"*WORKING IS MY ME TIME*": EXPLORING THE PERCEPTION OF *ME TIME* AMONG WORKING MOTHERS

Yohana Alverina[1], Yuliana Hanami[2,3], & Fitri Ariyanti Abidin[2,4]

[1]Postgraduate Professional Psychology Study Programme, Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Padjadjaran, Jatinangor, 45363, Indonesia
[2]Department of Psychology, Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Padjadjaran, Jatinangor, 45363, Indonesia
[3]Center for Innovation and Psychological Research, Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Padjadjaran, Jatinangor, 45363, Indonesia
[4]Center for Relationship, Family Life and Parenting Studies, Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Padjadjaran, Jatinangor, 45363, Indonesia

Correspondence: yohana22006@mail.unpad.ac.id

"*BEKERJA ADALAH WAKTU ME TIME*": EKSPLORASI PERSEPSI *ME TIME* PADA IBU BEKERJA

Abstrak

Me time memiliki arti penting untuk kesenangan dan relaksasi pribadi, namun eksplorasinya masih terbatas, khususnya di kalangan ibu di Indonesia. Studi kualitatif ini mewawancarai tiga ibu bekerja penuh waktu (berusia 28, 30, dan 36 tahun) untuk memahami persepsi mereka dalam alokasi me time sebelum menikah, setelah menikah, dan setelah memiliki anak. Analisis tematik mengidentifikasi enam tema utama: a) signifikansi me time, b) hambatan yang menghalanginya, c) interpretasi yang beragam, d) aktivitas yang dijalani selama me time, e) dampak dari kurangnya me time, dan f) strategi koping yang diterapkan. Studi ini menekankan pentingnya meluangkan me time sebagai cara untuk mengurangi stres dalam kehidupan sehari-hari. Para ibu menunjukkan kecenderungan adaptif untuk menyesuaikan pendekatan mereka dalam mengelola waktu pribadi seiring dengan tuntutan yang dihadapi oleh peran ibu. Penelitian ini secara efektif menyoroti kebutuhan akan prioritas me time untuk meningkatkan kesejahteraan holistik dan ketahanan saat dihadapkan pada tanggung jawab sebagai ibu.

Abstract

Me time holds significance for personal enjoyment and relaxation, yet its exploration, particularly among Indonesian mothers, is limited. This qualitative study interviewed three full-time working mothers (aged 28, 30 and 36) to understand their perceptions in *me time* allocation before marriage, after marriage, and after having children. Thematic analysis identified six major themes: a) the importance of *me time*, b) factors hindering it, c) diverse interpretations, d) activities pursued, e) repercussions of inadequate *me time*, and f) coping strategies employed. This study underscores the significance of dedicating *me time* as a means to alleviate the stress experienced in day-to-day life. Maternal individuals exhibit an adaptive inclination to tailor their approach to personal time management in light of the demands imposed by motherhood. This research effectively accentuates the necessity of prioritizing *me time* to enhance holistic well-being and fortitude when confronted with maternal responsibilities.

Keywords: independent leisure, *me time*, thematic analysis, qualitative, working mothers

Impacts and Implication in the Indigenous Context

Working mothers in Indonesia juggle multiple responsibilities, making *me time* essential. This aligns with the concept of "rukun", emphasizing harmony and mutual respect. *Me time* allows mothers to replenish energy, reduce stress, and maintain emotional stability, empowering them to fulfil their roles more effectively and contribute to a balanced society. Unlike family time, which focuses on children's needs and can be demanding, *me time* is solely for personal relaxation and self-care. This distinction highlights the unique importance of *me time* for maintaining the well-being and effectiveness of working mothers in their various roles. This study provides an essential foundation for exploring psychological fulfillment in the context of solo activities, a topic often overlooked in collectivist societies like Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

Me time, also known as independent leisure (Lewis, 2022), signifies a dedicated period when individuals engage in activities that provide personal enjoyment (Mingo & Montecolle, 2013). This designated time enables individuals to replenish their energy, revive their well-being, and nurture their physical and mental health. Despite its significance, the *me time* concept has received relatively limited attention in scholarly literature, thereby complicating the selection of a comprehensive definition. Previously, *me time* has been associated with solitude, defined as the state of being alone or lacking social interaction (Larson, 1990). Additionally, the most recent research has indicated some degree of overlap between *me time* and other leisure pursuits, such as those involving family, physical activities, social engagements, couples, and independent pursuits (Lewis, 2022).

Lewis (2022) conducted an extensive study examining the perceptions of *me time* among parents of preschoolers in New Zealand. The findings revealed that *me time* was understood as engaging in activities that brought feelings of enjoyment and fulfillment. Additionally, the study highlighted a positive correlation between the amount of time parents spent on *me time* and their level of satisfaction with it. However, there is a lack of research specifically investigating the perceptions of *me time* among working mothers.

Dillaway and Pare (2008) define working mothers as those working 40 hours or more outside the home. The employment rates among mothers with infants have been on the rise, with a current rate of 67.9% for mothers with children under the age of 18 in the United States (U.S. Department of Labor, 2023). While specific statistics for the labor participation rates of working mothers in Indonesia are not available, it is evident that the number of Indonesian females participating in the labor force increased to 53% in 2022, compared to 52% in 2021 (World Bank, 2023). Furthermore, evidence shows that wives bear heavier domestic responsibilities than husbands do, even with fair division in the household (Syuhudi, 2022). The increase in employment and the presence of multiple roles in the household reflect the changing landscape for working mothers, who face unique challenges associated with motherhood.

Motherhood presents a distinct life stage for women, accompanied by transitions and new responsibilities in caring for a child. The pressures to maintain a work-life balance during this period, if not properly managed, can lead to higher stress levels and diminished physical and mental well-being (Afiatin et al., 2016; Akyol & Arslan, 2020; Dong et al., 2022; Handayani et al., 2015; Lian & Tam, 2014; Marshall & Tracy, 2009; Novitasari et al., 2018). Furthermore, the challenge of keeping

a work-life balance becomes ever more prevalent, specifically for working mothers with young children from the ages of 0–6. An escalated necessity for an increased reliance on the combined involvement of both parental entities characterizes this developmental stage (Del Boca dkk., 2020).

However, the added roles of being an employee and a mother may significantly reduce the amount of *me time* available to working mothers, putting them at risk of inadequate self-care. Research has shown that spending time alone, especially for women who value solitude, can effectively help them recover from the stress associated with parenting (Dong et al., 2022). Despite these findings, there is still a lack of research specifically examining the perception of *me time* among working mothers in Indonesia. To address this gap in knowledge, the current study aims to address the following questions: 1) how do working mothers perceive *me time*?, 2) are there any differences in perceiving and experiencing *me time* before marriage, after marriage and after having children?, and 3) how does the lack of *me time* affect working mothers, and what coping strategies do they employ to mitigate these challenges? Given the rapid increase in the rate of working mothers in Indonesia, conducting this research becomes even more relevant in shedding light on the mental and physical pressures this understudied population faces.

METHODS

Participants

The target participants for this study were mothers who meet the following eligibility criteria: 1) working full-time outside of the home and 2) having children between the ages of 0–6. A smaller sample size was chosen intentionally, reflecting the nature of qualitative research, which prioritizes depth and richness of data over the quantity of participants (Blaikie, 2018). To initiate the recruitment process, potential participants were contacted and a brief call to comprehensively explain the research procedure was conducted. Prior to data collection, written informed consent had been collected from the participants. Once the participants were willing to participate, the researchers scheduled individual online interviews via Zoom due to the convenience of the participants. These interviews had an average duration of 45 to 60 minutes. A detailed description of the participants' characteristics is presented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Participant Characteristics

Characteristics	Participants		
	J	**K**	**D**
Education	Bachelor	Bachelor	Bachelor
Age	30	28	36
No. of Children	3	1	1
Child's age	4 years (twins) & 9 months	2 years	5 years
Occupation	Human Resources	Staff Customer Care	Senior analyst
Duration of Current Employment (years)	5	3	13
Marriage Age (years)	6	3	10
Ethnicity	Bataknese	Chinese	Bataknese

Design

The current study utilizes a qualitative approach, explicitly employing semi-structured interviews to gather data. The verbatim data is then analyzed using thematic analysis following guidelines by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Procedure

As part of the research process, participants were required to provide consent before proceeding with the interviews. Prior to the interviews, participants were presented with an informed consent form that provided a clear explanation of the study's purpose and procedure. Participants willingly signed the form, indicating their understanding and agreement to participate. Furthermore, participants granted explicit permission for the interviews to be audio-recorded for the purpose of data analysis.

Instruments

Data for this study was collected through online semi-structured interviews conducted via an online platform using Zoom. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they facilitate in-depth, real-time conversations, allowing researchers to explore the topic in detail and probe deeper with follow-up questions (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The interviews focused on three main areas of inquiry. Firstly, participants were asked about their perceptions regarding the importance of *me time*. Secondly, they were asked to discuss perceived differences in *me time* availability before and after becoming working mothers. Lastly, participants were asked to share their experiences and insights regarding the impact of insufficient *me time* on their lives as working mothers.

Analysis Strategies

Data gathered from the interview was transcribed verbatim and analyzed by the primary researcher using thematic analysis following guidelines by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first step was data familiarization, done by repeatedly reading the data to gain a more holistic understanding of the ideas and patterns present within the content. The second step was initial coding generation, which entailed the identification and labeling of segments of data that encapsulated a particular concept or idea. Following initial coding, the third step was the search for overarching themes by sorting and clustering codes that share thematic similarities. The fourth step was the review of themes to make sure they accurately represent the data's content and context. The fifth step was theme definition and labelling in order to encapsulate the essence of each theme and ensures that themes align with the study objectives. Finally, the sixth step was the report write-up presenting the results in a structured manner in order to evaluate the themes against the research objectives mentioned above.

RESULTS

This study was structured around three pivotal research questions, each focusing on different aspects of working mothers' experiences with *me time*. Through thematic analysis, six significant themes emerged, shedding light on the perception, evolution, challenges and coping strategies related to *me time* among working mothers: (1) the importance of *me time*, (2) factors that hinder *me time*, (3) the changing meanings of *me time*, (4) *me time* activities, (5) the impact of not having *me time*, and (6) and coping strategies employed to mitigate the negative emotions associated with a lack of *me time*. Within each theme, subthemes will be explored and discussed in detail.

Research Question 1: What is the Perception of Me Time Among Working Mothers?

Two themes emerged in relation to the first research question: "The importance of *me time*" and "Factors that hinder *me time*". The mothers in this sample shared insightful information to answer the first research question, highlighting the intrinsic value placed on *me time*, despite the challenges in attaining it.

Theme 1: The Importance of Me Time

Consensus was reached among all three participants regarding the significant importance of *me time* for their overall well-being. Participant D, for example, stated that *me time* is crucial because "all human beings need time alone". Upon further inquiry, another participant shared her perspective,

highlighting the mental exhaustion caused by domestic responsibilities such as childcare and household management. Consequently, she emphasized the vital role of *me time* in preserving her mental health and sanity.

> "*Taking care of the household or children makes my energy drain. I'm out of energy. Because dealing with children, compared to adults, is much harder. So it is very important because I can feel my energy back and make myself sane. My mental health is maintained.*" (J).

Another participant also explained that domestic responsibilities, added with the dual roles as a mother and employee, cause negative emotions to arise, particularly feelings of resentment and jealousy toward her husband for being able to have more free time.

> "*...Because when we don't have me time and we have to take care of the house and kids after coming home from the office, we feel resentment in our heart. Husbands can go and hang out with friends, but I have to go home to take care of my house and kids.*" (K).

Theme 2: Factors That Hinder Me Time

Mothers have established that *me time* is crucial for them. However, they revealed several factors that hindered them from being able to take time for themselves, especially after having kids. One of the most prominent factors is the added responsibility to consider not only her feelings and priorities, but also those of other members in the family such as her husband, kids, and in-laws. One participant shared her experience relating to this factor:

> "*When we first got married, there was a lot to do. There are other people's feelings that we have to pay attention to. We also had to consider being involved in the couple's community. When you have a child, you have to be able to divide your attention to multiple things; meanwhile, human beings need time for self-reflection every day.*" (D).

Additionally, another participant shared her experience when living with her in-laws while being pregnant with her second child:

> "*After getting married and becoming pregnant, well, that's when it became limited in my opinion. Because I had to take care of my husband, myself, especially when I was living with my in-laws. So there were time constraints. Even though there was time, it couldn't be as free as before, because things still needed to be attended to. Whether it was taking care of myself while being pregnant and not getting too tired, or maintaining proper behavior when living with my in-laws, I had to be considerate.*" (J).

Another factor identified by the participants is the need to seek permission from significant others. One participant specifically mentioned that after becoming a parent, her opportunities for solo outings have diminished. She explained that, for safety reasons, she must ask her husband for permission in advance before going out alone.

> "*Back then, I could join trips, stay on islands on my own, and meet new people there. After getting married, I couldn't do that anymore. Especially because my husband is the jealous type. He even accompanies me to the salon or facial appointments… I haven't been out in nature by myself because I have to ask for permission first. He is afraid something might happen if I drive alone. I also became hesitant of going out alone, even though I used to be able to drive alone.*" (K).

Research Question 2: Are There Any Differences in Perceiving and Experiencing Me Time Before Marriage, After Marriage, and After Having Children?

Two themes, "The Changing Meanings of *Me Time*" and "Changes in *Me Time* Activities", emerged from the analysis to answer the second research question, highlighting a shift not only in the experiences, but also in the forms of *me time* before marriage, after marriage and after having children. Additionally, mothers shared that working becomes a new form of *me time* for them*,* which will be explained in the subtheme below.

Theme 3: The Changing Meanings of Me Time

All three participants shared a common understanding that their concept of *me time* encompasses social interaction or quality time with significant others, while also acknowledging the importance of alone time. They expressed that spending time with other people rejuvenates them and provides a source of new energy. The following quotes are representative of their perspectives: "My concept of *me time* is enjoying things that make me happy. So I don't always have to be alone." (J). Another participant explained:

> "*My joy is around other people. So my me time is not always alone, even though I like it too, but my highest level of happiness is having conversation, not shopping or watching movies. In fact, my definition of solitude is quality time with my husband, because I can talk about anything with him.*" (D).

Participants' answers regarding their *me time* can also be categorized into a) perception before marriage and b) perception after marriage and after kids.

Subtheme: Perception of me time before marriage. Participants reflected on their experiences of *me time* before getting married. They expressed a sense of enjoyment in their independence and autonomy in managing their time and leisure activities. They recalled greater freedom and flexibility in their *me time*, less influenced by marital obligations. These recollections and perceptions highlight a period in their lives when they had more control over their leisure and could prioritize their own needs and preferences without the added responsibilities and commitments of marriage. "Back then before getting married, I could do whatever without any added responsibility" (J). Another reflected, "Before I was married, my me time was just hanging out in cafes with my campus friends" (K). Similarly, "Before marriage, time belongs only to us. I'm free to manage my own time" (D).

Subtheme: Perception of *me time* after marriage and after having kids. Participants' perceptions of *me time* underwent a shift after marriage and having children. They expressed that their definition of *me time* now almost always includes spending time with their husbands. Two participants elaborated on this shift, noting that after getting married, time became more of a shared experience. They expressed a sense of something missing when their *me time* did not involve their husbands, emphasizing the importance of quality time spent with their spouses as a necessary component of their personal well-being. One explained, "Well, it becomes a dependency to go everywhere just the two of us. He's always around. When I'm alone, something feels missing" (K). Another participant shared, "After marriage, there's another person we have to talk to. So our me time becomes a shared experience, because whoever we marry becomes our soul too. So our quality time satisfies us both" (D).

Theme 4: Changes in Me Time Activities

Participants provided a range of responses concerning the activities they engage in during their *me time*. These responses can be categorized into three distinct categories: activities before marriage, activities after marriage and having children, and activities related to work as a form of *me time*.

Before marriage, participants commonly mentioned activities such as watching shows, reading books, and getting sufficient sleep as their preferred *me time* activities. They also highlighted engaging in social activities, such as conversations, sharing stories, going out for lunches, and enjoying karaoke sessions with friends.

After marriage, there was a notable shift in participants' *me time* activities, with a greater emphasis on spending leisure time together with their husbands. Activities such as quality time spent with their spouses became a significant aspect of their *me time*. This suggests a transition from individual-focused activities to shared experiences as participants prioritized nurturing their relationships.

> "*Me time for me and my husband has transformed into something fancier: dining at restaurants we've never been to before or shopping with higher budgets. Since I got married, I have never had me time alone. He always has to accompany me wherever I go*" (K).

Another participant stated, "The need to have conversations with my husband still exists... In fact, my definition of solitude is the time spent together with my husband because we can talk about anything" (D).

Subtheme: Working as *me time*. An additional noteworthy finding from the participants is their perception of working as a form of *me time*. All three participants expressed that their work serves as a valuable source of *me time* for them. They view their employment as an opportunity to take a break from the demands and responsibilities associated with being a mother, wife, and homemaker. Engaging in work allows them to have a sense of personal fulfillment and achievement, which plays a significant role in maintaining their mental well-being.

Two participants specifically highlighted that their desire to work after having children does not diminish their love for their children. Instead, they perceive it as a necessary component for maintaining a mental health. They recognize the importance of finding a balance between their role as a mother and their own personal growth and fulfillment through work. "I don't think I can stay at home all the time. In fact, going out to work makes me feel saner. Because when I work, I achieve something that gives me a sense of satisfaction" (D). Another shared:

> "*I think I can't continue like this at home. I love my child, which parent doesn't love their child? But to constantly pay attention to them for 24 hours, I don't think I can do it. I need my sanity. And for me, one way to maintain my sanity is through work.*" (K).

> "*I don't have any me time at all. Well, my me time becomes work. When I work in the office, I work to achieve something... Maybe it's challenging to find me time, but it's still possible, even if it's no longer about going out, but going to the workplace.*" (J).

Research Question 3: How Does the Lack of Me Time Affect Working Mothers, and What Coping Strategies Do They Employ to Mitigate These Challenges?

Two interconnected themes, "The Impact of Not Having Enough *Me Time*" and "Coping Strategies in Navigating the Lack of *Me Time*" also emerged to address the third research question, exploring the consequences of not having enough *me time*, and what strategies mothers used to cope and adapt with these challenges.

Theme 5: The Impact of Not Having Enough Me Time

The theme of the negative impacts of a lack of *me time* among working mothers revealed the emotional and psychological consequences experienced by the participants. These consequences arise from the participants' struggles in fulfilling multiple responsibilities and the absence of sufficient alone time to recharge their energy. The inability to carve out time for themselves leads to various emotional challenges. One of the reported impacts is difficulty in regulating emotions, resulting in heightened emotional reactivity and being short-tempered with their children and spouses. The following quote highlight participants' experiences regarding the emotional consequences they faced:

> "*My emotions become unstable, that's very noticeable. Because I'm exhausted, I don't feel like I'm at my best. As a result, it affects my family negatively... I become reactive and easily get angry. Whatever the situation, the response tends to be negative.*" (J).

Similarly, another participant stated, "There is a significant difference in my mental health. I am naturally temperamental. With so many things to worry about, I become even more temperamental... *me time* would greatly help regulate my emotions." (K). A third participant shared, "We become reactive towards our children. We get upset over small mistakes. Our mental capacity diminishes because there is no time without children, no time to recharge" (D). Furthermore, participants shared that the absence of *me time* limits their ability to attend to their own physical and emotional needs. They often find themselves sacrificing their personal desires and preferences in order to prioritize the care of their children. This sentiment was expressed by one of the participants:

> "*The negative impact is that I neglect taking care of myself. In the past, we were very concerned about our physical appearance... if we had a few pimples or wanted to look a little more beautiful, we would immediately go to the salon. When we wanted to be alone, we could hang out or watch a movie by ourselves. But now, there is someone else who needs our attention.*" (K).

Another participant shared her experience of how the absence of sufficient alone time makes her feel emotionally depleted. She expressed:

> "*...I just realized that maybe it's not just my physical well-being that has been lost, but also my sanity. I feel empty, there's no more conversation with my husband, and time just passes by. I lack self-reflection and I've started losing my passion.*" (D).

Subtheme: The dilemma of *me time*. In their pursuit of *me time* alone, participants encountered a dilemma between prioritizing their personal well-being and devoting themselves entirely to their children. They expressed feelings of guilt when attempting to carve out time for themselves, as they were torn between fulfilling their parenting responsibilities and nurturing their own needs. Additionally, participants reported experiencing anxiety when leaving their children in the care of other family members or nannies, resulting in a compromised quality of their *me time*.

For instance, one participant shared her experience of attending a concert with friends after seven years, but her enjoyment was overshadowed by constant worries about her children. She expressed, "How could I be here having fun while my children are at home?" This quote reflects the participant's internal conflict, as she struggled to fully immerse herself in her *me time* due to the persistent thoughts and concerns about her children's well-being.

Similarly, another participant expressed her internal struggle between prioritizing her alone time and being present for her child:

> "*When I go out, they have less time with me. Even though I've been working for 5 days, I surely need one day for myself. But there's a constant internal struggle. Should I leave them alone? During the past 5 days, our time together has already decreased significantly... And of course, in Indonesia, people will ask, 'You left your child alone? That's pitiful, being left with a nanny.*" (K).

Similarly, the third participant also expressed the dilemma of desiring alone time without her child while being aware of the importance of balancing her responsibilities. However, she also highlighted the personal growth and resilience that emerged from this internal conflict. Despite the challenges, she acknowledged that choosing to prioritize *me time*, even with her child present, contributed to her mental and emotional development as a working mother.

Theme 6: Coping Strategies in Navigating the Lack of Me Time

This final theme delved into the strategies employed by the participants to effectively manage and navigate their experiences of alone time as working mothers. Participants shared their approaches

to finding moments of solitude, even in the presence of their children. The following subthemes emerged from their responses: acceptance, re-adjustment, seeking extra support, and maintaining open communication within their marriages.

Subtheme: Acceptance. Acceptance emerged as a key coping strategy among the participants. They acknowledged that the limited availability of alone time is an inherent aspect of motherhood and recognized the need to be patient and understanding with themselves. By accepting the challenges and emotional reactions that may arise from not having sufficient *me time*, participants were able to approach the situation with a calmer mindset and greater resilience. One participant emphasized the importance of acknowledging and processing any emotional reactions that may arise before attempting to find a solution. This involved recognizing and validating their own feelings of frustration, stress, or longing for alone time. By allowing themselves to experience these emotions without judgement, participants were able to navigate their responses more effectively. As one participant described, "In the end, I just accepted it, I couldn't avoid it. Well, what can I do? Just enjoy it." (J), and another individual noted, "According to my sister, who got married at the age of 31, there is still not enough time to play alone. So, for me who got married at the age of 25, let's just enjoy it." (K).

Subtheme: Re-adjustment. Re-adjustment emerged as a significant coping strategy employed by the participants to create opportunities for alone time while ensuring their children's well-being. Despite the challenges of balancing their roles as working mothers, participants actively sought ways to carve out moments of solitude that did not compromise their children's needs. One participant shared that she would utilize small pockets of time during her child's nap or her lunch hour at work to engage in activities that brought her personal enjoyment and relaxation. By strategically using these moments, she could still fulfill her own needs without neglecting her responsibilities.

Other participants mentioned the importance of finding overlapping activities that allowed her to have *me time* while also spending time with her children. For instance, she would watch TV with her children during their favorite show, enabling her to unwind while being present with them. Additionally, going out after their child's bedtime, typically after 9 PM, was another strategy employed by participants. By scheduling their alone time during their child's sleeping hours, they could create a space for themselves without disrupting their child's routine or caregiving responsibilities. "So, in the end, my *me time* is spent with my children, we watch movies together." (K). One participant remarked, "So even *me time* needs to be adjusted. In the end, my *me time* is

something that doesn't make my children feel like they've lost their mom, but I can still maintain my sanity. At least I can have a short rest, even if it's not for a long time." (J).

Subtheme: Extra support. Extra support emerged as a crucial aspect of participants' coping strategies to manage their roles as working mothers. Participants acknowledged the challenges of juggling multiple responsibilities and recognized the importance of seeking assistance to alleviate some of the burdens they faced. Participants highlighted the value of having housekeepers, nannies, and supportive family members, such as in-laws, who could provide additional help and share the caregiving responsibilities. K, who employed the assistance of two nannies, expressed the benefits of having a team to support her. With one nanny taking care of the child while the other served as a backup, she felt more at ease knowing that her child was in capable hands. Similarly, J emphasized the importance of her strong support system, including her mother and mother-in-law. When faced with challenges or when she needed a break, she could rely on their help and assistance. Having trustworthy family members available to lend a helping hand provided her with a sense of relief and contributed to maintaining her mental well-being.

Subtheme: Marital Communication. Marital communication emerged as a significant coping strategy for participants in managing the challenges associated with a lack of alone time. Participants recognized the importance of open and honest communication with their husbands to address their emotional needs and seek support. Participants expressed that spending quality time with their husbands served as a form of solitude and an opportunity to rejuvenate themselves. They valued the emotional connection and understanding they experienced when engaging in meaningful conversations with their partners. By sharing their feelings, concerns, and frustrations, participants felt heard and validated, which contributed to a sense of emotional relief and support. One participant emphasized the significance of marital communication by stating,

> *"I also trained my husband to always listen to me. Because I get scolded by people at work too. So my husband will listen to my daily stories from morning till evening, even if it's just listening, at least I can vent... I let him know about my frustrations and ask him to listen because it's all piled up in my mind." – K*

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the perceptions of *me time* among working mothers with children under the age of 6. Specifically, it sought to address the three research questions centered on how mothers perceive, navigate, and cope with the evolving challenges surrounding *me time* amidst their

familial and professional responsibilities. This aim was developed from the scarcity of research addressing the concept and definition of *me time* from the viewpoint of Indonesian working mothers. The findings in this study have been organized into six distinct themes, all of which are interconnected. The six themes are: 1) The importance of *me time*, 2) Factors that hinder *me time*, 3) The changing meanings of *me time*, 4) Changes in *me time* activities, 5) The impact of not having enough *me time*, and 6) Coping strategies in navigating the lack of *me time*.

In terms of the definition of *me time,* our participants reached a consensus regarding its significant importance, agreeing that all human beings need time alone. It has been established that spending time alone is beneficial for individuals across all kinds of life stages and roles as it provides a platform for self-renewal (Korpela & Staats, 2014) and emotional regulation (Long & Averill, 2003). Likewise, spending time alone is crucial for mothers as a way for them to recover from stress related to parenting (Dong et al., 2022). The participants in this study unanimously affirmed the vital importance of *me time* in aiding them to navigate the transitions inherent in their roles as working mothers. They highlighted the extensive physical and emotional demands of motherhood, noting that it significantly alters their lives by shifting priorities and markedly reducing the availability of *me time*.

This study brought to light the adverse emotional repercussions stemming from the inadequate availability of *me time* for working mothers. It impacted their ability to regulate emotions effectively and led to a diminished focus on prioritizing their own needs and well-being, especially because of the traditional notion that mothers continue to bear greater domestic responsibilities (Marshall & Tracy, 2009). It was argued by Afiatin et al. (2016) that the happiness of working mothers is more likely to be impacted by work-life balance rather than family life stages. Therefore, when mothers are unable to effectively allocate her time and energy in a way that allows them to feel fulfilled both at home and at work, they may be at risk of experiencing a lower quality of subjective well-being (Afiatin et al., 2016; Novitasari et al., 2018).

Despite its importance, there remain certain factors that exacerbate the challenges faced by mothers in obtaining *me time*. Among the reasons was the additional responsibility to consider other people's feelings, including their kids, spouses, and other family members, which consequentially impacted mothers' ability for emotional regulation. The theme "Factors that hinder *me time*" is worth noting as it emerged as a cross-cutting theme, elucidating the obstacles faced by working mothers across all research questions. These factors include workload, familial responsibilities, and guilt associated with taking time for oneself. The fact that parental guilt exists despite *me time* being a

basic human right for mothers reflects the societal expectations and pressures faced by working mothers to prioritize caregiving responsibilities over their own well-being (Forbes et al., 2020). Additionally, in Indonesia, mothers still bear a disproportionately larger burden of parenting, domestic workload and parenting stress compared to fathers (Syuhudi, 2022; Junida, 2015; Hallers-Haalboom et al., 2016; Oyarzún-Farías et al., 2021; Trumello et al., 2023), thus highlighting the complex interplay of internal and external factors that impact the ability of working mothers to engage in *me time*.

A noteworthy finding of this study was that even with the challenges aforementioned, mothers were able to adapt to new situations and transitions, including to how they perceive meanings and forms of *me time* before and after having a family. Participants reported two different types of *me time*: alone time and time with other people. An unforeseen finding was that *me time* for working mothers does not invariably equate alone time or solitude, which is defined as the absence of social interaction (Larson, 1990); rather, the majority of participants interpreted *me time* as the opportunity to do activities that bring personal enjoyment, often involving a spouse or a group of friends. A participant also used the term 'sterile time without kids', which can be a useful way to describe how working mothers perceive *me time*.

The presence of both solitude and social interaction being construed as factors of *me time* is what Buchollz and Catton (1999) called 'two interconnected needs', suggesting that human beings need both to have a balanced well-being. This becomes a relatively new finding on the concept of *me time* in Indonesia from the perspective of working mothers. Moreover, this concept may be understood differently under different cultural lenses. The collectivistic Indonesian culture is known to prioritize togetherness and familial values (Triandis, 1995), which may potentially affect how Indonesian mothers experience *me time*. This aligns with previous research contrasting the experiences of solitude or *me time* between Collectivistic and Western parents. Collectivistic parents emphasize interdependence, social harmony and group relationships, while Western parents may prioritize independence and individuality, thus influencing how they view time alone and time with their family (Coplan & Armer, 2007; Shi, 2013).

In relation to the changing perception of *me time*, participants agreed that there was more freedom and independence in choosing how and when they carved out time for leisure as single women. After becoming a wife, mother and employee, however, there was a significant shift in what *me time* meant for them. Two participants shared that their *me time* is now construed as quality time with their spouses, which is also termed as 'couple leisure' (Lewis, 2022). This is supported by the

findings of Soulsby and Bennett (2017), suggesting that there is a shift in identity within the context of marriage, specifically from "I" to "we". This might explain why participants feel like there is something "missing" when their *me time* does not include their significant others.

Moreover, mothers also adapted to the changing forms of *me time* activities. A significant difference was found in the time availability of *me time*, but not in the types of activities. One unexpected finding was that working itself was perceived by all of the participants as a form of *me time*. Despite the demands and pressures of the workplace, engaging in work-related activities provided a sense of personal achievement and satisfaction. This is in line with a study done by Akyol and Arslan (2020), which also argued that working gives a sense of positive affect and satisfaction to women, thus giving a positive reflection to their children in the future. This finding challenges the traditional notion of *me time* solely as leisure or recreational activities, therefore highlighting the significance of work in the lives of working mothers. This is also supported by a study by Buehler and O'Brien (2011), stating that working outside of the home brings better outcomes for a woman's overall well-being.

It has been established that *me time* serves as a crucial protective factor toward working mothers' overall well-being. This study revealed that although challenges remain throughout the process of finding *me time*, mothers are able to find healthy coping strategies to alleviate any negative emotion that may arise. The women in this study demonstrated resilience by employing strategies such as acceptance, adjusting their *me time* activities, seeking additional support and enhancing marital communication in order to cope with the lack of *me time*. Furthermore, the finding on extra support from other family members and social communities is supported by existing literature suggesting that social support plays a big role in achieving work-family balance (Handayani et al., 2015).

CONCLUSION AND RECCOMENDATIONS

Our study shed light on two important findings. Firstly, it highlighted the substantial importance *me time* holds for working mothers, emphasizing that its scarcity can yield adverse emotional consequences impacting maternal well-being. This emphasizes the necessity of taking tangible steps to ensure that working mothers receive comprehensive support from their communities in managing their multifaceted roles. Secondly, our study revealed that mothers demonstrate a high degree of adaptability as they navigate the dual responsibilities of a professional and a mother.

Despite facing challenges due to limited *me time*, they employ healthy coping strategies to maintain a balanced approach to their dual roles.

However, a notable limitation of this study is that the three participants are not fully representative of the diverse Indonesian culture. Future studies could consider expanding the sample size to include a more diverse group participants from various regions and communities across Indonesia in order to capture a broader range of experiences and provide a more comprehensive understanding of how Indonesian working mothers experience *me time*. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that this study focused on mothers who are employed in white-collar industries. As such, the findings derived from this study may not be generalizable to mothers working in other job sectors. Future studies could expand our comprehension of the concept and experience of *me time* among working mothers and its impact on their well-being across diverse occupational sectors, including blue-collar industries.

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COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARD

Ethical Statement

All procedures performed in this study were in accordance with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its amendments or with comparable ethical standards. The ethical aspect of the study has been institutionally reviewed. Informed consent has been obtained from all participants in this study.

Conflict of Interest

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

Daya Availability

The datasets used in this study are available from the corresponding author through email at yohana22006@mail.unpad.ac.id.

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