

Living Behind the Mask: A Phenomenological Study of High-Functioning Depression Among Young Adults

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E d i t o r	R e v i e w e r s
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1. Round 1

1.1. Reviewer 1

Reviewer:

The paragraph in the Introduction beginning “The capacity to remain outwardly functional despite internal distress may be understood partly through processes of concealment, self-monitoring, and social performance” relies heavily on the analogy with social camouflaging in autism. Although the analogy is potentially useful, the manuscript should be more cautious in transferring a construct developed in a different clinical population to depression. The authors should clarify that camouflaging is being used conceptually rather than diagnostically and should explain which specific mechanisms are hypothesized to be shared, such as suppression of visible distress, impression management, behavioral compensation, or strategic self-presentation. Without this clarification, the comparison may imply equivalence between distinct psychological processes. A stronger depression-specific theoretical framework on emotional suppression, self-presentation, stigma management, or perfectionistic overcompensation would improve conceptual precision.

The final paragraphs of the Introduction should be revised to sharpen the specific knowledge gap. The sentence “comparatively little attention has been directed toward the lived experience of young adults who remain externally successful while privately struggling” is central to the rationale but remains broad. The authors should specify what is already known about concealed depressive symptoms and exactly what has not been studied in the Malaysian context. The rationale would be stronger if it distinguished gaps in phenomenology, cultural interpretation, help-seeking, masking, and the psychological cost of maintaining performance. At present, the Introduction covers many adjacent clinical literatures, but the transition from those literatures to the precise research gap is not sufficiently focused. The final aim sentence is clear, but it should emerge from a more explicitly articulated empirical and cultural gap.

The Data Collection Tools section reports that interviews were conducted “either face-to-face in a private setting or through a secure online video-conferencing platform.” The authors should provide the number of interviews conducted in each modality and discuss how equivalence across modes was addressed. Face-to-face and online interviewing can differ in rapport, disclosure, privacy, observation of nonverbal cues, and participant comfort, particularly when sensitive depressive experiences are discussed. The manuscript should also specify whether the same interviewer conducted all interviews, the interviewer's professional background and qualitative training, whether the interviewer had any prior relationship with participants, and whether field notes differed according to interview modality. These details are important for evaluating reflexivity and consistency in qualitative data generation.

The statement that interviews were conducted “primarily English or Malay, depending on individual preference” raises an important issue regarding linguistic equivalence that is not sufficiently addressed. The manuscript should report how many interviews were conducted in each language, who translated the Malay transcripts, whether translation occurred before or after coding, whether bilingual researchers reviewed translations, and how culturally specific expressions were preserved. If coding was conducted on translated English transcripts rather than the original Malay material, the authors should discuss the potential loss of semantic and emotional nuance. For a phenomenological study, where interpretation depends heavily on the precise meanings participants assign to experience, the translation procedure should be described as a substantive methodological component rather than a minor logistical detail.

The Data Analysis section states that analysis was “informed by Colaizzi’s method of phenomenological analysis,” but the exact analytic procedure remains partially blended with generic thematic analysis language. The authors should clarify whether they followed Colaizzi's seven-step procedure systematically or adapted it. Specifically, the manuscript should distinguish significant statement extraction, formulation of meanings, clustering into themes, exhaustive description, formulation of the fundamental structure, and participant validation. If the analysis departed from Colaizzi's original process, those adaptations should be justified. The phrase “phenomenological thematic procedure informed by Colaizzi” is currently broad enough that another research team could not readily reproduce the analytic strategy.

Authors revised and uploaded the document.

1.2. Reviewer 2

Reviewer:

The Introduction contains several references whose relevance to the study's central construct is insufficiently explained. For example, the discussion of “functional dystonia,” “hallucinations and psychosis,” primary hyperparathyroidism, autoimmune thyroiditis, oral mucosal disease, and parkinsonian phenomena appears considerably removed from the phenomenology of concealed depression among young adults. While these sources may illustrate general principles regarding subjective experience or differential diagnosis, their inclusion dilutes the conceptual coherence of the Introduction. The authors should critically reconsider whether each cited study directly advances the argument about high-functioning depression. If these references must be retained, the manuscript needs explicit sentences explaining their conceptual relevance; otherwise, the literature review risks appearing citation-driven rather than theoretically integrated.

The Study Design and Participants section states that “the participants consisted of 18 young adults residing in Malaysia who were purposively selected because of their direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation.” The sampling procedure requires substantially greater methodological detail. The authors should specify the recruitment period, recruitment sites or platforms, geographical distribution within Malaysia, number of individuals who expressed interest, number screened, number excluded, reasons for exclusion, and whether any participants withdrew. Furthermore, because the sample included participants recruited through mental-health-related online platforms and social media, the authors should discuss the possibility of self-selection bias. Individuals already familiar with the term “high-functioning depression” may have been more likely to participate and may also have used similar explanatory language during interviews.

The eligibility criterion that participants reported “a sustained experience of depressive symptoms or significant depressive feelings” is currently too imprecise for a study centered on depression. The manuscript should state how depressive symptomatology was established during screening. If no validated depression measure or structured clinical interview was used, this limitation must be made explicit, and the authors should describe the screening questions used to determine eligibility. Because only eight of the 18 participants reportedly had a prior professional diagnosis, the sample potentially includes heterogeneous experiences ranging from clinically significant depressive disorders to nonspecific emotional distress. The authors should therefore avoid wording that could imply that all participants had a depressive disorder and should clarify whether the study investigates self-identified high-functioning depressive experiences rather than clinically confirmed depression.

The Methods section states that “high functioning was operationally understood as the ability to continue fulfilling major academic, occupational, familial, or social responsibilities while experiencing persistent internal psychological distress.” This definition needs greater methodological specificity. The authors should explain how much preserved functioning was necessary for inclusion, whether participants needed to demonstrate functioning in more than one domain, and how functioning was assessed during screening. For example, a participant could remain employed while experiencing substantial deterioration in attendance, performance, self-care, or relationships. A brief functional screening framework or explicit decision rule would make participant selection more reproducible and would reduce the risk that “high functioning” was determined retrospectively based on the narratives generated during the interviews.

The manuscript states that “data saturation was considered to have been reached with the 18 participants included in the final analysis,” but provides no evidence for how saturation was evaluated. The authors should specify whether they used code saturation, meaning saturation, informational power, or another criterion and indicate approximately when no substantively new themes were emerging. It would also be helpful to state whether recruitment ceased immediately after saturation or whether additional interviews were conducted to verify it. In phenomenological research, simply stating that saturation occurred is insufficient; the manuscript should describe the decision-making process that supported the adequacy of the final sample.

Authors revised and uploaded the document.

2. Revised

Editor’s decision after revisions: Accepted.

Editor in Chief’s decision: Accepted.