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The Covid-19 resilience journey of vulnerable young South Africans

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Abstract
Resilience, the ability to adapt well to adversity, is a critical factor in the well-being and success of young individuals. This study explored the multifaceted nature of resilience among South African youth challenged by COVID-related stressors and structural disadvantage. Specifically, this paper reports a follow-up qualitative leg of a sequential mixed-method design. Thirty-eight young adults (average age 24), all of whom reported high risk exposure but low depression symptoms, took part in semi-structured interviews to learn more about their resilience journey. Qualitative content analysis was employed to identify prominent themes. The study's findings emphasize the dynamic nature of youth resilience, with individuals being buoyed by social network support (especially family); personal agency, structural support, and resource combinations. The qualitative findings contribute to the growing attention to the need for comprehensive policies and programs that recognize and enhance multisystemic sources of support, enabling young individuals to navigate challenges and thrive in their transition into adulthood.

Keywords Resilience · Young adults · COVID-19 · South Africa · Qualitative

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The COVID-19 (COVID-19) pandemic significantly threatened physical and mental health (Mudiriza & De Lannoy, 2020; Santomauro et al., 2021). Young people were not exempt (MacDonald et al., 2023). Two meta-analyses showed that COVID-19 increased depression risk for young people (Racine et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021), with related concerns for long-term or life-course damage (Bynner & Heinz, 2021). Moreover, COVID-19-related challenges probably had an even more severe impact on young people who were already vulnerable due to pre-existing poor socio-economic circumstances (Bauer et al., 2021).

Globally, young people responded adaptively to the pandemic's challenges (Dvorsky et al., 2021). This included young people exposed to additional stressors, such as structural disadvantage (Theron et al., 2021). However, a systematic review of studies investigating the association between human capacity for adaptive responses to COVID-19-related stress exposure– i.e., resilience (Masten, 2014)– and psychological distress showed limited researcher attention to sub-Saharan African youth (Jeamjitvibool et al., 2022). Similarly, no African studies were included in a review that focused on the resilience of caregivers and children during the pandemic (Yates & Mantler, 2023). Pre-Covid reviews of mental health resilience to significant natural and man-made stressors also reported inattention to the resilience of Africans living in Africa (Rother et al., 2022; Theron et al., 2022). In contrast, this article redresses the under-representation of African participants in resilience studies and foregrounds the insights of 38 African emerging adults (i.e., 18-to-29-year-olds; Arnett, 2000) from disadvantaged

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communities in South Africa. It reports their lived experiences of what enabled resilience to COVID-19 stress.

Multisystemic resilience to COVID-19 stressors

While resilience definitions vary (Masten, 2014), many prominent resilience researchers explain human resilience as the capacity to respond adaptively to significant stress (Masten & Cicchetti, 2016; Masten et al., 2021; Rutter, 2012; Ungar, 2019). The earlier resilience studies emphasized the role of personal and relational resources in this capacity (Masten, 2014), with more recent studies pointing to a broader or multisystemic combination of resources. From a multisystemic perspective, human resilience is rooted in various resources distributed across biological, psychological, social, structural, and environmental systems (Masten, 2021; Ungar & Theron, 2020). For example, a pre-pandemic qualitative study with young people exposed to economic volatility and related constraints in Canada and South Africa reported resilience-enabling resources linked to young people's physical health, psychological capacity for agency, social systems (with emphasis on their families), and built environment (with emphasis on accessible recreation spaces) (Theron et al., 2022). However, as theorized (Masten, 2014; Masten et al., 2021; Ungar & Theron, 2020), situational and cultural context typically accounted for differences in the resources these Canadian and South African youths reported. In particular, the Canadian youth were more inclined to report enabling services (which fits Canada's service-rich ecology– Theron et al., 2022). In comparison, the South African youth were more likely to emphasize informal supports associated with their families, communities and faith-based organizations (which fits traditional values of interdependence and spirituality).

At the start of the pandemic, Masten and Motti-Stefanidi (2020) used a multisystemic resilience perspective to theorize how young people's adaptive capacity to COVID-19 (and other disasters) could be facilitated. Their commentary emphasized that resilience is more than a personal quality and that families, communities, and governments must purposefully co-facilitate young people's capacity to adapt. This was born out in subsequent empirical studies of youth resilience to COVID-19-related stress. For instance, in the United States (US), young people with access to outdoor spaces exercised, perceived more social support from family, friends, and significant others, slept better, prayed more and had higher resilience (Killgore et al., 2020). Similarly, an Australian study involving 1004 young people showed that secure employment, the opportunity for virtual interaction, hope, and access to nature enabled resilience to pandemic-related stressors (Oswald et al., 2021). Still, as shown in a systematic scoping review of 48 studies of emerging adult resilience to COVID-19 stressors in the early stages of the pandemic, most studies foregrounded psychological and social support, while institutional and ecological supports were seldom mentioned (Theron et al., 2023a).

Multisystemic resilience to COVID-19 stressors in African contexts

The scoping review just mentioned (i.e., Theron et al., 2023a) also reported a geographical bias in the studies of emerging adult resilience to stressors associated with the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic: only a handful of studies reported the resilience of emerging adults living outside of more developed world contexts such as North America, Europe, or Australia. Africa was only represented in three studies included in the review, and all three were conducted in South Africa (Gittings et al., 2021; Padmanabhanunni & Pretorious, 2021a, b). Additionally, none of these studies reported multisystemic resource combinations to explain the resilience of the young Africans in their studies. Instead, they foregrounded young people's strengths (e.g., compliance with public health measures and ego strength).

However, other studies investigating youth resilience to COVID-19-related stressors in African contexts showed that resilience cannot only be reduced to individual strengths. For example, Woldehanna et al. (2021) surveyed 2021 Ethiopian young adults and found that their resilience was associated with the strength of their social connections (e.g., relationships with peers and family). Similarly, Haag and colleagues (Haag et al., 2022) surveyed 233 youth living in a deprived neighbourhood in South Africa. While they found that COVID-related factors predicted mental health problems, they also found that positive systemic experiences (e.g., young people enjoying spending more time at home, with their families, and on hobbies) promoted mental health resilience. Another survey study involving 5693 youth in seven South African provinces concluded that having a job and caring for a family supported resilience to depression (Mudiriza & De Lannoy, 2020). Likewise, a 5-week qualitative study with 24 emerging adults (average age: 20) living in a South African township found that young people's resilience was intertwined with their families' and communities' capacity to conform to public health measures and provide instrumental, informational and emotional support (Theron et al., 2021).

The South African context: 2021

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, South African youth (ages 15 to 24) were no strangers to adversity, with 57.38% of these young people without work but available for and seeking employment in 2019 (The World Bank, 2023).

These numbers increased to 59.62% in 2020 and 64.18% in 2021 (i.e., during the COVID-19 years). In addition, South Africa enforced Coronavirus lockdowns and public health measures throughout 2020 and 2021. While these contributed to disease control, they were associated with widespread socio-economic stress worse for structurally disadvantaged communities (Turok & Visagie, 2021). For example, the National Income Dynamics Study-Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey reported escalating hunger and penury, including that approximately 3 million people lost employment during South Africa's strictest lockdown periods (Spaull et al., 2020).

Disadvantaged communities in South Africa are characterized by ongoing marginalization, structural disadvantage (e.g., low-quality housing, overcrowding, poor infrastructure, widespread poverty), and inadequate service delivery (Haffejee & Levine, 2020). They are also characterized by frequent (often violent) protests to redress service delivery inequity and local/national government corruption (Canham, 2018; Richardson et al., 2022). In addition, exposure to community disadvantage is associated with a heightened risk for depression among South African adults (Mungai & Bayat, 2019).

In 2021 (the time of the study we report), South Africa was under level 3–4 lockdown restrictions from June to August, including a ban on social gatherings (and in-person research) and a 21:00–04:00 curfew. After that, the lockdown was loosened (level 2, September; level 1, October onward). However, level 3–4 lockdowns also restricted movement, including school and university closures. In addition, university education moved online, requiring students to have access to computers, wifi, and electricity.

There was some government response to the socio-economic challenges associated with COVID-19 times. The Special COVID-19 Social Relief Distress grant– R350 (approximately US$20) per month, initially for 6 months in 2020– was extended until 2022. Furthermore, food parcels were distributed to the unemployed or families with a combined family income of less than R3,600 (approximately US$196) per month.

As noted in the earlier section on multisystemic resilience in African contexts, there has been some attention to the resilience of young South African people challenged by the multiple stressors that characterized the COVID-19 period in South Africa. While some of these studies have pointed to young people's resilience being co-informed by their social and structural ecologies (Haag et al., 2022; Mudiriza & de Lannoy, 2020), others have perpetuated attention to personal strengths (Padmanabhanunni & Pretorious, 2021a, b).

The current study

Although the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic appears to be over, there are likely to be subsequent pandemics (Michie & West, 2021). Understanding what enabled young people's resilience to stressors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic is vital to adequate preparation for future pandemics. Knowing that resilience is sensitive to situational and cultural context (Masten, 2014; Masten et al., 2021; Ungar & Theron, 2020), giving voice to youth whose perspectives have been neglected in the resilience literature (e.g., African young people living in Africa) is essential. In South Africa, people living in resource-constrained communities (such as townships) were disproportionately more negatively affected by COVID-19-related stressors than those living in better-resourced communities (De Groot & Lemanski, 2021; Turok & Visagie, 2021). As explained next, we report on the qualitative findings of a sequential mixed-method study, which would foreground the insights of emerging African adults living in resource-constrained communities during the pandemic. The qualitative study was guided by the following research question: *What supported the resilience of young people who self-reported high-risk exposure levels and minimal or mild depression symptoms*?

Research methodology and procedures

This paper reports on the follow-up qualitative leg of a sequential mixed-method design used to independently collect and analyze qualitative and quantitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The quantitative phase of the study was used to identify participants with high-risk exposure but minimal or mild depression (Cockcroft et al., 2023). As reported in Cockcroft et al. (2023) participants were eligible for the study if they self-identified as emerging adults (18–29 years old), be English literate, live in a disadvantaged community in Gauteng province, South Africa (e.g., high density, poor infrastructure, low socio-economic status), have personal experience with COVID-19-related stress, and were coping despite exposure to COVID-19 and living in a disadvantaged community (e.g., engaged in further education). These criteria were advertised on flyers, strategically placed posters and by gatekeeper word-of-mouth. Interested participants then contacted the study's RAs, who verified eligibility and completed the consent process.

Upon invitation, a total of 293 emerging adults between the ages of 18 and 29 completed a survey that included self-reported measures of risk (Labella et al., 2017), community adversity (Ruchkin et al., 2004) and depression symptoms (i.e. Beck Depression Inventory-II [BDI-II], Beck et al., 1996). First, the total risk score was summed, and the mean

was used to identify participants at higher risk (i.e., those who scored above the mean). Next, among participants at higher risk, we identified participants reporting lower (i.e., minimal/mild) depression symptoms (i.e., those who scored in the BDI-II ranges for minimal or mild depression). As in other resilience studies (Bonanno, 2004, 2021), individuals with high-risk exposure but minimal or mild depression were perceived as demonstrating resilience and invited to participate in an in-depth follow-up exploration of their resilience journeys.

Recruitment and study participants

We recruited participants for the qualitative follow-up as follows: Using self-reported depression symptoms and risk exposures (as reported in the survey; see Cockcroft et al. (2023) and Theron et al. (2023b), we sub-sampled participants who evidenced resilience (i.e., reported high risk and low depression scores). All these participants had consented to follow-up interaction with the research team (as per the original consent procedure). We identified 50 participants with the highest risk and lowest depression scores. A sample of 50 was used as this was likely to result in data saturation (Britten, 1995; Vasileiou et al., 2018). The RA telephoned the 50 participants and invited them to participate in a semi-structured interview to understand their resilience better. Of these, 38 consented to participate ($n = 14$ young men; $n = 24$ young women). All participants were either full-time students or unemployed during the interviews. All participants were Africans and had an average age of 24. Because conducting research in person was forbidden during COVID-19 restrictions, we had to collect qualitative data virtually or over the phone. Three trained research assistants collected data between June and December of 2021.

The Universities of Pretoria's Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (clearance number: UP17/05/01) and Faculty of Education Ethics Committee, gave ethical approval for the main study, including the qualitative leg reported here. A $10 supermarket voucher was given to participants for their interview participation. provided ethical clearance.

Data collection

We used The RYSE interview protocol (Theron et al., 2021), adjusted for use with emerging adults challenged by COVID-19-related stress (Ungar &Theron, 2020). The protocol, which was administered remotely (telephonically/virtually) due to pandemic-related restrictions at the time, asked about COVID-19-related stress and how it has impacted personal/household well-being and emerging adult development, as well as personal, relational, structural, and ecological resilience-enablers that support functional outcomes. We trained and supported two research assistants to conduct the interviews in English. Both were interned educational psychologists and registered with the Health Professional Council of South Africa at the time of the study. They had participated in previous research-focused studies that we conducted. They transcribed the audio-recorded interviews.

Data analyses

We were interested not only in our participants' unique sources of resilience but also in identifying dominant themes and potential resource combinations. For this purpose, qualitative content analysis was employed as it allows for the quantification of data by counting the frequency of different categories and themes (Kleinheksel et al., 2020; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). AF began by reading five transcripts to gain a general overview and identify preliminary categories. AF then used Excel to create a framework matrix with four preliminary categories: "Who or what supported the participants?" and "What was the nature and context of the support?"; "How did the support help them adapt well despite adverse conditions?" and "Other category". AF then extracted data from ten transcripts, one at a time, which could be a word, phrase, sentence, or even an entire paragraph describing what contributed to the resilience of the young people who participated. A codebook was developed and codes and phrases listed below were gradually expanded during this process. For example, in the category: "Who or what supported the participants?" codes or phrases such as "self, brother, mother, father, family; boyfriend, friends, community members; university lecturers, faith, and government" were allocated. The "What was the nature and context of the support" codes included "advice-giving, motivation, talking; money for food and data; physical space to study; bursaries, food parcels, government grants, training opportunities, and relaxation activities". With regards to "How did the support help them adapt well despite adverse conditions?" examples of codes were "ability to focus on studies", and "basic needs were met". In the "other" category, the personal agency of participants was identified, and strategies used such as walking, music, sports, positive mindset, among other were included in the coding book.

Following the initial coding described above, AF extracted data from the remaining 28 participants' transcripts using the framework matrix categories. To improve the trustworthiness of the data analysis procedures, a trained RA checked the extracted data of all participants against the framework matrix. During this phase, the RA verified the extracted data. The framework matrix categories were refined into four themes.

Next, AF tallied responses within each central theme to determine the importance of resilience enablers and

resource combinations. Mentioning any social network support, for example, was counted only once, and the same was true for personal agency and structural support. The RA-verified response is the final step in increasing trustworthiness. The findings of the qualitative content analysis were strengthened due to this double-checking procedure. Finally, the framework matrix was distributed to the co-authors for review.

Findings

We identified four self-reported sources of resilience that participants relied on to manage the compound stress of living in a disadvantaged community and facing COVID-19-related hardships such as unemployment and disrupted studies. In order of prominence, these were supportive social networks, positive personal agency, resource combinations, and structural supports, as depicted in Table 1. We detail each next.

Social network support ($n = 36$)

Almost all the participants (i.e. 36 of 38) acknowledged the importance of social network support, primarily from their immediate social network (i.e., family members and, to a lesser extent, from friends). Family and friends' emotional and material support contributed to participants' ability to navigate challenges and adapt to COVID-19-related adversities. In addition, some mentioned more distal social network support (i.e., from the community).

Table 1 Prominence of key sources of resilience

Key sources of resilience		Prominence $N = 38$
Social network support	• The family are the dominant source of emotional and material support, and to a lesser extent, friends. • A generous community eases education and employment challenges.	$n = 36$
Positive personal agency	• A positive mindset supported by self-talk facilitates meaning-making • Finding solace and empowerment in active involvement in specific activities • The protective value of faith-based hope	$n = 31$
Resource combinations	• Family and self, • Family, friends/neighbours and self:	$n = 29$
Structural supports	• Government-sponsored grants and food parcels enabled participants to reciprocate their families' emotional and material support and overcome unemployment-related adversities.	$n = 7$

The family

Several participants mentioned their siblings and parents as the dominant emotional and material support sources. Starting with emotional support, participants were grateful for the advice (and related insightful perspectives gained) and understanding ear of their family members. They were also inspired by the courage and tenacity of their family in the face of ongoing hardships. The following excerpts illustrate this well:

> …my brother. He's the person that I do go to when I'm feeling very stressed… I guess it's just talking to him about things and he does let me know and he does advise me to look at it from this way or this way. So yeah, just talking to him and him telling me that "even though it's going to take an extra 6 months, but then you know you'll get it because you know how much you want this thing and what you need to do to get it"…I guess it will be their motivational words,". (Participant 6, a 26 year-old young man)

> I would say the motivation I get from parents and the ability to observe how they do things. Like trying by all means not to give up and not to stand down. Because ever since the Covid regulations were lifted, my father has been up and down trying to work by all means. So that drive that I see in him, is one of the things that keeps me going… So recently, my mother was admitted to hospital. But then the smile that she wore every day when went to see her in the hospital, the way that she was talking to us, we were supposed to be the ones who are motivating and comforting her but then it was the other way around. She told me that "you can see the situation right now at home, so you have to do something about it. You have to work hard at school. You have to make sure that you do good and that you finish school so that you can help me (Participant 16; a 19-year-old young man).

Some participants included friends when they were reporting the protective value of emotional support. For instance, However, as shown in the following excerpts, the mention of friends was usually interwoven with the mention of family:

> I would say it is my family. I have a good family structure. They are supportive. They've been there for me always. And then I have a partner, a romantic partner…So with the lockdown, it presented us with the chance to have family time a lot more because we

> spent a lot of time together and bonding and talking about life generally and how to handle challenges of life. So, it gave us more family time because that was important to our family: time together… (Participant 10, a 21 year-old young man)

> I go outside, take a walk and sometimes I do meet up with friends like a couple of my friends, but I don't really talk about what's stressing me, I just chill with my friends or my brother (Participant 9, a 21-year-old young women).

Participants also valued their families' material support. As illustrated next, for the most part, this is related to family members, making it financially possible for young people to seek employment or keep studying. In some cases, families also provided a place to stay conducive to studying online (something that could be tricky in the over-crowded, under-resourced dwellings that typify disadvantaged South African communities). No participant mentioned material support from friends.

> So, my brother helped me financially. He has been sending me job posts whenever there [are] job posts so that I can apply for them. And even when I have low data, he will send money so I can have data to just be in communication with family or to email for jobs and search for jobs. So, those kinds of stuff. And with my entire family, I would say it's just their prayers. So, when I tell them that I have a problem they would be praying for me, and they will be encouraging me not to give up (Participant 5; a 26-year-old young woman)

> from my side, it would be my mom because she makes sure that we have everything that we need, like the basic needs. She always makes sure that we have them. Like food and water, and electricity…It makes my life easier because I only have to worry about other things. Like I have to worry about education. I don't have to also worry about buying food. I don't have to worry about at home there's no food (Participant 20; a 22-year-old young woman).

> So, for me, it would have to be my family. Like, I mentioned that at home, usually there are nephews and nieces. So, my brother allowed me to come and live with him… I had my own space to be able to study properly without any distractions. Because when you are used to living alone, especially on campus, you do need that time to be alone… I was always in my room, and that really helped me to be okay (Participant 15; a 22-year-old young man).

The community

Aside from family and friends, a few participants highlighted how a generous community *eases education and employment challenges*.

Typically, this was in the form of the wider community, making resources accessible and available. For the most part, this related to the generous sharing of opportunities (e.g., short courses, development programs) that had the potential to ease educational and employment challenges. Often, young people were uncertain about the exact identity of these generous individuals. For example, Participant 3 (a 24-year-old young woman) related the following:

> There are some people that have helped us with short courses that you can learn and do at home even if you did not get into University…Some people– I don't know if he is the ward councillor of our community or people who want to help us here– they always provide short courses that are free, that will keep us busy, and learnerships and other activities that we can apply for without using data…. Those people helped me to be okay. Like, the stress of not knowing how I'm gonna get to school, whereas other people know how to apply online, they know how to go to an internet café. So, right now, my stress has decreased.

Positive personal agency (*n* = 31)

There was a shared recognition among almost most (i.e., 31 of the 38) participants regarding the strong interconnection between their capacity to generate positive and hopeful meaning and their ability to engage in proactive actions that sustained hopefulness. This reciprocal relationship between meaning-making and action-taking underscores the importance of maintaining a positive state of mind.

Young people mentioned the empowering influence of inner strengths that helped them stay positive and motivated, such as a *positive mindset, positive self-talk*, *active involvement in specific activities, and faith-based hope*. In this regard, Participant 26 (a young woman aged 29) highlighted how a positive mindset, supported by self-talk,

facilitated meaning-making during challenging COVID-19 times.

> I think that I am strong enough sometimes. Believing that there is a better tomorrow. And the fact that I still have more to do on this earth. So, what I can say is that being positive, even though it's hard sometimes. And having a positive mindset will always keep you motivated

Young men and women highlighted how being active was interwoven with the capacity for a positive mindset. These activities included participating in sports, listening to music, journaling, and self-reflection. For instance, Participant 10 (a 21-year-old young man)related how he could relax and gain perspective after participating in physical exercise and listening to music.

> So soccer, it is a physical exercise, as you can see. And then exercise is always good for relaxing your mind. So, I feel mentally relaxed. And then listening to music soothes my soul, and I just feel soothed inside. And then I manage to look at the situation objectively rather than subjectively, because you know when you're looking at something subjectively, things can get even worse. So I get soothed and then I'm calm and then I manage to look at the situation and then go forward with the mindset that "I will find a resolution"

Similarly, Participant 36 (a 28-year-old young woman) listed how she kept busy in ways that fostered resilience. For example, she found solace and empowerment in writing, expressing herself creatively through creating stories and opening her mind to the possibility of a world where things were less stressed:

> I talk to my friends and I talk to myself and I write as well… And even when I write– so I did [studied] Film and TV Production, so I just create stories and just open my mind and just create a world where things are okay

Participants 37 and 22, both young women, added the protective value of organized religion and related beliefs and practices in maintaining hope in the face of adversity. They voiced their belief that putting Faith in a higher power (the Christian God in their case) and relying on prayer to find solace and relief is the best course of action.

> There's nothing other than praying and having that Faith and to trust God. It helps because I know that He is our creator and He knew us before we were even born and He had His plans for us. So, He knows whatever it is that we are going through, all we have to do is to pray. So, I am talking about myself here, I know that when I pray, I feel like there's a load that is lifted and it gives me Faith in that He will never leave me nor forsake me. And you have to go through certain things in life for you to be okay and for you to also talk about Him and His mercy and to be able to say that "you know one day I was in this kind of situation, but through Him I managed to overcome it". That's the Faith that I had (P37; a 27-year-old young woman)

> When I kneel down and pray, I feel like a load has been lifted off my shoulders. I feel lighter (P22; a 24-year-old young woman)

Resource combination (*n* = 29)

More than three-quarters (i.e., 29 of 38) of participants reported a combination of personal agency and social network support when they reflected on what had helped them manage the stress of living in a disadvantaged community and being exposed to COVID-19 stressors. While there was some implicit reference to their built environment in these resource combinations (e.g., outdoor space to 'let off steam and play soccer with their friends), most resource combinations emphasized family and self, or more occasionally, family, friends/neighbours and self:

> I have a good support system around me. And my neighbours, those are really good people. And family members as well. And, I also gave credit to myself because people can say whatever they want and do whatever they want, but if I myself am not motivated and ready to take life head on, it would be of no use, you understand? So, I motivate myself. I believe in myself, and I believe in the future, no matter how hard it is right now (P11; 28-year-old young man).

> I believe it's hope and Faith; a positive mindset, and the assistance that our parents give to keep us going… I was engraved in the word of God, that kept me going with the support of my parents; they brought positive energy that they gave me. And, the choices that I made myself. So, that kind of made me to continue with hope and Faith (Participant 17; 25-year-old young man)

Structural support (*n* = 7)

Structural support appeared to be rare as only a few participants referred to the protective value of structural support (e.g., government-sponsored grants, student loans, or food parcels). However, when they did, they stated that even though the structural support provided by the South African government was limited, it assisted them in overcoming the challenges associated with being unemployed and looking for work. In their experience, these supports helped them maintain a positive attitude and believe in overcoming challenging circumstances. In addition, being a grant recipient supported participants in feeling that they were contributing to their families (i.e., in a small way, they were able to reciprocate the emotional and material support their families had shared with them).

> The R350 helped us because when we are at home, there are a lot of us, and we eat a lot. So, you cannot expect to get everything that you need. So, at least you can contribute a little bit and you can actually save a little bit of it so that if ever you are called for an interview, you will not struggle with money for transport to go to the interview (Participant 3; a 24 -year-old young woman)

> My child attends creche, so at least I know that the moment the child support grant gets in, it goes straight to paying the creche. I don't even do anything else with it. So, at least there I'm covered with the costs for creche and transport and then the rest I will see to it myself. (Participant 29; a 26-year-old young woman)

> Two years ago I wasn't on a bursary… in 2020, I was a fee-paying student, so things would take time. Like those groceries, I wouldn't be able to afford them, as I would right now, back then (P14; a 19-year-old young man).

Discussion

African young people, one of the fastest-growing youth populations on earth (Kariba, 2020), have been primarily marginalized in studies of emerging adult and family resilience to COVID-19-related stressors (Jeamjitvibool et al., 2022; Yates & Mantler, 2023). To remedy this oversight, we report qualitative work with 38 emerging adults living in disadvantaged communities in South Africa's Gauteng province. The interviews focused on understanding what supported these young people, who reported low levels of depression despite their adverse life circumstances, to respond adaptively to the compound stress of exposure to COVID-19-related challenges and community disadvantage.

In order of prominence, four themes– supportive social networks, positive personal agency, resource combinations, and structural supports– shed light on how this group of young South African adults responded adaptively. Given pre-existing systematic reviews of South and sub-Saharan African child and youth resilience studies that reported the prominence of personal and relational resources to African young people's capacity to respond adaptively to significant stress (Govender et al., 2019; Van Breda & Theron, 2018), we were unsurprised by participants' emphasis of these two resources. Still, while supportive social networks or personal agency dominated young people's responses, many (*n* = 29 participants) combined references to themselves and their social networks to explain their resilience.

However, this is not quite the robust combination of resources that more recent multisystemic approaches to resilience report (e.g., combinations of biological, psychological, social, institutional, and built/natural environment resources (Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020; Ungar & Theron, 2020). In this study the young people's spontaneous grouping of personal and social resources reinforces the understanding that human resilience may not be reduced to a set of personal strengths. Their insights are all the more important given the growing discontent with many governments' neoliberal policies and related (mis)interpretations of resilience as the individual's responsibility (Rosenberg et al., 2023).

Concerning their immediate social networks, participants mostly talked about the importance of family and not so much about the importance of friends in their resilience journey during COVID-19. We found this interesting, given the developmental understanding that emerging adult resilience is more likely to be personal strength and in friendships than family connections (Yoon et al., 2021). The unusual circumstances of the lockdown restrictions may have meant that young people had less time to spend with their friends than usual and that this increased the amount of time they spent with their families, leading to a greater sense of gratitude for their relatives' help. Indeed, studies elsewhere (e.g., with young (Americans; Liu et al., 2020) have reported pronounced protective value for family support compared with friends during COVID-19-challenged times. Another possible explanation for emphasizing the family could be that most of our participants self-identified as Black African. Traditional African values enshrine the importance of the

immediate and extended family (Jaga, 2020). Participants' emphasis on family connections reflects this importance and cautions against culturally neutral (albeit developmentally appropriate) explanations of what enables resilience (Masten, 2014).

The scarcity of structural support in our findings is glaring. However, the impact was notable. Only a few participants reported receiving government assistance from South Africa. However, even limited forms of structural support, such as the R350 subsidy mentioned by some participants, can positively impact resilience by relieving financial burdens and enabling participants to navigate financial challenges while remaining optimistic about the future. The current study's findings are consistent with previous research, indicating that structural support for young people transitioning into adulthood is frequently scarce or insufficient (Armstrong-Heimsoth, 2021; Wimer et al., 2020). The rarity of structural support reported by participants in the present study reflects a broader socio-economic issue in South Africa, where economic inequalities and a lack of structural support may present additional barriers to resilience(Theron et al., 2022). Therefore, resilience-building approaches with vulnerable youth should be tailored to the specific circumstances especially applicable to countries that are currently experiencing economic difficulties, like South Africa. This realisation emphasises the significance of promoting both personal coping strategies and the establishment of supportive and enabling environments as critical components of initiatives aimed at building resilience.

Theoretical and practical implications

The findings of this study add to the growing emphasis on the need for comprehensive policies and programmes, specifically in South Africa, that recognise and enhance different forms of support, enabling young individuals to effectively navigate challenges and thrive during their transition into adulthood. First, by understanding the interplay of various resources and their combined impact on resilience, interventions and policies can be designed to support youth in overcoming adversity effectively. Second, by emphasizing the development of positive social networks. Third, addressing structural support scarcity is critical. Policymakers should work to develop comprehensive programs that offer financial assistance, educational support, and job opportunities to young adults. Ensuring equitable access to resources can reduce young people's financial stress and boost their resilience during this critical life stage. Finally, encouraging the development of individual agency and inner strengths should be a priority. Positive mindset, self-belief, and goal-setting interventions can help emerging adults overcome challenges and maintain resilience.

Limitations and future directions

It is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The sample size was relatively small, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study was conducted within the specific context of South Africa, and cultural and contextual factors may influence the experiences of youth resilience. Further studies are needed in South Africa to explore the importance of resource combination in youth resilience research, specifically on how vulnerable youth pool available resources, maintain a positive mindset, and rely on their inner strengths to exemplify their resilience's dynamic nature.

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Declarations

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