Phenomenology of serious procrastination in Malaysian postgraduates

Azlina Mohd. Kosnin, Muhammad Umar Khan*
Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 81310 UTM Skudai, Johor, Malaysia.

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ABSTRACT
Postgraduate students, especially those doing research, need to mainly regulate their studies by themselves, however failing to do so could be because of procrastination. Procrastination is the delay of very important task in the favor of a less important or unimportant one. Studies suggest that procrastination can damage academic performance, can prolong the time needed for graduation, and can cause attrition of postgraduate students. However, there is a dearth of literature of qualitative research, especially in Asian countries, with respect to the experience of high-intensity and problematic procrastination (termed serious procrastination) among postgraduate students. Moreover, different environmental and social factors that aggravate procrastination also need investigation. Furthermore, strategies rooted in the lived experiences of serious procrastinators, which may help procrastinators mitigate their tendency to delay, are also needed but are quite scarce in terms of published literature. Therefore, the current study was carried out to fill the aforementioned gaps in literature. Qualitative research approach and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research method and unstructured in-depth interviews were used in the present study. Seven master themes emerged as result of this study which tell cognitive, behavioral, affective and environmental factors related to serious procrastination.

1. Introduction
Procrastination is commonly referred to as a needless delay of doing what is very important. A person who is procrastinating does something less important instead. Moreover, this delay of doing the important task causes loss of productivity and is mostly considered counterproductive. It is a tendency to intentionally delay an important task by subverting one’s attention to a less urgent one [1]. Procrastination has a lot of negative consequences for a person’s studies [2]. Moreover, it can be very troubling for postgraduate research students as it may cause them to leave their studies incomplete [3].

High intensity and extremely problematic form of procrastination is the type that has been recently recognized as a problem [4]. Moreover, disorganized and high intensity (serious) procrastinators may form a separate group that needs specific focus of attention to know their characteristics and experiences; interviews with these people has been recommended for such an exploration [5]. Furthermore, Procrastinators’ own experiences and life skills have seldom been made the topic of inquiry and such an account is rather scarce in Asian milieu [6, 7].

Hence, the current study was conducted to investigate the lived experience of serious procrastination (high intensity and problematic procrastination) in postgraduate research students of Malaysian origin (Asian milieu). The current study was conducted to explore the following three objectives:
1: To explore the experience of serious procrastination in terms of its cognitions, behaviors, and affect among postgraduate research students.
2: To explore different extrinsic factors negatively affecting the studies of postgraduate research students with serious procrastination.
3: To explore strategies that postgraduate research students with serious procrastination consider helpful in their studies.

2. Method
Qualitative research approach and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research method was used in the present study. A total of eight participants, selected via extreme case purposive sampling, were involved in this study. The participants were
postgraduate students from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia who scored more than 48 on the Malay (translated and adapted) version of the Tuckman Procrastination Scale and considered procrastination to be a big problem for their studies.

3. Results and discussion

It was found that procrastination is experienced by postgraduate students in three ways, it runs in mind as a concept, it is done as a behavior, and there are feelings of dejection (sadness) attached to it. The first three master themes show this finding. It was also found that people are negatively affected by certain external factors and their procrastination increases; these external factors are problematic things and problems related to people who are around. Master themes 4 and 5 show this finding. Finally, it was found that two strategies can be helpful for reducing procrastination; first is that structured environment and strong deadlines should be provided to postgraduate students, and second strategy is that postgraduate students should take some initial steps to help themselves like asking for help from others and accepting some discomfort as a step in achieving something good. Master themes 6 and 7 show this finding. A brief description of all the seven master themes is as follows:

1) Concept of procrastination (get blurred and run away) - When postgraduate research students with procrastination have a big assignment/research to do, they don’t know how to start it so they get blurred and stressful by the idea of starting and completing that assignment; therefore, they try to run away from it and do something else that may be less stressful or pleasurable instead.

2) Behavior of procrastination (cannot sit for long then start from zero every time) - In terms of behavior, people affected by procrastination cannot sit for long to do their big assignment/research, so they leave the assignment many times after starting it. Therefore, they have to start their thinking and their work many times from zero, and the big assignment/research becomes even more difficult to finish.

3) In dejection not liking oneself (the problem is me, I am a loser) - Dejection means sadness; running away from the big assignment/research causes a lot of guilt and dejection, so the person feels even more stressed and overwhelmed and again runs away. Therefore, the person considers himself/herself to be a failure; and this creates even more problem because the person feels even more low than before and thinks he/she does not have the ability to complete the big assignment/research.

4) Problematic things (writing is difficult, especially with TV, movies, YouTube, Whatsapp, and Facebook) - There are certain things that increase procrastination like the nature of a task; one of the problems is that the activity of doing research (academic writing) itself can increase procrastination in postgraduate students. However, doing research or academic writing becomes more difficult if there is no isolated workspace/study area and the person is at a place where there are a lot of distractions nearby; like a television or a smartphone (electronic media, social networking websites as well as video streaming websites).

5) Problems with people (friends and family take priority over work, my supervisor is too nice) - External factors like friends and family members, if they do not understand the situation of a student, can increase his/her procrastination by disturbing him/her during his/her study time. When the procrastinator is already trying to run away from the big assignment/research, then he/she leaves his/her studies on any request by friends or family. Another thing than can increase procrastination is any big problem or loss in the family of the student which diverts his/her attention away from his/her studies. Another person who may unknowingly encourage more procrastination could be a super-nice supervisor who lets the student manages his/her study time and research milestones and does not intervene. Such a supervisor who lets the student be on his/her own, increases that person’s procrastination.

6) Structure (in need of workspace, deadlines, strict supervision) - There is however something that could be done to reduce procrastination. Some things/arrangements should be provided by the educational institution to the postgraduate students in order to reduce their procrastination. These things include a proper workspace for them that is free from major distractions; and the students’ attendance should be made necessary. Then there should be strong deadlines (both big and small) for the research students, given by the university, to finish their work. Provision of external deadlines should be coupled with the availability of a strict supervisor who does not
negotiate on enforcing such deadlines and requires regular attendance of his postgraduate research students.

7) Initiating (do something, friends will support, limit enjoyment) - There are some things that can’t be done at institutional level and should be done by the student to reduce his/her procrastination. The first step is to take initiative by doing something (no matter how little) in the right direction. This ‘something’ could be to start doing his/her work on big assignment/research, or at least, take a right step by asking help from others like counselors, family members fellow students and friends. Friends’ support should be requested by the procrastinator in helping himself/herself start and continue to do his/her work. However, that (helping) friend should be aware of the student’s procrastination tendency and the friend should be willing to help. Moreover, the procrastinator must try to accept some discomfort while doing something important; because difficult tasks require effort, and effort brings discomfort in the beginning.

4. Conclusion

This study shows that serious procrastination starts with a hazy mindset of running away from the important academic tasks to reduce angst. This running away transforms into a habit of repeatedly running away from the important task and a haphazard style of studying. Owing to serious procrastination, the person feels dejected. Moreover, doing postgraduate research in itself evokes procrastinatory trend in the person, and serious procrastination especially gets worsened different enjoyment opportunities laid out nearby the person. However, serious procrastination can be mitigated through providing the serious procrastination with environments that are conducive for learning and a specially tailored plan of study that includes nonnegotiable deadlines by a strict supervisor. Furthermore, serious procrastinators should try to initial steps towards going their academic task; they may just start taking steps towards asking for help from others, like of close friends and family members especially. Here, cooperation from friends and family is also necessitated especially in terms of monitoring the serious procrastinator do his/her work. Then, one of the most important factors that could reduce procrastination is acceptance of being uncomfortable for the time one is doing his/her important task.

Reference