

Thematic Analysis of Technology Use by Urban Couples in Stress Management [†]

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Abstract: Urban couples spend much time working, which poses challenges in their daily life. These challenges can cause stress, affecting relationship quality and an individual's well-being. We identified and described stressors and explored the use of technology to manage their stress. The participants consisted of three couples living in the Greater Jakarta area. A focus group discussion was used to collect the data, and inductive thematic analysis was used to analyze it. Urban couples experienced relationship stress, parenting stress, financial stress, work-related stress, and daily hassles. Couples can manage stress by using digital media and smart communication technology to provide entertainment and communication, as well as to search for information.

Keywords: dual-earner; urban couples; relationship quality; dyadic coping; stress



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1. Introduction

Women started working in Indonesia in 1932, with the movement of Suwarni Pringgodigdo [1]. In Indonesia, the modernization of society is changing the roles of husbands and wives within a marriage. Both the husband and wife often have jobs to sustain the family's living situation in urban areas. This trend is obvious in the Indonesian National Workforce Survey, which stated that 38.9% of workers in Indonesia were women and 61.0% were men [2]. The proportion of women in the workforce is increasing, which is a common characteristic of urban couples.

On average, workers in Jakarta spend more than 40 h/week, at 8 h/day, working. According to the National Force of Workers Survey, 70.3% of citizens in Indonesia at the productive age reported working more than 35 h [2]. This estimation does not include the time it takes to commute. Tomtom.com [3] estimates that, on average, Jakarta citizens spend around 214 h/year only commuting in traffic, and within those hours, it is estimated that 106 h are spent waiting in traffic jams. The overcrowded traffic and long working hours create a unique characteristic of everyday life in urban cities, unlike rural areas. Thus, we focused on the unique life experiences of urban couples in the Greater Jakarta area in dealing with daily hassles.

Stress is a condition or a demand from the environment typically greater than a person's normal capacity, requiring an additional response that can impact a person physically and psychologically [4,5]. Stress is conceptualized as stressors, which are any event, force,

or condition that results in physical or emotional stress [6]. In this study, stress was viewed from a relational perspective to identify and describe daily stressors that contribute to urban couples' relationship quality.

Randall and Bodenmann formulated a stress typology to understand stress's impact on relationship quality [7]. Stressors are differentiated into (1) internal versus external stress. Internal stressors originate from within the relationship (such as conflicts, tensions, attitudes, needs, desires, and habits of one partner that disturb the other; a lack of compatibility among partners). In contrast, external stressors are the stressors that originate from outside of a relationship (such as stress in the workplace, financial stress, social stress in the neighborhood, or stress about the extended family, including siblings, parents-in-law, and other relatives); (2) major and minor stresses are defined by how intense the experience or condition felt by people within a relationship; and (3) acute versus chronic stresses are defined by the duration of the stress [7]. Randall and Bodenmann suggested that the experience of external, minor, and chronic stress impacts relationship quality the most [7]. Therefore, describing and identifying the external stressors are essential to minimize the adverse effects of stress on the marital quality of urban couples [8].

Relationships and marital quality are essential in shaping a happier and more prosperous life. Marital satisfaction is associated with higher life satisfaction and momentary happiness. This correlation is found in both men and women [9]. Meta-analysis study results showed that higher marital quality is associated with higher individual well-being [10]. These results support previous findings that higher marital quality is linked to a higher score on a self-rated health scale [11]. Thus, an intervention is needed to improve marital quality.

Couples need coping strategies to maintain their marital quality. In a romantic relationship, the coping strategies practiced by romantic partners are known as dyadic coping. The systemic transactional model (STM) explains that the dyadic coping process emphasizes the interdependence and mutuality among partners, meaning that the stress of one partner affects the other but also that the resources of one partner expand the resources of the other [12]. Stress-related function in STM can reduce stress from the spillover effect experienced by both partners (we-stress).

Many meta-analyses show that the conventional intervention method positively impacts marriage quality through education, such as a Relationship Education program [13]. Aside from conventional methods, various interventions for improving couples' relationship quality using modern information systems and technology are available [14]. Smartphones have also been used to maintain marital relationships [15]. However, no studies have focused on finding and identifying specific coping mechanisms for couples to manage stress using information and communication technology.

We explored the role of digital media and smart communication as tools for couples' coping mechanisms. Das [16] defined digital media as follows: "Digital media refers to the media encoded in machine-readable formats. Digital media can be created, viewed, communicated, modified, and preserved on digital electronic devices such as software, digital images, videos, web pages, websites, social media, digital data, digital audio, and E-books". Digital-based stress management is expected to reduce divorce risks among married couples [17,18]. For example, couples use smartphones to communicate with their partners, maintain relationships, share information, and perform specific tasks.

This research aims to answer the following: (1) What stressors can reduce the quality of marriage relationships among urban couples? (2) What coping strategies and mechanisms do urban couples use to manage and reduce stress? (3) How do urban couples utilize information systems and technology advancements such as digital media and smart communication to reduce and manage stress?

2. Material and Methods

We used qualitative methods, specifically inductive thematic analysis. A focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted to collect participants' data using interview questions.

2.1. Participants

Two dual-earner couples and one single-earner couple were recruited using the convenient sampling method (Table 1).

Table 1. Demography of participants.

	1st Couple	2nd Couple	3rd Couple
Code	PAR 1B	Husband PAR 2B	PAR 3B
Age	42 years old	34 years old	48 years old
Job	Employee	Lecturer	Debt collector
Code	PAR 1A	Wife PAR 2A	PAR 3A
Age	34 years old	34 years old	46 years old
Job	Employee	Housewife	Employee
Marriage	13 years	11 years	16 years
Children’s age	9 and 6 years old	10, 3, and 1.7 years old	15 and 8 years old
Work/Home	Jakarta/Jakarta	Jakarta/Jakarta	Jakarta/Bekasi

2.2. Measures

Data were collected during the focus group discussion, which was conducted via a Zoom meeting, and experts on the topic were also interviewed. Participants were asked questions during the focus group discussion. See the Supplementary Materials from <https://bit.ly/FGD-IQ> (accessed on 27 July 2023).

2.3. Design and Procedures

We used a qualitative approach (i.e., FGD) as the data collection method and inductive thematic analysis to analyze the results. Participants were recruited by distributing flyers around Binus University, Greater Jakarta area. See the Supplementary Materials from <https://bit.ly/FGD-IQ> (accessed on 27 July 2023).

2.4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyze, and report patterns within data, as well as to organize and describe the data [19].

3. Results

The thematic analysis results are presented in 141 highlights, which are organized into 88 themes. These themes are then reduced to 26, as illustrated in Figure 1.

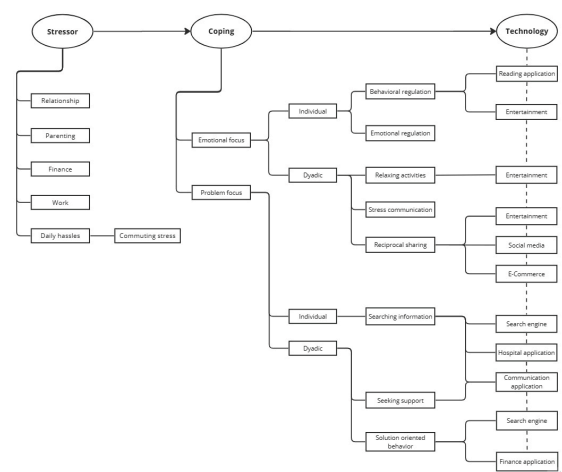


Figure 1. Stressors, coping strategies, and technology used to manage stress in urban couples.

The model consisted of the following three main parts: stressors, coping, and technology use. Each of these steps was correlated with the research question. First, the thematic analysis yielded five themes related to stressors that reduce the quality of marital relationships, as follows: (1) relationship stress, (2) parenting stress, (3) financial stress, (4) work-related stress, and (5) daily hassles.

3.1. Couples' Stressors

Relationship stress came from relationships with co-workers and family. Stressors also came from work supervisors:

"The supervisor asks to do something as if someone is eating red pepper. Once they order something, it's harsh and must be done right at the moment". (48 years old, male, debt collector)

Family relationship stress came from relationships with in-laws. Although in-laws can function as a support system, asking for help from in-laws can be a challenge:

"Probably asking parents-in-law to take care of the kids. Sometimes, I feel bad or something like that. Sometimes, I feel like a burden to them. But, it is a better option rather than hiring strangers when no one is at home". (42 years old, male, school finance department employee)

3.1.1. Parenting Stress

Parenting was challenging for urban couples, especially when their children experienced health issues:

"Since I was alone and had no one to help, it was unbelievable every day, especially one thing that usually causes stress when children get sick, and it continued in the same circle. It could happen around a week to the second child, then the next few days for a week to the third child. So, the doctor knew very well they got sick with a similar pattern". (34 years old, female, housewife)

3.1.2. Financial Stress

Financial stress was not mentioned directly, but indirectly presented:

"Not only transferring money, but there is also an additional IDR 6.500 admin fee". (34 years old, male, lecturer)

This implies that, in addition to regular financial stressors, fees caused additional stress for urban couples.

3.1.3. Work Stress

Work-related stress consists of stressors related to demands in the workplace. These demands are specific depending on the occupation:

"Usually, it's the pressure from work for me. The challenge or any kind of thing we need to keep up with the deadline for export shift things, we must know when the goods come in. That's all my problem in the workplace". (34 years old, female, logistic employee)

3.1.4. Daily Hassles

The final stressor involves daily hassles, as follows: the challenges, responsibilities, and conditions that urban couples face daily. These stressors are considered minor and chronic due to their low intensity levels but occur daily [20]:

"Oh yes, it was because I was on the road during a traffic jam that caused stress". (48 years old, male, debt collector)

3.2. Couples Stress Management

Couples' stress management is categorized into problem- or emotional-focused coping individually or dyadically.

3.2.1. Emotion-Focused Dyadic Coping

The emotion-focused dyadic coping is divided into the following two groups: individual behaviors and dyadic behaviors. Individual behaviors include behavioral and emotional regulation and relaxing activities. These activities are performed individually with information and communication technologies.

Emotional-focused coping, especially individual strategies, are behavioral and emotional regulation. Aside from passive behaviors, such as waiting for their partner to calm down, behavioral regulation also covers applications for reading and accessing the Internet. The following participant claims that their partner regained their composure before conducting stress communication:

“Waiting for my wife to be in a calm state, if she is not even in a calm state, then it will be unhelpful to vent”. (34 years old, male, lecturer)

“We each read on our own”. (34 years old, male, lecturer)

Participants explained how they use gadgets to calm themselves:

“Yes, using the gadget by ourselves”. (42 years old, male, school’s finance department employee)

Participants also waited for the right moment to control their emotions:

“... and wait for the right moment. I will wait for the right moment until I can think clearly about ‘why does it happen?’ and how can I make it logically sound”. (34 years old, male, lecturer)

One of the participants mentioned that the only thing that he could do after experiencing a stressful situation was to be patient and not be triggered or angered by the situation. He stated that getting angry brought him nothing:

“Well, the only thing I could do was be patient. If I get fed up as well, the result will not do any good. So, just be patient”. (48 years old, male, debt collector)

The following quote shows that a participant held their emotions back until they felt better, were more composed, and could talk about it:

“For me, I usually settle my emotions first and wait for the right moment. . . . When I have felt better, I will then talk about it”. (34 years old, male, lecturer)

The same thing happened to the following working mother, where she sometimes experienced a sense of yearning or missing her son, and the only thing she could do was be patient:

“I can only hold back my longing emotions because I know my first child is far from me. I mean, I am far from him and he has been with his grandma since kid”. (46 years old, female, school finance department employee)

The following participant mentioned when she used social media, she was very happy, and it calmed her emotions when she saw content of someone playing the piano:

“I like the most.. What is it? Usually, like someone was playing piano. That’s the kind of music I like”. (46 years old, female, school finance department employee)

Dyadic behaviors include relaxing activities, stress communication, and reciprocal sharing. The following couple had the same hobby, and they often talked to each other and shared their feelings and experiences while watching a drama series together:

“We both liked it because we have the same hobby of watching drama. We were having a conversation while watching a Korean drama. Just like that, we were talking to each other”. (34 years old, female, logistic employee)

The couples usually watched movies/series with the same title, but they progressed through the stories at different paces, making it feel like they were racing against each other:

"We often will watch the same title, but a lot of the time, she can progress through the series quicker, which can sometimes feel like a race between us two". (34 years old, male, lecturer)

The couples liked to share stories about the problems they had, and it helped them feel better after venting out their stress on each other:

"As for me, mostly I talked it out. If there are any problems in my office, I would like to spill it out to (Participant 1B). Just like that, but I felt better when I let out everything". (34 years old, female, logistic employee)

Lastly, couples mentioned using social media to share entertainment content even when they are in the same room:

"Mmmm. . . for this Ma'am, usually we use social media to share reels even when we are sitting next to each other" (34 years old, male, lecturer)

3.2.2. Problem-Focused Dyadic Coping

The problem-focused dyadic coping mentioned by the participants consisted of individual and dyadic behaviors. Individual behavior focuses on solving a problem by searching for information, utilizing information and communication technologies (e.g., search engines and hospital applications), and communication applications such as WhatsApp:

"Usually, I look up my child's symptoms so I can ask and search it using Google and then look through an application. In Hermina, there is an application where you can see the doctor's availability and which day at which time. Later, I will contact my partner about what time he (Participant 2B) is going home, the doctor will be available during this time, can he make it? Just like that. If it's possible then okay. If not, is there availability during this time? That way". (34 years old, female, housewife)

Similarly, dyadic behaviors include seeking support and solution-oriented behavior. The couples sometimes needed support and help from their families to care for their kids:

"Probably asking parents-in-law to take care of the kids..". (42 years old, male, school finance department employee)

Participants also used features included with a financial application called Flip. The transfer feature from Flip allowed participants to save costs on admin fees, which suggests that finance-related issues do, indeed, cause stress among urban couples:

"Using m-banking really helps. On the other hand, I'm happy with the Flip features". (34 years old, male, lecturer)

3.3. Technology Utilization for Couples' Stress Management

The thematic analysis results reveal the utilization of information systems and technology by couples to manage stress, as follows: entertainment applications, search engines, social media, e-commerce, and finance applications. Entertainment applications can take many forms, but the ones mentioned by the participants are streaming, reading, and gaming/leisure applications. The couples mentioned using streaming applications to watch entertaining content together, chat, and share:

"We both liked it because we have the same hobby of watching [drama]. We were having a conversation while watching a Korean drama. Just like that, we were talking to each other". (34 years old, female, logistic employee).

The participants mentioned the application Webtoons, which they liked to use to read comics:

The participants mentioned Webtoon, an application for reading comics:

"Probably Webtoon, it's because I like to read comics". (34 years old, female, housewife)

Couples also used search engines to find relevant information to solve their problems as effectively and efficiently as possible and hospital applications to search for information about medical check-up schedules and doctors' schedules:

"Usually, I look up my child's symptoms so I can ask and search for them using Google and then look through an application. In Hermina (hospital), there is an application where you can see the doctor's availability on which day and at which time..." (34 years old, female, housewife)

The participants mentioned that for emotional regulation, they used ICT mainly to access entertainment and socializing apps. The couples did not use psychology-related applications:

"Usually, it's a streaming application for me than social media. But I don't use any psychologist thing application". (34 years old, male, lecturer)

The couples used the social media application Instagram:

"Same. A social media [application] maybe. Social media like Instagram as well". (34 years old, male, lecturer)

One of the participants mentioned Facebook as their favorite social media application:

"I personally liked Facebook the most". (46 years old, female, school finance department employee)

The couples mentioned that they often used e-commerce applications to regulate their emotions by doing some online shopping. The e-commerce applications mentioned were Shopee and Tokopedia:

"Shopee, Tokopedia, and the likes of it". (34 years old, male, lecturer)

The participants mentioned that Flip helped solve problems related to financial stress, specifically, the stress of high admin fees for mobile banking transactions:

"Using m-banking really helps. On the other hand, I'm happy with the Flip features". (34 years old, male, lecturer)

4. Conclusions

The results of this research reveal how urban couples manage stress, especially using information and communication technology, such as digital and social media. Urban couples' daily stressors align with those of previous research. According to the literature, these stressors include parenting, relationships, traffic jams, and others [21,22]. Couples also experience stress related to their own, their partner's, or their child's health [23].

The findings of this research suggest that dual-earner urban couples often experienced stress associated with work and childbearing, since both couples work and raise their children as well as manage the household. The increasing number of working wives positively impacted the family preparedness for the potential absence of one's spouse's income in the case of spousal death, divorce, or layoff, as well as an increase in a wife's understanding of her husband [24]. Quality of life can be increased with the financial stability of a family. According to the STM, partners' well-being is strongly intertwined, and their happiness depends on one another [12]. Alternatively, couples experience the same stressful events, which affect each spouse individually [25]. If their partner is not in a good emotional state to conduct stress communication (e.g., their partner is in a bad mood), then they suppress their emotions momentarily and wait for the right moment to engage in stress communication after their partner has recovered to a more optimal state. Interestingly, one of the couples stated that the wife tends to keep things to herself instead of sharing because of concerns that the husband is angry. This is in line with previous research regarding spillover, which refers to the transmission of problems across domains [26–28].

The coping strategies used by urban couples to reduce and manage stress align with dyadic coping strategies. Each of these forms of dyadic coping was divided into

emotional-focused and problem-focused ones, which indicate which aspect couples focused on when using dyadic coping to solve problems or manage negative emotions elicited by stress [8]. Another common emotion-focused coping strategy used individually and dyadically is humor.

Moreover, technology helped manage the stress of urban couples in terms of relationship maintenance [15]. Couples used technology to manage emotions individually or together with partners. There were differences between the coping strategies of husbands toward wives and wives toward husbands. Couples consumed the same entertainment content alone and then discussed it together. Interestingly, communication between partners using information and communicational technologies occurred even when both partners were in the same place.

In contrast, several coping strategies did not need technology's help. The couples regulate their emotions and are patient. Aside from this, one person chose to regulate their emotions with the help of their partner by engaging in stress communication. However, another person waited for the right moment and considered the state and condition of their partner before engaging in communication of stress. However, sophisticated technology did not replace the ability to manage one's behavior.

The devices at work were not considered as stress management tools by the participants, which is contrary to previous research [15]. This technology use was not seen in the data because the FGD session did not ask about it. Financial problems were not mentioned explicitly by the participants, whereas based on previous findings/research [29], financial problems must be a significant stressor.

There are limitations regarding the scope and the procedures in this research. Firstly, participants were limited to three couples. Even though there were enough participants to conduct an FGD, this number of participants is not enough to represent urban citizens. Future studies are necessary to recruit more participants and interview them, considering that FGDs are not effective if the number of participants is greater than eight. We did not distinguish participants from formal and informal work backgrounds because the previous study found differences in stress sources among families with work backgrounds [30]. Thus, it is necessary to consider work backgrounds and control for participants' socioeconomic statuses such as adding minimum wage and specific jobs.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://bit.ly/FGD-IQ> (accessed on 27 July 2023).

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