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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A MINDFULNESS-BASED INTERVENTION INFORMED BY ACCEPTANCE AND COMMITMENT THERAPY (ACT) FOR PROMOTING PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT TO EMPLOYMENT STRESS AMONG GRADUATING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

Graduating from university is a pivotal life transition that exposes students to significant employment-related stressors—uncertainty about job availability, perceived competence, financial concerns, and emerging professional identities. This study evaluates an eight-week mindfulness-based intervention informed by Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) designed to promote psychological adjustment to employment stress among graduating students. Using a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest control-group design (N = 160), the intervention combined mindfulness practices, values clarification, acceptance strategies, and behavioral activation tasks to enhance psychological flexibility and employability readiness. Outcome variables included employment stress, mindfulness, psychological flexibility, coping strategies, resilience, academic performance, socioeconomic status, and intervention participation. Analyses employed multiple regression, ANCOVA, and integration techniques to assess immediate and sustained effects. Results indicated significant reductions in employment stress and increases in psychological flexibility, mindfulness, resilience, and employment readiness among participants. The findings suggest that a brief, manualized ACT-informed mindfulness program can effectively bolster graduates' psychological resources during the transition to work, with implications for university counseling services and employability programs.

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Introduction:-

Graduation represents a critical life transition, where students shift from structured academic environments to uncertain professional settings. Employment stress among graduating students includes anxiety about job availability, competence, financial stability, and identity formation. Such stress can hinder psychological adjustment, manifesting as lower self-efficacy, depression, diminished motivation, and an inability to commit to valued goals. Transitioning into the labor market requires not only technical competencies but also resilience and adaptive coping strategies that allow graduates to navigate uncertainty and setbacks constructively. Globally, university-to-work transitions are

increasingly characterized by volatility. Technological advancements, economic shifts, and the lingering disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic have created labor markets that demand flexibility and resilience from new graduates. Studies indicate that up to 60% of final-year students report moderate-to-severe anxiety about employment prospects, with concerns extending beyond job availability to questions of personal competence, long-term career security, and financial independence^[1]. In many countries, particularly low- and middle-income settings, cultural expectations that graduates will immediately contribute to family income intensify the weight of this transition^[2]. For students in the Philippines, these pressures are particularly salient, as familial obligations and regional labor-market disparities create a heightened sense of urgency to secure stable employment.

Mindfulness interventions have been increasingly studied for their capacity to reduce stress and enhance well-being. Mindfulness cultivates a nonjudgmental awareness of present-moment experience, which helps individuals disengage from maladaptive rumination and catastrophic thinking about the future. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), a third-wave behavioral therapy, integrates mindfulness with acceptance of difficult internal states, values clarification, and behavioral activation. Its central aim is to increase psychological flexibility—the capacity to stay present, accept uncomfortable experiences, and commit to actions aligned with personal values. These processes are particularly relevant to individuals facing the uncertainty inherent in job transitions, where uncontrollable outcomes (e.g., labor-market fluctuations, rejection from employers) frequently trigger distress. Recent work suggests that psychological flexibility, the core component of ACT, relates strongly to students' well-being, resilience, and ability to cope effectively during stressful periods^{[3][4]}. Meta-analytic evidence further indicates that mindfulness-based and ACT-informed interventions consistently reduce stress and depressive symptoms while enhancing adaptive coping strategies^[5]. However, much of this literature has focused on general student stress, academic pressure, or clinical anxiety and depression. Far less attention has been directed to employment-specific stress during the graduation-to-work transition, despite its recognized impact on long-term career outcomes and mental health trajectories^[6].

The gap is particularly pronounced in developing countries such as the Philippines. While Western contexts have generated a body of evidence on the efficacy of mindfulness and ACT for student mental health, local applications remain scarce. Philippine higher education institutions are beginning to integrate mental health programs following the enactment of the Mental Health Act of 2018, but few initiatives directly address employability-related psychological concerns. Employment stress in this context is not only an individual issue but also intersects with structural economic realities such as high youth unemployment, underemployment, and migration aspirations^[7]. Interventions that strengthen psychological resilience while aligning with local cultural and economic conditions could therefore provide timely, context-specific support for graduating students. This study aims to fill that gap by evaluating whether an eight-week mindfulness-based ACT intervention can improve psychological adjustment—operationalized as reduced employment stress, enhanced well-being, and increased employability readiness—among graduating university students. By embedding the intervention within a quasi-experimental design and applying econometric modeling, we examine both immediate and sustained effects. We hypothesize that participants in the intervention group will demonstrate significant reductions in employment stress, increases in psychological flexibility, and improved job-search readiness compared to controls. Moreover, we test whether psychological flexibility mediates these outcomes, thereby illuminating the mechanisms through which ACT-informed mindfulness exerts its benefits.

The significance of this research is threefold. First, it contributes theoretically by extending ACT and mindfulness literature into a novel applied domain: the psychology of employability transitions in LMIC contexts. Second, it contributes methodologically by integrating psychological outcome measures with econometric techniques, offering a nuanced understanding of both short-term and longer-term effects. Third, it provides practical implications for universities, policymakers, and counseling practitioners seeking scalable, evidence-based interventions to support graduates. If effective, the program can be integrated into existing career services or counseling frameworks, potentially transforming the way higher education institutions prepare students not only for the technical but also the psychological demands of employment. In sum, as universities strive to balance academic preparation with holistic development, this study positions psychological flexibility and mindfulness as vital resources in supporting successful graduation-to-work transitions. By targeting the intersection of mental health and employability, the intervention aims to promote not just immediate stress reduction but also sustainable well-being and resilience in the face of an unpredictable labor market.

Psychological Flexibility, Mindfulness, and Student Well-Being:-

Psychological flexibility is widely regarded as a cornerstone of mental health in contemporary behavioral science. It refers to the individual's capacity to fully engage with the present moment, accept internal experiences without excessive struggle, and pursue actions aligned with personally meaningful values, even when such actions involve discomfort ^[1]. In contrast, psychological inflexibility is characterized by experiential avoidance, rigid behavioral patterns, and fusion with distressing thoughts, which collectively contribute to maladaptive coping and poorer well-being ^[2]. Among university students, psychological flexibility plays a crucial role in coping with the stressors of academic performance, future uncertainty, and social comparison. Evidence shows that students with higher flexibility demonstrate greater resilience, lower levels of anxiety and depression, and higher persistence toward goals despite setbacks ^[3].

A 2025 systematic review reported that mindfulness, adaptive coping, and social support are consistent correlates of flexibility in higher education populations ^[4]. In particular, mindfulness practice strengthens awareness of internal experiences while reducing reactivity, thereby supporting flexible responses to stress. Qualitative research adds depth to these findings. Interviews with students highlight that those who can reinterpret challenges as opportunities for growth are better able to sustain motivation and emotional stability. Conversely, students with inflexible coping styles often resort to avoidance, procrastination, or disengagement, which perpetuates academic and vocational difficulties ^[5]. These insights suggest that interventions targeting flexibility may yield broad benefits for students preparing to transition into employment.

Psychological Flexibility as a Mediator of Student Outcomes:-

Beyond being an outcome in itself, psychological flexibility frequently operates as a mediator that explains how interventions influence well-being. Recent studies show that flexibility mediates the relationships between mindfulness practice and reductions in stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms ^[6]. In academic contexts, flexibility also mediates the impact of self-compassion and coping strategies on resilience and achievement ^[7].

This mediating role has practical significance. It implies that interventions such as mindfulness training or ACT do not merely reduce stress directly but rather work by enhancing flexibility, which in turn allows students to navigate difficult experiences more adaptively. In the context of employment stress, flexibility could help graduates manage the emotional toll of job applications, repeated rejections, or delays in securing work, while still pursuing actions consistent with their long-term values.

ACT-Based Interventions in Student Populations:-

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is uniquely positioned to foster psychological flexibility through six interrelated processes: acceptance, cognitive defusion, mindfulness, values clarification, self-as-context, and committed action ^[8]. Its efficacy in educational populations has been demonstrated across multiple delivery formats, including face-to-face, group-based, and online interventions. For instance, a randomized controlled trial in Finland tested a web-based ACT program among university students and found significant improvements in psychological flexibility, well-being, and study skills, with effects sustained at follow-up ^[9]. Another 2022 study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that flexibility mediated the relationship between mindfulness and psychological well-being, suggesting that ACT processes remain relevant even under crisis conditions ^[10].

Research on ACT has also extended to issues such as test anxiety, procrastination, and general student stress. Findings consistently show that students benefit from ACT's emphasis on acceptance and value-guided action, which contrasts with traditional avoidance-based coping ^[11]. Although few studies directly address employment stress, the parallels are clear: both academic and vocational stress involve uncertain outcomes, fear of evaluation, and potential failure. Thus, ACT's principles of resilience and value alignment are highly transferable to the employment transition context.

ACT and Employability Readiness:-

While research explicitly connecting ACT and employability readiness is still emerging, several studies suggest potential pathways. Employability readiness is not limited to technical skills but also encompasses psychological preparedness, adaptability, and proactive career behaviors ^[12]. By fostering committed action aligned with values, ACT can encourage students to take consistent steps toward career goals despite uncertainty.

Mindfulness and Stress Reduction

Mindfulness-based interventions (mbis) have a well-documented capacity to reduce stress, anxiety, and burnout while enhancing emotional regulation and resilience ^[14]. By fostering nonjudgmental present-moment awareness, mindfulness helps individuals disengage from maladaptive rumination and catastrophic thinking about the future—processes that commonly underlie employment-related anxiety. Large-scale studies support these benefits. A 2021 MOOC-based mindfulness intervention found that participants reported lower perceived stress and higher work or study engagement ^[15]. Mindfulness also alters cognitive appraisals of stress: it reduces threat appraisal and increases challenge appraisal when individuals face demanding tasks ^[16]. This mechanism is especially relevant for graduating students, who must learn to frame interviews, assessments, and labor market competition as opportunities rather than threats. Meta-analyses conducted between 2020 and 2024 confirm the effectiveness of mbis in educational settings, reporting consistent improvements in resilience, concentration, and well-being ^[17]. In the workplace, mindfulness has also been linked to higher job satisfaction and reduced turnover intentions ^[18]. These findings suggest that mindfulness not only alleviates distress but also cultivates qualities that enhance long-term employability.

Mindfulness in Southeast Asia:-

Research in Southeast Asian contexts highlights the cultural adaptability of mindfulness interventions. For example, a 2022 study in Malaysia demonstrated that mindfulness training significantly reduced academic stress and improved emotional regulation among undergraduates ^[19]. In Thailand, mindfulness-based programs integrated with local cultural practices showed enhanced acceptability and effectiveness ^[20]. These regional findings suggest that mindfulness is a culturally resonant approach in collectivist societies, where acceptance and nonjudgmental awareness often align with traditional philosophies. Extending such interventions to the Philippine context is thus both feasible and culturally appropriate, although empirical research remains limited.

Gaps and Relevance to the Philippines:-

Despite global and regional advances, the Philippine literature on mindfulness and ACT in higher education remains sparse. Local research on employability tends to prioritize technical competencies, work values, and skill acquisition ^[21]. While these are essential for labor market success, they overlook the psychological dimensions of employability, particularly how students manage uncertainty, stress, and setbacks during the job-search process. The Philippine Mental Health Act of 2018 has created momentum for integrating psychological support into schools and universities. However, most institutional programs still emphasize general counseling services rather than targeted interventions for employment stress ^[22]. Given that youth unemployment in the Philippines was reported at 10.2% in 2023, higher than the overall national average ^[23], the psychological challenges of transitioning from school to work cannot be ignored. Cultural expectations add further weight.

Filipino families often expect graduates to contribute financially soon after finishing university, sometimes becoming primary breadwinners. This cultural pressure compounds employment stress, particularly for students from low-income households. Additionally, migration aspirations are widespread, with many graduates preparing for overseas employment. Such aspirations introduce unique stressors, including uncertainty about visa approvals, adaptation to foreign cultures, and separation from family ^[24]. In this context, mindfulness and ACT-informed interventions may provide valuable tools for students to navigate complex psychological demands. By enhancing acceptance, values clarity, and flexible coping, these approaches can help graduates balance cultural obligations with personal aspirations while maintaining psychological well-being.

Discussion:-

The econometric analysis revealed robust evidence that the intervention produced meaningful and statistically significant improvements across several psychological domains. Participants who completed the eight-week ACT-informed mindfulness program reported notable reductions in perceived employment stress, alongside marked increases in mindfulness, psychological flexibility, resilience, and employment readiness. These findings confirm the program's overall efficacy in strengthening the psychological resources necessary to navigate the uncertainties of the job market. Among all predictor variables, mindfulness and psychological flexibility emerged as the strongest negative correlates of employment stress. This suggests that graduates who are more capable of staying present, accepting uncomfortable emotions, and acting in accordance with personal values are less likely to experience debilitating anxiety regarding their employment prospects. In particular, the cultivation of acceptance-based coping and value-guided actions—core principles of ACT—appeared to buffer the emotional impact of job-related uncertainties. Interestingly, academic performance and socioeconomic status were not significant predictors of stress once psychological variables were controlled for. This finding underscores that cognitive and emotional adaptability may

be more critical to managing employment-related anxiety than external factors such as grades or financial background.

In a practical sense, it highlights the importance of equipping students with internal psychological tools rather than relying solely on academic or economic advantages to determine their success during the transition to employment. Resilience and employability readiness also demonstrated strong negative associations with stress, indicating that students who felt more capable of recovering from setbacks or perceived themselves as job-ready experienced lower distress levels. The cointegration analysis suggested that the positive effects of mindfulness, flexibility, and resilience were not merely short-term but sustained over time, pointing to the long-term efficacy of the intervention. Furthermore, active participation in the ACT-based sessions consistently predicted greater post-test gains, implying that engagement and consistent practice are key to deriving maximum benefit from mindfulness and ACT training. Overall, the findings lend empirical support to the integration of mindfulness and ACT frameworks into higher education settings. Beyond improving immediate emotional well-being, such interventions foster lasting psychological flexibility, confidence, and employability readiness—qualities essential for thriving in today's rapidly changing labor market.

Conclusion:-

The study provides compelling evidence that an ACT-informed mindfulness program can serve as an effective psychological intervention for graduating students facing employment stress. By enhancing mindfulness, psychological flexibility, and resilience, the program helps students manage uncertainty, cope adaptively with rejection, and maintain purposeful action toward career goals. The findings suggest that success in the transition from university to employment is shaped as much by mental readiness as by technical competence. Integrating mindfulness- and ACT-based strategies into university counseling and career development programs could thus foster a more holistic approach to graduate preparation. Such initiatives can promote not only employability but also long-term psychological well-being and life satisfaction. As institutions of higher learning seek to support students in increasingly competitive and unpredictable job markets, evidence-based interventions like this one offer a sustainable and scalable framework for cultivating emotionally resilient and career-ready graduates.

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