Positive Development Of University Students Over Their University Journey In Taiwan

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Abstract—**This study examines the psychosocial development of university students in Taiwan. A total of 15 university students with an average age of 22.35 years, who exhibited positive development throughout their university journey, were invited to participate in this study. Semi-structured in-depth interviews and phenomenological analyses were conducted for data collection and analysis, respectively. Several themes that were characteristic of their positive development were identified from the data analysis, namely self-expectation, self-efficacy, self-management, social networking, cooperation and dedication, extensive and diverse learning, learning from role models, and self-development. The implications of the findings were discussed.**

Keywords—positive development, psychosocial development, university student

I. INTRODUCTION

The university journey is recognized as a critical developmental phase that substantially affects students' psychosocial development (Lin et al., 2016). Over the past three decades, the number of university students has markedly increased from 260,000 in the 1980s to nearly 1 million in 2024 (Ministry of Education, 2024). In Taiwan, university students must navigate a rapidly changing educational environment and society while managing high levels of stress and intense competition (Yang, 2020). Pursuing positive psychosocial development continues to be a concern for higher education institutions. A notable gap exists in evidence regarding such development from the perspective of Taiwanese university students, which this paper aims to address. This study was conducted to describe Taiwanese university students' positive development throughout their university careers.

II. LITERATURE ON TAIWANESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Taiwanese university students typically face various life stressors, including academic, employment, interpersonal, family, physical, emotional, and self-identity challenges (Liu, 2011). Within a rapidly evolving society and educational system, the two primary goals for university students are to lead a high-quality spiritual life and to perform meaningful work. In a study conducted by Chang and Chen (2009), 88.5% of the participants regarded leading a high-quality spiritual life as an essential life goal, 86.4% regarded performing meaningful work as an essential life goal, and 72.5% and 66.2% regarded living rich lives and becoming professionals, respectively, as

essential life goals. Chiang (2009) surveyed 576 Taiwanese college students and discovered that the majority of them were motivated to pursue meaning in life, with a positive correlation between the sense of meaning in life and motivation to such meaning. Students with religious beliefs tended to have a higher sense of meaning in life compared with those without. In addition, greater religious faith was correlated with a stronger sense of meaning in life. Moreover, the level of social support, the influence of daily distress, and the motivation to seek meaning all positively influenced the sense of meaning in life.

Tseng (2007) argued that college students both desire and admire a life that combines happiness and meaning. However, pursuing happiness and creating a more meaningful life may be more challenging than expected for university students. Yang (2020) examined the correlation between the sense of meaning in life and the psychological well-being of college students, and they discovered a significant positive correlation. They also discovered that the sense of meaning in life has predictive power over psychological well-being. In a survey of 1,331 university students in Taiwan, Hao (2012) discovered that those who are self-accepting, who maintain positive interpersonal relationships, and who are optimistic and positive tend to experience low emotional distress. In addition, those who are emotionally stable tend to experience low mental, interpersonal, and emotional distress. Ma (2021) surveyed 855 undergraduates and revealed them to suffer from employment, self-identity, interpersonal relations, affection and family stress.

Using the data of 29,601 university students, Liu (2011) reported that the top three life goals among college students were "to have a happy home," "to lead a high-quality spiritual life," and "to engage in meaningful work." The top three employability skills that the students believed they must possess at graduation were "a positive personal work attitude" (e.g., time management, sense of responsibility, record-keeping, and self-discipline), "professional skills applicable in the workplace," "ethics and morality," and "teamwork." Overall, life goals substantially affect students' self-concept and employability, both at graduation and beyond. When students view life goals as essential, their self-concept tends to be more positive, with a positive correlation between the two. Similarly, when students attach additional importance to life goals, their employability assessment increases. According to Liu (2011), helping college students establish life goals is beneficial for their future development.

III. Literature on University Students Worldwide

Padilla-Walker and Nelson (2017) argued that emerging adults focus on the role of purpose, transitioning to family and work, positive engagement in service, and resilience from disability in positive development. O'Connor et al. (2011) reported that higher levels of positive development in emerging adulthood are associated with stronger family and peer relationships, more favorable adjustment to school settings, higher family socioeconomic status, and more favorable emotional control.

Using data from the 2008 National Survey of Student Engagement, Korobova and Starobin (2015) examined the relationship between student engagement, student satisfaction, and the academic success of international and American students. They discovered that the most accurate predictors of satisfaction with the overall educational experience and academic success, as measured by grades, were the five benchmarks of effective educational practice: level of academic challenge, student–faculty interaction, enrichment of educational experiences, supportive campus environment and relationship quality, and institutional emphasis on supportive campus environments. O'Connor et al. (2011) identified the student behaviors and institutional conditions that influence the engagement and academic success of first-year university students at a university. They discovered that student–staff interactions serve as a significant indicator of student success. Kuh et al. (2006) emphasized that high levels of student engagement are necessary for and contribute to collegiate success.

Professionals in higher educational systems focus not only on students' intellectual development and learning but also on their moral, social, physical, and spiritual growth (Musil, 2006). This comprehensive approach underscores the added value of college education, with which students enhance their thinking, develop a stronger sense of self, and deeply engage with others who are different from themselves as a result of their college experience. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2024), social and emotional learning (SEL) involves acquiring skills to recognize and control emotions, develop empathy, make responsible decisions, establish positive relationships, and effectively navigate challenging scenarios. SEL includes self-awareness (identifying emotions and recognizing strengths), social awareness (perspective-taking and appreciating diversity), self-management (controlling emotions and setting goals), responsible decision-making (analyzing situations, assuming personal responsibility, respecting others, and solving problems), and relationship skills (communicating, building relationships, negotiating, and refusing).

Wayt (2012) identified the individuals who have a great influence on students to pursue and complete their degrees. They argued that students who stay in college tend to have a positive relational influence on their persistence decisions and also have positive college experiences and interactions with both their social and their academic groups. These interactions, both on and off campus, influence their decisions to stay in college. Socially oriented relationships, such as those with family and friends, have a stronger influence on students' persistence decisions compared with academically oriented relationships, such as those with classmates, faculty members, and student affairs staff. In other words, students' human relationships, which universities have the least control over, are the ones that students believe have the greatest influence on their college success.

IV. Model of Positive Development

Hawkins et al. (2009) proposed a model of positive development, which was used as a framework for understanding students' positive development in this study. This model, relevant to young adulthood, includes five developmental domains, namely civic action and engagement, trust and tolerance of others, trust in authorities and organizations, social competence, and life satisfaction. Civic action and engagement refer to an individual's willingness to participate as a citizen, and they are essential for political socialization and democratic functioning (Winter, 2000). Trust and tolerance of others and trust in authorities and organizations are key aspects of social capital that reflect an individual's connection to their community and their ability to harmoniously collaborate with others from diverse backgrounds (Whitley & McKenzie, 2005). Social competence refers to successful social relationships, which help individuals meet daily functional requirements, participate in society, and assume responsibility for themselves and others (Gresham et al., 2001). Life satisfaction refers to a sense of contentment and congruence between desires or needs and achievements or resources (Keyes & Waterman, 2003), and it is often considered a measure of quality of life (Park 2004). The relationship between life satisfaction and positive functioning has been primarily valued in the subjective well-being literature, with life satisfaction construed as a core dimension of this construct.

V. Method

Phenomenological research aims at studying the phenomena as experienced by human beings. It entails a careful description of ordinary conscious experience of everyday life (the life-world), a description of things (the essential structures of consciousness) as one individual or a group of individuals experiences them (Schwandt, 1997). Thus, the researcher used this method to describe student positive development over the university journey.

A. Participants

Study participants included 15 university students from three universities in Taiwan. Participants' ages were from 19 to 25 years old with an average of 21.75. Criteria for selecting participants were that they are active in learning and development as well as are willing to share their experiences of psychosocial development. Also, all participants self-evaluated their overall university career as rich, positive and abundant especially in their psychosocial development.

B. Interviewer

A research assistant (RA) with a master's degree in counseling conducted 15 interviews from each of the three universities respectively. Prior to the study, the RA received training in interviewing skills, counseling,

qualitative research, and research methodology. She completed pilot studies to refine her interviewing skills. She established relationships with the participants that were based on trust, and she had an open and nonjudgmental manner during the interviews.

C. Data Collection

Fifteen in-depth interviews, lasting 90-120 minutes, comprised the principal data for the study. A snowball method was employed to search for the participants. The RA invited the first prospective participant, and ask him/her to recommend the next one for interviews. Sample questions included: (1) Please describe your development experiences during the university journey. (2) Please describe significant or impressive development (issues) over your university career. Please give some examples and/or impressive occasions. (3) If any, how would you enhance your psychosocial development and move toward positive development? Finally, taped interviews were transcribed verbatim for data analysis.

D. Data Analysis

The first and second authors are the analysts. They analyzed data by following the procedures proposed by Moustakas (1994): (1) Reading through the written transcripts several times to obtain an overall feeling for them; (2) Identifying significant phrases or sentences that pertained directly to the experience; (3) Formulating meanings and clustering them into themes common to all of the participants' transcripts; (4) Integrating the results into an in-depth, exhaustive description of the phenomena; and (5) Validating the findings with the participants, and including participants' remarks in the final description. The analysts employed strategies proposed by Gibbs (2007). They (1) checked the transcripts against the original recordings, (2) constantly compared the data with the codes and wrote memos about the codes and their definitions, and (3) cross-checked codes and compared results that were independently derived. In addition, strategies proposed by Creswell and Miller (2000) were adopted. The analysts (1) triangulated different data sources of information, (2) employed member checking to reveal the accuracy of the findings through taking the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to participants, (3) adopted rich description to convey the findings and offer detailed descriptions of the setting and multiple perspectives about a theme, (4) clarified the bias through self-reflection which formed a narrative that resonated well with readers, (5) presented negative or discrepant information that ran counter to the themes, and (6) spent prolonged time in the field to develop an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and to convey details about the site and the people that lead credibility to the narrative account.

VI. RESULTS

A. Self-Expectation

The participants set goals to achieve substantial personal development throughout their university journeys. They initially set small, manageable objectives and subsequently progressed to addressing more difficult tasks. One participant explained, "I have expectations, and I am motivated to make efforts to become a model university student of substance." Another participant noted, "My motivation for studying at the university is that I want to achieve something on my own merits alone. This is my goal." These responses indicated that the participants were highly motivated, were self-driven, and started with small, manageable objectives before shifting to intermediate and main objectives associated with their postgraduation careers.

B. Self-Efficacy

The participants regarded their university years as a prime time for personal growth. They described it as an essential period to take responsibility over their lives; venture beyond their comfort zone; pursue deeper learning; and discover more about their interests, weaknesses, and strengths. One participant stated, "Being fully capable of doing my job indicates growth and is part of the learning process, which enhances my self-efficacy." The participants also assumed responsibility for themselves, were willing to explore new possibilities, were brave enough to self-improve and address mistakes, and continued to refine their self-efficacy. One participant commented, "I keep trying to handle things myself, learning to constantly correct mistakes along the way."

C. Self-Management

The participants emphasized the importance of effective time management, strategic life planning, and disciplined task execution in university life. One participant stated, "My timetable is quite flexible, and I can make decisions on my own; I can take charge of many things." The participants also expressed a desire to balance academic responsibilities with other areas of life, in an attempt to achieve balanced development. One participant noted, "A better university student, to me, is one who can find a better way to balance academic achievements and extracurricular activities." Overall, the participants believed that they were the final arbiter in how their lives at the university would be and that they should live it in a disciplined and organized manner.

D. Social Networking

Overall, the participants valued stable and mature interpersonal relationships. They believed that controlling one's emotions and respecting a diverse range of opinions are crucial for effective collaboration. One participant mentioned, "I should know more about myself so that I can change and control my emotions in order to communicate and get along well with others." The participants were also open to criticism and different viewpoints, and they attempted to resolve differences through communication and to maintain harmonious relationships. One participant noted, "It is important to get along with different people, listen to diverse opinions and ideas, and empathize with the feelings of others."

E. Cooperation and Dedication

The participants emphasized the importance of peer support, emotional exchange, teamwork, team cohesion, encouragement, working toward a common goal, and establishing positive interpersonal relationships as critical

components of their personal growth. One participant remarked, "I value teamwork, where collaborative effort often results in outcomes greater than the sum of individual efforts. Working closely with team members toward shared goals provides me with a sense of victory and is deeply meaningful to me." The participants also recognized their role as college students in contributing to their departments, sports teams, clubs, and school and community services as a means to fulfill their civic responsibilities. One participant stated, "As a college student, I feel responsible for contributing to my class, department, club, school, and community. I am committed to making a contribution whenever possible." These responses reflected the participants' strong belief in the power of cooperation and positive team spirit.

F. Extensive and Diverse Learning

The participants aimed to maintain high academic standards while engaging in extracurricular activities to enhance their university experience. One participant explained, "I strive to broaden my horizons by visiting different places and trying new things; this is how I gain diverse perspectives that enrich my life." The participants also applied theoretical knowledge to practical tasks, integrating classroom learning with real-world applications. One participant shared, "Inspired by classroom learning, I constantly think of better solutions to potential problems through theories and concepts learned at school. I also attempt to refine my skills through persistent practice."

G. Learning from Role Models

The participants viewed teachers, peers, and high-performing students as role models, drawing inspiration from their knowledge and methods of overcoming challenges. Teachers, recognized for their trustworthiness, knowledge, proactivity, and helpfulness, often served as a valuable resource for guidance, with some introducing students to academic communities. One participant noted, "My teacher is very knowledgeable and kind. I find my perspectives broadened each time I seek advice." The participants also admired senior students for their life and academic experiences, although they were only a few years older. One participant expressed, "I value discussions with senior students because they offer insights based on shared experiences in life and school, which are extremely valuable." The participants also looked up to peers who excelled in academia or in sports with exceptional interpersonal skills and disciplined lifestyles, viewing them as examples to follow.

H. Self-Development

The participants had high self-expectations, had ambitious goals, assumed responsibility, and were deeply engaged with their university studies. They explored their interests and traits, engaged in self-reflection, pursued meaningful life values, and gradually shaped their self-identity and personal growth. One participant reflected, "The four years at university have transformed me, altering how I view my life and how I use the knowledge gained to reflect upon and improve myself." The participants were also committed to achieving their goals, and they worked diligently to make meaningful contributions to their classes,

departments, clubs, and communities. One participant stated, "My university goal is to leave a lasting legacy." By contributing to teams with a sense of autonomy and responsibility, the participants achieved a sense of accomplishment and purpose through teamwork. Through experiential learning, they continued to deepen their self-understanding, explore their life's meaning, and progressively outline their future career goals and self-identity. One participant shared, "Spending time alone at the university has aided my self-understanding and self-awareness. The greatest benefit over the last four years has been developing my self-identity and discovering my interests and future paths, all fueled by my motivation for self-exploration and the pursuit of meaning."

VII. DISCUSSION

The participants were aware of the rapidly evolving social and educational landscapes and challenges, such as societal changes, academic pressure, and competitive work environments (Yang, 2020). This study corroborates findings on university students' employment, self-identification, and academic, interpersonal, emotional, and familial stressors (Ma, 2021), underscoring the importance of active involvement and commitment to broad and diverse experiential learning in fostering academic success (Kuh et al., 2006).

The findings of this study are consistent with those of Liu (2011), who argued that students with clearly defined life goals tend to develop employable skills and a positive self-concept through self-assessment. In other words, setting precise life goals plays a key role in the future development of university students. The findings of this study are also consistent with those of Liu (2011) and Chang and Chen (2009), who argued that university students value high-quality spiritual life and meaningful work and view a fulfilling life and professional achievement as essential life goals. In addition, the study findings support those of Chiang (2009), indicating that Taiwanese university students are motivated to pursue the meaning of life. In contrast to Liu's (2011) study, the participants included in this study did not prioritize "having a happy family" as a key life goal, which may reflect broader social trends where young people marry later and few focus on intimate relationships, marriage, and family during their university years.

Overall, the participants included in this study emphasized the importance of skills such as time management, responsibility, self-discipline, and teamwork. These findings are consistent with those of Liu (2011), who argued that university students value the development of employable skills and the strengthening of work attitudes, including time management, accountability, self-discipline, and teamwork. The participants also recognized the importance of interpersonal relationships, interpersonal skills, emotional regulation, and adaptation to the school environment. These findings support those of O'Connor et al. (2011), who indicated that positive development in early adulthood, including during university years, is associated with peer relationships, adaptation to the school environment, and emotional regulation.

The participants valued interpersonal connections and social networking, actively sought guidance from role

models such as teachers and high-achieving peers, and established strong relationships to enhance their academic learning and personal development. These findings are consistent with those of Wayt (2012), who argued that university students who effectively interact with both social and academic groups and establish a robust network of relationships are likely to complete their degrees. Similarly, the study findings support those of Korobova and Starobin (2015), who demonstrated that student–teacher interactions, enriched educational experiences, supportive campus environments, and high-quality teaching are crucial to the learning and development of university students. These findings are consistent with those of O'Connor et al. (2011), who argued that student–faculty interactions are a key indicator of student success.

The findings of this study underscore the importance of SEL, as indicated by CASEL (2024), confirming that students' acquisition of skills to recognize and control emotions, develop empathy, make responsible decisions, establish positive relationships, and navigate challenging scenarios is an essential process. The participants demonstrated self-awareness, maintained stable emotions, established positive interpersonal relationships, and effectively navigated university life. These findings are partially consistent with those of Hao (2012), indicating that college students who accept themselves and foster optimistic outlooks are likely to experience stable emotions and low psychological, interpersonal, and emotional distress. These findings also support those of Musil (2007), who argued that student development includes not only intellectual growth but also moral, social, physical, and spiritual dimensions.

The findings of this study are partially consistent with those of Hawkins et al. (2009) regarding the positive development of young adults, including university students, which includes civic engagement, trust in others, and confidence in institutions and organizations, as well as satisfaction with social skills and personal life. The participants displayed a strong sense of responsibility; acknowledged their roles within their academic groups, clubs, and communities; and were committed to contributing to these communities as active members.

The participants embraced diversity, respected interpersonal differences, and exhibited trust toward other individuals, groups, and organizations. They also developed interpersonal skills, collaborated with individuals from various backgrounds, valued teamwork, and engaged in activities both on and off campus. Overall, the findings of this study confirm the importance of an individual's connection to their community and society and their ability to cooperate with individuals from diverse backgrounds (Whitley, 2005). The participants exhibited strong social skills and were satisfied with their university experiences.

VIII. IMPLICATIONS

Overall, the findings of this study can be used by counseling and education professionals to support university students in their personal development. For instance, these findings can aid students in clarifying their self-expectations and establishing goals, initially focusing on smaller targets before progressing to intermediate or main ones. These findings can also be used to help senior university students contemplate their career goals after graduation. Professional staff should help university students manage a goal-oriented, planned, and disciplined life; engage in a broad range of experiential learning activities; and strike a balance between academic and extracurricular activities. They should also support students in connecting theory with practice, acting responsibly, overcoming challenges, solving problems, and enhancing their self-efficacy. Students are encouraged to observe the behavior and performance of role models, to seek their advice, and to reflect upon their experiences to strengthen their self-development.

IX. CONCLUSIONS

Taiwanese university students have high expectations for university life, and they assume responsibility for their personal and academic growth. They lead goal-oriented, planned, and disciplined lives, balancing between academic and extracurricular activities. They also extensively engage in diverse learning experiences, overcome challenges, solve problems, and enhance their self-efficacy. Through continuous observation and reflection, they correct and improve themselves depending on their experiences. They also manage their emotions, embrace interpersonal differences, value teamwork, and develop their interpersonal skills. In addition, they often participate in the execution of tasks assigned by groups, institutions, or communities. Through experiential activities, they explore their interests and traits and consistently reflect upon their experiences. By seeking guidance from role models, they gain a deeper understanding of themselves, gradually establish their own life and career directions, and build their own self-identity.

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