities and academic outcomes, creates a distinctive stress environment that merits focused phenomenological investigation (Lopez et al., 2024; Santos et al., 2025).

Consequently, this study is anchored on the theoretical foundations of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, complemented by Park's Meaning-Making Model. IPA, grounded in three philosophical traditions—phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography—provides the methodological framework for understanding how BSBA-HRM students make sense of their lived experiences with feasibility study-related stress (Smith et al., 2009; Noon, 2018). The phenomenological foundation emphasizes the exploration of participants' subjective experiences and consciousness, while the hermeneutic dimension acknowledges the interpretive nature of understanding through the concept of double hermeneutics, wherein researchers interpret participants who are themselves interpreting their experiences (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Noon, 2018). The idiographic focus ensures detailed examination of individual cases to understand the uniqueness and complexity of each participant's meaning-making process (Noon, 2018). Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model (1984) provides the theoretical lens for understanding stress as an interactive process between individuals and their environment, emphasizing cognitive appraisal processes—primary appraisal (threat evaluation) and secondary appraisal (coping resource assessment)—that determine whether situations are perceived as stressful and influence the selection of coping strategies, either problem-focused or emotion-focused (Biggs et al., 2017; Lin et al., 2022). Park's Meaning-Making Model (2010) complements these frameworks by explaining how individuals construct meaning from stressful experiences through the dynamic interaction between global meaning (fundamental beliefs and goals) and situational meaning (event-specific appraisals), with discrepancies between these

meaning systems creating distress that motivates meaning-making efforts aimed at reducing incongruity and promoting adjustment (Park, 2010; Park, 2022). Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how BSBA-HRM students experience, interpret, and cope with feasibility study pressures while constructing meaning from their academic challenges, ultimately revealing the subjective nature of stress experiences and the diverse strategies employed to navigate complex academic demands (Gilbert et al., 2025; Smith et al., 2009).

Research Questions

General Question:

How do fourth-year BSBA-HRM students make sense of their lived experiences with stress related to conducting feasibility studies?

Specific Questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of fourth-year BSBA-HRM students when facing feasibility study-related stress?
2. How do BSBA-HRM students interpret and give meaning to the stressful situations they encounter during their feasibility study process?
3. What coping strategies do fourth-year BSBA-HRM students employ when dealing with feasibility study pressures, and how do they make sense of the effectiveness of these strategies?
4. How do BSBA-HRM students' personal, academic, and social contexts influence their experience and interpretation of feasibility study-related stress?
5. What meanings do fourth-year BSBA-HRM students attach to their feasibility study journey, and how do these meanings evolve throughout their experience?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research design, which is a qualitative methodology specifically suited for exploring how individuals make sense of their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is grounded in three philosophical underpinnings: phenomenology (exploring lived experiences), hermeneutics (interpreting meaning through double hermeneutic processes), and idiography (detailed examination of individual cases) (Noon, 2018; Smith et al., 2009). This research design is particularly appropriate for investigating the subjective experiences of BSBA-HRM fourth-year students facing feasibility study-related stress, as it allows for in-depth exploration of how participants interpret and construct meaning from their challenging academic experiences (Alase, 2017). The IPA approach enables researchers to capture the rich, nuanced nature of stress experiences while maintaining focus on individual meaning-making processes and coping strategies employed by students during their capstone project requirements (Smith et al., 2009).

Participants

The study utilized purposive sampling with 12 participants from fourth-year BSBA-HRM students currently enrolled in a feasibility study course. The sample size aligns with IPA recommendations, where smaller, concentrated samples between 4-12 participants are advised for professional-level studies to ensure detailed, idiographic analysis (Noon, 2018; Smith et al., 2009). Participants were selected based on homogeneous sampling criteria to ensure shared experiences with the phenomenon under investigation (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Inclusion criteria include: (a) fourth-year students enrolled in BSBA-HRM programs, (b) currently conducting feasibility studies within the past six months, (c) minimum age of 18 years, (d) willingness to participate in 60-90 minute interviews, and (e) ability to provide informed consent. Exclusion criteria include: students who have not yet commenced feasibility study requirements, those experiencing severe psychological distress requiring immediate intervention, and students unable to articulate their experiences in English or Filipino. The homogeneous nature of the sample facilitated detailed examination of convergence and divergence within the group while maintaining the idiographic focus essential to IPA methodology (Smith et al., 2009).

Research Instrument

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection instrument, consistent with IPA's emphasis on facilitating "conversations with purpose" that enable participants to share their stories in their own words (Smith et al., 2009; Rajasinghe et al., 2024). The interview guide contained open-ended questions designed to explore participants' lived experiences with feasibility study-related stress, their interpretation of stressful situations, coping strategies employed, and meaning-making processes throughout their academic journey (Alase, 2017). Sample questions include: "Can you tell me about your experience conducting your feasibility study?" "How do you make sense of the challenges you have encountered?" "What strategies have you used to cope with stress during this process?" and "How has this experience affected your understanding of yourself as a student and future professional?" The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility to follow participants' narratives while ensuring coverage of key phenomenological themes (Smith et al., 2009). Probing questions were employed to encourage deeper reflection and elaboration on significant experiences, emotions, and meaning-making processes (Rajasinghe et al., 2024).

Data Gathering Procedure

Data collection followed established IPA protocols emphasizing participant comfort and rich narrative development (Smith et al., 2009). Individual face-to-face interviews lasting 60-90 minutes was conducted in private, comfortable settings chosen by participants to ensure confidentiality and minimize environmental distractions (Alase, 2017). Interviews were audio-recorded with explicit participant consent and professionally transcribed verbatim to capture the full

richness of participants' accounts, including pauses, emotional expressions, and speech patterns (Smith et al., 2009). Field notes were maintained throughout the interview process to document non-verbal cues, emotional responses, and contextual observations that may inform interpretation (Noon, 2018). A reflexive journal was kept by the researchers to document personal reactions, assumptions, and interpretive insights throughout the data collection process, supporting the hermeneutic dimension of IPA analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Member checking opportunities were provided to participants, allowing them to review transcripts and clarify or expand upon their responses if desired (Alase, 2017).

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Smith, Flowers, and Larkin's (2009) six-step IPA analytical framework. Step 1: Reading and Re-reading involves multiple immersive readings of each transcript to develop familiarity with participants' accounts while maintaining an open, phenomenological attitude. Step 2: Initial Noting includes detailed line-by-line coding to capture descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual observations about participants' experiences. Step 3: Developing Emergent Themes involves transforming initial notes into concise themes that capture the essential qualities of participants' accounts. Step 4: Searching for Connections Across Emergent Themes includes organizing themes into clusters and identifying relationships between them. Step 5: Moving to the Next Case involves repeating steps 1-4 for each participant while maintaining idiographic focus. Step 6: Looking for Patterns Across Cases includes identifying superordinate themes that capture shared experiences across participants while preserving individual variations (Smith et al., 2009). NVivo software was utilized to support data organization and thematic development, while maintaining close engagement with raw data throughout the analytical process (Noon, 2018). The analysis emphasized both convergence (shared experiences) and divergence (unique individual variations) in participants' accounts, consistent with IPA's idiographic commitment (Smith et al., 2009).

Ethical Procedures

This study adhered to established research ethics principles and obtain approval from the proper authorities (Walker, 2007). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they understand the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, voluntary nature of participation, and right to withdraw at any time without penalty (University of Connecticut, 2015). Participants received detailed information sheets explaining the research objectives, data collection procedures, confidentiality measures, and researcher contact information (Walker, 2007). Confidentiality and anonymity was maintained through the use of pseudonyms, secure data storage in password-protected files, and removal of identifying information from transcripts and research reports (Ethical Considerations in Qualitative Research, 2022).

Given the potential for emotional distress when discussing academic stress, psychological support referrals were provided to participants who may require professional assistance, and interviews was be conducted with sensitivity to participants' emotional well-being (Walker, 2007). Data protection protocols include encrypted storage of audio recordings and transcripts, limited access to research team members only, and secure destruction of recordings following transcript verification (University of Connecticut, 2015). Participants were informed of their right to review transcripts, request removal of specific content, and receive copies of research findings upon study completion (Walker, 2007).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Through interpretive phenomenological analysis of the 12 participants' lived experiences, three superordinate themes emerged that capture the essence of how BSBA-HRM fourth-year students make sense of their feasibility study-related stress. The analysis revealed both convergent and divergent patterns in students' meaning-making processes while maintaining focus on individual experiential accounts.

Superordinate Theme 1: "The Weight of Academic Expectations"

This theme encompasses participants' experiences with overwhelming academic pressures and their interpretations of feasibility study requirements as both burden and milestone.

Subordinate Theme 1.1: Academic Overwhelm and Time Pressure

Participants consistently described feeling overwhelmed by the comprehensive nature of feasibility study requirements. (P1) expressed: *"It's like carrying the weight of the entire business world on your shoulders. Every chapter demands perfection - the market analysis, financial projections, everything has to be flawless."* This narrative demonstrates primary appraisal processes described in Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model, where P1 evaluates the feasibility study as exceeding her perceived resources, triggering stress responses (Biggs et al., 2017). The metaphor of "carrying weight" reveals how she constructs meaning around academic demands as physically and emotionally burdensome, consistent with research showing that academic workload represents the most dominant stressor among business students (Akram et al., 2022).

Similarly, (P3) reflected: *"Time becomes your enemy. You think you have months, but suddenly you are drowning in data collection, interviews, and endless revisions."* P3's personification of time as an "enemy" illustrates how temporal pressure creates adversarial relationships with academic requirements, supporting findings that time management difficulties significantly contribute to student stress (Garett et al., 2017). His use of "drowning" metaphor suggests overwhelming experiences that threaten academic survival, reflecting what Park (2010) describes as situational meaning that

conflicts with global expectations of manageable academic progress. (P5) described the temporal pressure: *"The feasibility study is not just another assignment. It is four years of learning compressed into one massive project that determines if you are really ready for the business world."* P5's interpretation reveals sophisticated meaning-making where he constructs the feasibility study as a comprehensive assessment of his entire academic journey, demonstrating what Park (2022) terms "global meaning adjustment" where individuals revise their understanding of events' significance. This perspective transforms routine academic work into high-stakes professional evaluation, intensifying stress through elevated personal significance.

Subordinate Theme 1.2: Performance Anxiety and Fear of Failure

The fear of inadequate performance emerged as a central concern. (P2) shared: *"Every meeting with my adviser feels like a judgment day. I keep thinking, what if my business idea is not viable? What if I have wasted months on something that would not work?"* P2's "judgment day" metaphor reveals how she constructs adviser interactions as existential evaluations rather than supportive guidance, reflecting secondary appraisal processes where she perceives limited coping resources relative to perceived threats (Lin et al., 2022). Her catastrophic questioning pattern demonstrates what cognitive-behavioral literature identifies as maladaptive thought processes that amplify academic stress (Short, 2017). (P7) articulated his performance concerns: *"The pressure is not just about grades anymore. This feasibility study represents our capability to succeed in the real business world. Failure here feels like failing at life."* P7's meaning-making extends beyond academic performance to encompass entire life trajectory, illustrating how students construct global meaning systems where academic success becomes synonymous with personal worth (Park, 2010). This interpretation intensifies stress by expanding the perceived consequences of academic difficulties, contradicting research suggesting that compartmentalizing academic experiences reduces stress impact (Deng et al., 2022).

Superordinate Theme 2: "Navigating the Maze of Coping Strategies"

This theme captures participants' diverse approaches to managing stress and their ongoing process of discovering effective coping mechanisms.

Subordinate Theme 2.1: Problem-Focused Coping and Strategic Planning

Participants employed various problem-focused strategies to manage feasibility study demands. (P4) explained: *"I learned to break everything down into smaller chunks. Instead of thinking about the entire feasibility study, I focus on completing one section at a time - market analysis this week, financial projections next."* P4's systematic approach reflects effective problem-focused coping consistent with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) framework, where individuals take direct action to modify stressful situations (Biggs et al.,

2017). Her strategy of cognitive restructuring through task segmentation supports research demonstrating that breaking complex projects into manageable components reduces perceived stress and improves academic outcomes (Akram et al., 2022). (P6) described his systematic approach: *"Organization became my lifeline. Without structure, I would have drowned in the complexity."* P6's metaphorical language ("lifeline," "drowned") reveals how he constructs organizational strategies as essential survival mechanisms, demonstrating successful secondary appraisal where coping resources are identified and mobilized effectively (Lin et al., 2022). His experience supports literature indicating that time management and organizational skills serve as protective factors against academic stress (Garett et al., 2017). However, not all participants found problem-focused strategies equally effective. (P10) acknowledged: *"I tried making schedules and breaking things down, but when the pressure mounted, all my planning fell apart. Sometimes you need more than just organization."* P10's experience highlights individual differences in coping effectiveness, supporting IPA's idiographic focus on unique experiential variations (Smith et al., 2009). Her recognition of planning limitations demonstrates sophisticated meaning-making about the boundaries of problem-focused approaches, suggesting need for multiple coping strategies during high-stress periods (Park, 2022).

Subordinate Theme 2.2: Emotional Regulation and Social Support

Emotional coping strategies featured prominently in participants' accounts. (P8) shared: *"When the stress becomes unbearable, I call my family. Just hearing their voices reminds me that I am more than this project. Their belief in me gives me strength to continue."* P8's narrative demonstrates effective emotion-focused coping where social support provides emotional regulation and identity affirmation (Short, 2017). Her recognition that she exists beyond academic performance reflects healthy meaning-making that maintains global identity stability despite situational stress, consistent with Park's (2010) model of adaptive meaning adjustment. (P9) emphasized peer support: *"My classmates became my survival network. We formed study groups, shared resources, and encouraged each other during breakdowns. We are all fighting the same battle."* P9's military metaphor ("survival network," "fighting," "battle") reveals how he constructs academic challenges as collective warfare requiring mutual support, supporting research demonstrating that peer relationships serve as crucial protective factors against student stress (Alkhawaldeh et al., 2023). His collaborative approach contrasts with individualistic coping patterns, highlighting cultural and personal variations in support-seeking behaviors. Conversely, (P11) struggled with social coping: *"I wanted to reach out, but I felt like a burden. Everyone else seemed to have it together while I was falling apart. Isolation became my default, even though it made everything worse."* P11's experience illustrates how perceived social comparison can inhibit help-seeking behaviors, demonstrating maladaptive meaning-making

where personal struggles are interpreted as unique failures rather than shared experiences (Deng et al., 2022). His insight about isolation's negative effects shows developing self-awareness about ineffective coping patterns.

Subordinate Theme 2.3: Adaptive versus Maladaptive Coping Patterns

Participants displayed varying levels of coping effectiveness. (P10) acknowledged problematic patterns: *"I started staying up all night, surviving on coffee and energy drinks. I thought working harder meant working longer, but I was actually becoming less productive and more anxious."* P10's reflection demonstrates evolving meaning-making where initial interpretations of effective coping (longer hours equals better outcomes) are revised through experiential learning, illustrating the dynamic nature of meaning adjustment described by Park (2022). Her recognition of maladaptive patterns supports literature indicating that sleep deprivation and stimulant reliance exacerbate rather than alleviate academic stress (Short, 2017). In contrast, (P11) discovered balanced approaches: *"I realized that taking breaks actually improved my work quality. Exercise, proper sleep, and recreational activities were not luxuries - they were necessities for maintaining mental clarity."* P11's meaning transformation from viewing self-care as "luxury" to recognizing it as "necessity" reflects sophisticated cognitive reappraisal consistent with effective stress management literature (Lin et al., 2022). His experience supports research demonstrating that holistic wellness approaches enhance academic performance while reducing stress (Garett et al., 2017).

Superordinate Theme 3: "Transformation Through Adversity"

This theme encompasses participants' evolving understanding of their stress experiences as catalysts for personal and professional growth.

Subordinate Theme 3.1: Reframing Stress as Growth Opportunity

Several participants demonstrated sophisticated meaning-making by reinterpreting stress as development. (P12) reflected: *"Initially, I saw the stress as purely negative, something to eliminate. But gradually, I understood that this pressure was molding me into a more resilient professional. The challenges were not obstacles - they were training."* P12's meaning transformation illustrates what Park (2022) describes as benefit-finding, where individuals reconstruct stressful experiences as growth opportunities. Her metaphor of "molding" suggests stress as a formative force rather than destructive pressure, demonstrating successful meaning-making that promotes psychological adjustment while maintaining engagement with challenging situations.

(P4) shared similar insights: *"The feasibility study stress taught me more about myself than four years of regular coursework. I discovered capabilities I never knew I had and learned to push beyond perceived limitations."* P4's

narrative reveals how stress experiences can catalyze self-discovery and capability recognition, supporting research on post-traumatic growth following challenging academic experiences (Park, 2022). His comparison with "regular coursework" suggests that meaningful learning requires sufficient challenge to promote development, aligning with educational literature on optimal challenge levels for student growth. However, not all participants achieved this reframing. (P7) struggled: *"People keep telling me this will make me stronger; but honestly, I just feel beaten down. Maybe some people grow from stress, but right now I just want it to end."* P7's experience highlights individual differences in meaning-making capacity and timing, demonstrating that growth-oriented reframing may not be accessible during peak stress periods (Gilbert et al., 2025). His honesty about feeling "beaten down" reflects authentic phenomenological experience that resists imposed positive interpretations, supporting IPA's commitment to honoring diverse experiential realities (Smith et al., 2009).

Subordinate Theme 3.2: Professional Identity Formation

Participants interpreted their feasibility study experiences as transformative for their professional development. (P1) observed: *"Through all the stress and struggles, I started thinking like a real business consultant. The analytical thinking, problem-solving under pressure - these are not just academic skills anymore. They are part of who I am becoming as an HRM professional."* P1's identity shift from student to "real business consultant" demonstrates how challenging academic experiences can catalyze professional identity development, supporting research on capstone projects as identity-forming experiences (Lopez et al., 2024). Her recognition of skills as integral to professional identity rather than separate academic competencies reflects sophisticated meaning-making about the relationship between education and career preparation.

(P3) expressed similar professional awakening: *"The feasibility study forced me to see myself as a future business leader, not just a student. Every challenge became preparation for real-world responsibilities I will face in my career."* P3's transformation from "student" to "future business leader" illustrates how academic challenges can serve as professional socialization experiences, consistent with literature on professional identity development in business education (Santos et al., 2025). His reframing of challenges as "preparation" demonstrates successful meaning-making that transforms present difficulties into future advantages.

Discussion

Theoretical Integration and Meaning-Making Processes

The findings provide substantial support for Park's Meaning-Making Model (2010), particularly evident in participants' transformative narratives. P12's evolution from viewing stress as "purely negative" to understanding it as professional "molding" exemplifies

the meaning-making process where discrepancies between global meaning (stress is harmful) and situational meaning (this stress is developmental) motivate cognitive adjustment to reduce incongruity. However, P7's struggle to achieve similar reframing demonstrates that meaning-making is not universal or immediate, supporting Park's (2022) emphasis on individual and temporal variations in meaning construction.

Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model (1984) receives strong empirical support through participants' detailed appraisal processes. P1's interpretation of feasibility studies as requiring "perfection" demonstrates primary appraisal where academic demands are evaluated as threatening, while P4's systematic task breakdown illustrates secondary appraisal leading to effective problem-focused coping selection (Biggs et al., 2017). Importantly, the findings reveal that appraisal processes are not static but evolve through experience, as demonstrated by P10's recognition that her initial coping strategies were counterproductive.

The double hermeneutic principle of IPA was crucial in interpreting participants' meaning-making processes. Students' interpretations revealed layered hermeneutic understanding where feasibility study experiences were simultaneously constructed as academic requirements, professional preparation, personal challenges, and identity-forming opportunities (Smith et al., 2009). This multiplicity of meaning demonstrates the complex interpretive work individuals perform when making sense of significant life experiences.

Literature Integration and Empirical Connections

The prominence of academic workload stress aligns with Akram et al.'s (2022) findings that academic demands represent the most significant stressor for business students. However, our results extend this research by revealing how students construct meaning around workload intensity - participants interpreted feasibility study demands not merely as excessive work but as comprehensive tests of professional readiness, intensifying stress through elevated personal significance.

Social support effectiveness varied considerably among participants, with P8 finding family support essential while P11 experienced peer comparison as inhibiting help-seeking. This divergence supports research indicating that social support effectiveness depends on individual differences in support preferences and cultural contexts (Alkhawaldeh et al., 2023). The findings suggest that support interventions must account for individual variation in social coping preferences rather than applying universal approaches.

The transformation theme extends existing literature on post-traumatic growth by demonstrating how academic stressors can catalyze professional identity development among business students. P12's growth narratives support research suggesting that challenging experiences, when successfully navigated, can enhance

resilience and self-efficacy (Park, 2022). However, P7's contrasting experience highlights that growth outcomes are not inevitable, requiring adequate support and individual readiness for meaning transformation.

Implications Grounded in Empirical Findings Individualized Support Approaches

The stark differences between participants like P4 (who found systematic planning effective) and P10 (whose planning strategies failed under pressure) demonstrate that support services must offer diverse coping strategy options rather than one-size-fits-all approaches. P11's isolation despite recognizing its negative effects suggests need for proactive outreach to students who struggle with help-seeking behaviors.

Temporal Considerations in Support Delivery

P7's inability to achieve growth-oriented reframing during peak stress periods indicates that meaning-making interventions may be most effective after immediate stress reduction. Support services should provide crisis management first, followed by meaning-making facilitation once students achieve psychological stability.

Professional Identity Development Integration

P1 and P3's professional identity formation suggests that capstone experiences serve dual functions as academic requirements and professional socialization opportunities. Curricula should explicitly acknowledge and facilitate this identity development process rather than treating it as an incidental outcome.

Methodological Strengths and Limitations

The IPA approach successfully captured the phenomenological complexity of stress experiences, revealing how individual meaning-making processes shape coping effectiveness and growth outcomes. The idiographic focus illuminated crucial individual differences that quantitative approaches might obscure, supporting the value of phenomenological methods for understanding subjective stress experiences.

However, the cultural homogeneity of the Filipino sample limits transferability to other educational contexts. The collective coping strategies described by P9 may reflect cultural values that differ in more individualistic societies. Additionally, the retrospective nature of some accounts may be influenced by memory reconstruction, though this limitation is inherent in phenomenological research focusing on meaning-making processes.

Future Research Directions

Longitudinal IPA studies could capture meaning-making evolution in real-time rather than relying on retrospective accounts. Cross-cultural phenomenological research could examine how different cultural contexts shape academic stress meaning-making processes. Intervention studies based on identified effective coping strategies could develop evidence-based support programs while respecting

individual differences in meaning-making capacity and timing.

Conclusion

This interpretive phenomenological analysis reveals that BSBA-HRM students' feasibility study stress experiences are characterized by complex, individual meaning-making processes that significantly influence coping effectiveness and growth outcomes. The findings demonstrate strong empirical support for established stress and coping theories while extending understanding of how meaning construction shapes student experiences of academic challenges. The study contributes to literature on academic stress by highlighting the crucial role of individual interpretation in determining whether challenging experiences become sources of distress or catalysts for professional development.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this interpretive phenomenological analysis, institutional interventions should prioritize the development of individualized, multi-tiered support systems that recognize the diverse meaning-making processes and coping strategy preferences among BSBA-HRM students. Universities should establish specialized capstone support programs that integrate both problem-focused skill development (project management, time management, research methodology) and emotion-focused interventions (counseling services, peer support groups, mindfulness training) to address the multifaceted nature of feasibility study-related stress (Barbayannis et al., 2022). Given the study's findings that students like P4 benefited from systematic planning while P10's organizational strategies failed under pressure, support services should offer multiple pathway approaches rather than standardized interventions, allowing students to explore various coping mechanisms until they identify personally effective strategies. Additionally, faculty development programs should be implemented to enhance supervisory practices, recognizing that adviser relationships significantly influence student stress levels and professional identity formation, as evidenced by P2's experience of adviser meetings as "judgment day" versus P1's transformation into thinking "like a real business consultant" (Vasileiou et al., 2023; University of Baguio, 2021).

Curriculum redesign should incorporate progressive stress management and professional identity development throughout the BSBA-HRM program rather than treating feasibility studies as isolated capstone experiences. The findings reveal that students construct meaning around feasibility studies as comprehensive assessments of their entire academic journey and professional readiness, suggesting need for scaffolded preparation experiences that gradually build requisite skills while fostering adaptive coping strategies and professional identity formation (Gundersen et al., 2021; Massachusetts School Building Authority, 2023). Universities should implement early intervention programs that teach stress recognition,

meaning-making skills, and diverse coping strategies beginning in the first year, allowing students to develop personalized stress management toolkits before encountering high-stakes capstone requirements. Furthermore, the curriculum should explicitly integrate professional identity development activities that help students understand the connection between academic challenges and professional preparation, as demonstrated by P3's realization that "every challenge became preparation for real-world responsibilities." Regular reflective exercises and meaning-making workshops should be embedded throughout the program to help students develop the sophisticated cognitive reappraisal skills evidenced by P12's transformation from viewing stress as "purely negative" to understanding it as professional "molding" (Park, 2022; TimelyCare, 2025).

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