

Commentary on “A Post-Pandemic Wellness Experiences Scale: Demographic Variation and Influences on Depression”

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Abstract

This commentary critically engages with Tawa et al.’s development and validation of the Post-Pandemic Wellness (PPW) scale, a psychometrically grounded instrument designed to measure wellness across four dimensions: positive reframing, economic stress, social stress, and existential impact. The authors’ multi-time point validation (2021 and 2024) adds rigor and temporal relevance to their findings, revealing both consistencies and evolutions in post-pandemic mental health trajectories across demographic groups. While the PPW subscales show high internal consistency and statistical integrity over time, notable differences emerge in the mediation pathways previously linking race and depression, particularly among Asian American participants. The disappearance of these effects in the 2024 data invites further inquiry into how sociopolitical shifts modulate psychological stress. This commentary explores how existential stress may not only predict distress but also correlate with resilience, drawing on existing literature on post-traumatic growth. Limitations in the study’s design—including under examined intersections of age, race, and gender, and its reliance on self-reported online data—suggest directions for future research. Expanding the scale to distinguish between negative and adaptive existential responses and incorporating mixed-methods approaches—such as in-depth interviews or focus groups stratified by racial-gender identity—would enhance its applicability. Finally, while the scale offers significant diagnostic promise, its generalizability to clinical populations or minoritized subgroups with limited digital access may be constrained.

The article by Tawa et al.¹ offers a timely and methodologically sound exploration of how different demographic groups in the U.S. experienced the psychological aftershocks of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their development and validation of the Post-Pandemic Wellness (PPW) scale provides an original contribution to the growing body of literature seeking to map the emotional and existential terrain left in the pandemic’s wake. In particular, the study’s attention to disaggregated racial and gender-based data and its use of confirmatory factor analysis, mediation modeling, and bootstrapping demonstrates a robust and replicable methodological framework. However, while the scale and its core findings are valuable, several patterns in the results warrant further discussion and future exploration, especially in light of the changing social landscape between 2021 and 2024.

The authors’ psychometric validation of the PPW scale across two time points—2021 and 2024—suggests that the four-factor model (positive reframing, economic stress, social stress, and existential impact) maintains conceptual clarity and statistical integrity over time. The 2024 confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), though initially below fit thresholds, achieved acceptable model fit

after theoretically grounded modifications. This continued reliability strengthens the argument that these four dimensions effectively capture post-pandemic wellness. Notably, the reliability coefficients for each subscale in 2024 ($\alpha = .83-.92$) are excellent, particularly for complex constructs like existential stress.

The 2024 results, however, complicate the narrative advanced by the 2021 findings. While in the 2021 sample, existential stress mediated higher depression scores for Asian participants, and positive reframing partially accounted for racial differences in depression between Black and White participants, these effects did not replicate in the 2024 data. This null finding invites a deeper interrogation of what has changed—both methodologically and socially—since the earlier assessment. The authors wisely caution against overinterpreting the shift, given the absence of longitudinal data. Still, the historical context is compelling: in 2021, Asian Americans faced heightened racialization and violence due to anti-Asian scapegoating during the pandemic's early phase. This context likely amplified existential vulnerability, as seen in the original mediation effect. By 2024, with public attention partially shifted and some normalization of anti-Asian sentiment into structural discourse rather than acute violence, existential stress levels may have stabilized. The dissipation of the existential stress–depression pathway among Asian participants may reflect broader socio political shifts rather than a flaw in the model.

Interestingly, across both samples, existential stress showed a *positive* correlation with positive reframing. This counterintuitive finding raises provocative questions about the dialectical nature of post-crisis cognition. One might speculate that the confrontation with existential stress spurred a search for meaning—a psychological pivot echoed in the literature on post-traumatic growth. Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004)² framework on growth following trauma suggests that individuals navigating existential disruption often reconstruct meaning in life domains like relationships, identity, and purpose. The correlation between existential stress and positive reframing in this study aligns with those findings. Future iterations of the PPW scale might explicitly differentiate *negative* existential impact (e.g., loss of meaning, disorientation) from *positive* existential processing (e.g., reevaluation of purpose), allowing a more nuanced modeling of this dynamic.

From a demographic standpoint, the finding that women consistently reported more existential stress than men echoes decades of gendered mental health research suggesting women are more attuned to—or more burdened by—existential and emotional dimensions of crisis. This aligns with gendered coping research showing that women are more likely to use emotion-focused strategies (Tamres, Janicki, & Helgeson, 2002)³, which may heighten both emotional processing and reported distress. In contrast,

men may rely more on avoidance-based coping, potentially underreporting existential disruptions. Age-related trends further underscore generational vulnerability: younger participants reported significantly less positive reframing and more economic, social, and existential stress. This is especially notable given that economic stress was robustly correlated with depression ($r = .39, p < .01$), suggesting the pandemic may have amplified pre existing economic precarity among youth, particularly those from racially marginalized backgrounds.

Although the authors controlled for age in their race-based analyses, the age-race intersection remains underexplored. For instance, Latino/a and Asian participants were significantly younger than White participants in the sample—an uneven demographic distribution that may obscure deeper structural inequities. In both samples, White participants reported the *highest* levels of depression, even though they generally experienced *more* economic stress and *less* existential stress than other groups. This paradox invites further qualitative inquiry: does this reflect different expectations, cultural coping styles, or access to social support?

Crucially, the study's null mediation results in 2024 should not be seen as evidence against the relevance of post-pandemic wellness subscales in explaining racial disparities in depression. Rather, they highlight the multifactorial nature of mental health outcomes. The PPW scale is sensitive to distress, but its subscales alone cannot capture the full scope of racialized experience in post-pandemic America. As the authors imply, integrating other variables—such as collective identity, community engagement, or ongoing exposure to racial discrimination—could better clarify these pathways.

In conclusion, Tawa et al. have created a rigorous, replicable, and theoretically grounded tool in the PPW scale, and their findings from two post-pandemic time points offer valuable insights into how existential and economic factors shape wellness and depression. The 2024 results, while less confirmatory than those from 2021, deepen the story by showing how psychological outcomes evolve as the social environment changes. Future studies should further disentangle existential impact from existential growth, potentially by integrating narrative or ethnographic interviews that examine how individuals narrate their post-pandemic experiences. Exploring racialized experiences through a longitudinal or mixed-methods lens, including participatory action research or community-based focus groups, may yield richer insights into cultural models of meaning-making and resilience. As we navigate a still-unfolding public health crisis, the PPW scale remains a vital tool for understanding who is left behind—and why. However, its deployment must be accompanied by caution: the psychometric strength of the PPW scale may not fully

translate to clinical or underserved populations without adjustments for digital literacy, cultural idioms of distress, or structural barriers to mental healthcare.

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