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STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES IN CHINESE IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

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ABSTRACT—This qualitative study involved interviewing 40 Chinese Americans residing in Lincoln and Omaha, NE, and Naperville, IL, on their perceptions of family strengths and acculturative stress. Themes related to family strengths include family support leading to achieving a renewed sense of family, contextual support from friends and community, communication among family members, spiritual well-being, and balancing host and heritage cultures. Themes pertaining to acculturative stress are language barriers, loneliness, and loss of social status and identity at the early stage of immigration. New dimensions are being added to the current family strengths model. Implications for health professionals are provided.

Key Words: acculturation, Chinese immigrants, family strengths model

Introduction and Background

The number of Chinese immigrant families has been burgeoning. They make up the largest Asian group in the United States. The 2000 census shows that the total population of Chinese Americans residing in the US is

more than 2 million. Furthermore, the demographics of Chinese immigrants have changed from rural to metropolitan, from nonprofessionals to professionals (Lu 2001). Despite the increase in population, research on strengths and stress of Chinese American families remains limited.

Family Strengths Model

Otto (1962) first introduced the concept of family strengths. Hill (1973:3) defined family strengths as "those traits which facilitate the ability of the family to meet the needs of its members and the demands made upon it by systems outside the family unit." Stinnett (1979) broadened the definition to include relationship patterns, interpersonal skills and competencies, and social and psychological characteristics that contributed to a healthy family identity. These qualities helped promote and sustain satisfying relationships in the family, and developed and reinforced the family's skills and resources to handle life challenges in an effective manner.

Stinnett et al. (1981) studied how strong families coped with crisis situations. Families that coped well tended to view the crisis as a growth experience, relied on the family unit as the primary resource, communicated effectively, and had a belief in a philosophy of life, usually a faith in God. In another study, Olson and McCubbin (1983) saw cohesion (togetherness), adaptability (ability to deal with change), and communication as the qualities of strong families.

Likewise, Stinnett and DeFrain (1985) identified six strengths: appreciation and affection; commitment; positive communication; enjoyable time together; spiritual well-being; and the effective management of stress and crisis. Olson and DeFrain (2003) compared Olson's model of three major qualities with their model of six characteristics and found that they fit surprisingly well together. Olson's cohesion was represented by DeFrain and Stinnett's commitment and time together. Olson's adaptability fit closely with their family's ability to cope with crisis and spiritual well-being. Olson's communication was equivalent to DeFrain and Stinnett's positive communication and appreciation and affection.

New cross-cultural studies continually enhance the ever-evolving family strength model (DeFrain and Stinnett, 2002). For example, Casas (1979) conducted a study of Latin American families and concluded that love, understanding, mutual respect, family togetherness, and communication were the major qualities of strong Latin American families.

Xie et al. (1996) found that families in China perceived a sense of harmony as a family strength. A sense of harmony was defined as having a

sense of family, having commitment to the family, enjoying each other's company, getting along, and being willing to compromise and forgive. Medora et al. (2000) conducted a similar study in India and identified five of the six aforementioned strengths found by Stinnett and DeFrain (1985). Besides those five, three other strengths were revealed: a sense of harmony, a feeling of support and overall well-being, and a feeling of cooperation and dependability.

Acculturation Stress

Migration is a multifaceted event. It involves changes at the social, emotional, cultural, and economic levels. As such, it often results in stress. This type of stress, an inherent part of immigration experiences, is defined as acculturative stress and is often related to adjustment difficulties when an individual is undergoing acculturation (Sodowsky et al. 1995). Acculturation stress is an individual's negative response to conflicts in values, attitudes, and behavior between two autonomous cultures during the process of acculturation. It is also a "reduction in the health status of individuals, and may include physical, psychological, and social aspects" (Berry et al. 1987:493). Acculturative stress often entails three aspects: lifelong duration, pervasiveness, and intensity (Smart and Smart 1995).

Acculturation is the process whereby the attitudes and behaviors of persons from one culture are modified as a result of contact with a different culture (Moyerman and Forman 1992). An acculturation framework posits two major issues operating simultaneously, the first being cultural maintenance and the second being contact and participation in the host culture. Berry (1986) posited three stages of acculturation: (1) contact—interface of two cultures; (2) conflict—the struggle of choosing values adhering to either the host culture or the heritage culture; and (3) adaptation—strategies to reduce the conflict and maintain balance between the two culture. Berry (1997) further listed four patterns of acculturation: (1) assimilation—giving up one's ethnic identity and the heritage culture's value in favor of the host culture's; (2) integration—achieving balance between the heritage culture's value and the host culture's by maintaining one's ethnic identity, coupled with contact and participation with the host culture; (3) separation—little or no interaction with the host culture and a strong desire to maintain one's ethnic identity; and (4) marginalization—maintaining no contact with either home or host culture, experiencing alienation, loss of identity, and stress.

However, this model is criticized for assuming a unidirectional and hierarchical relationship between two cultures (LaFrombiose et al. 1993).

Instead, research has shown that biculturalism is a significant predictor of immigrant satisfaction. Rumbaut (1991) identified “additive acculturation” to describe the process of adapting to the host culture while retaining ethnic identity and cultural values.

LaFrombiose et al. (1993) promoted a multicultural model that reiterated a pluralistic approach to the study of migration. This model addressed the feasibility of maintaining the heritage culture’s values and simultaneously adopting values from the host culture through public and private domains of the immigrant. It assumed that internal conflicts resulting in immigration could be a positive factor leading to an individual’s personal and psychological development.

Likewise, Kim (1996) identified a process of “stress-adaptation-growth” that many immigrants achieved in a new country provided they had the social support and individual motivation. In this process, an immigrant’s identity was no longer monocultural, but bicultural. Bicultural identity was “an identity that conjoins and integrates, rather than separates and divides” (348). However, factors at both the individual level and the social level contributed to this identity transformation. At the individual level were factors such as personality, motivation, and educational background. At the social level were supportive environment and acceptance.

Purpose of the Study

Through interviews with 40 Chinese immigrants in Lincoln and Omaha, NE, and Naperville, IL, the purpose of this study was twofold: (1) to gather and identify Chinese immigrants’ perceptions of family strengths, and stressors related to immigration, and (2) to add to or modify the current Family Strengths Model.

Methodology

This study employed the semistructured interview, a qualitative research method that aims at understanding each participant’s experience as closely as possible to how the participant felt it or lived it (Sherman and Webb 1988). Qualitative research is well suited to ascertaining meanings within the private domain of family life (Daly 1992).

Due to the nature of this study, it was not feasible to identify Chinese American family strengths in their entirety. Instead, the study aimed at providing insight into the interactional and interpretive meanings of 40

Chinese Americans who left their home country to pursue goals and reestablish themselves in the United States.

General questions for these 40 participants included: What do you perceive to be your family's strengths? What challenges have you faced since you came to the US? Who provided you the most support? By encouraging them to share their stories, the research was bringing to light many "invisible" meanings and perspectives surrounding Chinese American families: their strengths and challenges. We utilized an "issue-focused" strategy (Weiss 1994) in order to uncover Chinese American family strengths in their full depth and breadth. In the issue-focused section, themes from the interview were introduced and discussed using brief illustrations from the transcripts without revealing much information about the interviewees.

Sample

This sample consisted of 40 Chinese immigrants (15 were males and 25 females) residing in Lincoln and Omaha, NE, and Naperville, IL. Lincoln has a population of 225,000, of which a little over 1,000 are Chinese. Omaha has a population of 390,000, of which approximately 15,000 are Chinese. Naperville is located 30 miles west of Chicago and has a population of 130,000, with close to 10% of the population being Asian Americans. The participants were recruited through local Chinese family-life educational programs, Chinese schools, or Chinese churches. All participants were married and all except three had at least one child. The majority of the participants received the minimum of a bachelor's degree in China, and two received their college education in the US. Seventeen of them received a master's degree, and 12 received PhDs. Seven out of the 40 participants had two children. All except one had a child or children living at home at the time of the interview. Of the 40 participants, one was retired, three were stay-at-home moms, two were students working on their degree, and the rest held professional careers such as university professor, computer programmer, company manager, and university research associate. The length of time since their migration to the US ranged from 3 to 20 years, with an average of 8 years. Their age ranged from 35 to 55, with a mean of 39 and a mode of 37. All interviews lasted between 20 and 60 minutes and were conducted either by telephone or at the participants' homes, church, or Chinese school. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim if participants were comfortable. Otherwise, notes were taken and shared with interviewees to check accuracy during the interview.

Findings

Five major themes related to family strengths were identified. The first one was family support leading to achieving a renewed sense of family. The second one was contextual support from friends and community. The third one was communication among family members. The fourth one was spiritual well-being. The fifth one was balancing host and heritage cultures.

Three themes related to acculturative stress were also revealed. These included language barriers, feelings of loneliness, and loss of social status and identity in the early years of migration.

Themes Related to Family Strengths

Family Support Leading to Achieving a Renewed Sense of Family. Throughout this study, the term “family support” was repeatedly mentioned. Even though family had always been the cornerstone in Chinese culture, many participants expressed how they achieved a new understanding of what their families meant to them upon arrival in the US. In many ways, they appreciated and valued their families more. One 39-year-old female shared her thoughts on this theme: “We were together all the time in China, so I never fully understood the meaning of family until we were apart. Then I realized how much I missed my family, and the role my husband and my son played in my life.” Another female in her late 30s echoed the thought: “Had we not been able to come to the US together as a family, we would not have come here at all. At this point in my life, being with my family is important. . . . Family support is so important.”

A female in her early 40s put it simply: “When my husband and I first got married in China, we were like separate individuals who pursued separate goals. After we came to the US, I changed my concept of my family. We supported each other and we did many things together. To me, that has been the biggest accomplishment since we came to the US.” Family became a crucial social unit with priorities centering family activities. “My husband and I always make sure we attend our daughter’s violin recital and her Chinese school performance,” commented one mother.

Family included members of the extended family as well. One 39-year-old female pointed out that her sister’s family, her parents, and her in-laws offered help at different times during her stay in the US, and how her family would relocate in order to be closer together after she finished her education. “My sister was already in Texas, so when I applied for school, I

naturally applied there. I lived with her family the first year. Later, her family moved to Chicago, so we moved again to be closer to her family. . . . In the past couple years, my in-laws and my parents came to visit us and helped us with childcare and housework.” Family support included reassurance, encouragement, and spending time as a family.

Despite the education they received in China, many of the participants found it necessary to further their education in the US in order to gain social mobility. Some of them had what seemed like formidable goals at the time, and thus requiring family members’ understanding and support. One participant who struggled for years to get his medical license stated, “I owe my family a lot. Without their support and encouragement, I would not have achieved what I have achieved today.”

One 43-year-old stay-at-home mom shared her story of supporting each other through thick and thin: “A few years ago, my husband left his academic job to work in a computer company. Then the company went under and he was unemployed. At that time, we were concerned that our children would worry about the family’s financial state, so we had a discussion with them. We talked about cutting our budget and assured them that we have some money saved for a rainy day.”

Many participants reported they enjoyed spending time with their family members. “On weekends, I would play basketball with my son. He is getting very good at the game.” One mother talked about her family’s efforts to balance work and family time: “In order to have more family time, my husband goes to work at 4:30 a.m. and comes home at 2:30 p.m. I work six hours instead of eight, so I can be home around 2:30 p.m. as well. We sacredly guard our family time. After dinner, our family would take a walk around the block.” “Saturday evening is family time. We turn off the TV and play Chinese chess and different other games.” One wife shared, “Now that our child is older, my husband and I have a bit more time for each other again. We are both outdoor persons. We like hiking. It gives us a sense of togetherness.”

Another dimension of family support was the manifestation of care to the elderly in the family. Being first-generation immigrants themselves, participants of this study encountered a major issue—elder care at a distance. Some participants expressed concern about their aging parents with whom they could not spend much time. Therefore, support and understanding from their spouses were deeply appreciated. How immigrants take care of their aging parents at a distance is beyond the scope of this study and deserves more investigation in the future.

Contextual Support from Friends and Community. As mentioned earlier, immigration is a multifaceted event that involves changes at the social, psychological, cultural, and economic levels. Many participants shared stories of how they found support in the new community, such as the Chinese Student Association and different support groups on campus. Since the first place most of the participants of this study landed was a university town where they were to pursue their education, naturally, many of them mentioned the support from the Chinese Student Association whose primary goal was to help new students on campus to get adjusted. Other sources of help included professors, classmates, and friends they met in school and at church activities, and host family organizations whose goal was to match international students with local residents with an interest in cultural exchanges. This new support network lessened the immigrant's degree of alienation and provided a crucial means to combat loss and loneliness.

One male participant shared the following: "I had a close group of five or six Chinese male friends. We were like brothers. On weekends we got together and shared our thoughts and experiences as students in the US. Whenever we had difficulties, we helped each other out."

Besides student associations on campus, other support groups, such as host families, were reported to help with the early transition from heritage culture to host culture. Many local residents were found to be friendly and helpful, thus making the transition stage less traumatic. In many cases, friendships developed and lasted a long time.

One female shared the following story: "I was informed about the host family program on campus and went to sign up for that. It so happened that I had a nice chat with the lady who was in charge of the program. She was in her late 60s. She volunteered herself to be my host family. From there, our relationship developed. She became my host mother. She actually introduced me to her friends as her daughter 'who was accidentally born in China.' We did many things together. She took me to shop on weekends, invited me over for Thanksgiving dinner. It was her love, her friendship, and her generosity with her time that helped me survive the first year. She made me feel like I was part of her family. Though she is no longer with me today, I always think of her as my guardian angel."

Another female resonated with the same theme: "I have been very fortunate. When I was studying for my degree, my professor, who later became my best friend, cared about Chinese students sincerely."

Communication among Family Members. Being able to communicate one's feelings is pivotal. However, positive communication takes learning and

practice. One 42-year-old female described her learning process: “We used to argue a lot, but that could not solve the problem. Both my husband and I have similar personalities and are very strong-minded. I once attended a workshop by a psychologist from Northwestern University on the topic of Art of Love. I learned that to get my point across, I needed to have the right method. There is a Chinese saying that states ‘Strike the iron while it is hot.’ Through this workshop, I learned not to apply this in relationships. In fact, in relationships we need to cool down before our discussion. I learned to say ‘I am sorry,’ or ‘I was wrong’ to my husband, something I could not bring myself to say at the early years of my marriage.”

Not only spousal communication but also parent-child communication was considered important by the participants. One mother in her early 40s put it succinctly: “I am very proud that my daughter still confides in me her secrets. The boy she likes, and the boy who likes her, and I always give her suggestions on boys. I also shared with her my own dating stories. She commented that her other Chinese friends’ parents did not talk about such things with their children. We are very open about such issues in my family.” Another female echoed her family’s open communication: “My husband and I were classmates in college. We know each other very well. We can express freely how we feel. My son can communicate openly with us.”

Spiritual Well-Being. In their struggle to reestablish themselves in the US and find their new role and identity, many traveled an inward journey to find peace and harmony. One male participant commented, “In my early years in the US, there were times I felt like I was floating and drifting along on the ocean, not knowing where to go. I lost my goals in life at one point. I used to believe that the purpose of life was to be able to bring out all my potential. Now, I have changed that belief. . . . The journey provided us many opportunities to learn, to grow, and to be more mature. So now, being successful or not is not a major concern for me, rather, being able to live fully to the meaning of life is more important. This whole journey is a learning experience.” He continued, “Throughout our lives, we will no doubt encounter many types of struggles, such as those with career and with culture, but I think the biggest battlefield lies inside us. Once we achieve victory there, we can bring out the meaning in life.”

Some participants commented how their beliefs changed their family life in a positive manner. One woman shared, “I used to find fault with my husband all the time. After attending church and becoming a Christian myself, I came to accept him as who he is. I am more accepting of my family members.”

Several mentioned that they would use the Bible as the guiding principle in their parenting. “We hope they live by the Bible principles—honesty, courage, responsibility, and respect. They are not culture-specific. They are the virtues that belong to all cultures.” “I would pray with my son before he goes to bed every night.” The topic of Christian Chinese American families deserves more study in the future.

Spirituality is manifested in their future goals. One woman stated, “After I send my son to college, I would like to go back to China to open a nursing home for the poor and to provide some services for the needy.” Through hard work and determination, many of these immigrants achieved their dreams. However, their dreams did not stop at the material level. One woman who had come to the US over 15 years ago said, “What am I searching for now? A good neighborhood, a good position, a big house, expensive cars? It should be more than that. I feel more complete by giving back to society.”

Balancing the Host and Heritage Cultures. With hard work and education, many of these participants have done well in their careers. Their social mobility allows them to get access to the host culture, which many find attractive and appealing. Meanwhile, with the help of technology and ever increasing global communication, many participants have easy access to Chinese newspapers and China’s news broadcasts. Some parents shared their appreciation of both cultures. “I feel parenting in America is much easier than in China. Here we have more choices and freedom, and academic success is not the only choice children face.” One mother shared her positive view of the American culture: “I like the parts of American culture that are open and friendly. Let me share an example. In China, in my daughter’s school, only the good-looking girls were invited to go to dance classes. One year, my daughter was not invited and she was so disappointed and sad. Here in the US, her teachers encourage everyone to participate. I think this is a very positive thing. I like the part of the American education system that encourages children and does not compare or criticize children that much.”

Another woman shared the following: “I opted for the combination of both cultures. The Chinese culture emphasizes academic achievements, so naturally I strive to help my children achieve academically. On the other hand, I like to see my children become independent and able to express themselves freely. I allow them the space to develop that.”

While embracing and absorbing the positives of the host culture, many participants also stressed the importance of developing a bicultural identity in their children, the second generation of immigrants. One mother put it

succinctly: “It is very important to learn more about Chinese culture. They will grow up to be bicultural and [there is] nothing you can do about it. They will have the social identity of being Chinese American. It is very important for them to have a good understanding of Chinese culture to be able to have peace with their social identity.”

To introduce the Chinese culture to the second generation of immigrants, the majority of the participants sent their children to Chinese Heritage School on weekends to learn the Chinese language and culture, and to socialize with other Chinese children. One mother stated, “I am a lot busier on weekends than on weekdays. My daughter has a piano lesson on Saturday morning. She goes to Chinese school Saturday afternoon to learn drawing, dancing, chess, and English writing.”

Besides sending their children to Chinese Heritage School, many parents in this study also traveled with their children to China every year to experience Chinese culture and to maintain contact with friends and relatives in China. One mother reported, “A trip to Beijing, China, spurred my son’s interest in Chinese history and culture. He has so many questions for us these days regarding Chinese history.”

However, bicultural identity development can also generate conflicts and dilemmas in the parenting arena. Chinese culture, under the influence of Confucianism, placed high value on education. The majority of participants in this study had school-age children. Some reported the dilemma of how much they should push their children academically. They lamented that the American education system, albeit encouraging creativity, did not fare well in helping their children build a solid foundation for basic knowledge. “The American school system has both positive and negative sides. The positive is encouraging independent thinking and creativity. The negative side is that it did not do enough to build a solid knowledge base. So, we decided to send our daughter to an algebra class two nights a week,” one mother shared.

Another mother commented, “As a parent, I struggle between the American culture and the Chinese culture, trying to find a fine line between what is appropriate and what is best for my child. Should I relax and let her do whatever she wants to? Should I be strict with her academically like my parents did with me? Should I let her get involved in sports more or emphasize her studies more? These are the questions I constantly ask myself.”

One woman shared similar thoughts: “It is hard to be a Chinese parent living in Naperville. On one hand, I want to give my son plenty of time and room to do things at his pace and at his level. I want him to grow up to be a happy individual. On the other hand, I feel guilty sometimes, because I let

him quit his piano lessons, and I did not push him hard enough to study Chinese. All the Chinese I know here send their children to music lessons and to Chinese school.” “It is hard to get my son to play piano or learn Chinese on the weekend. He always complains about the extra work that his American friends do not have on weekends,” one mother shared. “My daughter is very active. She is involved in all kinds of sports—swimming, skiing, etc. My mother would never involve me in sports like this. I think it is a positive thing to be actively involved in sports. But sometimes, if she plays too much, it is hard to get her to calm down to study. She wriggles too much during her study time.”

Despite the high educational degree these participants achieved, when asked about their expectations for their children, many stated that academic achievement should not be the only goal they have for their children. Instead, they stressed that being an emotionally healthy individual and becoming an independent social entity in American society was of higher salience.

Themes Related to Acculturative Stress

Language Barriers at the Early Stage. Many participants reported language being the main barrier. One female stated, “I attended my first class and couldn’t understand much of what the professor said. I brought a tape recorder to class and recorded all the lectures. After class, I spent hours to figure out what was taught.” One mother shared her pain: “Language was the main issue when I first came. I still have that concern. Sometimes when my son talks to me very rapidly, I can’t understand him well.” Because of language barriers, some found it hard to communicate with native speakers, thus limiting their interactions with them.

Loneliness. Due to the nature of immigration, which involved change and loss, many immigrants reported experiencing loneliness. Many participants, especially those who came to the country without their spouse, reported experiencing loneliness. “I missed my wife and my daughter terribly. I did not know whether they would be able to come or not, or when they would come. That first year was very tough for me,” said one male in his 40s. A female echoed this theme: “I was very lonely. I lived in an apartment all by myself, not knowing another soul there. I remember whenever I called my family in China, as soon as I heard their voices, I just cried.” Another female responded, “My son was only one year old when I came to the US. My husband was in England. I missed them terribly.”

Loss of Social Status and Identity. The majority of participants in this study came to the US to pursue higher education. Prior to coming to the US, many of them were well-established in China, teaching in universities or working in research labs. Upon arrival in the US, some experienced the loss of social status. One woman, who was a physician in China for eight years, came to the US to find herself enrolled as a nursing student. She shared, “When we first came, things were tough. There were times we seriously considered going back to China. The hardest part was that we were not sure how the future would unfold. We did not have any sense of security. We left so much behind when we came here.”

One participant who was teaching at a well-known university in China before coming to the US put it this way: “The hardest part of the transition was adapting to the new social status. That is, you came from an environment where you were, relatively speaking, well respected and successful, to be a poor student again.” One woman related the following: “I was a piano teacher in China. When I first came here, I worked as a salesperson in a piano store. I felt so embarrassed at the beginning, because being a salesperson was considered losing face in my culture. So, that was a challenge for me.”

A stay-at-home mom concurred: “I was working in a government office before I came to the States. It was considered a very good job then. When I came here, I was only a stay-at-home mom. Today, my former colleagues in China are very successful in their careers, holding top positions, whereas I have nothing careerwise. But it is worthwhile. I have my family here.”

Conclusion

The Family Strengths Model incorporates six major qualities: appreciation and affection; commitment; positive communication; enjoyable time together; spiritual well-being; and the effective management of stress and crisis. The results of this study were congruent with some aspects of the model, and they added new dimensions to the model as well: balancing host and heritage cultures, and contextual support. This group of immigrants seemed to have achieved cultural assimilation, which is measured by the degree to which immigrants adopt the language, customs, and other cultural practices of the host culture. However, a high level of cultural assimilation did not predict a corresponding social assimilation. In other words, interviewees were able to maintain a strong ethnic attachment, thus maintaining a bicultural identity to various degrees.

As mentioned earlier, leaving one's country entailed change of support system. The most significant aspect of migration was the change in social context and social status. The absence of social support and familiarity often engendered feelings of loneliness, and bred anxiety and loss of security and control.

Therefore, many immigrants, in the process of adapting to the culture, strived to reestablish their social groups through associations or church organizations. The presence of support from people of the same country of origin and members of the host culture were likely to facilitate an immigrant's adaptation. Contact with people from the same country reinforced one's sense of self and one's affinity to the heritage culture, whereas contact with people from the host culture facilitated the entry into American society.

Despite the fact that this group of Chinese immigrants came to the US voluntarily to pursue their goals in education and career, and have achieved their success, the immigration process posed no less stress and challenges to these sojourners. It has taken them hard work, determination, and understanding and support from family members and the community to make the process a success, and to sustain it.

Implications

Research on the strengths of Chinese American families remains patchy. The increasing numbers of this ethnic population necessitate studies of a similar nature to provide scholars and health professionals with a more accurate picture of Chinese American families. As reported by this study, garnering support is pivotal in surviving the early stage of the journey. This study reiterates the need to establish international student support groups on campus and support groups in the community to ease the transition.

Limitations

There were two limitations of this study. First, all the participants were from urban areas in the Midwest. It was a relatively homogeneous group—highly educated professionals with intact families. Thus, the interview was likely to have a skewed vision of participants' perceptions of family strengths and acculturative stress. Second, this study used qualitative methods, thus limiting generalization of the results to the general public. Future studies beg further investigation on similar topics with different population groups and with larger and random samples.

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