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X's and Y's in the Midst of the Pandemic: Generational Identity, Mental Well-being and Life Satisfaction Among Filipino Adult Learners

Ronnell D. Dela-Rosa 

Bataan Peninsula State University,
PHILIPPINES

Jerome V. Cleofas* 

De La Salle University, PHILIPPINES

Ryan Michael F. Oducado 

West Visayas State University,
PHILIPPINES

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Abstract: The 2019 novel Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has increased the mental health challenges and decreased the quality of life among students and the general adult population. However, adult learners and non-traditional students who are currently at their quarter and midlife during the pandemic, remain underrepresented in well-being research. Moreover, the unique sociocultural and historical contexts specific to generational cohorts may have an impact on the way they experience and cope with the challenges brought about by the pandemic. This study sought to determine the relationships among generational identity, mental well-being and life satisfaction among Millennial and Generation X Filipino adult learners. A total of 543 adult learners participated in this online cross-sectional study. Findings suggest that young millennials reported lower levels of mental well-being and life satisfaction compared to old millennials and Gen Xers. Moreover, mental well-being was found to be a predictor of life satisfaction among Filipino adult learners, regardless of their generational identity. Schools must implement initiatives to monitor and address mental health issues among adult learners, contextualized to quarter and midlife contexts.

Keywords: Adult learners, COVID-19, generations, gen X, mental health, millennials, schools.

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Introduction

In the context of the 2019 novel Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) global health crisis, the popular adage “*the pandemic is the great equalizer*” could not be any further from the truth. Multiple cross-country evidence has demonstrated the unequal distribution of this virulent disease and its consequences in societies, disproportionately affecting people from social margins: the very young and the very old, women and girls, the poor, people with illness and disabilities, cultural and geographic minorities (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020). As the world enters the second half of the second year of the pandemic with more than 200 million confirmed cases, 4 million deaths and multiple mutations of the virus (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021), research that investigates various sociocultural determinants of COVID-19 outcomes continues to be essential to inform efforts to mitigate the spread of the disease, and minimize its negative impacts on lives of humans, especially the marginalized. Specifically in the Philippines, a developing country characterized by a medical populist pandemic response (Lasco, 2020), and sustained number of cases and deaths of at least 1.6 million and 29 thousand respectively as of this writing (Department of Health, 2021), social inequalities have only become more pronounced.

Because of the changes in the educational landscape brought about by the pandemic (Toquero, 2020), students have become a common population of interest of COVID-19 research. There is teeming evidence that suggests high incidence of mental health issues among students in tertiary education institutions in the Philippines (e.g., Bautista & Manuel, 2020; Cleofas & Rocha, 2021; Oducado et al., 2021) and elsewhere (Deng et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021). Moreover, research has indicated the positive relationship of mental well-being to life satisfaction among students during the pandemic (Al-Abyadh & Azim, 2020; Rogowska et al., 2020). However, the majority of the psychological studies during the pandemic usually involve tertiary education students as a general aggregate sample (e.g., Baten & Desoete, 2021), and fail to specifically select adult learners in their quarter and midlife. There has been only one study conducted that examined the mental conditions of non-traditional students. This United States-based research observed better

* **Corresponding author:**

Jerome V. Cleofas, Department of Sociology and Behavioral Sciences, De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines. ✉ jerome.cleofas@dlsu.edu.ph

psychological resilience among non-traditional students compared to traditional learners (Babb et al., 2021). We argue that current student-centered COVID-19 research may not fully represent adult learners, especially in the developing world. Moreover, currently available research that establishes the link of mental health outcomes on life satisfaction among adults in quarter and midlife (25 to 60 years old) conducted during the pandemic was not specific to students attending tertiary education (Karataş & Tagay, 2021).

In COVID-19 studies in the general adult population and young students, age has been a common demographic characteristic used by studies to determine differences in mental health and life outcomes (Prati & Mancini, 2021). However, we argue that viewing these phenomena from a purely age-based perspective would not provide a complete picture of the external contexts that influence the psychosocial conditions of students at a specific point in their lifetime. We believe that apart from age, generational identity must also be considered as a factor in analyzing mental health. Each generational cohort is exposed to unique life experiences and historical events (Katz, 2017). Students' generational identity can influence their decisions and coping patterns as they navigate this pandemic, and ultimately shape their mental health and views about their lives during the COVID-19 era. In the context of social inequality, evidence has demonstrated how generational membership as a social category can be a determinant of poor COVID-19 outcomes (El-Gabalawy & Sommer, 2021; Reading Turchioe et al., 2020). Thus, mental well-being explorations and initiatives should not only be age-sensitive, but also generation-sensitive. This study therefore involves Filipino adult learners, and focuses on generational identity, mental well-being and life satisfaction as its phenomena of interest. Since our target population is tertiary education students in their quarter and midlife, the generations covered are Generation X, and Generation Y (commonly referred to as millennials).

Generation X in the Midst of the Pandemic

Frequently cited literature identifies members of Generation X, or Gen Xers, as individuals born between 1965 to 1980. Gen Xers' life trajectories were characterized with dichotomies they experienced as they journeyed through the tail end of the 20th century. Their generation bridged cultures before and during the digital boom, economic abundance and recessions, and changing faces of politics and radicalism (Katz, 2017). In the Philippines, Gen Xers came-of-age during the Martial Law Era and witnessed the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution (Hechanova, 2017). Being the generation sandwiched between baby boomers and millennials, Gen Xers characterized themselves as being work- and family-oriented, traditional yet decisive, having caring and influential leadership styles (Salvosa & Hechanova, 2020)—a set of traits that appear to mix the characteristics of the generation that came before and after them.

During the era of COVID-19, Gen Xers are placed in an ironic position. Their generational cohort entered the pandemic feeling "financially fragile" because of the tough economic conditions of 2019, while also bearing the burden of caring for their aging parents and looking after their own families (Klipfel, 2020). However, a United States based report showed that while the financial status of other generations declined during the pandemic, Gen Xers have exhibited an increase in wealth by the end of 2020 (Schneider, 2021).

In the context of their mental health and life satisfaction during the pandemic, studies have noted that Gen Xers exhibit higher scores compared to Baby Boomers in terms of anger, anxiety, depression and fatigue (Reading Turchioe et al., 2020) and engagement in maladaptive health habits such as tobacco and alcohol consumption (El-Gabalawy & Sommer, 2021). Moreover, evidence suggests that around 15 to 27 percent of Gen Xers have reported worse quality of life in the time of COVID-19 (Weitzer et al., 2021).

Generation Y in the Midst of the Pandemic

While the common starting point for millennial births is in 1981, the endpoint of births for this generation varies in the literature, ranging from 1994 (Schlee et al., 2020), 1995 (Lamasan & Oducado, 2018), to 1996 (Dimock, 2019). For this study, the birth-year bracket that will be used for millennials will be 1981 to 1995 (25 to 39 years old). The millennial generation came of age during the time of internet revolution, globalization, political polarization, and conflicts in the Middle East. Smartphone technology, constant connectivity and social media were things that millennials adopted into their lives during their later adolescent years, while Gen Zers did not know of a world without the internet (Dimock, 2019; Oducado, 2019).

Studies conducted among Filipino millennials have characterized them as tech-savvy, laid-back, energetic and adventurous. As leaders, millennials are described as responsible listeners (Salvosa & Hechanova, 2020). Filipino millennials are known to be expressive about themselves, popular media, leisure, consumption, work-life balance, relationships with friends and family, and socio-political engagements (Lamasan & Oducado, 2018; Velasco, 2020). However, millennials have been criticized for being less responsible, hardworking, collaborative, and patriotic by older generations (Pew Research Center, 2020).

In the context of their mental health and life satisfaction during the time of COVID, evidence suggests that millennials reported higher scores compared to Gen Xers and Baby Boomers in terms of anxiety, depression and fatigue (Reading Turchioe et al., 2020) and engagement in maladaptive alcohol, junk food, media and internet consumption (El-

Gabalawy & Sommer, 2021). Moreover, evidence suggests that most millennials admit that the pandemic has impacted their lives on a severe scale (Al Dhaheri et al., 2021).

However, even within the millennial generational cohort, subpopulations are present. This cohort can be further divided into young millennials (born between 1989 to 1995) and old millennials (born between 1981 to 1988). Pew Research Center (2020) revealed that old millennials resist being categorized as millennials, are critical about their younger counterparts within the cohort, and identify more with traits of Gen Xers. Also, since the diffusion of new digital and internet technologies is often delayed in developing countries such as the Philippines (Rouvinen, 2006), we suspect that the technosocial contexts that Western scholars claim to have shaped the generation, may have been more applicable among Filipino young millennials than earlier counterparts within their generation. Hence, this study dissects the concept "millennial" into two distinct generational identities: young millennials and old millennials.

Research Gap and Present Study Objective

As explained earlier, there is limited research that examines the mental health and life conditions of adult learners in their quarter and midlives at the time of COVID-19. Moreover, we assert the need to apply a generational perspective in this endeavor, cognizant of the role of generational identity as a gradient of pandemic-induced inequality, and a sociocultural determinant that shapes psychological well-being of Generation Xers, Old Millennials and Young Millennials as they navigate the pandemic, while also pursuing advanced academic degrees. Therefore, this study aims to determine the relationships among generational identity, mental well-being and life satisfaction among Filipino adult learners.

Methodology

Study Design and Sample

This study was a part of a larger pandemic-related research project for students in a tertiary educational institution in central Philippines. A total of 543 adult learners whose age are within the millennial (Generation Y) and Generation X bracket (age range=25 to 55) were included for analysis. This research is cross-sectional in nature in terms of design. Convenient sampling was used to recruit participants in the study.

Instrumentation

We collected survey data via Google forms. To determine demographic profile, age, sex assigned at birth (male/female), marital status (single/married), educational level (undergraduate/graduate), self-reported income bracket (low income/middle to high income) and working status (employed/not employed). We determined the adult learners' generational identity based on the age they indicated (young millennials=25 to 31 years old; old millennials=32 to 39 years old; Generation X=40 to 55 years old).

To measure mental well-being, we used the seven-item Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (Tennant et al., 2007). Possible responses for each item range from 1 (none of the time) to 5 (all of the time). Total scores range from 7 to 35. It has an acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach alpha=0.87) in the Filipino population (Cleofas & Oducado, 2021). Sample statement is "Over the last two weeks, I've been thinking clearly."

The main outcome variable in the study is life satisfaction, measured using the five-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985). Possible answers for each item range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Final life satisfaction score is derived from averaging the scores. It also has a good Cronbach alpha score ($\alpha=0.87$). Sample item is "In most ways my life is close to my ideal."

Data Gathering Procedure

Prior to data collection, we secured administrative clearance. Through the assistance of educational managers, the online survey link was sent to the email address of the students of the institution. In accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and Data Privacy Act of the Philippines, we secured the informed consent of the adult learners. The first webpage presented the informed consent form which contained the objectives and procedures of the study, including information of the voluntary nature of their participation, their rights as respondents, and the confidentiality and security in handling their data. It is only when they respond "agree" in the online informed consent form would they be sent to the formal questionnaire.

Analysis of Data

We used frequency and percentage to describe categorical variables, and mean and standard deviation for continuous variables. We used one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and Tukey's post-hoc analysis to test the association between generational identity, and mental well-being and life satisfaction. Mental well-being and life satisfaction were then tested for correlation using Pearson r moment correlation. Finally, we used multiple linear regression to test predictive relationships of generational identity and mental well-being with life satisfaction. The distribution of the key

variables of interest yielded normal scores in collinearity and normality (Kolmogorov-Smirnov=0.0569, $p=0.060$). We used $p<0.05$ level to determine the significance of the relationships tested. JASP 0.14.1 was used for statistical analysis.

Results

Respondent Characteristics

Table 1 describes the respondent characteristics in the study. Out of the total number of respondents ($N=543$), the majority is comprised of young millennials ($n=319$, 58.7%), followed by old millennials ($n=135$, 24.9%) and Gen Xers ($n=89$, 16.4%). Majority of the young millennials are 25 years old (23.5%, mean= 27.4 ± 2.03), female (68%), single (78.1%), in the undergraduate level (59.9%) and low-income bracket (57.4%), and not employed (65.5%). On the other hand, most old millennials are 32 years old (23.7%, mean= 34.5 ± 2.12), female (79.3%), married (65.9%), in the graduate level (77.0%) and middle to high income bracket (65.9%), and unemployed (70.4). Finally, majority of Gen Xer respondents are 42 years old (12.4%, mean= 45.9 ± 4.56), female (79.8%), married (83.1%), in the graduate level (87.6) and middle to high income bracket (77.5%), and not employed (69.7%).

Young millennials reported a moderate level of mental well-being (mean= 26.7 ± 5.45), which was one category lower than their older counterparts (means: old millennials= 28.8 ± 4.68 , Gen Xers= 28.7 ± 4.42). Meanwhile, high levels of life satisfaction were observed across three generational cohorts (mean=5.10 to 5.46; SD=0.852 to 1.18).

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Generational Cohorts

Variables	Generational Cohorts*						Total	
	Young Millennials		Old Millennials		Generation X		n	%
	n	%	n	%	n	%		
(mean)	(SD)	(mean)	(SD)	(mean)	(SD)	(mean)	(SD)	
Total	319	58.7	135	24.9	89	16.4	543	100.0
Age**	27.4	2.03	34.5	2.12	45.9	4.56	32.2	7.27
Sex assigned at birth								
Female	217	68.0	107	79.3	71	79.8	395	72.7
Male	102	32.0	28	20.7	18	20.2	148	27.3
Marital Status								
Single	249	78.1	46	34.1	15	16.9	310	57.1
Married	70	21.9	89	65.9	74	83.1	233	42.9
Educational Level								
Undergraduate	191	59.9	31	23.0	11	12.4	233	42.9
Graduate	128	40.1	104	77.0	78	87.6	310	57.1
Self-Reported Income								
Low income	183	57.4	46	34.1	20	22.5	249	45.9
Middle to High Income	136	42.6	89	65.9	69	77.5	294	54.1
Working Status								
Employed	110	34.5	40	29.6	27	30.3	177	32.6
Not Employed	209	65.5	95	70.4	62	69.7	366	67.4
Mental Well-being**	26.7	5.45	28.8	4.68	28.7	4.42	27.6	5.19
Life Satisfaction**	5.10	1.18	5.47	1.02	5.46	0.852	5.25	1.11

Notes: $N=543$, *the denominator for percentages is the total number of respondents per cohort, **mean and SD used for continuous variables

Generational Differences in Mental Well-being and Life Satisfaction

Table 2 presents the one-way ANOVA test results that determined the association of generational identity with mental and life satisfaction during the pandemic. Findings suggest that there were significant differences in the scores for mental well-being ($F=10.42$, $p<0.001$) and life satisfaction ($F=8.42$, $p<0.001$) when adult learners were grouped according to generational cohorts. Tukey post-hoc test results reveal that young millennials have significantly lower levels of mental well-being and life satisfaction compared to old millennials and Gen Xers ($p<0.01$).

Table 2. Differences in Mental Well-Being and Life Satisfaction when Grouped according to Generational Cohort

One-Way ANOVA Results	Tukey Post-Hoc Test Results		
	Categories	Mean difference	p-value
Generational cohort*mental well-being (F=10.42, p<0.001)	Young millennials vs old millennials	-2.02*	<0.001
	Young millennials vs generation X	-1.91*	0.002
	Old millennials vs generation X	0.104	0.985
Generational cohort*life satisfaction (F=8.42, p<0.001)	Young millennials vs old millennials	-0.378*	0.002
	Young millennials vs generation X	-0.363*	0.004
	Old millennials vs generation X	0.016	0.992

*significant at p=0.05 level

Correlation Between Mental Well-being and Life Satisfaction

Pearson r results suggest that mental well-being and life satisfaction have a significant moderate positive relationship ($r=0.636$, $p<0.001$).

Linear Regression Analysis Results

Since bivariate analyses suggest that generational identity and mental well-being are correlates of life satisfaction, we pursued a linear regression analysis that included the two variables as predictors, as seen on Table 3. The overall model explained 40.7% variance of life satisfaction ($F=123$, $p<0.001$). Mental well-being significantly positively predicted life satisfaction ($B=0.134$, $SE=0.01$, $p<0.001$), while generational identity was a non-significant predictor.

Table 3. Multiple Linear Regression Analysis of Generational Identity and Mental Well-Being as Predictors of Life Satisfaction

Predictors	B	SE	t	p value	Overall Model		
					r ²	F	p value
Intercept	1.523	0.20	7.68	<.001	0.407	123	<0.001
Mental Well-being	0.134	0.01	18.57	<.001			
Generational Identity (ref= young millennial)							
Old millennial	0.109	0.09	1.22	0.221			
Generation X	0.107	0.10	1.04	0.301			

Discussion

This present study sought to determine the relationships among generational identity, mental well-being and life satisfaction among Filipino adult learners. To our knowledge, this is one of the first mental-health-related studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic that have specifically focused on the older, non-traditional student subpopulation in the ASEAN region, which adopted a generational perspective. This paper extends the knowledge on psychological wellbeing and generational diversity in education during quarter and midlife.

On Differences Across Generations

Our current research suggests that young millennials exhibit significantly lower mental well-being levels compared to older millennials and Gen Xers. Evidence from multi-country studies involving the general population have also noted higher levels of stress, depression and anxiety among those aged less than 30 years old during the pandemic (Varma et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). In the Philippines, higher distress was suggested among younger adults, while higher individual, community and national resilience, protective factors against mental problems, were found to be higher among middle and older adults (Aruta et al., 2021).

Our findings also found the same pattern in terms of life satisfaction: young millennials demonstrated lower scores compared to older cohorts. This replicates the results of Weitzer et al. (2021) which noted lowest quality of life among Austrian adults aged below thirty years old (similar age bracket for young millennials).

These results also extend the research of Babb et al. (2021) that indicated higher psychological resilience scores and better management of COVID-19 induced stress among non-traditional students compared to traditional, younger counterparts. Babb et al. (2021) further argue that enhanced coping comes with age and experience that equip them with psychological resources to overcome adverse life events.

Through the lens of age and life-course perspectives, low mental well-being and life satisfaction scores among young millennials can be attributed to the pandemic-induced interruptions in the performance of life roles and achievement of milestones during quarter life, such as finishing higher education, entering productive workforce, maintaining

satisfying relationships with family, peers and intimate partners, and engagement in recreational activities (Cleofas, 2021; El-Gabalawy & Sommer, 2021).

Beyond the struggles in attaining social expectations of being in their 20s, the unique generational characteristics of being a millennial, may also contribute to the poor psychological well-being among young millennial adult learners in our study. For instance, evidence suggests that millennials have seen themselves as less hardworking and self-reliant compared to older generations (Pew Research Center, 2020). With millennials being exposed to more economic losses during the pandemic compared to Gen Xers (Klipfel, 2020; Schneider, 2021), these generational traits could rationalize their sense of distress. Descriptive statistics of the present study did show that most young millennial adult learners are unemployed and in the lower income bracket.

Moreover, Filipino millennial culture has been characterized by travel, leisure, fitness, sports and wellness, and in-person social interactions with family members and peers (Velasco, 2020)—activities which have been heavily restricted due to the long-standing quarantine. Also, Velasco (2020) noted that Filipino millennials also tend to be politically engaged. Experiencing first-hand the social consequences of the public health crisis and the volatile socio-political situation of the country (Lasco, 2020) can cause frustration, and worsened mental and life outcomes among young millennials (Cleofas, 2021).

While the aforementioned discussions appeal to evidence that look into millennials as an aggregate cohort, we reassert our results that among the Filipino millennial adult learners in our present study, significant differences in mental well-being and life satisfaction were noted between the younger and older sub-cohorts of the same generation, with the young millennials reporting poorer outcomes. We reiterate that old millennials, who are now in their 30s in this time of COVID-19, may tend to identify themselves more as Gen Xers than millennials (Pew Research Center, 2020). This may explain why old millennials in this study are in the same mental space with Gen Xers.

Also, many advancements and initiatives in mental health awareness and destigmatization in the Philippines, including the passage of the Philippine Mental Health Act, transpired during the decade of 2010, when young millennials were emerging into adulthood (De Los Santos & Jakubec, 2018). The increasing discussions regarding mental health issues in media and other public spaces during their coming-of-age years (McTernan et al., 2020) may have enhanced their cohort's ability to recognize symptoms of psychopathology (Ines, 2019). This increased mental health literacy could have contributed to the lower, more critical self-ratings of mental well-being and life satisfaction among young millennials in this present study.

Mental Well-being as a Predictor of Life Satisfaction in Quarter- and Midlife

Our present study suggests that higher mental well-being scores predict better life satisfaction among Filipino adult learners in their quarter and midlives, which extends previous research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic in the general population in the Philippines (Aruta et al., 2021) and elsewhere (Karataş & Tagay, 2021; Liu et al., 2020; Shamblaw et al., 2021). The negative impact of poor mental health on life satisfaction has also been indicated among university students (Al-Abyadh & Azim, 2020; Egcas et al., 2021; Rogowska et al., 2020).

This significant positive predictive relationship between mental well-being and life satisfaction has been adjusted for the effects of generational identity. The regression model also showed the non-significant effect of generational identity on life satisfaction. This suggests that despite the generational differences noted on the two variables, the positive effect of mental well-being on life satisfaction is sustained. Similarly, recent study in the Philippines has demonstrated the non-significant effect of age on quality of life, while maintaining the latter's link to COVID-19-related mental status (Rabacal et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Our findings highlight the importance of generational identity is a social gradient that may influence mental health and life outcomes, especially during a public health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Young millennials may be of greater likelihood to exhibit poorer well-being and quality of life during the pandemic. However, regardless of these generational differences, mental well-being maintains its beneficial influence on life satisfaction among Filipino adult learners in their quarter and midlives.

Recommendations

Our present research provides evidence to support the promotion of mental health among adult students who are in their quarter and midlife, a subpopulation usually underrepresented in current school mental health promotion programs in the Philippines that cater more to youth-related concerns. Preventive mental health initiatives for adult learners should be sensitive to the life-course context of their age-bracket such as career and family building that have been impacted by COVID-19, and monitor, promote and improve family-work-school balance in their lives. Moreover, these activities must also be informed by the generational nuances of adult learners and consider the unique traits and sociohistorical contexts specific to their generational identity. Likewise, universities must provide agency to perform self-care for students to become more engaged in learning (Cleofas, 2021; Linkous, 2021) Moreover, schools help in

promoting COVID-19 health protective behaviors, such as hygiene and vaccination, as these can help improve agency and satisfaction with life (Cleofas & Oducado, 2022).

Findings also provide implications to teaching and learning among adult learners, such that teachers and educational leaders must be aware of the social and psychological contexts of the generational cohorts where students belong to. Their generation-specific experiences and aspirations can be used as a springboard for interactive and affective learning. However, we caution against a simplistic categorization of learners based on generational identity alone. In tertiary institutions where generational diversity is present, educators must make use of strategies on tackling how differences in terms of generational membership, and other social gradients, such as class, gender, ability, religion, and ethnicity, can be used as a resource to make meaningful learning experiences for the improvement of andragogy in higher education.

As we enter a post-pandemic world, future researchers can conduct a similar study on how adult learners transition back to campus-based learning, and on the identification of their psychological well-being and particular learning needs based on their generational backgrounds during this transitional experience. Moreover, qualitative methods can also be used, as this strategy may provide clues on how life histories influence their mental state and learning styles as adult learners and to ascertain whether generational experiences truly influence these quarter- and midlife outcomes.

Limitations

Our cross-sectional study was only able to collect data in one tertiary educational institution, thus the generalizability of our results may be restricted. It must also be noted that our measures do not indicate psychopathology like depression or anxiety, and are merely subjective indicators of mental health. Future researchers replicating this study can consider involving multiple universities, and using diagnostic measures of mental conditions for more representativeness and precision.

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Authorship Contribution Statement

Dela Rosa: Conceptualization, admin and technical support, manuscript writing. Cleofas: Conceptualization, design, data analysis, interpretation, manuscript writing. Oducado: Conceptualization, interpretation, manuscript writing.

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