



Emotional Dynamics of Postgraduate Students in Completing their Thesis: A Narrative Inquiry

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.18415/ijmmu.v10i5.4574>

Abstract

Emotions play a crucial role in maintaining motivation, one of the factors which affect one's learning achievement. The two opposing types of emotions have differing effects on thinking and reasoning; positive emotions facilitate rational thought whereas the reverse is also true. This qualitative study aims at investigating factors affecting students' emotions in completing their final projects, the thesis. More specifically, the study aimed to reveal factors triggering positive emotions among students and how to maintain them and factors causing the emergence of negative emotions and those exacerbating them. The participants of the study were students of a post-graduate degree in English education program who have written their thesis and completed their study. Data were gathered using in-depth interviews with the participants and were analyzed qualitatively using Jeong-Hee's (2016) principles of narrative data analysis. This research found that factors causing the emergence of students' emotions, both positive and negative emotions, consist of two: human and non-human factors. The human factors can be those relating to academic context (supervisors and classmates) and also familial context (parents, spouse and relatives) whereas the non-human factors are time and place for consultation, examinations, and also resources to support the writing of students' thesis. Interestingly, the triggers of negative emotions are also those identified as triggers of positive emotions, if accomplished in opposing directions. It is then recommended that all relevant parties should be aware of the potential roles they can play in relation to students' emotions; they can be causes of both positive and negative emotions as well as the ones who help to maintain and to worsen them.

Keywords: *Positive and Negative Emotions; Master's Thesis Writing*

Introduction

Background of Research

Emotions are found to have a positive effect on someone's overall well-being (Fredrickson, 1998). As well, emotions can lead to better physical health (Veenhoven, 2008), greater resilience to stress (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004) and enhanced productivity (Park, 2005). This is not limited only to workplace contexts but also to other contexts such as education as studies on emotions have found that to some extent students' learning is influenced by their emotions (Linnebrink-Garcia & Pekrun, 2011).

Emotions have also been found to play two opposing roles in students learning as they can both facilitate and inhibit students' rational thought or reason (Cleveland-Innes & Campbel, 2012). Further, emotions can impact on students' motivation and further engagement in learning (Wosnitza & Volet, 2005). In the context of education, emotions are considered to be most influential on one's learning (Roger, 2015).

Research also has shown that emotions are linked to achievement and self-regulated learning (Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, & Perry, 2002), and success and failure in general (Jarell et al. (2017). Also, when related to motivations positive emotions are found to affect and facilitate intrinsic motivations (Løvoll, et al., 2017). Having this said, the aspects of emotions should not be neglected in education and professional domains as positive emotion correlates with higher academic performance whereas the opposite with poorer performance (Xun, 2021).

Significance and Urgency of Research

While research on emotions has been conducted quite extensively in the contexts of learning such as students' emotions during online learning (Sun and Zhang, 2021; and Naylor & Nyanjom, 2020), not much is found about the dynamic of students' emotions in the process of completing their final project of a thesis, more specifically in a master's study program.

Specific to the context where this current study is going to be conducted, in a study program at a state university in Indonesia, the following illustration might be worth considering. Data from the study program indicate that the time needed for students to graduate has been increasing from year to year. Take for example what has been happening in the last three years. In 2019, the average number of months needed by students to graduate was 30.6. This number increased to 36.5 months in 2020 and in the following year to 42.3 months. To provide some more detail, of those graduates, the time range in terms of the number of months is from 20 to 76, with only 11.29 percent graduating on time. From here we can see that the time needed to complete their study is far from ideal, which is 2 years or 24 months (Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2020). Surely, this is alarming as students have to invest too much time, energy, and money and are even still prone to drop out, a situation which is bad not only for the students themselves but also for the study program. The study program might lose its good accreditation status and even suffer a total closure.

Data from the study program also show that almost all students finished their coursework in three semesters, which means that the remaining months spent by students until they graduated were for completing their thesis. This provides information that students had to struggle badly in this endeavor and surely, during this process, they are very much involved emotionally (with all aspects relating to the thesis writing process which might involve both people and non-people). Some factors identified to relate to and shape their emotions, in addition to their internal factors, are, among other things, their supervisors, the study program and faculty management, and the facilities at the campus.

The end goal of the study is to enable students to have emotional intelligence, a type of intelligence that is defined as "the ability to harness emotions to facilitate various cognitive activities, such as thinking and problem solving" because "[e]motionally intelligent individuals may also be able to harness the motivational qualities of emotion (Salovey, Detweiler-Bedell, Detweiler-Bedell, & Mayer, 2008:536). As such, if we can reveal what factors trigger students to have and maintain their positive emotions and what causes negative emotions as well as what worsens them, measures can be taken in order to ensure the occurrence of the expected situations which in turn will potentially assist students in completing their thesis. Having this realized, students are likely to finish their studies earlier and the number of potential drop-outs can be decreased and even mitigated.

Research Questions

As a guide to conducting this study, the following research questions are formulated:

1. What are the factors which spark students' positive emotions?
2. What helped them to maintain their positive emotions?
3. What are the factors that have triggered the students' negative emotions?
4. What can be done to avoid the emergence of students' negative emotions?

Review of Related Literature

The Construct of Emotions

Emotions cannot be easily and concisely defined despite long investigations on them (Cabanac, 2002) and there is even no one agreed and preferred definition of emotions (Chapman & Nakamura, 1998). After a review of many experts' proposals to define emotions, some of whom were rather pessimistic to come to an agreement, Cabanac (2002:26) finally proposed a definition of emotions as “...; *any mental experience with high intensity and high hedonic content (pleasure/displeasure)*”.

Emotions as a general construct are very crucial in humans' life as they are part and supportive of their well-being (see Sun & Zang, 2021) and in the educational contexts, they should not be neglected as emotions are “... perhaps among the most influential for learning processes, ..” in additions to students and educators' values (Lund & Chemi, 2015: ix). It is also to note that emotions can affect learning in that positive emotions facilitate learning and the reverse is disruptive to learning. In teaching contexts too, emotions can influence teacher communication behaviors and how students respond to teachers' emotions, especially in the three discrete positive emotions of enjoyment, pride and hope (. (Titsworth et al., 2013)

When dealing with emotions, it is important to note that in most cases we cannot choose our emotions, as the emotions we show very much depend on what stimuli we encounter. However, despite the inability to opt on which emotion to show, there are things we can do to respond to our emotions, that is, to modify, interpret, and vary their implication (Oatley, 1992). The appropriately managed emotions will lead to motivational resilience which reduces intensity of stress and the ability to construct persistence in dealing with difficult situations (Skinner, Pitzer & Brule, 2014). In relation to how we manage the implications of our emotions, Salovey et al. (2008:533) state

The essential assumption in our work has been that individuals differ in how skilled they are at perceiving, understanding, regulating, and utilizing this emotional information, and that a person's level of “emotional intelligence” contributes substantially to his or her intellectual and emotional well-being and growth.

Positive emotions are said to “... broaden attention, cognition, and behavioral repertoires” which will “... lead to the long-term effects of frequent positive emotions, which serve to build resources that make lasting contributions to survival, health, and happiness”. (Fredrickson & Cohen 2008:777). So important are positive emotions that they should be cultivated in all spheres of life including in the workplace and education. Having awareness of this will surely make all stakeholders relevant to the contexts to encourage the presence of situations that will trigger the emergence of positive emotions.

In general, positive emotions tend to result in higher levels of effect, which in turn leads individuals to engage in approach behaviors; negative emotions have the opposite effect such that individuals' effect is lower and they tend to engage in avoidance behaviors (Mottet et al., in Titsworth, 2015).

Broaden and Build Theory of Positive Emotions

Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions holds that positive emotions *broaden* people's momentary thought-action repertoires and lead to actions that *build* enduring personal resources (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001). (Italic is original). Their theory of emotions can be described as follows:

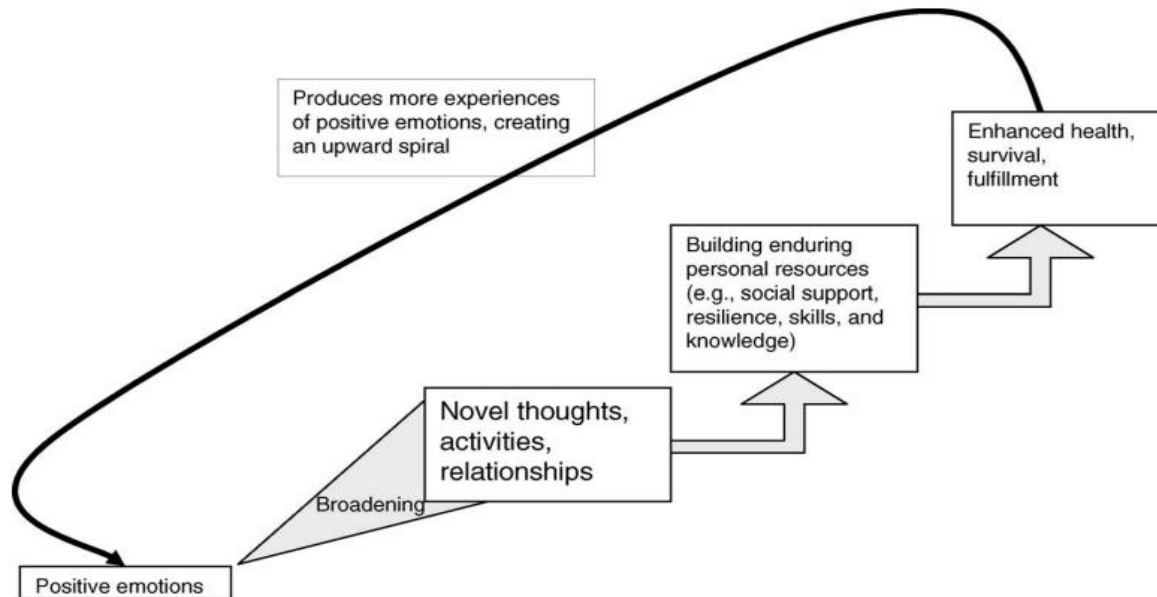


Figure 1. Fredrickson's Broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions

Positive emotions lead to *broadened* and *more flexible* response tendencies, widening the array of the thoughts and actions that come to mind (Fredrickson, 1998). "Joy, for instance, creates the urge to play, push the limits, and be creative—urges evident not only in social and physical behavior, but also in intellectual and artistic behavior. Interest, a phenomenologically distinct positive emotion, creates the urge to explore, take in new information and experiences, and expand the self in the process. Contentment, a third distinct positive emotion, creates the urge to sit back and savor current life circumstances, and to integrate these circumstances into new views of self and of the world". (Fredrickson & Cohen 2008: 782). In addition to the three domains of positive emotions above, Tong (2007) adds a unique appraisal domain of positive emotions such as interpersonal relationship, mastery, and spirituality. In their final review of theories and research on positive emotions Fredrickson and Cohen (2008: 791) remark: "there is good reason to celebrate and encourage positive emotions."

Some studies have identified that students' emotional experience relate to how they work out and retrieve information from long term memory (Grossberg, 2009); students' encounters with positive emotional experiences will facilitate them to recall newly learned information ((Nielson & Lorber, 2009) The opposite is also true in that when students experience negative emotions, they tend to tune out and shut down, effectively removing themselves from the learning process. (Sanders in Titsworth et al., 2013:193). Having seen the above, we can then conclude that emotions should be part of our education as they can have an effect on the success or failure of our learning as emotions depend on stimuli that evoke them (Shuman and Scherer, 2014).

The control value approach of achievement emotions (Pekrun 2006) postulates that if, for example, a student experiences and judges a learning situation at university to be intrinsically relevant and controllable, it is likely that positive emotions (such as enjoyment) will arise. Negative emotions (such as anxiety) may be triggered if a situation is evaluated as important but uncontrollable (like a relevant test).

Among these factors, appraisals of personal competences, task demands, the probability of success and failure, and the value of these outcomes likely play a major role in the arousal of achievement emotions (Pekrun & Perry, 2014: 124)

Motivational quality (Pekrun & Perry, 2014: 130) proposes that “ [t]eachers, parents, and peers deliver both direct and indirect messages conveying achievement values. Two indirect ways of inducing emotionally relevant values may be most important. First, if tasks and environments are shaped such that they meet individual needs, positive activity-related emotions should be fostered.”

Challenges in Thesis Writing in English as a Foreign Language

There have been many studies conducted on students’ problems in completing their thesis, the most challenging task to complete in students’ academic endeavors (Huang, in El-Freihat, 2021). Some of the studies worth mentioning are: Asmawan (2016), Chandra S (2015); Musa (2019), Sadeghi and Kajepasha (2015) and Sulasteri et al. (2019). From all those studies which are from different fields of study, it can be identified that problems or difficulties in thesis writing can be caused by both internal and external factors. The internal factors include intelligence, motivations, and activity of working on the project, whereas the external factors comprise supervisors, peers, academic supervisors, and the availability of facilities.

More specifically, in relation to writing a thesis at the master’s degree level in English as a foreign language, Sadeghi and Kajepasha (2015) identified several problems among Iranian university students such as organization, language, style, content, and methodology. This is understandable as very often those aspects of writing can be different from those in students’ first language writing. For example, in the organization. It is commonly acknowledged that the organization of ideas in texts among Asian writers is more of a spiral or circular shape while in English-speaking countries they are more straightforward or linear.

Another study worth mentioning is that of Backhou and Bouhania (2020) on the problems encountered by master’s degree students in writing their thesis in Algeria. This study revealed that as a non-english speakers of English, students found difficulties in completing their studies which are not only limited to linguistic-related problems but also sociocultural problems.

Experience we have had as study the program management provide us information on issues relating to their thesis completion. Some of the emerging themes are how students have access to the supervisors, how the supervisors respond to their inquiry or message, how long and which feedback they get from the supervisors, as well as how they can find an appropriate time for all supervisors to come for their thesis exams. From this illustration, we can see that students’ problems in thesis writing are multifaceted as they are not only about the ‘what’ and ‘how’ to write but also the process of coming to that thinking and writing, which requires physical, sociocultural and psychological readiness. These complex issues are surely potential triggers of positive and negative emotions which affect the whole process of completing a thesis among postgraduate students and this is the main aim of this study, which is to investigate the dynamic of students’ emotions when writing their final project of a thesis.

Research Methods

Research Approach and Design

This is a qualitative study employing a narrative inquiry method. This method is considered appropriate for the study as it aims to gain meaning as intended by the participants based on their perceptions and understanding of each variable in the context of completing their master’s thesis.

Research Participants

The participants of this study were students of the master's program in English Education at one state University in Lombok who just completed writing their thesis. They were mostly from the sixth semester and above. The participants were sought based on the data available in the study program. There were six participants in this study, consisting of one male and five female students.

Research Procedures

The first step in conducting this research **was to identify the participants** as described earlier. This step was quite easily accomplished as the research team was from the department who had access to the data about the study program including the students who are currently active in the program. The second step was to contact the potential participants for their availability to participate in the research. Not to ignore at this stage was to ensure the adherence to research ethical codes, which is participants' informed consent.

Five participants agreed to be interviewed to collect data on their experience during the process of writing their thesis. The interviews conducted were in-depth interviews which aimed to enable the collection of rich data on the topic. All the data were digitally recorded, one of which was in a video format, while the others were in an audio format.

Data Analysis

After collecting the data, which were in form of verbal qualitative data, they were analyzed following Jeong-Hee's (2016) principles of narrative data analysis and interpretation, which can be practically described as follows: transcribing verbal oral data, identifying emerging concepts from the transcribed data through repeated coding processes, identifying categories, that is linking codes to make a unit or category, identifying patterns, that is repeated units or categories emerging throughout the narrative, and creating themes that represent similar patterns. All the data analysis process is shown in the following graph, as proposed by Jong-Hee (2016)



Figure 1. Jong-Hee's (2016) data analysis process.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study are presented and structured based on emerging topics relating to who and what triggers students' emotions during the process of thesis writing. To support the claims, relevant excerpts are presented and the data source is mentioned using the participants' pseudonyms. The presentation starts with data analyses on factors triggering emotions which can be divided into 2: human-related and non-human factors.

Human-Related Factors Triggering Students' Emotions

One of the main factors identified as triggers of students' emotions is people. These people are those with whom students frequently have contact and include two: those identified as academic-related and those belonging to familial relationships.

Academic-Related People

Thesis writing is part of an academic endeavour in which students are engaged a lot. There are a number of people identified to play a role in the process of students writing their thesis. The first one is **supervisors**. Supervisors are the people most the way how supervisors deal with their supervising technique can trigger students' positive emotions and also negative emotions such as disappointment (when SP did not give clear and detailed feedback on what to revise and improve (AA). Supervisors can also be people to whom students can share their feelings and problems (AA)

Difficulty to Get Supervisors' Signatures

Supervisors can also be a source of negative emotions, such as confusion. Students can get confused when supervisors could not agree with examiners on the title or any other thesis-related matters (BAI).

Supervisors as a source of disappointment to students when they do not get their messages replied by supervisors promptly:

Saya sempat *down*, berkali kali ke sini kampus), ..., sampai sini chatnya hanya dibaca dan tidak ada balasan dan balasan sehari setelahnya ... (BAI)

(I once lost my motivation, I've come here (campus), ... but when I'm here, my chat was just read, and no response at all and I got one the following day ...)

Despite this, they feel glad that they can talk to the head of the study program who provides hope and keep the motivated.

Another negative emotion related to supervisors is caused by supervisors' slow response and their inadequate quality of feedback when checking students' work. BAI, for instance, reported her reluctance to consult her thesis with this supervisor due to the aforementioned reason.

Slow response dari SP1.... Itu yang membuat saya malas untuk bimbingan. [tesis]

(... and this made me unwilling to come for [thesis] consultation)

Also, the supervisor was identified to be a source of negative emotion in terms of the feedback given on students' thesis proposals. There were no adequate notes on what to revise, and often the supervisor just gives comments on the same part of the thesis. [here the participant reported that the supervisor just make notes on Chapters 1 and 3, and no notes at all were given on Chapter 2, which the participant thought was problematic (BAI)

In addition, where consultation is held was also identified as the source of negative emotions. One participant reported that she had to come to her supervisor's home for a consultation:

... lokasi [rumah] beliau juga jauh. Sekali dibalas mintanya jam 5 sore. Itu juga bulan puasa. (BAI).

(... the location of his house is quite far. One day, my text message was replied and I was asked to come [to hos house] at 5. PM. And it was Ramadhan.)

Another interesting finding from the study relates to how consultation with the supervisor was conducted.

Classmates

There have been different accounts of how classmates play a role during research and thesis writing in general. SHI, for example, reveals that classmates are supportive of what is happening to her. The regular meetings they arranged were a source of power and motivation:

Tetap komunikasi dengan teman,, ... saling mendukung.

(I keep communicating with my classmates, ... we support each other.)

The same is expressed by AA. According to her, classmates (not only in her new class, but also during her bachelor degree):

A friend of mine from the bachelor's degree helped me with proofreading. My friend and my parents had been reminding me to finish my study.

Different from SHI, BAI does not see classmates as supportive to each other as everyone, according to her, just focused on her own thesis: ... tidak saling urus. [everyone is busy with their own business]

Oneself: being aware of why could not graduate on time. For example, one participant could not collect data because of not being able to manage her time. [The participants in her research had been back to their hometown when she was ready to collect her data]. She was able to solve the problem by using her communication skills to persuade her research participants to provide her with the data she needed.

Head of the Study Program

Head of the study program, which includes the secretary of the study program, was considered to be a person to talk to in case students have problems in the process of thesis writing. Not seldom do they come and meet him for sharing problems and concerns. The head of the study program, who in some cases is also the thesis supervisor or examiner, is often consulted for problems relating to communication with supervisors (DDK), provision of resources (BAI), and even personal problems (AA). The accommodating and welcoming attitude of the head of the study program can be very beneficial for reducing the amount of stress students are encountering.

Familial: Parents, Spouse

Spouse has been claimed as one source of positive emotion. In the case of BAI, for instance, she was motivated by her husband when she faced problems with her supervisor and thesis writing in general. That she had been accompanied by her husband for a consultation on campus and her supervisor's house was felt to be very motivating and encouraging by this particular participant.

However, parents-in-law were identified as a cause of negative emotions. In the case of BAI, for example, she was feeling intimidated and under pressure by her parents-in-law's attitude towards her study. This even causes her a loss of focus.

... keluarga suami sering turut campur dengan urusan kita. Sehingga mmembuat malas [mengerjakan tesis saya]. Kan kalau cewek sudah sakit hati maunya tidur saja.

(... my husband's family interferes with our problems. That made me unwilling [to work on my thesis]. You see, when a girl is annoyed, she just wants to stay in bed.)

Own Parents

Interestingly, participants' own parents are indicated to play two opposing roles: sources of both positive and negative emotions. SHI, for example, claims that her parent (in this case, her father) was felt to lack understanding of what she was facing and was considered to put her under pressure. She felt that her father did not understand what thesis writing was like. He just wants her to finish her study and seems to think that it was her who was lazy and could not deal with the problem.

... bapak saya agak kaku dikit, kurang mengerti dengan kesibukan dosen, dan maunya kita cepat lulus. Dan menurut bapak saya kayanya saya yang malas

(My parent doesn't really understand how busy lecturers are. He just wants me to graduate as soon as possible. He just thinks that I don't work hard enough...)

Whereas her mother is considered to be more understanding than her father.

Psychiatrist:

One of the participants (AA) admitted to consulting a psychiatrist when she was feeling down after the thesis proposal exam and was even prescribed some medication. This is a particular case as this participant had been suffering from a psychological problem even before starting to write her thesis.

Non-Human Relating Triggers of Emotions

In Addition to Human-Related Factors, This Study Also Found Non-Human-Related Factors Affecting Their Emotions. The Following Are Some Examples:

Thesis Examination Room

Where the thesis examination is held was a concern to the participants. This might seem insignificant. However, this could be a trigger for students' emotions. A participant (AA) was feeling intimidated when she was sitting for the exam, then the exam room curtain was slit open, which means passers-by could see her being under examination. She suggested that an exam room should be representative and provide a safe feeling for the examinee.

Resources, timing, getting signature, exam (AA),

Determining Exam Schedule

This theme appears to most participants as a problem. Deciding the appropriate time for taking the exam was felt a source of negative emotions. As there are four examiners who should attend the exam, there is a need to have all these examiners available at a particular time. This can be difficult as those examiners are also active teachers who have to teach lessons. This situation is regretted by students as this has slowed down the process of their thesis writing progress.

Susah menentukan jadwal [ujian] karena harus klop dengan dosen. (SAS)

(It's not easy to determine the exam schedule as it has to match all examiners' time availability).

Due to the above difficulty, sometimes it is the case that an exam is attended by only two examiners, something which students regret and found surprising as she was notified a few minutes before the exam started.

Support with resources

The availability of resources for writing a thesis was felt important by the research participants and can be a trigger of positive and negative emotions. Thesis supervision should be done continuously, from the beginning to the end of thesis writing (AA). This is said, AA further demands that the supervision should also be detailed enough not just superficial. One way of conducting this supervision is that the supervisors not only give suggestions for writing the thesis in general and revisions but also how they should be done including potential resources that can be used.

Discussion

Triggers of negative emotions, as causes of students' delay in completing their thesis, are similar to those identified in Sulasteri et al.'s (2019), which include supervisor, peers, family and facilities. According to them, in addition to intelligence and motivation, supervisors, peers, family and facilities have to some extent caused problems for students in finalizing their theses, although students' rating on those factors is just moderate, which means that those factors are not always considered as determining factors. Supervisors and peers are, for example, rated 60% each, whereas family and facilities are rated 52% and 64% respectively.

As has been presented, the identified factors which have contributed to students' negative emotions have caused students' progress in completing their thesis, and this is in line with a study by Jarell et al. (2017) which has found the relationship between success, failure and emotions. The more positive emotions students can get from those relating to thesis writing, the more possibilities for students to achieve their success, that is to complete their thesis.

The fact that the same factors associated with thesis completion, be they human-related or non-human-related, can play two opposing roles, as supports and obstacles depending on what emotions they have triggered in the students. This also implies that if managed appropriately, factors having been identified as causes of negative emotions can be turned into those of positive emotions.

Communication is one of the main concerns among students. This is surely understood as students do not come every day to campus, as they have no more courses to attend. Also, there is no schedule for having the consultation. This can be positive if the unavailability of a consultation schedule means more flexibility for consultation. However, this can also imply the opposite, that there is no certainty about having the regular consultation which will affect students' preparation for the consultation

Resources and facilities have also been identified to affect students' emotions in their thesis writing. This result is in line with studies on how school infrastructure affects student learning and achievement (Barret et al. 2019; Ramli & Zain, 2019). Resources, for instance, will ease students in finding relevant publications to support their arguments and the same applies to facilities too. A comfortable study room and exam room will surely provide a safer and more secure feeling to students when sitting for their thesis examinations.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Based on the data presentation and analysis above, it is found that the triggers of both positive and negative emotions comprise the same factors: human and non-human factors. The human factors consist of academic-related (lecturers, study program management, and classmates) and familial people (immediate family members such as parents and relatives). The non-human factors concern time for thesis consultation, examination room, and resources needed to support the completion of the thesis.

In relation to how to trigger and maintain positive emotions and to avoid the emergence of negative emotions, as the two are from the same factors, it is recommended that those identified as triggers of positive and negative emotions and those having control of and responsibility for non-human triggers should understand their critical roles in relation to students emotions. They can be of support and at the same time obstacles to creating emotional resilience in master's students in completing their thesis.

Acknowledgment

This research was possible because of the support provided by University of Mataram with the fund grant no. 1729/UN/18.L1/PP/2022

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