

Appreciating professional Master of IOP students' coping through persona methodology

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Orientation: The distance learning professional Master of Industrial and Organisational Psychology (IOP) student faces the challenge of balancing a demanding academic workload with work and life responsibilities.

Research purpose: The objective of the study was to better understand students' coping by crafting an archetypal coping persona of the professional Master of IOP student.

Motivation for the study: As research on the coping mechanisms students adopt for safeguarding academic and professional success is scant, further researching the coping persona will promote richer insight into and appreciation of the student population's needs, goals, anxieties and experiences.

Research approach/design and method: The study adopted a qualitative, descriptive-interpretive research design with an open-ended questionnaire survey approach. The persona methodology with qualitative theme analysis enabled the integration of 11 distance learning professional Master of IOP students' responses into an archetypal coping persona.

Main findings: The persona methodology yielded two distinctive and overlapping personae characteristics that describe the core academic and professional goals, fears, needs, coping mechanisms and psychological well-being attributes among M1 and M2/3 professional Master of IOP students.

Practical/managerial implications: A better understanding of coping personae uncovers considerations for student selection, retention and success through a curriculum that fosters personal and professional coping capacities among master's students.

Contribution/value-add: The identified personae contribute new insights that extend the student coping literature and inform empathic student academic and professional learning journey support.

Keywords: agency; career calling; coping mechanisms; coping ethics; goal facilitation; persona methodology; professional Master of Industrial and Organisational Psychology student; psychological well-being.

Introduction

The coping mechanisms among university graduate students, especially psychology professionals, remain a key interest because of their impact on student success and well-being (Brown et al., 2022; Edwards et al., 2014; El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Mozid 2022; Priya & Kumar, 2020; Takács et al., 2021). The professional Master of Industrial and Organisational Psychology (IOP) programme is designed to prepare graduates for careers as qualified industrial psychologists after the completion of their coursework (year), mini-dissertation and internship (M2/3 year) and successfully passing the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) Board for Psychology's national board examination (Coetzee et al., 2022; Oosthuizen et al., 2023). Distance learning Master of IOP students are generally employed and face the challenge of balancing a demanding academic workload with work and family responsibilities (Van Niekerk et al., 2024). Such students must tap into essential coping mechanisms and psychological well-being attributes to successfully complete their qualification (Edwards et al., 2014; El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Varo et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2024).

The distance learning M1 students must attend compulsory practical training sessions, work through online learning activities and materials and complete several applied practice-based

assignments across various modules during the coursework year. During the M2/3 year, students must independently conduct research and complete a mini-dissertation under supervision. They must also enrol for a one-year internship at an HPCSA-accredited institution (employer) under the supervision of an academic and external industrial psychologist. The three-year span of the professional Master of IOP programme poses numerous growth and study demands for the student (Coetzee et al., 2022; Oosthuizen et al., 2023; Van Niekerk et al., 2024). Prior research highlights the importance of educators fostering an internal repertoire of coping mechanisms within such students that will enable them to manage and navigate the challenges and demands of their professional studies and careers (Brown et al., 2022).

In this study, coping personas refer to archetypes that characterise the common goals, needs, challenges, anxieties, coping mechanisms and psychological well-being attributes that professional Master of IOP students employ to successfully handle academic and internship demands and challenges. Personas help create an archetype of a learner group that is appealing and informative to those utilising it in the design and delivery of a programme (Almahri et al., 2019; Salomão et al., 2015; Zagallo et al., 2019). Personas further provide a rich account of learners' study experiences and generally act as an empathy or compassion map towards a more humancentric approach in programme design, delivery and student support (Rynearson et al., 2021). The archetypal description of a learner group, in the form of a persona, also provides a common vocabulary for discussions and decisions about the learner population and academic support initiatives (Lilley et al. 2012; Weinhandl et al., 2023, 2024).

Study objective

Student coping studies tend to involve quantitative and qualitative research based on empirically developed measuring instruments that assess associations between coping and well-being constructs (Feyisa et al., 2022; Freire et al., 2020; Mozid 2022; Priya & Kumar, 2020; Yano et al., 2021). Although such research provides evidence of the importance of coping strategies among higher education students to promote their success (Feyisa et al., 2022; Freire et al., 2020; Priya & Kumar, 2020; Takács et al., 2021; Yano et al., 2021), research on the qualitative data-driven coping persona of the distance learning professional Master of IOP student is lacking.

This study addresses this research gap to better understand students' coping mechanisms by crafting an archetypal coping persona of professional Master of IOP students. Such a coping persona could promote richer insight into and appreciation of the student population's needs, goals, anxieties and experiences. Additionally, an archetypal persona could inform selection criteria for future cohort applicants while engendering compassionate, targeted academic and well-being support interventions and initiatives that promote student retention and success.

Professional Master of IOP programme lecturers often have limited knowledge and awareness of students' lived experiences of the programme's study demands and challenges (Van Niekerk et al., 2024). Research provides evidence of the usefulness of student personas in planning and developing learning materials, feedback and student support resources to ensure students' needs are met in digital learning contexts (Weinhandl et al., 2023). Aligned with research by Weinhandl et al. (2023, 2024), the persona serves as an information tool that could be useful in professional lecturers' development. It can help them facilitate an alignment between distance learning teaching and assessment tools and the coping characteristics master's students employ to promote students' performance, well-being, retention and success.

Literature review

Coping refers to individuals' capacity to assess internal and external challenges and threats to personal well-being in relation to personal goals and resources. Coping involves the activation of cognitive, emotional and behavioural efforts as coping mechanisms to master, reduce or tolerate perceived challenges and threats that cause psychological distress (Priya & Kumar, 2020; Takács et al., 2021). Psychological coping mechanisms are adaptive, active coping strategies (e.g. finding a solution to the problem, reducing negative feelings and social support networking) to regulate cognitions, emotions and behaviours in response to environmental or situational affordances or constraints. Prior research offers evidence of positive adaptive coping mechanisms' beneficial effects on students' stress, mental health, well-being and study engagement (Fitzgibbon & Murphy, 2023; Freire et al., 2016).

Research also reveals that students in health care professions generally tend to engage in adaptive, positive coping strategies that promote their capacity to complete their studies and attain their academic and professional goals. Students thus employ problem-focused and active coping strategies (agentic coping, positive reframing, acceptance, humour, planning and self-regulated time management, positive reframing, optimism, spirituality and instrumental support seeking) that target the root cause of stress and engender long-term stress relief for mental health (Fitzgibbon & Murphy, 2023; Guskowska & Dąbrowska-Zimakowska, 2022; Mozid 2022; Priya & Kumar, 2020; Wolters & Brady, 2021). Freire et al. (2016) and Yano et al. (2021) also provided evidence of positive reappraisals (changing the meaning of a problematic situation by highlighting its positive aspects and activating positive expectations), instrumental support seeking (seeking understanding, support and information for resolving the problem and emotional state caused by the problem) and planning (analysing and designing an action plan to solve a problematic situation while proactively managing time) as important protective coping and well-being mechanisms for academic situational challenges and demands. Emotional support, access to social support networks and mindfulness

(remaining present and accepting experiences and emotions as passing) act as further protective coping mechanisms in stress-inducing situations and account for reduced distress and increased positive psychological functioning (Dailey et al., 2022). Mindfulness facilitates mindful agency whereby students regulate their emotional states and their cognitive study engagement and learning processes (Yang et al., 2023). Professional development is another coping mechanism where the pursuit of graduate studies towards a profession reflects active self-care, positive mindfulness, self-belief, self-regulation and self-awareness (Cleofas & Mijares, 2022). Spiritual and religious activities act as additional self-care mechanisms that promote effective coping by enhancing meaning-making and promoting a sense of personal competence and psychological well-being (Ying & Han, 2009).

Psychological well-being attributes provide the behavioural repertoire or resources for agentic coping and adapting (Naidoo 2023; Priya & Kumar, 2020; Takács et al., 2021). Individuals' psychological well-being is a facet of positive psychological functioning. The facets include mental vitality (hopefulness and mental vigour for problem-solving and learning), emotional vitality (sense of personal mastery, enthusiasm and vigour for emotional self-regulation and goal-directed actions), self-acceptance, environmental mastery, positive relations with others, autonomy, purpose in life (pursuit of self-realisation) and personal growth. These psychological attributes are valuable resources for adaptive coping in the university context (Freire et al., 2016; Richman et al., 2009; Ryff, 1989; Shapiro, 2023). Prior research further highlights academic resilience (having mental toughness, grit and being results and ability oriented to beat the odds academically despite adverse conditions) and psychological resilience (activating positive coping mechanisms and mobilising an identity-based learning motivation to deal with external pressure factors in the face of adversity) as core psychological well-being attributes among students in the psychology and health care professions (Siebecke, 2023; Yang et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2024). Students ascribing to an authentic career calling and having an identity-based motivational connection to a future goal (e.g. registering as an industrial psychologist) are more likely to engage their psychological well-being attributes in active coping and self-regulation (Lee 2024; Zhou et al., 2020).

However, distance learning professional Master of IOP students' coping mechanisms and psychological well-being attributes are unclear. This study employed the persona methodology to identify common archetypal coping mechanisms and psychological attributes to engender a greater appreciation for the way in which these students cope with the programme's challenges and demands.

Research design

The researchers adopted a qualitative, descriptive-interpretive research design with an open-ended questionnaire survey approach to explore master's students' subjective reality.

The open-ended questionnaire allowed the participants to express their lived experiences, realities and perceptions freely and in their own words. The interpretive research paradigm enabled the researchers to explore the narrative responses in the context of professional Master of IOP studies and through the lens of participants' values and meaning attributions. The researchers' personal viewpoints and prior scientific knowledge were utilised to decode the collected data's meaning (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Bhattacharjee, 2012; Creswell, 2013; Züll, 2016).

Research setting

The study involved students pursuing the professional Master of IOP degree at a South African comprehensive open distance learning higher education institution.

Entrée and establishing researcher roles

The researchers were subject matter experts who adopted an objective, neutral role during data collection and in the analysis and interpretation of themes to avoid bias in the presentation and discussion of the findings (Khan 2014).

Sampling and participants

Participants had to be officially registered for the professional Master of IOP degree to participate in the survey. A purposive and snowball sampling technique yielded a sample of 11 full-time employed participants. Four students were enrolled for the first-year coursework modules (M1 year), and seven students were enrolled for their mini-dissertation and internship programme (M2/3 year). The sample of participants identified as women ($n = 9$) and men ($n = 2$) of black African ($n = 4$), Indian ($n = 1$), mixed race ($n = 2$) and white ($n = 4$) racial origin. In terms of age, seven participants indicated that they were in the age group of 30 years to 40 years (career exploration stage), three participants were in the age group of 41 years to 50 years (career establishment stage) and one participant was in the age group of > 50 years (career maintenance stage). The sample profile ensured that the researchers had enough variation in the data for the development of the archetypal professional Master of IOP student persona.

Instrument

The researchers developed an open-ended questionnaire (Züll, 2016) to collect in-depth information about various master's student characteristics that would assist in developing the archetypal coping persona. Participants answered demographic questions about their year of first registration, current year of study, age group, gender identification, racial origin, employment status and relationship status. As per the persona methodological protocol, the demographic characteristics were only used as background information, while the narratives generated by the open-ended questions were perceived to have a greater impact on crafting the persona (Cooper, 2004).

Based on guidelines from persona methodology scholars (Bartels et al., 2023; Lilley et al. 2012; Weinhandl et al., 2023, 2024; Zagallo et al., 2019), the open-ended questions asked students to describe:

- The career-life journey that led them to apply and register for the professional Master of IOP programme.
- Their main motivation for enrolling for the master's programme.
- Their key goals for completing the programme.
- Advice they would give prospective students about factors to consider when applying and enrolling for the programme.
- Key challenges they faced during the professional programme.
- Their key fears regarding the programme.
- Key aspects of the programme they enjoy most and feel really happy with.
- Key coping strategies they apply to cope successfully with the programme's study demands and challenges.
- The type of support they need from programme lecturers to help them cope better with the programme's study demands and challenges.
- Their general life motto in handling challenges and problems they encounter.
- Principles of ethics they apply in handling challenges and problems encountered in their master's studies.
- Their psychological well-being.

Data collection

Data collection was administered through the university's information and communications technology (ICT) department to ensure unbiased, voluntary participation. All students registered for the professional Master of IOP received an invitation via a university no-reply email with the URL link to the online survey questionnaire. The researchers applied an iterative approach, oscillating between data collection and analysis on a weekly basis. This approach led to snowballing by means of invitation reminders until a point of theme saturation was reached, and the sample size was thus regarded as adequate to promote meaning making (Hennink et al., 2020).

Capturing and storing data

The data were automatically captured on an Excel spreadsheet generated by Microsoft Office Forms and stored by the researchers in an online, password-protected folder.

Data analysis

The researchers utilised thematic analysis as a qualitative descriptive method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The six-step persona methodology process (Pruitt & Adlin, 2010) enabled the researchers to objectively attach meaning to the extracted themes.

Step 1 involved discussing the purpose of the study with the target audience in mind. This discussion yielded the various categories of open-ended questions posed to participants.

In *step 2*, the researchers employed researcher triangulation with a constant comparative methodology to ensure the rigour, validity and credibility of data and theme analyses, meaning making and interpretation (Creswell, 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Standard qualitative open coding procedures were applied to manually establish an initial list of codes for significant response themes that provided a rich understanding of participants' narrative descriptions of each open-ended question (Al-Asfour et al., 2021; Creswell, 2013). To minimise the risk of potential bias, each researcher first independently studied the data several times to gain an overall impression of the response themes. The researchers followed an inductive, reiterative process to code the data based on recurring discussions, which involved in-depth clarifications and comparisons, and going back to the text to verify insights before reconvening. The reiterative process allowed for the researchers' interpretations to be triangulated until researcher consensus was reached, and the core overarching persona themes and subthemes became sufficiently refined for interpretation and persona development. The principle of meaning saturation (i.e. the point at which no further dimensions and insights were identified) was applied to establish the final list of core persona themes and subthemes to ensure that the persona data had content validity (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Vasileiou et al., 2018).

In *step 3*, the researchers created a persona skeleton that contained relevant data and underlying themes with descriptions that could be used to further develop the persona character (Adlin et al., 2006; Pruitt & Adlin, 2010; Zagallo et al., 2019). *Step 4* involved evaluating and refining the initial skeleton to develop a unique master's student coping persona. In *step 5*, the coding summaries were used to identify the key characteristic attributes of each theme that emerged. The most defining attribute was used to create the persona's name. In this respect, the researchers used the homogenous group attribute, *Professional Master of Industrial and Organisational Psychology Student*, as the persona name. The researchers did not add a persona picture of a real-world individual as per the typical persona methodology convention because prior studies showed that such pictures trigger biases and preconceptions in those who study and use them. Also, the sample had a multiculturally diverse race and gender profile that could not be depicted in a single persona picture (Zagallo et al., 2019). Representative quotes were selected from the sample of participants to illustrate the key coping characteristics of the master's student persona. Finally, in *step 6*, the researchers engaged in validating the respective persona by obtaining consensus from a third researcher that the persona appropriately aligned with the response data.

Reporting

The findings were reported in terms of persona theme categories, which are summarised in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

Persona: The M1-year (coursework) professional master of industrial and organisational psychology student		
<p>The M1-year (coursework) student is either in the career exploration or establishment stage. The student is employed with work experience in the human resource field and may be single, divorced, married or partnered with children. The student wishes to study industrial and organisational psychology (IOP) because of an authentic career calling to register as a professional industrial psychologist with the requisite IOP knowledge, competence and tools for facilitating the well-being, growth and performance of people in the workplace. The student is working towards successfully completing the coursework year to qualify for the M2 or M3 year, which entails a mini-dissertation and internship programme. The student is anxious about potentially not achieving academic and professional success by not passing their coursework, not successfully completing the dissertation, having difficulty obtaining and completing an internship and having difficulty registering as an industrial psychologist. The student taps into several coping mechanisms, ethical values and psychological well-being attributes to ensure self-mastery and agency in achieving academic and professional goals.</p>		
Life motto		
Get back up on the horse. No matter how many times you fall, get back up. There is always a solution to any problem, whether you discover the solution, or someone assists, but there is always a way out.		
Goals	Challenges	Academic support needs
Practising as a professionally registered industrial psychologist and attaining academic success: passing the coursework year, growing and learning the necessary IOP skills and tools from coursework studies.	Proactive time management to master the programme's demands, securing internship and research opportunities, personal work-study-life balance support structures, securing financial support for an internship.	Clear assessment guidelines and resources. Academic feedback and supportive mentoring on coursework assignments and research.
Programme enjoyment	Coping mechanisms	Psychological well-being attributes
Personal and academic growth through knowledge, empowerment and building resilience; lecturer expertise and student support; developing professional IOP skills by engaging in learning experiences (coursework and internship).	Mindfulness, journaling, self-regulated learning through time and boundary management, holistic self-care and self-reflection, religion and/or spirituality, personal development, self-belief and relational support networking.	Authentic career calling, meaningful, active study engagement, problem-focused and active adaptive coping, grit (mental toughness and perseverance), mental and emotional vitality, academic and psychological resilience, professional identity-based motivation, learning and growth orientation.
Coping ethics		
Self-aware, conscientious, ethical coping is visible in personal and professional character, values and conduct; personal and professional competence, accountability and resilience.		

IOP, Industrial and Organisational Psychology.

FIGURE 1: Coping persona of the M1-year (coursework) student.

Persona: The M2/3-year (mini-dissertation and internship) professional master of industrial and organisational psychology student		
<p>The M2/3-year (mini-dissertation and internship) student is either in the career exploration or establishment stage. The student is employed with work experience in the human resource field and may be single, divorced, married or partnered with children. The student is working towards completing the M2/3-year master's studies and all other requisites for registering as an industrial psychologist. The student wishes to broaden and deepen their insight into industrial and organisational psychology (IOP) and human behaviour through the mini-dissertation research and internship process, as well as specialising in an IOP subdomain to provide professional services that benefit people in the workplace. Professional registration is seen as a licence reflecting the IOP skills to promote positive and desirable personal, professional and IOP outcomes for individuals, organisations and communities. The student is anxious about potentially not achieving academic, personal and professional success, such as not successfully completing the dissertation and internship, losing the motivation to complete their master's studies and not being able to handle the challenges of the IOP discipline once they enter practice. The student taps into several coping mechanisms, ethical values and psychological well-being attributes to ensure self-mastery and agency in achieving academic, personal and professional goals.</p>		
Life motto		
Finish what you start. Your direction is more important than your speed. Sometimes, the only way is through. I believe that I have been put on this path for a reason and there's no way around it; there's no option of quitting. The only way is through.		
Goals	Challenges	Academic support needs
Practising as a professionally registered industrial psychologist and attaining academic and professional success: completing master's studies and registering as an industrial psychologist; professional IOP competence towards facilitating positive personal, professional and IOP outcomes.	Proactive time management to master the programme's demands; securing an internship, research opportunities and financial support for an internship; personal work-study-life balance support structures.	Academic support and student resources for research, the dissertation and securing an internship; academic feedback and supportive mentoring on research, the dissertation and internship; active lecturer visibility and student monitoring in the M2/M3 year.
Programme enjoyment	Coping mechanisms	Psychological wellbeing attributes
Personal and academic growth through knowledge, empowerment and building resilience; lecturer expertise and student support; developing professional IOP skills by engaging in learning experiences (coursework and internship).	Mindfulness, journaling, self-regulated learning through time and boundary management, holistic self-care and self-reflection, religion and/or spirituality, personal development, self-belief and relational support networking.	Authentic career calling, meaningful, active study engagement, problem-focused and active adaptive coping, grit (mental toughness and perseverance), mental and emotional vitality, academic and psychological resilience, professional identity-based motivation, learning and growth orientation.
Coping ethics		
Self-aware, conscientious, ethical coping is visible in personal and professional character, values and conduct; personal and professional competence, accountability and resilience.		

FIGURE 2: Coping persona of the M2/3-year (mini-dissertation and internship) student.

Strategies to ensure data quality and integrity

Aligned with Nowell et al.'s (2017) guidelines, the study's trustworthiness (data quality, integrity, credibility and transferability) was ensured through researcher triangulation, transferability through thick descriptions, dependability through quality documentation and record keeping of the data analysis process and confirmability by providing response evidence for the established themes and explanations for interpretations.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of South Africa College of Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee (ethical clearance CREC#3: 3377 and permission 2024_RPC_062). The open-ended questionnaire approach (Züll, 2016) ensured anonymous and voluntary participation, including objectivity and unbiasedness in data collection and analysis. Participants provided informed consent for the research before completing the research questionnaire. Participants had the right to withdraw from the study, and their privacy and confidentiality were ensured by collecting the responses as anonymous group-based data, which could not be traced back to an individual participant.

Results

The researchers identified six core persona theme categories that summarise the core archetypal persona characteristics of the professional Master of IOP student. The responses indicated two student subgroups: those in their M1 year (coursework) and those in their M2 and/or 3 year (mini-dissertation and internship). This alluded to two coping personas with overlapping and distinctive characteristics, as depicted in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

Persona theme 1: Career-life journey and motivation for master's programme enrolment

Generally, the responses from both student clusters highlighted a career-life journey in the human resource field, which triggered a passion for the psychology of human behaviour to help people grow and thrive in the workplace. This passion stirred participants' desire to enrol in IOP at the requisite master's level to enable registration as a professional industrial psychologist who can provide specialised services that promote the growth, performance and well-being of people and their organisations.

Participants' responses further illustrated that two distinctive mindsets were exhibited by the M1 and M2/3 student clusters. As a student cohort in their first year of study, busy with the coursework modules and practical sessions, the core theme that emerged from M1 participants reflected individuals were studying IOP based on a desire to register as a professional industrial psychologist. Their aspiration towards professional registration was driven by a passion for applying psychological principles of human

behaviour in developing people in workplaces. For example, Participant 5 explained:

'Early on in my career I found that I have a passion for training and developing people in the [sic] professional capacities. When I learnt of IOP and what it entails, I realised that [it] is a profession I want to go into.' (P5, M1 year; male; career establishment stage)

Participant 9 commented:

'I started studying clinical psychology because I have a passion for psychology. I realised I enjoy business as well. This is when I changed and started studying IOP. I started working in the banking industry, which helped me grow and mature. I decided to apply and register for [a] Master's [sic] to become a qualified industrial psychologist.' (P9, M1 year; female; career exploration stage)

Participant 11 stated:

'It is my passion to be a registered IO Psychologist [sic], it may have taken me more time to get to this level, but it is still a step closer to achieving a personal goal.' (P11, M1 year; male; career exploration stage)

From the M2 and/or 3 participants, there was a sense of the mini-dissertation research and internship broadening and deepening insight into IOP and human behaviour. Participants emphasised a desire to specialise in an IOP subdomain to provide professional services that benefit individuals, teams and the organisation. For example, Participant 3 reported:

'I am a [sic] HR professional with 10 years of experience specialising in psychometry and talent management. Having embarked on a specialised route early on in my career, I was always looking to broaden and deepen my insight about human and organisational psychology to ensure that processes and practices are well founded and to the benefit of individuals, teams and the organisation as a whole.' (P3, M2/3 year; female; career exploration stage)

Participant 7 explained:

'I've always wanted to be an OD specialist since my undergrad, it sounded very interesting ... I am a person who like[s] to assist, see people winning in life and being fulfilled ... it has been a challenging journey but very fulfilling. I enjoy every minute of what I am doing as an intern and believe this is my calling. I have now been exposed to other spheres of IOP and it's interesting. I'm passionate about guiding people, seeing progress in people's lives, and seeing change that makes people to be [sic] more effective and engaged in what they do.' (P7, M2/3 year; female; career exploration stage)

Persona theme 2: Goals and fears pertaining to the master's programme

The responses from both student clusters (M1 year and M2/3 year) reflected an authentic career calling, apparent in the clear, future-oriented goal of registering as a professional industrial psychologist and setting up a private practice. For example, Participant 5 stated:

'I wish to follow a professional career, with the eye on having my own practice.' (P5, M1 year; male; career establishment stage)

Participant 8 echoed:

'I want to start my own practice.' (P8, M2/3 year; female; career exploration stage)

These goals elicited key fears about not successfully completing their master's studies. As stated by Participant 4, the fears alluded to not achieving one's goals by:

'[N]ot completing my M1 year successfully, not passing my dissertation, not getting approval for my internship programme, and difficulty to register as intern psychologist and psychologist.' (P4, M1 year; female; career exploration stage)

For the M2/3 participants, the fears hinted at them not successfully completing their dissertation and internship and losing the motivation to complete the master's programme. Participant 6 stated, for example:

'My biggest fear is to give up. I am so close to that and have lost my motivation to continue my studies.' (P6, M2/3 year; female; career establishment stage)

Participants in their M1 year described a goal of mastery, which alluded to achieving academic success by passing the coursework year, growing and learning the necessary IOP skills and tools from their coursework studies. Participant 9 explained:

'My key goal is to pass but it is also to learn as much as I can to become an amazing IOP. I want to use this opportunity to grow and learn the necessary tools to use in my career as an IOP.' (P9, M1 year; female; career exploration stage)

M2/3 participants emphasised academic and professional success (completing their master's studies and registering as an industrial psychologist) as an achievement goal. Their pursuit of this goal reflected a self-directed, dedicated motivational approach towards demonstrating the acquired IOP skills to attain positive and desirable outcomes. They mentioned personal and professional development and advancing the field and practice of IOP through advocacy, mentoring and stewardship. Participant 3 mentioned the following goals:

'(1) Personal growth and development; (2) Take care of the heart of the organisation in ways that truly matter, not just surface interventions; and (3) Contribute to the IOP community.' (P3, M2/3 year; female; career exploration stage)

Participant 1 explained that the goal was:

'To register as an IO psychologist, becoming a support bridge for aspiring young psychologists in my district, and also advocating for professionalism and occupational excellence in my local government.' (P1, M2/3 year; female; career establishment stage)

In the words of Participant 3, what matters most to the M2/3 student seemed to be:

'[C]ompleting the master's programme and feeling well equipped to be an IOP who upholds the professional credo and ethical standing of the IOP community.' (P3, M2/3 year; female; career exploration stage)

In this respect, Participant 7 explained that their key fear as a qualified professional is:

'[T]o be able to face and handle the challenges of this discipline when I'm finally qualified.' (P7, M2/3 year; female; career exploration stage)

Persona theme 3: Programme challenges and support needs

Generally, proactive time management to master the demands of the master's programme, securing finances for an internship, cultivating a personal support structure for work-study-life balance and academic support in securing research and internship opportunities were highlighted as key challenges for the M1 and M2/3 participants. Participant 11 reported, for example:

'Time management, balancing between family, work and school were the most challenging.' (P11, M1 year; female; career exploration stage)

Participant 6 stated:

'It would be best if the university is able to assist the students in finding an organisation [*where they can*] do their research and internship.' (P6, M1 year; female; career establishment stage)

These challenges were echoed by the M2/3 participants. For example, Participant 1 stated:

'Securing [*an*] internship at record time was a challenge.' (P1, M2/3 year; female; career exploration stage)

Participant 7 reported:

'Time, family challenges.' (P7, M2/3 year; female; career establishment stage)

When asked what advice participants would offer prospective master's students, Participant 9 replied:

'Be able to time manage. Make sure you are doing it for the right reasons. This will help motivate you. Have a good support structure; there are moments this course will be challenging, which means you will need to turn to someone for guidance and support.' (P9, M1 year; female; career exploration stage)

Participant 1 added:

'Consider your time budget, financial budgeting and availability of academic and professional support.' (P1, M2/3 year; female; career establishment stage)

Participant 7 stated:

'Be ready for a busy year ahead, having a supportive structure like family or friends.' (P7, M2/3 year; female; career exploration stage)

The participants highlighted the specific academic support they need to cope with the master's programme's demands and challenges. Participants in their M1 year expressed a need for clear assessment guidelines and feedback to master the coursework demands. For example, Participant 11 stated:

'Clearer instructions, sometimes the deciphering expectation is the very thing which brings about most stress. The phrase that we are at master's level and should know this does not assist.' (P11, M1 year; female; career exploration stage)

M2/3 participants emphasised academic support and student resources for completing the dissertation, academic support for securing an internship, academic feedback on dissertations and internships and more active student monitoring and lecturer visibility as support mechanisms. Participant 3 explained:

'[T]he transition to M2/3 was quite abrupt. Some more guidance on what [is] next would have assisted me to get [sic] through all the hoops a bit easier.' (P3, M2/3 year; female; career exploration stage)

Participant 2 called for:

'... more visibility from lecturers during the M2/3 year.' (P2, M2/3 year; female; career establishment stage)

Participant 1 stated:

'Extensive monitoring.' (P1, M2/3 year; female; career establishment stage)

Persona theme 4: Programme enjoyment

Personal and academic growth through knowledge, empowerment and resilience, lecturer expertise and student support and the development of professional IOP skills by engaging in learning experiences (coursework and internship) were common themes among M1 and M2/3 participants' responses on the aspects they enjoyed the most. For example, Participant 9 reported:

'I enjoy all the information I have learnt. I feel empowered by the knowledge.' (P9, M1 year; female; career exploration stage)

Participant 10 highlighted:

'Coursework and internship.' (P10, M2/3 year; male; career exploration stage)

Participant 11 explained:

'The challenges faced and being able to overcome these challenges. The skills obtained such as coaching and career counselling. I am excited about the internship, putting what I have learnt to practice. Accomplishing my dream firstly, secondly the knowledge I am obtaining, seeing myself pushing and overcoming challenges.' (P11, M1 year; female; career exploration stage)

Participant 3 commented:

'The programme has prepared me well for my journey as an IOP. I found the lecturers to be very knowledgeable and attentive to students.' (P3, M2/3 year; female; career exploration stage)

Participant 8 echoed:

'That we have the full support from the lecturing team.' (P8, M2/3 year; female; career exploration stage)

Persona theme 5: Life motto, coping mechanisms and ethics

M1 and M2/3 participants' life motto responses reflected a generic mindset of embracing agency, resilience and grit (mental toughness and perseverance) as mechanisms for achieving their goal of completing their master's studies for professional registration as industrial psychologists. For example, Participant 9 stated their life motto:

'Get back up on the horse. No matter how many times you fall, get back up.' (P9, M1 year; female; career exploration stage)

Participant 11 explained:

'There is always a solution to any problem, whether you discover the solution, or someone assists, but there is always a way out.' (P11, M1 year; female; career exploration stage)

In this respect, the life mottos of the M2/3 participants reflected the motivational power of an authentic career calling and clear future-oriented goals to elicit mastery and perseverance despite challenges. For example, Participant 2 stated as life motto:

'Finish what you start. Your direction is more important than your speed.' (P2, M2/3 year; female; career establishment stage)

Participant 3's life motto echoed the motivational strength of an authentic career calling:

'Sometimes the only way is through. I believe that I have been put on this path for a reason and there's no way around it, there's no option of quitting. The only way is through.' (P3, M2/3 year; female; career exploration stage)

The participants further reported key coping mechanisms for embracing the demands and challenges they encountered in their master's studies. Some common themes for both student clusters included mindfulness, journaling, self-regulated boundary and time management, holistic self-care and self-reflection, spiritual and religious activities, personal development, self-belief and relational support networking. Participant 9 explained:

'I have used my support structure to lean on. I also tried my best to manage my time.' (P9, M1 year; female; career exploration stage)

Participant 3 elaborated:

'Trying to set a routine and stick to it. This required a lot of discipline, a lot of boundaries and a lot of, "sorry, I can't make it." I tried to maintain holistic wellbeing – e.g., exercise, nutrition, prayer, and religion.' (P3, M2/3 year; female; career exploration stage)

Participant 4 reported coping mechanisms such as:

'Journaling, talking, and reflecting with [a] life coach, peer mentor, friends, and family. Taking breaks for relaxation, reading fiction books and spending time with loved ones.' (P4, M1 year; female; career exploration stage)

Participant 8 highlighted:

'Mindfulness, believing in myself and reaching out for assistance, journaling.' (P8, M2/3 year; female; career exploration stage)

The participants' responses reflected conscientious, ethical coping strategies in facing programme demands and challenges. The M1 participants viewed ethical coping as a fundamental aspect of their personal and professional character and conduct, along with exhibiting personal accountability and resilience. For example, Participant 5 explained:

'Ethics is a way of life and behaviour. It is not something you list. In short, do the right thing, always. But especially when no-one [sic] is watching. In a professional context, the [sic] Annexure 12 provides guidelines to follow when in doubt.' (P5, M1 year; male; career establishment stage)

Participant 9 stated:

'I take accountability for my problems - I don't make excuses. I focus on overcoming the challenge [rather] than making excuses about it.' (P9, M1 year; female; career exploration stage)

Participant 2 highlighted personal values in conscientious ethical coping:

'Honesty, integrity, sound morals and justice, fairness.' (P2, M2/3 year; female; career establishment stage)

Participant 3 reported:

'Professional competence and do no harm - to self and others.' (P3, M2/3 year; female; career exploration stage)

Persona theme 6: Psychological well-being attributes

The M1 and M2/3 participants' responses in themes 2 to 6, as well as their descriptions of their state of psychological well-being, revealed specific psychological well-being attributes among professional Master of IOP students. For example, a career mindset of authentic meaning making (wanting to have an impact on what one accomplishes in life by perceiving the master's studies as valuable and worthwhile) spurred active study engagement (a strong drive and reasons for completing the master's studies) and coping mechanisms to balance academic rigour and personal well-being through relational support networks. Overall, the participants seemed to adopt a problem-solving and adaptive coping approach to the programme's demands and challenges. Additional psychological well-being attributes included grit (mental toughness and perseverance), a sense of personal mastery (feeling confident in dealing with life's problems), academic and psychological resilience and professional identity-based motivation (feeling optimistic, balanced, sure and pleased about the master's programme).

Participants' descriptions of their state of psychological well-being also alluded to mental vitality (hopefulness and mental vigour for active study engagement), emotional vitality (sense of personal mastery, enthusiasm and vigour for managing negative emotions such as feeling tired and worn out while doing the master's studies) and professional identity-based motivation as important attributes of the professional Master of IOP student. For example, Participant 4 declared her state of psychological well-being as:

'Overall good, but there is [sic] times of stress, uncertainty and fatigue.' (P4, M1 year; female; career exploration stage)

Participant 1 commented:

'My wellbeing has improved given the workshop training being attended from time to time.' (P1, M2/3 year; female; career establishment stage)

Participant 11 explained:

'I am more optimistic and motivated, nearing the end of M1. This year has proven to be a very challenging year, but it has also taught me that one can overcome anything presented to them if they are determined.' (P11, M1 year; female; career exploration stage)

Participant 7 reported:

'Very stressful and yet fulfilling because I love what I do.' (P7, M2/3 year; female; career exploration stage)

Discussion

The objective of the study was to better understand students' coping by crafting an archetypal coping persona of the professional Master of IOP student. In the context of this study, the persona construct represents a short and simplified description of the archetypal coping characteristics among distance learning professional Master of IOP students. The findings yielded two student personae (M1 year and M2/3 year) that captured and communicated the distinct common (archetypal) ways students perceive and experience the professional Master of IOP programme.

Consistent with prior research (Coetzee et al., 2022; Oosthuizen et al., 2023), the common thread across the two personae was the future-oriented intentionality of registering and practising as a professional and competent industrial psychologist. Drawing from the achievement goal theory (Chazan et al., 2022; Pintrich, 2000), this goal alludes to a professional identity-based motivation towards mastering IOP competence. At the heart of the mastery-oriented goal lies a clear, authentic career calling to provide services that help optimise the growth, well-being and performance of people and their organisations (Coetzee et al., 2022).

The findings illuminated the career calling as an agentic (self-empowered) purposiveness to register as a practising professional and competent industrial psychologist. In the pursuit of this archetypal career goal, the academic goal for the M1-year student entails mastering the first hurdle to progress to M2/3-year registration. In contrast, the M2/3-year student's goal leans more towards realising the goal of professional registration and practising as a competent industrial psychologist. The findings suggested that the career calling provides students with the impetus, grit and resilience to master the challenges and demands of their academic studies, including balancing work-study-life demands. Participants' sense of accountability, autonomy

and resilience in successfully completing their master's studies is noteworthy and could be attributed to the internally driven career calling. The findings are consistent with the basic premise that the career calling is transcendent in nature, with the individual feeling psychologically summoned to pursue goals associated with a purposive, meaningful life role that is used to help others or contribute to the common good (Xie et al., 2017; Zhou et al., 2020). An authentic career calling often shields individuals from the physical, mental and emotional fatigue caused by role overload, work stress and emotional exhaustion (Zhou et al., 2020). The eudaimonic well-being theory (Freire et al., 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2001) further explains that psychological well-being is achieved through personal growth and fulfilment and realising one's full potential through a virtuous goal pursuit.

The findings further identified archetypal coping mechanisms (relevant to both the M1-year and M2/3-year participants) that are consistent with prior research on professional health care graduate students' coping strategies. Participants' intentional agency in academic and professional goal attainment was evident in them harnessing several positive, active, adaptive coping mechanisms, such as mindfulness, journaling, boundary and time management, holistic self-care and self-reflection, religious or spiritual activities, personal development, self-belief and relational support networking (Cleofas & Mijares, 2022; Dailey et al., 2022; Fitzgibbon & Murphy, 2023; Siebecke, 2023; Wolters & Brady, 2021; Yang et al., 2023; Ying & Han, 2009).

Participants' professional demeanour of self-aware, conscientious ethical coping is evident in their recognition of personal and professional character, values and conduct, including personal and professional competence, accountability and resilience in coping. These qualities of ethical coping allude to the ethical competence attributes of virtuous beingness, knowing and abiding by professional rules and principles in one's conduct and ethical self-reflection (Kim et al. 2021). The importance that participants attributed to ethical competence in coping is consistent with the ethical guidelines for good practice and self-care that the professional industrial psychologist ascribes to (HPCSA, 2021). Prior research affirms ethical conduct, behaviours, attitudes and values as positive attributes of students' commitment to professional and personal development and resilient coping (Connell et al., 2021).

In summary, the two personae reflect archetypal psychological well-being attributes, such as an authentic career calling, meaningful, active study engagement, problem-focused and adaptive coping and grit (mental toughness and perseverance). Other attributes include mental and emotional vitality, academic and psychological resilience and professional identity-based motivation towards navigating psychological affordances and constraints in the pursuit of academic and professional goals. Prior research emphasises these psychological

well-being attributes as the behavioural repertoires that students capitalise on to adapt to and cope with demanding programme conditions in the pursuit of purposive academic and professional goals. These archetypal psychological well-being attributes serve as an innate reservoir of cognitive-affective adaptation energy that acts as a protective positive psychological functioning mechanism in response to stress (Code, 2020; Freire et al., 2016, 2020; Naidoo 2023; Lee 2024; Priya & Kumar, 2020; Richman et al., 2009; Takács et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2020).

The student personae provide information on the core personal and academic challenges master's students face, including the need for targeted academic support and resources for promoting academic success. Consistent with prior research (Van Niekerk et al., 2024), the perceived challenges and academic support needs reflect a time-demanding study programme requiring personal work-study-life support structures, including visible academic support to help students cope with programme demands. Agentive coping catalysts for mastering the programme's challenges and demands evidently stem from the joys of personal and academic growth resulting from engaging and empowering learning experiences (coursework and internship) that build IOP knowledge and skills. Prior research shows that a learning orientation often generates an intrinsic motivation to persevere in seeking greater knowledge and expertise (Jha & Bhattacharyya 2013). Psychological experiences of attaining personal growth, developing new knowledge, skills and capacities and states of enjoyment (vitality) denote thriving in one's studies and work (Porath et al., 2012). Feelings of thriving generally facilitate purposive adaptation and coping in the pursuit of meaningful career goals (Coetzee, 2019; Porath et al., 2012; Van Niekerk et al., 2024).

Lecturer expertise and student academic support are important programme affordances (effectivities) that presumably contribute to a programme's enjoyment and students' coping. Aligned with the goal facilitation theory (Coetzee, 2019; Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008; Xie et al., 2017), the findings suggest that the participants perceived the programme's supportive social environment and its affordances for personal and professional growth as instrumental to goal attainment. Research shows that the pursuit of meaningful, purposive goals in a conducive social environment generates positive attitudes and coping mechanisms relative to individuals' goals (Xie et al., 2017; Zhou et al., 2020).

Implications for theory and practice

This study provides the first known application of the persona methodology to grasp the coping needs, well-being attributes and challenges South African distance learning professional Master of IOP students face. The personae contributed new insights that extend postgraduate student coping literature by revealing that students' clear career calling, professional identity-based motivation, achievement,

mastery goals, coping mechanisms and psychological well-being attributes act as important agentic mitigators of programme challenges. These attributes also relieve students' academic and professional goal anxieties and feelings of study fatigue and emotional exhaustion.

Practically, the personae descriptions (Figure 1 and Figure 2) offer lecturers a greater appreciation of students' professional commitment to successfully complete their master's studies through the agentic application of coping mechanisms to pursue their professional registration goal. The findings position student coping at the heart of an optimally supportive professional master's curriculum, with learning and assessment pedagogies that instil resilient coping mechanisms to promote students' greater psychological well-being and programme enjoyment. The elicited personae could serve as an empathy or compassion map for lecturers to appreciate the most important qualities and lived experiences among master's students to better align academic student support, programme content and delivery with students' study needs, experiences and expectations. The personae further uncovered the potential for higher education institutions to employ coping considerations during students' selection and increase retention and success rates through a curriculum that fosters the master's student's personal and professional coping capacities.

Limitations and future research

The personae represent an archetype of the distance learning professional Master of IOP M1-year and M2/3-year student. As such, the personae characteristics were context specific and should only be used in the context for which the respective personae were developed. A limitation of the findings is that the study explored the subjective views and lived experiences of a small number of student participants. Future research should utilise quantitative and qualitative or blended research approaches with a larger group of IOP master's students from different higher education contexts. The use of personae in professional Master of IOP students' selection and personal and professional development training could be investigated to further explore their relevance and usefulness in student selection, success and retention. Future research could also apply the persona methodology to generate archetypal characteristics among high-performing and poor-performing master's students.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations of the study's research design, the findings are grounded in real human-driven data that provided a rich foundation for crafting an authentic evidence-based professional Master of IOP student coping persona. In this respect, the researchers trust that the persona approach engenders lecturers' compassion for these students to provide empathetic, targeted academic and well-being support that is conducive to their academic and professional learning journey as prospective industrial psychologists.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, A.v.N., upon reasonable request.

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