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Houseplants as Mental Health Supports for Dorm Occupants During the Lockdown Period at Portland State University

Brittani Wallsten

Background

In March of 2020, like much of the country and the world, Portland, Oregon, went into lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic (VanderHart, 2020). The duration of this lockdown differed across the globe, but for Portland State University students the lockdown lasted until the beginning of Fall Term 2021. Students had several choices. For those living in the dorms, they could either leave campus and attend school remotely from somewhere else or continue living in the dorms while, again, attending their classes remotely. New students could choose to either remain off-campus or move into the dorms in a following academic term. Approximately 675 students choose to live in the dorms during the lockdown year, a third of the average number of dorm dwellers in previous years (Powell, 2020). According to the university, most dorm-occupants were between 18 and 21 years old (78% of occupants in 2021), and most were first-year students, 44% in 2021 (Portland State University, 2022). All university classes were remote and many university services were limited, if they were functioning at all. Additionally, in an effort to increase social distancing, dorm residents were not permitted to have roommates.

Some students living in the Portland State dorms not only had to adjust to living far from home, but were also incredibly socially isolated at a time when they would have been exploring a new city and making new friends. Tulane University has shared some of the facts about rising rates of social isolation because of the pandemic and its negative health effects, which include worse sleep, reduced immune function, higher rates of anxiety and depression, poor cognitive function, and a higher risk of cardiovascular issues in comparison to pre-pandemic levels (Tulane University, 2021). Son and others published findings that 71% of participating students had increased anxious and depressive symptoms as a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdowns (Son et al, 2020). How did students attempt to cope with these struggles? Many got pets, went on walks, called friends and family, and some got houseplants.

A survey by Garden Center Magazine found that the houseplant industry boomed across the United States after the lockdown began: 95% of garden centers surveyed made a profit at a time when businesses were struggling to stay open (Spirgen, 2020). Before the pandemic, millennials made up about 29% of gardeners and plant owners, but this surged by up to 65% in 2020 (Whitinger and

¹ This article, which was based on a class project rather than a research study, was not reviewed by the PSU IRB.

Cohen, 2020). This study aims to explore how acquiring houseplants for their dorms during the pandemic affected the mental health of students at Portland State University.

Literature Review

Therapeutic horticulture, or the use of plants to support mental health, has a large discourse community. In Canada, researchers set up a successful outreach program for college students experiencing loneliness. At the events these researchers hosted, students could come into a common space and play with therapy dogs, plant some seedlings, or paint (Moore et al, 2021). This study, however, was implemented before the pandemic and was meant to be a social event as well as a mental health support. A study in Bulgaria by Dzahamov and others surveyed college students during their lockdown and found that having plants indoors, on their balconies, in their backyards, or outside their windows eased these students' feelings of anxiety or depression by allowing them to "escape" (Dzahamov et al, 2021). However, this study did not mention whether students acquired new plants during the lockdown or if they had always enjoyed flora. A diverging study by Thatcher and others found that students working in lab settings did better on mental tasks when there were plants in the workspace, but in an office setting there were no significant differences in productivity when plants were present (Thatcher et al, 2020). Plants increased some positive feelings about the workspace, but participants scored lower in work engagement and about the same in most other measures when plants were around (Thatcher et al, 2020).

The studies above look at the effects of plants on students' mental health and productivity. My study does not look at productivity or academic metrics but instead seeks to uncover what students felt was supportive about the plants and why they chose to get them in the first place. Were the plants a way to escape without leaving the room, as found in Dzahamov's study (2020)? Was it the act of caring for something that supported their mental health, as indicated by Moore's study (2015)? Maybe there was an increase in positive feelings but no other big change, as found by Thatcher's study (2020). By using qualitative methods, this study aims to answer some of these questions by asking students themselves.

Methods

For this project, I conducted two one-on-one interviews as well as one focus group with three participants. One student volunteered for both the focus group and a personal interview. All participants (n=4) were undergraduates at Portland State University who were living in the dorms for at least a year after the

pandemic began. The participants were mostly female (n=3) and all participants identified as white. Their names were changed for this report. All of them acquired new houseplants during the Covid-19 lockdown. Some participants had plants before the pandemic began and got more, while others were new plant owners. I asked these folks to participate because we shared classes and I already knew most of them at least as classmates, and so I felt that they would be comfortable sharing a bit about their mental health. I approached participants in person after classes and contacted them through text messages and Instagram for scheduling. I explained the project and asked if they were interested in being interviewed or participating in a focus group. All four volunteered to participate.

Within the next few weeks after selecting participants, interviews were held in person and the focus group was held online via Zoom. The interviews lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. The focus group lasted 30 minutes. I used a semi-structured interview guide with questions relating to how participants felt about their space, why the participants chose plant ownership, and how plants affected their time in the dorms during the lockdown. The focus group's questions were like the interviews but adapted to a more conversational setting. The focus group participants knew each other beforehand so there was already some trust amongst the members, but they were not close friends.

I began the interviews and focus group with a brief explanation of the study, the risks and how I was trying to mitigate them, and the privacy policy. The risks I explained were that, because my research involves mental health, they may feel triggered or uncomfortable if I ask about something more intimate than they were expecting. I let them know that they can always stop me and ask for a break or to end the interview early and I would not be bothered. I gave the participants a chance to opt-in or out as they chose. All chose to continue participating. The meetings were recorded on a voice memo app, and I transcribed them afterward.

For this project, and among these participants, I was an insider in a few ways. I am also an undergraduate student at PSU, I live close to campus, and I own houseplants. I asked questions based on my research but also based on how the lockdown and the isolation caused by Covid-19 has affected me. I am also a generally feminine-presenting person so I am sure that allowed for some more open and intimate conversation with the participants than a more masculine-presenting person might experience. Most of the conversations felt casual and friendly and unburdened by power dynamics. Yet, in some ways, I was on the outside and came from a place of some power. I am older than all the participants by 3 to 6 years, which created some distance in our conversations at points. I also work in the field of mental health, so there were times when I used jargon or spoke in a way that may have felt less like a classmate discussion and

more like a therapeutic engagement. This was not my intention, but I noticed it happen a few times in the interviews.

After the interviews and the focus group, I transcribed the conversations from recordings and began coding. I printed out the manuscripts and used open coding followed by focused coding to identify common ideas and themes that were present in the data (Bailey, 2007). The following are the themes that arose from the data.

Findings

Routine

One of the themes that were mentioned in all of the interviews and the focus group is that having houseplants supported the student's day-to-day routine, which was essential for their mental health. Because the plants needed regular water and care, the passage of time was more salient for them. Adrian said, "*for me at least it helps to be held to a routine like that... if I don't have a structure for myself then I spiral and don't do anything.*" Another student described that she had a lot of trouble keeping a normal sleep schedule because of being cooped up in her room all the time. With remote class, she did not have responsibilities throughout the day to build a schedule around, so she would be up at odd hours. She said about her plants, "*they helped me keep a schedule, you know for watering and seeing them grow or put out a new leaf was exciting.*" At a time when having a "normal routine" was difficult, houseplants supported these students in creating their own schedule and sticking to it.

Positive Responsibility

The next theme that came up frequently was the idea that the responsibility of their plants was a source of joy, pride, and comfort. One student simply put, "*it's nice to have something to care for.*" Another student said, "*I really like having them and they feel like someone to talk to and take care of.*" Two participants compared their plants to pets. They could not have any animals in their dorms because of the university's housing rules, time constraints, or financial constraints, but houseplants served as an outlet for this desire to care for something. One interviewee said, "*I missed my pets back home so having something alive in the space was really nice.*" Another participants said they would like to have a pet someday, "*[but] in the meantime, I think plants are a good way to provide the benefits that a pet does.*" This need for positive responsibility or the feeling of having something to take care of was common among all the participants and was fulfilled by owning plants.

Interestingly, the focus group discussed a possible limit to this idea after a participant described receiving one of her plants as a gift. She said, "*I think, for*

a gift, a plant is a good choice... it's really rewarding and satisfying too... you can actually see the plant growing when you do take care of it." Another group member countered this idea with the stress that may be added to someone by that extra responsibility. They said, *"it is a responsibility even if it is a small amount of responsibility, it's still responsibility."* For the most part, participants agreed that their plants were a source of pride, and they enjoyed the low level of responsibility plants added to their lives, however they did not think it was a good idea to give a plant as a gift without asking the recipient first.

Beauty

All the interviewees mentioned how much they enjoyed the aesthetic value of their plants. Folks said things like *"I really love the green"* and *"I don't know it's like a dream to have an apartment full of beautiful plants."* But more than just the look of the plants, the participants emphasized the "energy" of them. Diane said, *"I mean I love plants in general. I feel like it brings really positive energy to a space. Like I feel like there's a really palpable difference between an indoor space that has plants and one that doesn't. You know?"* This was a common phrase among participants. Adrian had the reverse experience. They were sold a dying plant from a store, and despite their best efforts was unable to save it. Adrian said that having the dead plant around was very upsetting. It seems like plants influenced the students' emotions in both ways—pleasant when they are thriving and upsetting when they were dying. Thankfully, most folks had positive experiences with their plants, and Adrian was hopeful to try again someday.

"Indicator"

The final theme I would like to discuss was coined in the focus group by Fae. They shared:

I think a lot of times when my mental health wasn't doing great I would start neglecting like basic or "basic-adjacent" responsibilities. And I wouldn't really notice because it would be really difficult for me to like get what I am doing done. If that makes sense? ...and obviously like, no one's going to point out if I'm like falling behind with like household chores or homework or stuff like that. ... So like to have an indicator in some way is like a little bit helpful.

The rest of the group latched onto this idea and agreed that they appreciated their plants for providing a visual marker of how they were maintaining their space. Fae also said, *"when you don't care for plants it's like visually obvious... And I feel like that's a good reminder to be like, 'Oh I've been neglecting a plant. What*

else have I been neglecting?” Adrian shared similar sentiments and Diane agreed, adding, “*Like in the opposite sense of ‘seeing your plant is dying and you haven’t taken care of it’ you can actually see the plant growing when you do take care of it!*”. This idea of plants as an indicator seems to be the summation of all the other themes I identified from these data. The plants added beauty, routine, and a positive sense of responsibility to a student’s life. But, when mental health became a struggle, responsibilities and routine would slip and the plants would start to be less beautiful and lively. The students could then notice this indicator and do what they needed to do to support themselves and recover.

At the end of the interviews and focus group, I asked each participant if they would, for the reasons above, recommend a houseplant to new dorm occupants. All of them agreed that it would be a good idea if the student wanted it. The focus group questioned whether giving a plant to someone who did not want one was wise, since having a dying plant around was so upsetting for Adrian. But, they thought that if the student was able to choose their plant, for example using a gift card, it could be really supportive for them.

Conclusion

In this study, I sought to explore through interviews and a focus group how having houseplants in their dorms during the Covid-19 pandemic may have been supportive to the mental health of Portland State students. I found that the plants gave these students a positive sense of responsibility and helped them maintain a routine. The plants also added an aesthetic value to their living spaces and served as an indicator for when their mental health may have been struggling. All the students enjoyed having their plants around and wanted to continue having plants and other living things in their homes. These participants also recommend houseplants to any interested new dorm students.

This study was limited in a few ways. First, I was only able to speak to a small group of people. It would be interesting to interview many more students to see how they experienced their plants during the lockdown. I think a survey would be a great addition to this study. There is a strong selective preference around plants because plant-lovers like their plants and are far more eager to share, whereas other folks may not care or feel interested or motivated enough to share in an interview setting. A survey may be able to catch some of these other perspectives. I also think that I could refine my questions a great deal now that I have identified some themes and common experiences. My original interview guides were very broad, and a lot of my data was not as relevant as it could have been. I learned a lot in this study and believe these adjustments would lead to more answers and new questions.

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