

“It Is Not Just a Degree”: A Narrative Inquiry into Identity, Resilience, and Personal Growth in Graduate Education

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ABSTRACT

Graduate education is commonly represented through visible academic milestones such as completing coursework, submitting a thesis, and earning a degree. Such representations, however, can obscure the emotional, relational, and identity-related work that accompanies graduate study. This narrative inquiry explores how time management and stress management intersect with identity formation, emotional resilience, and personal growth in the experience of one master's graduate in Indonesia. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and an open-ended questionnaire and were analyzed thematically while preserving the participant's narrative trajectory. Four interrelated themes emerged: academic and emotional challenges; time and stress management; the development of emotional resilience; and personal growth through changing motivation and purpose. The participant experienced isolation, self-doubt, and intense pressure, particularly during thesis completion. She responded through structured planning, journaling, prayer, self-care, and support from trusted others. Over time, these practices did more than help her complete academic tasks: they supported a shift from externally driven achievement toward greater autonomy, self-understanding, and purpose. The findings suggest that graduate education is not only an intellectual undertaking but also a process of becoming in which coping practices, relationships, and reflection can shape how students understand themselves. The study therefore highlights the value of graduate support systems that address academic demands and emotional well-being in an integrated way.

Keywords: Graduate Education; Time Management; Stress Management; Emotional Resilience; Personal Growth

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INTRODUCTION

Pursuing a master's degree is often framed as a goal-oriented pathway toward advanced knowledge, professional development, and improved career prospects (Buchanan et al., 2007; Jung & Li, 2021). This framing is useful, but it can reduce graduate education to a sequence of measurable outcomes: completing courses, meeting assessment requirements, writing a thesis, and obtaining a credential. The lived experience is typically more complex. Graduate students must respond to demanding academic tasks while also negotiating personal expectations, professional responsibilities, uncertainty, and changes in how they understand themselves (Agboma & Govender, 2026).

These pressures can become especially visible during periods of intensive research, supervisor feedback, revision, and degree completion. Studies of postgraduate students have

documented anxiety, systemic stress, isolation, and impostor-related experiences that may affect persistence and well-being (Bekkouche et al., 2022; Chi et al., 2023; Nori & Vanttaja, 2023). Supervisory processes can also become emotionally consequential because feedback is not only an academic event; it may be interpreted as an evaluation of competence and belonging (Chugh et al., 2022). For some students, the challenge is therefore not simply to complete more work, but to maintain a workable sense of self while responding to repeated academic demands (Travis et al., 2020).

Within this context, time management and stress management are often treated as practical study skills, yet their influence can extend beyond productivity. Effective time management has been associated with lower stress and better academic functioning, while poor time regulation can intensify overload and procrastination (Claessens et al., 2007; Macan et al., 1990). Stress management likewise involves more than reducing discomfort; it concerns how students interpret pressure, mobilize coping resources, seek support, and remain engaged with valued goals. These processes can contribute to resilience and to the gradual formation of an academic and personal identity (Masten, 2001; Skinner, 2023).

Existing research has generated substantial knowledge about graduate stress, mental health, supervision, persistence, and academic outcomes (Bekkouche et al., 2022; Chi et al., 2023; Chugh et al., 2022; Valencia Quecano et al., 2024). However, these dimensions are often examined separately. Less attention is given to how everyday practices such as planning, emotional reflection, spiritual coping, and help-seeking are woven into a student's developing sense of identity and purpose over time (Frey & Smith, 2019). A narrative perspective is useful for addressing this gap because it treats experiences not as isolated variables but as connected events that acquire meaning within a person's life story (Allen et al., 2021).

This study therefore positions time and stress management as part of a broader developmental process. Planning may help a student regain a sense of control over competing demands, whereas reflective and relational coping may help the student interpret setbacks without allowing them to define personal worth (Souers & Hall, 2018). In this sense, resilience is not the absence of distress but the capacity to continue adapting through ordinary psychological and social resources (Masten, 2001). Personal growth may emerge when difficult experiences are re-evaluated in relation to values, autonomy, and future purpose (Gamage et al., 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2024).

Against this background, the present study examines one graduate student's account in depth to understand how academic pressure, coping practices, identity, resilience, and personal growth became connected across her master's journey. The guiding research question is: How does a graduate student perceive the role of time management and stress management in shaping identity, emotional resilience, and personal growth throughout graduate study?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic and Emotional Challenges

Graduate study can place sustained demands on students' cognitive, emotional, and relational resources. Anxiety, self-doubt, isolation, and impostor-related feelings may become particularly salient during research and thesis completion, when students are expected to work independently while repeatedly exposing their work to evaluation (Bekkouche et al., 2022; Chi et al., 2023; Nori & Vanttaja, 2023). These experiences should not be treated merely as side effects of academic work because they influence motivation, participation, help-seeking, and students' sense of belonging. Research on well-being in education similarly suggests that well-being involves not only functioning or achievement but also belonging and becoming (Soutter et al., 2014).

Resilience provides one conceptual lens for understanding how students continue to function and develop under such pressure (Skinner et al., 2020). Masten (2001) describes resilience as "ordinary magic," emphasizing that adaptive functioning often arises from ordinary systems of self-regulation, supportive relationships, and meaning-making rather than from exceptional personal traits. Academic coping research also shows that stress, coping, motivation, and performance are interconnected. In the model proposed by Struthers et al.

(2000), problem-focused coping and motivation help explain how students respond to academic stress. Figure 1 illustrates this relationship and supports the view that academic demands and psychological responses are analytically connected rather than separate.

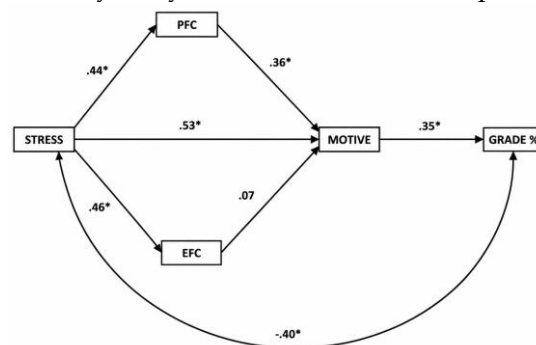


Figure 1. Path model linking academic stress, coping style, motivation, and course grade.
(Source: Struthers, Perry, & Menec, 2000)

Time Management and Stress Management

Time management and stress management are closely related in academic life. Time management includes behaviors such as prioritizing, scheduling, setting goals, and allocating effort across competing tasks (Claessens et al., 2007). Among university students, stronger time-management practices have been associated with lower stress and better academic functioning (Macan et al., 1990). Conversely, poorly regulated time can amplify procrastination and create cycles in which delayed work increases pressure, pressure reduces concentration, and reduced concentration produces further delay.

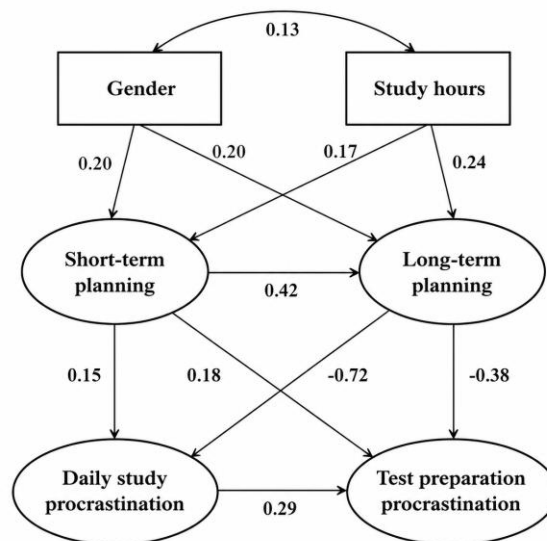


Figure 2. Structural model of time-management planning and academic procrastination.
(Source: Valente et al., 2024)

Recent work on planning and procrastination reinforces this connection. Valente et al. (2024) show that short- and long-term planning are related to students' procrastination patterns, while Ramlan et al. (2024) emphasize the links among motivation, emotion regulation, and time-management balance. In graduate education, structured planning can therefore be understood as more than a productivity technique: it may function as a problem-focused coping strategy that reduces uncertainty and restores a sense of manageable progress. At the same time, planning alone cannot address all sources of stress. Sustainable coping also requires rest, emotional regulation, and changes in how demands are interpreted (King & Kabat-Farr, 2022).

Emotional Resilience

Emotional resilience refers to the capacity to adapt, recover, and remain meaningfully engaged when facing adversity or sustained pressure. In academic settings, resilience does not

mean that students are unaffected by stress. Rather, it concerns how they regulate emotion, use available resources, reinterpret setbacks, and continue acting in ways that support longer-term goals. This distinction is important because a student may experience anxiety, disappointment, or exhaustion while still demonstrating resilient adaptation.

Resilience is also relational and contextual. Masten's (2001) account emphasizes ordinary adaptive systems, while broader resilience frameworks show that outcomes are shaped by the interaction between internal resources and environmental supports. Zhang and Dong's (2023) framework, presented in Figure 3, illustrates resilience as a dynamic process involving stressors, person-environment interaction, internal resources, and adaptive outcomes. Although developed in a different population, the framework is useful here as a general conceptual illustration: graduate students' resilience may depend on both self-regulation and the availability of supportive relationships and environments. This interaction is also consistent with work that links motivational resilience and academic identity to students' wider social ecologies (Skinner, 2023).

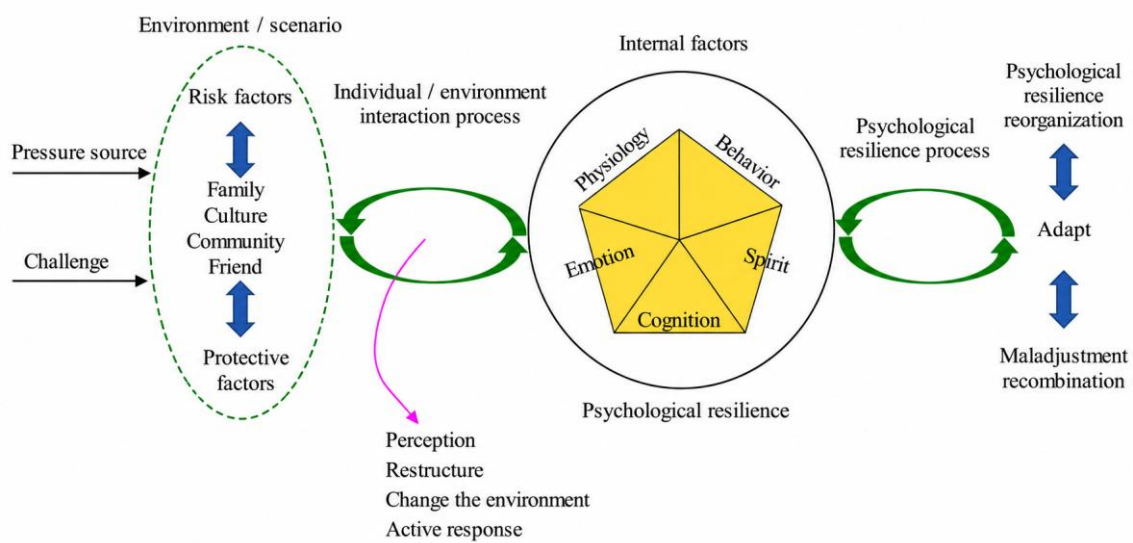


Figure 3. Psychological resilience framework illustrating interactions among environmental conditions, internal resources, and adaptation (Source: Zhang & Dong, 2023).

Personal Growth Process

Personal growth can be understood as an ongoing process through which individuals become more self-aware, autonomous, purposeful, and congruent with their values. Rogers's humanistic perspective conceptualizes growth as movement toward greater openness to experience and a more internally guided valuing process (Rogers, 1959, 1961, 1964). This perspective is particularly relevant to graduate education because academic experiences can challenge prior assumptions about competence, success, dependence, and future direction.

Transformative learning offers a complementary explanation. Taylor (1998, 2007) describes transformation as a process in which unsettling experiences can prompt critical reflection and revisions of previously taken-for-granted assumptions. In graduate study, repeated revision, uncertainty, failure to meet self-imposed timelines, and changing relationships with supervisors or peers may become occasions for this kind of reflection. Personal growth is therefore not necessarily linear; it can involve disruption, self-questioning, and gradual reconstruction of meaning.

The Personal Growth Process (PGP) model proposed by Maurer et al. (2023) integrates these ideas by describing growth as a dynamic process grounded in psychological safety and willingness to engage with change. The model includes shifts toward self-awareness, openness, existential courage, autonomy, responsibility, self-compassion, and compassion for others, with authenticity, harmony, and life satisfaction as broader outcomes. Self-determination theory further suggests that movement toward more autonomous and internally endorsed motivation

can support sustained engagement and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2024). Together, these perspectives provide a framework for examining how graduate challenges may become connected to changing motivation, identity, and purpose.

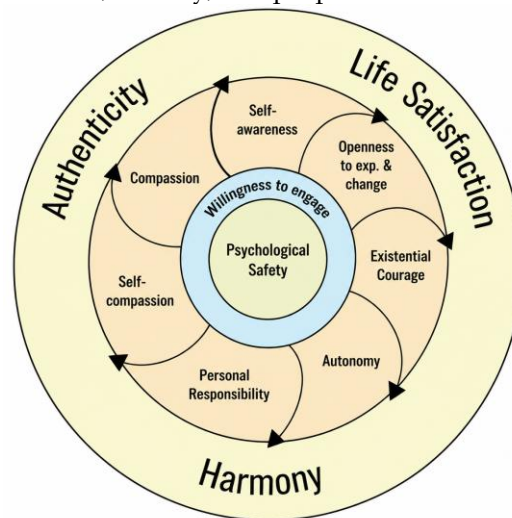


Figure 4. Personal Growth Process (PGP) model (Source: Maurer et al., 2023)

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed narrative inquiry to explore how time management and stress management became connected to identity, emotional resilience, and personal growth within one graduate student's lived experience. Narrative inquiry is concerned with how people organize experience into stories and how meaning develops through the relationship among events, contexts, and time (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Clandinin & Caine, 2013). This approach was appropriate because the study aimed not to measure the frequency of particular coping strategies, but to understand how the participant interpreted their significance across her graduate journey.

Participants

The participant was a woman who had completed a master's degree at a public university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. She completed the program with high academic distinction and had been actively involved in academic, organizational, and scholarly activities during her studies. Her experience was selected for in-depth exploration because it combined sustained academic demands, substantial extracurricular commitments, and a prolonged period of thesis completion. To reduce unnecessary identifiability, this revised manuscript reports only participant characteristics that are directly relevant to the research focus.

Data Collection

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and an open-ended questionnaire. The semi-structured interviews enabled the participant to narrate significant events, pressures, coping practices, and changes in self-understanding while allowing the researcher to follow issues that emerged during the conversation. The open-ended questionnaire provided an additional opportunity for reflection on time management, stress management, academic struggle, resilience, and personal growth. Taken together, the two forms of data provided complementary narrative material about both concrete practices and the meanings the participant assigned to them. Participant quotations in this revised manuscript have received only minor grammatical and punctuation editing for readability; their intended meaning has been preserved.

Data Analysis

The interview material was transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis as an organizing procedure within the narrative inquiry, informed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Analysis began with repeated reading of the interview transcript and questionnaire responses

to develop familiarity with the participant's account. Initial codes were then generated around significant experiences, emotions, coping practices, turning points, and reflections. Related codes were grouped and reviewed as candidate themes. The final themes were organized around four domains that were strongly represented in the data: academic and emotional challenges; time and stress management; emotional resilience; and personal growth and motivation. The themes were then interpreted in relation to the temporal and developmental logic of the participant's story so that the analysis retained the connectedness of her experiences rather than presenting the codes as isolated categories.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The participant's account revealed four closely connected themes: (1) academic and emotional challenges, (2) time and stress management, (3) building emotional resilience, and (4) personal growth and motivation. The themes are presented analytically, but they should be understood as parts of a single developmental narrative. Academic pressure generated emotional strain; coping practices helped the participant regain control and process difficult emotions; and repeated reflection gradually changed how she understood success, responsibility, and her future.

Academic and Emotional Challenges

Balancing academic responsibilities with emotional well-being was one of the most persistent difficulties in the participant's graduate experience, particularly during thesis completion. The combined demands of assignments, research, revisions, and personal responsibilities created periods in which she felt that she was carrying the burden alone. Although friends and family were present, she described a subjective sense of isolation and uncertainty about her own competence:

"I often felt alone, even though I had friends, because I could not rely on them all the time. I had to do things by myself. The emotional strain was the hardest part. Sometimes I felt that I did not belong or that I was not truly capable of handling the challenges I faced, as if I were only pretending to be competent while everyone else knew better. It made me withdraw even more and deepened my sense of isolation."

The feeling of not fully belonging was intensified by self-doubt during the final semester, when revisions accumulated and the participant's planned graduation timeline became uncertain:

"I often doubted myself, especially in the final semester. I had set a goal to graduate in May, but the constant revisions and stress made me question whether I could do it."

Her first response was to create structure. Daily and monthly to-do lists became a way to convert an overwhelming workload into visible responsibilities that could be rescheduled rather than abandoned:

"I always create a to-do list and journal for each day and month. If I cannot complete something, I reschedule it, but I do not simply ignore it. Even when I feel exhausted or overwhelmed, I try to take care of myself and stay committed to what I need to accomplish because I know that maintaining my well-being is part of fulfilling my responsibilities."

This practice gave the participant a sense of continuity and control, but her account also shows the limits of purely task-oriented coping. Structure could help her decide what to do next, yet it could not by itself resolve feelings of isolation, self-doubt, or exhaustion. The emotional challenge therefore required both organizational and reflective responses.

This pattern is consistent with research showing that postgraduate stress often combines demanding work with questions of competence, belonging, and mental well-being (Bekkouche et al., 2022; Chi et al., 2023; Nori & Vanttaja, 2023). Through the Student Well-Being Model, the participant's isolation can be understood in relation to "belonging," whereas her changing self-understanding reflects the developmental dimension of "becoming" (Soutter et al., 2014). Her persistence also reflects Masten's (2001) argument that resilience frequently depends on ordinary adaptive processes rather than on the absence of distress.

The participant's structured planning can also be interpreted as problem-focused coping: she acted on the source of pressure by organizing tasks and protecting progress. At the same

time, later parts of her narrative show increasing use of emotion-focused and relational coping. This combination is important because Struthers et al. (2000) found that coping, motivation, and academic performance are interconnected. In the present case, the central issue was not that one strategy eliminated stress, but that different strategies served different functions as the demands changed.

Time and Stress Management

Time and stress management became especially important when the participant had to coordinate academic deadlines with personal responsibilities. She described effective management as a deliberate process of breaking larger demands into smaller, more manageable actions:

"I break down my tasks into smaller chunks and set specific times to complete them. This allows me to stay on track and avoid procrastination."

This strategy reduced the psychological size of difficult tasks. By translating broad goals into smaller actions with specific time allocations, the participant created a clearer path for progress and reduced the likelihood of avoidance. Her account is consistent with the broader literature linking planning and time management to lower procrastination and improved academic functioning (Macan et al., 1990; Valente et al., 2024).

"Stress is inevitable, but I deal with it by staying focused on my goals and tasks. I keep moving forward and stay productive, even when things get overwhelming."

At first, productivity functioned as a way of containing stress: continuing to work prevented pressure from turning into complete disengagement. However, the participant later recognized that staying busy could become insufficient if the emotional sources of stress were left unprocessed:

"Stress might be temporarily alleviated by staying busy, but if the underlying emotional struggles are not addressed, they may appear later as burnout."

This realization broadened her understanding of stress management. Instead of treating rest as a distraction from academic responsibility, she came to see recovery as necessary for sustaining it:

"It is crucial to take breaks and focus on something outside college, like spending time with family or enjoying a hobby. This helps me recharge and keeps me balanced."

Her account therefore shows two complementary forms of coping. Planning, task segmentation, and scheduling addressed the workload directly, while breaks, hobbies, and emotional reflection supported recovery. The value of this combination is consistent with the argument that short-term productivity strategies need to be accompanied by longer-term changes that protect student well-being (King & Kabat-Farr, 2022).

The participant's experience also illustrates why time management and stress management should not be conceptualized as separate skills. Structured planning reduced uncertainty and procrastination, which in turn reduced one source of stress. Yet stress also arose from self-expectations, emotional fatigue, and perceived isolation, none of which could be solved through scheduling alone. Ramlan et al. (2024) similarly emphasize the relationship among time-management balance, motivation, and emotion management. In this case, the most sustainable approach involved both organization and emotional recovery.

Overall, the participant gradually moved from a narrow understanding of coping as "keeping up with tasks" toward a more balanced approach in which academic responsibility included rest, self-care, and realistic adjustment of plans. This shift became an important bridge between managing immediate pressure and building longer-term resilience.

Building Emotional Resilience

The limits of productivity became most visible during the final stage of the thesis, when the participant experienced intense emotional distress that affected sleep, confidence, and her willingness to continue. She described this period as a low point in her graduate journey:

"There were nights when I cried by myself and could not sleep. I felt like I was failing even though I had tried my best. I even thought about giving up."

The significance of this moment lies not only in the intensity of the distress but also in how her coping changed afterward. She began to recognize that continuously pushing herself forward could mask rather than resolve emotional strain:

"Rather than simply powering through by staying busy, which I had done every day, I realized that I needed to confront my emotions directly."

This recognition marked a shift from coping primarily through action to coping through acknowledgment and reflection. Journaling became one of the practices through which she named and organized difficult emotions:

"I often write in my journal about my feelings, reflect on my day, and write quotations that motivate me when I face complicated challenges in graduate study."

Journaling helped the participant create distance from immediate emotional reactions and reinterpret them as experiences that could be observed and learned from. Reflection of this kind is consistent with the broader role of reflective practice in higher education, where meaning is developed through reconsidering experience rather than merely recording events (Van Beveren et al., 2018).

"I often cry when I pray and tell God everything that has happened. It helps me find inner peace."

Prayer served a different but complementary function. For the participant, spiritual reflection provided calm, meaning, and a sense that academic difficulties did not define the entirety of her life. Her narrative also shows that resilience was not produced only internally. She increasingly relied on trusted relationships rather than treating independence as having to manage everything alone:

"Sharing my struggles with family and trusted friends made me feel less alone and reminded me that I was not expected to carry everything by myself."

Social support changed the meaning of her difficulties by restoring a sense of connection. This is important because the participant's earlier distress had been intensified by withdrawal and the belief that she should cope independently. Reaching outward therefore became part of resilience rather than a sign of reduced competence.

"I do not regret that low point. That is when I truly found myself. I learned that falling does not mean failing. It means I am human, and I can rise again."

This reflection indicates growth through adversity rather than evidence that the distress itself was beneficial. The participant did not describe becoming resilient because pressure disappeared; instead, she described learning to interpret setbacks less globally and to respond with a wider repertoire of coping resources.

The pattern closely reflects Masten's (2001) concept of resilience as an adaptive process supported by ordinary resources. Journaling and emotional awareness functioned as internal resources; prayer contributed meaning and emotional regulation; and family and friends provided relational support. Zhang and Dong's (2023) framework similarly emphasizes that resilience develops through interactions among stressors, internal resources, environmental supports, and adaptation. Applied cautiously to this case, the framework helps explain why the participant's resilience strengthened when she stopped relying on productivity alone.

Thus, emotional resilience in this narrative was not a stable trait possessed from the beginning of the degree. It developed through repeated encounters with pressure, recognition of ineffective coping, deliberate reflection, spiritual practice, and greater willingness to seek support. Resilience became a process of remaining engaged without denying vulnerability.

Personal Growth and Motivation

As the participant became more able to manage pressure and interpret setbacks, she also described a change in how she understood herself. Graduate education came to represent more than the acquisition of academic knowledge; it became a period in which her motivation, autonomy, and future purpose were revised. She summarized this shift as follows:

"I entered the program with one mindset, and I am leaving with another. I am not just a student anymore; I am someone who knows what I want and is willing to work for it."

The statement reflects an identity shift from primarily meeting externally defined expectations toward a more self-directed understanding of goals. This change did not occur

smoothly. Moments of uncertainty forced her to question assumptions about who she was supposed to become:

"There were times when I felt completely lost, but somehow that made me stop and ask, 'Who am I becoming?'"

Such moments resemble the "disorienting dilemmas" described in transformative learning theory: experiences that interrupt familiar assumptions and invite critical reflection (Taylor, 1998, 2007). In the participant's case, uncertainty created space to reconsider dependence on others' decisions and expectations.

"I used to wait for others to help me decide, but now I trust myself more."

The growth of self-trust was accompanied by a change in motivation. At the beginning of the journey, her effort was strongly connected to making her family proud:

"I just wanted to make my parents proud; that was the goal that kept me moving."

This motivation was meaningful and sustained effort, but the participant later described a more personally endorsed reason for continuing her academic development:

"Somewhere along the way, I realized that this is my life, and I want to be a lecturer because I love learning and teaching and want to share my knowledge."

The shift is consistent with self-determination theory, which distinguishes between behavior controlled mainly by external demands and behavior that is more autonomous and internally endorsed (Ryan & Deci, 2024). The participant did not reject family expectations; rather, she incorporated them into a broader purpose that she experienced as her own. This process also reflects the importance of personal values in shaping learning and achievement (Gamage et al., 2021).

"It is not just academic knowledge; it is also life experience."

By the end of her account, success had expanded beyond grades, timelines, and degree completion. She described a future identity organized around learning, teaching, empathy, and contribution. This broadened conception of success is consistent with the PGP model, in which personal growth involves increasing self-awareness, autonomy, responsibility, openness, and compassion (Maurer et al., 2023).

The participant's narrative also resonates with Rogers's account of an organismic valuing process, in which people progressively evaluate experiences in relation to a more authentic sense of self (Rogers, 1959, 1961, 1964). Her graduate journey repeatedly required this re-evaluation: academic setbacks challenged competence, emotional lows challenged the assumption that productivity alone was sufficient, and reflection challenged the idea that success should be defined only by external approval.

Personal growth in this study was therefore not a separate outcome that appeared after academic problems were solved. It developed through the same experiences that generated difficulty. The participant learned to organize demands more realistically, acknowledge emotional limits, seek support, trust her own decisions, and connect academic work to a personally meaningful future. The degree remained important, but its meaning changed: it became evidence not only of academic completion but also of a longer process of becoming.

DISCUSSION

The key contribution of this work is an integrated and process-oriented description of the way time management, stress management, emotional resilience, identity formation, and personal growth interact in graduate education. Previous studies have provided ample evidence of graduate student stress, anxiety, coping, supervision, procrastination, motivation, and well-being, but these dimensions have often been studied as isolated psychological or academic phenomena (Bekkouche et al., 2022; Chi et al., 2023; Chugh et al., 2022; Skinner, 2023). This study adds to this literature by demonstrating how common coping practices take on different meanings over the course of one graduate student's educational trajectory. Planning was first a strategy to meet academic demands, and journaling, prayer, self-care, rest, and social support later helped the participant to process emotional strain and reassess her perception of competence, independence, and success. This study also provides contextual originality by illustrating these processes in the lived experience of an Indonesian master's graduate. This

story is an example of how coping practices can serve as a resource for identity building and development, rather than resilience as an individual trait, or time management as an academic study skill. This interpretation aligns with contemporary views that interpret academic development as a mix of motivation, identity, social environments, and developmental change (Skinner, 2023; Maurer et al., 2023).

The results revealed four inter-related dimensions of the participant's graduate experience. The emotional pressure of academic demands was significant, especially during thesis completion, and included feelings of isolation, uncertainty, self-doubt, and concerns about personal competence. Secondly, the participant reestablished a sense of control and kept up with academic progress thru structured time management, breaking down tasks, planning on a daily and monthly basis, scheduling and rescheduling unfinished work. Third, productivity was not a panacea for the emotional aspects of academic stress. The participant employed organizational strategies, journaling, prayer, rest, self-care, acknowledgment of emotions, and support from family and trusted friends to build emotional resilience. Fourth, participants experienced meaningful change in motivation and identity thru repeated experiences of difficulty, coping, and reflection. The participant moved gradually from an externally directed achievement orientation to a heightened sense of self-trust, autonomy, and personally endorsed professional purpose. This pattern fits with the Personal Growth Process model, which links growth to increasing self-awareness, autonomy, responsibility, openness, and authenticity (Maurer et al., 2023), and with self-determination theory, which describes the developmental significance of increasingly autonomous forms of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2024). Findings suggest that graduate education can influence not only degree completion but also how students see themselves, manage difficult emotions, interpret setbacks, and set future goals.

Moreover, the findings both converged considerably with previous research and extended it. The participant's experiences with emotional pressure, isolation and uncertainty are consistent with Bekkouche et al. (2022) who identified systemic pressures as significant contributors to graduate student mental health problems, and Chi et al. (2023) whose systematic review and meta-analysis found substantial anxiety among graduate students. Her worries about competence and belonging are also akin to the impostor related experiences (Nori & Vanttaja (2023). Likewise, the emotional significance of revision, academic evaluation and feedback is consistent with Chugh et al. (2022) who found that feedback from supervisors has an impact on postgraduate researchers beyond the technical development of their research. The participant's use of task segmentation and structured planning aligns with Valente et al. (2024) who connected time management planning with academic procrastination, and her effort to balance planning with emotional regulation corresponds with Ramlan et al. (2024) who highlighted relationships between time management, motivation, and emotion management. Her acknowledgment that continued productivity could only offer a temporary fix also resonates with King & Kabat Farr (2022) who distinguished between short term responses to academic stress and more sustainable approaches that protect student well-being. Furthermore, the participant's gradual increase in adaptive resources is consistent with Skinner's (2023) concept of motivational resilience, and her growing self-awareness, accountability, and autonomy are consistent with the personal growth dimensions defined by Maurer et al. (2023). Finally, the shift from a largely familial achievement to a personally endorsed goal of learning and teaching underlies Ryan & Deci's (2024) account of more autonomous motivation. Taken together, these comparisons suggest that the present story reflects patterns identified in the graduate education literature, and also how such patterns can be woven together in the developmental trajectory of one person.

Furthermore, there are a number of possible reasons for similarities and differences between the present study and previous research. Such similarities may be attributable to structural features shared by many types of graduate education. Graduate students are accustomed to heavy workloads, independent research obligations, on-going assessment, ambiguous time-lines for completion and high expectations for self-direction. Such conditions may create anxiety and self-doubt and increase the need for planning, coping and social

support (Bekkouche et al., 2022; Chi et al., 2023). The importance of relational and internal resources in the present case is also consistent with Masten's (2001) view of resilience as an adaptive process that is promoted by personal and social systems in everyday life. This study, however, differs from much of the existing literature on a number of features. Previous research has tended to utilize quantitative surveys, systematic reviews, meta-analyses or studies of larger postgraduate populations, but the current narrative inquiry considers shifts in meaning in one participant's experience. While this methodological approach does not lend itself to statistical generalization, it does allow for the identification of temporal changes that may be obscured by aggregated data. Context is important also. Initially, family expectations played a major role in the participant's motivation and prayer became an important source of emotional regulation (Froese & Jones, 2021). These results suggest that coping and motivation exist in cultural, relational and spiritual contexts, and not only in the individual. The participant graduated with high academic distinction, while being heavily involved academically and organizationally. The student's experience of the relationship between stress, coping and development may vary depending on their academic performance, financial circumstances, supervisory relationships, employment responsibilities, disciplines or access to social support. Such differences in context and methods are partly responsible for the present study being seen as a useful contribution to rather than a replication of findings from broader postgraduate populations (Tuval-Mashiach, 2021).

In addition, study extends graduate education research by offering a relational and temporal description of the way academic coping might be incorporated into identity development. Its contribution goes beyond identifying planning, journaling, prayer, self-care, and social support as coping methods, as prior literature has already established the importance of many of these resources. Rather, the study revealed how the function and meaning of these practices changed over time. Planning initially supported the participant's academic continuity and sense of control (Chishima & Wilson, 2021). Later, thru reflection and emotional acknowledgment, she re-evaluated the meaning of setbacks (Ellbin et al., 2021). Relational and spiritual resources helped lessen isolation and promote emotional healing (Hall, 2021). This was followed by stronger self-confidence, autonomous motivation and clarity of purpose. Thus, the findings suggest a conceptual pathway in which academic strain leads to coping, coping leads to opportunities for reflection, reflection leads to adaptive resilience, and resilience leads to changes in identity, motivation, and personal purpose. This interpretation builds on resilience perspectives that emphasize adaptation thru ordinary resources (Masten, 2001), the Personal Growth Process model that describes movement toward greater autonomy and self-awareness (Maurer et al., 2023), and self-determination theory's explanation of internalized and autonomous motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2024). It also supports transformative perspectives that difficult experiences may lead people to re-evaluate previous assumptions and develop new understandings of themselves (Taylor, 2007). In this sense, the study frames graduate education as a becoming process in which academic completion and personal transformation can emerge from the same lived experiences.

Overall, the findings have important practical, academic and institutional implications. Graduate programs should develop integrated student supports, including academic advising, realistic workload planning, peer connection, open communication with supervisors, and accessible emotional support, rather than separate academic and wellbeing concerns (Tudor, 2018). This is especially important for supervisors, as repeated feedback and revision can shape the students' confidence and academic belonging, as well as the quality of their research (Chugh et al., 2022). Universities might offer workshops on thesis planning, mentoring programs, structured peer support, reflective activities and appropriate well-being services to help students cope with workload and emotional pressure. Programs that operate in culturally diverse settings also need to recognize that family relationships, spirituality, and culturally meaningful practices can be important coping resources but should not assume that all students will utilize them in the same way. Future research should use longitudinal and multiple-case narrative designs to test the existence of the developmental pattern identified here in different disciplines, institutions and cultural contexts. Future researchers should also examine how

gender, socioeconomic status, employment responsibilities, supervisory relationships, family expectations, spirituality, and access to institutional support affect the relationship between stress management, resilience, and identity development. Such research can contribute to a more holistic understanding of graduate success that includes sustainable wellbeing, resilience, autonomy, identity development and purposeful professional growth, beyond academic performance and degree attainment.

CONCLUSION

This narrative inquiry examined how time management and stress management intersected with identity, emotional resilience, and personal growth in one graduate student's experience. Four interrelated themes emerged. First, academic pressure was inseparable from emotional experiences of isolation, self-doubt, and uncertainty. Second, structured planning and task segmentation helped the participant maintain progress and reduce avoidant delay, but productivity alone was insufficient for managing emotional strain. Third, resilience developed through a broader set of resources, including journaling, prayer, rest, and social support. Finally, repeated reflection contributed to a shift from predominantly externally driven achievement toward greater autonomy, self-trust, and purpose. The case suggests that graduate education can function as both an academic and developmental process. Support for graduate students should therefore address not only task completion and research performance but also the emotional and relational conditions that enable students to sustain engagement and develop a coherent sense of purpose.

This study is based on a single narrative and is not intended to represent the full diversity of graduate-student experiences. Its value lies in depth and contextual meaning rather than statistical generalizability. The participant's academic success and active organizational involvement may also distinguish her experience from students with different educational, financial, disciplinary, or personal circumstances. Future research could examine multiple narratives across programs and institutions, use longitudinal designs to follow changes as they occur, and explore how culture, gender, socioeconomic conditions, supervision, and access to support shape coping and identity development. Because the manuscript reports only the data available in the original study, future work should also document data-collection procedures and research-ethics processes in greater methodological detail. For practice, universities should consider graduate support systems that integrate academic guidance, realistic workload planning, opportunities for peer connection, and accessible emotional support.

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