Determining Factors of Flourishing: A Qualitative Study to Identify Signature Ingredients of Flourishing

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Abstract

Introduction. Flourishing received considerable attention within positive psychological research. Individuals who flourish thrive, function better and are more social compared to non-flourishers. Despite growing research, there is a lack of qualitative studies aiming to learn more about factors that constitute flourishing. This study aimed to identify individual signature ingredients of flourishing, which are factors that flourishers experience as outstanding to their optimal well-being. Moreover, the current COVID-19 pandemic is restricting the life of many individuals and it is yet to be discovered whether this stressor affects flourishing. Therefore, the effects of COVID-19 on signature ingredients were investigated.

Method. A qualitative design was employed, with an open question to gain idiosyncratic insight into the factors that contributed to the level of flourishing of participants from three independent samples. A of a total of 86 participants took part in the data collection, all considered as flourishing based on the MHC-SF. One sample included data from before the COVID-19 pandemic, another sample was drawn at the start of the pandemic, while a third sample was collected after one year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The data were analysed applying an inductive content analysis approach.

Results. A total of 6 main categories and 21 more specific categories were found. The main categories that could be identified were type of contact, flow, personal competencies, mindset, simple joys and sense of self. One significant difference of a main category could be found between the three samples, the main category sense of self was mainly mentioned in the sample after one year of COVID-19. Moreover, only the category unexpected acts of kindness differed significantly across the three samples, it was exclusively apparent in the sample at the beginning of COVID-19.

Discussion. The results confirm that overarching factors of flourishing are identifiable, thus, the idea of signature ingredients of flourishing is valid. Overarching factors were discussed in light of the current literature. Social contact was found to be a global factor, in line with conceptualizations of flourishing. Other categories established more individual behaviours that constitute flourishing. Lastly, this study found only marginal differences in signature ingredients of flourishing based on the three samples. Hence, these findings suggest that signature ingredients remain stable despite adverse events.

Keywords: qualitative, flourishing, determining factors, signature ingredients, COVID-19, positive psychology

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Many people strive to be happy in their lives and about their lives, unfortunately, not everyone has the same preconditions for this to happen. Up to the year 2000, the focus of psychology was on the pathology of mental illness (Huppert & So, 2013; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). The fact that people might care more about their happiness or satisfaction in life than about their mental illness itself was disregarded (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014), as was the fact that many people without a mental illness are not happy with their lives (Keyes, 2005). The movement of positive psychology changed this way of thinking as it grew out of the recognition of the negligence of well-being and human experiences. Positive psychology places its focus on processes and conditions that help a person to function optimally and to flourish (Gable & Haidt, 2005).

Flourishing

The concept of flourishing has attracted considerable scientific interest and is a key concept of positive psychology (Hone et al., 2014; Huppert & So, 2013; Keyes, 2002; Schotanus-Dijkstra et al., 2016). It is also a main component of the Two-Continua Model of Keyes (2002). Here, flourishing is defined as being: "filled with positive emotion and to be functioning well psychologically and socially" (Keyes, 2002, p. 210). The Two-Continua Model defines mental health with two distinguished yet related dimensions. Therefore, one continuum illustrates the absence or presence of mental illness while the second continuum illustrates the absence or presence of mental well-being (Westerhof & Keyes, 2010). In this model, flourishing is equated with positive mental health i.e., optimal mental well-being. Due to the two continua, mental health is not measured by the absence of illness, hence, one can also reach positive mental health despite the presence of mental illness.

Fundamental to Keyes definition of flourishing is the view that flourishing is composited of hedonic and eudemonic aspects. Research has shown that hedonia and eudemonia are closely related, yet, distinct constructs (Huta, 2018). Hedonic aspects include emotional well-being which is connected to the subjective happiness of a person (Diener, 2009). Therefore, hedonic behaviours aim to obtain positive affect and to minimize negative affect through engaging in experiences that are pleasurable and evoke satisfaction (Diener, 2009) such as watching television or engaging in personal care (Henderson et al., 2013). In contrast, eudemonic aspects represent social and psychological well-being and are concerned with functioning well in society and life. Here, the usage and development of the best in oneself is focal (Huta & Ryan, 2010). This implies for example engaging in activities that

other people can profit from or activities that strengthen the intrinsic value of the individual itself, such as voluntary work (Henderson et al., 2013). While some scholars consider eudemonia as more pertinent to flourishing (e.g. Joshanloo, 2019), others emphasize both as crucial conditions of flourishing as they have their own ways of contributing to well-being (Henderson et al., 2013; Huta & Ryan, 2010). Therefore, it is imperative to include both aspects to prevent missing important insights.

There are several ways to assess the level of flourishing while taking eudemonic and hedonic aspects into account. One such measure is the PERMA-Profiler which is based on Seligman's five pillars of well-being (Butler & Kern, 2016). Another measure is the Mental Health Continuum Short-Form (MHC-SF). The MHC-SF is a 14-item measure (Keyes et al., 2008) with three items focusing on the emotional well-being of a person, therewith assessing hedonic aspects. The rest of the items assess the eudemonic aspects by focusing five items on social well-being and six items on psychological well-being (Hone et al., 2014). To be identified as flourishing, an individual has to indicate "almost every day" or "every day" on 7 items out of the 14-item measure, while one of these items has to be a hedonic aspect (Keyes et al., 2008).

Experiencing flourishing is associated with numerous advantages. Longitudinal studies showed that flourishing protects individuals against mental disorders such as anxiety or mood disorders (Grant et al., 2013; Schotanus-Dijkstra et al., 2016) while it reduces suicide risk (Keyes et al., 2012). In general, high levels of well-being decrease the probability of all-cause mortality at all ages (Keyes & Simoes, 2012). On a more personal level, flourishing facilitates persons to function better and be more social and productive in comparison to non-flourishing people (Dolan et al., 2008; Hamar et al., 2015; Huppert, 2009). Moreover, positive emotions are an important element of flourishing (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). Through the experience of positive emotions, people gain a broader focus of attention, which can lead individuals to build enduring personal resources over time (Fredrickson, 2001).

The Gap of Research in the Domain of Flourishing

Next to the various advantages of flourishing, many other valuable insights into flourishing have been gained. For example, the prevalence of flourishing in various groups was studied (e.g. Schotanus-Dijkstra et al., 2016), and certain character traits were linked to flourishing (e.g. Lamers et al., 2012). However, current literature lacks qualitative studies about the phenomenon of flourishing (Hefferon et al. 2017). For example, considering the MHC-SF and its various concepts, it remains unclear what a person specifically associates with flourishing. While the MHC-SF considers social contribution as an important factor for

flourishing (Keyes et al., 2008), the respondent cannot give idiosyncratic information about what they do to contribute to society. As the experience of flourishing is dependent on the person itself, it could bring valuable insights to identify specific factors that contribute to the experience of flourishing. Nevertheless, these idiosyncratic insights in the domain of flourishing are currently missing. Qualitative research should study more in-depth experiences with flourishing (Joseph et al., 2009) as it allows a deeper understanding and/or novel ideas concerning flourishing and how people perceive this (Hefferon et al., 2017).

Only a limited number of qualitative studies concentrated on factors that people associate with flourishing. An in-depth semi-structured interview study by Said (2020) showed how participants from different ethnic backgrounds reflect on their level of flourishing. Five main categories could be identified as decisive for flourishing, these categories included family, community, religion, self-care and purpose in life. However, the sample size ($N = 4$) of this study was small, therefore, the results need to be considered with caution. Another qualitative study that used a between-subject design, focussed on the differences that participants described concerning flourishing before COVID-19 and during COVID-19. Two cohorts were researched, one before COVID-19 and one during the pandemic, with 124 participants in total (Perk, 2021). The results indicated that people experienced the enjoyment of a situation, the satisfaction with oneself and personal success as important factors for their emotional well-being. For psychological well-being, factors such as internal resources, physical activation and relaxation exercises were mentioned. Lastly, social well-being included factors such as social support, social connectedness and sharing with others (Perk, 2021).

Furthermore, three cross-sectional survey studies by Wissing et al. (2019) investigated the experiences of well-being in relation to goals, meaning and interpersonal relationships of flourishers and languishers. Exploration of open-ended semi-structured questions suggested that flourishers generally reported being more other-focused while also making more use of eudemonic values such as achieving intrinsic value by helping others. These attitudes refer to a greater orientation towards reciprocity and mutual fulfilment with regard to interpersonal relationships, as well as a general drive towards a greater good. Moreover, aspects that played a crucial role in the well-being of the participants were relationships, religion, and work (Wissing et al., 2019). The study also highlighted the necessity of going beyond the surface of concepts to understand underlying motives and processes of well-being. Apart from these insights, not much knowledge has been gained about factors that determine flourishing.

However, research focussing on individual factors that might constitute flourishing may be beneficial, especially when keeping research about signature strengths in mind. Through research on people's strengths, it came to attention that people tend to experience certain strengths as fundamental to their own identity. Signature strengths according to Peterson & Seligman (2004) are "strengths of character that a person owns, celebrates and frequently exercises." (p.18). These strengths are generally considered stable while they can be pliable to a certain degree (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Being able to identify and use signature strengths is described as an important foundation of flourishing (Jayawickreme et al., 2012). The greater the use of signature strengths, the greater the benefit for the subjective well-being of a person (Proyer et al., 2013). To classify as a signature strength, the strengths have to align with the individual itself and their motivational and emotional features of fulfilment. The most important criteria for signature strengths are excitement, ownership, authenticity and motivation (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Applying this knowledge about signature strengths to flourishing, it can be hypothesized that getting to know exact factors that a flourishing person describes as most important to them concerning their state of flourishing can bring valuable insights. A signature ingredient of flourishing could be seen as a factor that people highlight as being most important to their flourishing, an ingredient that is most prominent in determining their level of flourishing. These factors can be individual and do not have to align with any measure or concept of flourishing. Moreover, they would only have to align with motivational and emotional features of fulfilment of the individual itself. If signature ingredients of flourishing can be identified and if they could have the same potential effects on motivation that signature strengths exhibit (Meyers et al., 2015) or the same positive effect on well-being, signature ingredients could be used as a way to promote flourishing. Specifically, as flourishing is a dynamic process that is subject to change (Wissing et al., 2019).

Furthermore, there may be many factors in the environment of a person that could influence their optimal well-being. One factor that negatively influences the well-being of a person is stress (Thoits, 2010). Currently, there is a stressor that is omnipresent around the globe and that is affecting the population: The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19). COVID-19 is an infectious and fast-spreading respiratory disease (World Health Organization, n.d.) and in order to contain the virus, lockdowns are mandated around the globe (Koh, 2020). These lockdowns include the shutting down of businesses, having to work from home and the avoidance of physical contact with other people. People are faced with obstacles in their lives that can have tremendous consequences for the health of a person as they endanger a person's

physical, financial and psychological resources (Sibley et al., 2020). Although these protective measures were implemented to keep the population safe, the negative influence of the pandemic on the well-being of a person is hard to deny.

Nonetheless, it remains unclear whether flourishers are stable in what they perceive as the most important aspects of their flourishing pre-and during the COVID-19 pandemic. It could be pertinent to examine how exactly ingredients of flourishing develop, and specifically, whether the relative weight of the ingredient's changes. Gaining these insights could give further confirmation of signature ingredients of flourishing. Moreover, potentially finding a way to further foster flourishing and to find resources that can deter distress seems crucial, particularly in times of a global pandemic.

Purpose of the Present Study

Accordingly, this study focuses on the domain of flourishing and on identifying factors that constitute flourishing. It is known that flourishing can be achieved through many components as depicted in theories or constructs. Still, it is unexplored whether certain stable, yet individual signature ingredients could be identified. To gain insights from immediate experiences, only perspectives of flourishing individuals are taken into account. The primary aim of this study is to apply the idea of signature strengths to flourishing and to identify potential signature ingredients that can help a person to reach optimal psychological functioning. The secondary aim is to explore whether these signature ingredients are influenced or stable despite the COVID-19 pandemic by analysing qualitative data gathered before and during the outbreak of COVID-19.

Methods

Design

The qualitative study made use of a between-subject design. Data were derived from a semi-structured question. Three studies were involved in the data collection, the studies were consecutively executed in April in the years 2019, 2020 and 2021. All studies were approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Behavioural Sciences at the University of Twente (190320 and 210168).

Participants and Procedure

All participants were recruited using convenience sampling (Etikan et al., 2016). A total of 122 participants took part in the study of April 2019 and 51 participants took part in the study of April 2020. In April 2021 a total of 153 participants took part. Each year the

surveys were distributed via a link, so the participants could fill in the survey from any device with an internet connection.

At the start of each survey, the participants received detailed information about the study, including the objective of the study, their own rights, how the data will be processed and about their anonymity. Participants had to give online informed consent before the survey could be filled in. Before answering the relevant open question, participants were shortly informed about the concept of flourishing.

Only people scoring in the range of flourishing were selected for the current study. The selection of flourishers was based on the results of the Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (Keyes et al., 2008). Moreover, a prerequisite for the study was the minimum age of 18 years and the ability to understand and write the German language. Participants who did not meet the inclusion criteria or had missing data were excluded from the study. Therefore, the final sample of the current study consisted of 31 participants from the study in April 2019, 18 participants from the study in April 2020 and 37 participants from the study in April 2021.

Participants in 2019 were more often male (68%) and the mean age of the sample was 36.19 years (SD = 16.59). By contrast, the participants in 2020 were more often female (56%) with a mean age of 35.56 years (SD = 17.63). The participants of 2021 also showed a greater number of females (68%) while the mean age of this sample was 44.27 years (SD = 18.26). A chi-square test revealed significant differences in gender distribution across the three samples $\chi^2(2)$ = 8.53, p = .014. A Kruskal-Wallis test showed a marginally significant difference in age distribution across the three samples $H(2)$ = 4.77, p = .092.

Materials

This study was part of three larger studies examining the concept of flourishing (2019, 2020 and 2021). The surveys were created with the survey software Qualtrics. One open-ended question was used in the study: "Please describe one or more situations wherein you flourish: What do you do? What do you feel? What do you think? When you describe such situations, try to think about how you function as a person in relation to others and/or how you function as a person in relation to society?". The question was constructed by researchers of the University of Twente and was formulated broadly so that in-depth experiences could be investigated. The participants were asked to answer the question by writing 150-800 words.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data derived from the participants were read in their original language (German). Necessary data fragments were translated into English by the researcher. Furthermore, the data were analyzed applying an inductive content analysis using Atlas.ti.

Inductive content analysis is a way to systematically and objectively analyze and abstract data of a phenomenon where the knowledge is still fragmented (Kyngäs, 2020). As a first step, the unit of analysis was established, which were factors that constitute flourishing. In order to get familiar with the data, the data was thoroughly inspected several times before the data analysis started. Open codes, which are fragments of text that are related to the unit of analysis (Kyngäs, 2020), were established and marked. Each fragment was only coded once; no fragment could incorporate multiple codes, each had to be mutually exclusive. The open codes were then inspected, and the content was examined for similarities and differences. Similar open codes were grouped as sub-categories. Codes that were only mentioned once and did not belong to a sub-category were deleted. Furthermore, sub-categories were inspected and those with commonalities were grouped into categories, for example being optimistic and positive thinking were grouped as optimism. The main categories were established by comparing categories with each other and checking for similarities. For example, the categories optimism, goal-orientation, endurance and spontaneous were synergized into the main category mindset. The main categories were labelled using comprehensive terms incorporating the aspects of the categories. After the first coding cycle, the raw data was coded again to ensure the reliability of the categories and to improve the comprehensiveness of the codes. A total of 6 main categories were established that way (see Table 1).

To examine the role of the current COVID-19 pandemic on flourishing, a comparison of the main categories and their presence in the data was made between the different samples. The statistical software IBM SPSS Statistics 26 was used to analyze the frequencies of the main codes and their presence in the data in the samples before, at the beginning and after one year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, to investigate whether there were significant differences between the three cohorts, independent chi-square tests were run for each category.

Results

Participants incorporated a variety of factors that, in their experience, contribute to their flourishing. While there were many different factors mentioned, overarching categories could be found. In total, 21 categories emerged from the data which could be further sorted into 6 main categories. Table 1 gives an overview and example quotes of the main categories and subcategories. Table 2 depicts the distribution of the categories before, at the beginning and after one year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1

Overview of the Main Categories and underlying Categories with Related Quotes Derived from Participants Determining Factors of Flourishing.

Main Category	Categories	Definition of the Category	Example Quotes
Type of Contact		Experiencing flourishing in different social contexts.	
	Social Contact	Being happy when in company of others such as friends and family, but also pets.	"First and foremost, I get the feeling of flourishing in interpersonal contact" (3001)
	Solitude	Or being happy when one can spend time alone.	"But it is also important to have time for yourself and to think about many things that are important in life." (3124)
Flow		Finding amusement in activities.	
	Activities	Hobbies that one frequently engages in or activities that one enjoys.	"I thrive in, for example, situations where I pursue my passion, filmmaking." (3002)
	Nature	Enjoying being in or surrounded by nature.	"Or when I'm in a place where I feel good. Enjoy nature." (5230)
	Sportive Activity	Being physically active and/or	"I do my daily activities such as playing soccer." (1405)
	Music	getting pleasure from music.	"The music that is right for me can also trigger these feelings of happiness and joy." (5072)
	Meditation	Finding joy in practising meditation.	"When I forget the environment, when I am in a flow, when I am completely into (…) or meditation." (5042)

Main Category	Categories	Definition of the Category	Example Quotes
Personal Competencies		To be contented when having the feeling of being efficient or good at what one is doing.	
	Work	Liking one's job and/or being good at it.	"When I work as a waiter (…)." (1107)
	Altruism	Finding joy in doing something beneficial.	"I also enjoy giving these things away and making others happy with them." (5043)
	Proud	Being proud of oneself	"I always experience flourishing when I have the feeling that I am doing something well or am good at something." (3051)
	Positive Affirmation	or enjoying appreciation by others.	"In relation to other people, I feel the feeling of flourishing when I feel accepted." (3030)
Mentality		Individual styles to approach a day or a task.	
	Endurance	Through showing stamina,	"For me, flourishing is also related to achievements." (3020)
	Optimism	being optimistic,	"My experience is that positive thinking makes it easier to get through the day as soon as I leave the front door (…)." (3090)
	Goal-oriented	being goal-oriented	"I also have the feeling of experiencing flourishing when I have achieved what I have set myself to achieve, for example when I have successfully achieved my goals." (3114)
	Spontaneous	and/or being instinctive	There is no regular daily routine, it results from spontaneous ideas that we then implement." (5043)
Simple Joys		Simple things that make a person feel good.	
	Me-Time	Such as having some time to unwind.	"(…) free time on the weekends so I can relax there." (5008)
	Little Things	Experiencing as a sunny day, a coincidence	"(…) when I wake up in the morning with the sun." (3030)
	Unexpected Acts of Kindness	and/or having friendly contact with strangers.	"I would say that a lot of things, even small things, make me happy, such as a friendly counterpart." (1508)

Main Category	Categories	Definition of the Category	Example Quotes
Sense of Self		Happiness that is focused on the self or own circumstances.	
	Positive Self-image	Having a positive attitude towards the self.	"I am happy when I find my centre and when I am authentically myself (…)." (5042)
	Own Needs	Being pleased when doing things according to one's own needs and/or wishes	"I feel especially happy when I pay attention to all areas of my life. By that I mean that in my free time I think about what I feel like doing and then try to do exactly that." (5062)
	Health	and valuing one's health conditions.	"With the security of a healthy, functioning and happy family." (3046)

Table 2

Frequency and Percentage of Each Category Separated per Cohort and the total sample.
100% Refers to the Sample Size of Each Cohort, One Code for Each Participant per
Category.

Main Category and Categories	2019 (*n* = 31; 100%)	2020 (*n* = 18; 100%)	2021 (*n* = 37; 100%)	p^a	Total sample (*n* = 86; 100%)
Type of Contact	23 (72.2%)	13 (72.2%)	32 (86.5%)	.335	
Social Contact	23 (74.2%)	12 (66.7%)	32 (86.5%)	.207	67 (77.9%)
Solitude	3 (9.7%)	1 (5.6%)	1 (2.7%)	.472	5 (5.8%)
Flow	15 (48.8%)	18 (44.4%)	21 (56.8%)	.643	
Activities	8 (25.8%)	4 (22.2%)	14 (37.8%)	.397	26 (30.2%)
Nature	2 (6.5%)	4 (22.2%)	10 (27.0%)	.086	16 (18.6%)
Sportive Activity	6 (19.4%)	3 (16.7%)	5 (13.5%)	.809	14 (16.3%)
Music	3 (9.7%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.7%)	.228	4 (4.7%)
Meditation	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (10.8%)	.062	4 (4.7%)
Personal Competencies	14 (45.2%)	7 (38.9%)	17 (45.9%)	.887	
Work	10 (32.3%)	4 (22.2%)	10 (27.0%)	.743	24 (27.9%)
Altruism	2 (6.5%)	3 (16.7%)	8 (21.6%)	.216	13 (15.1%)
Proud	5 (16.1%)	3 (16.7%)	3 (8.1%)	.527	11 (12.8%)
Positive Affirmation	4 (12.9%)	2 (11.1%)	4 (10.8%)	.962	10 (11.6%)
Mentality	7 (22.6%)	4 (22.2%)	10 (27.7%)	.887	
Endurance	5 (16.1%)	0 (0%)	5 (13.5%)	.211	10 (11.6%)
Optimism	1 (3.2%)	3 (16.7%)	4 (10.8%)	.271	8 (9.3%)
Goal-oriented	1 (3.2%)	1 (5.6%)	2 (5.4%)	.895	4 (4.7%)
Spontaneous	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (5.4%)	.258	2 (2.3%)
Simple Joys	4 (12.9%)	6 (33.3%)	9 (24.3%)	.229	
Me-Time	4 (12.9%)	1 (5.6%)	6 (16.2%)	.539	11 (12.8%)
Little Things	1 (3.2%)	4 (22.2%)	4 (10.8%)	.111	9 (10.5%)
Unexpected Acts of Kindness	0 (0%)	3 (16.7%)	0 (0%)	.003	3 (3.5%)

Main Category and Categories	2019 ($n = 31$; 100%)	2020 ($n = 18$; 100%)	2021 ($n = 37$; 100%)	p^a	Total sample ($n = 86$; 100%)
Sense of Self	2 (6.5%)	2 (11.1%)	12 (32.4%)	.015	
Positive Self-image	0 (0%)	1 (5.6%)	5 (13.5%)	.090	6 (7.0%)
Own Needs	1 (3.2%)	0 (0%)	5 (13.5%)	.108	6 (7.0%)
Health	1 (3.2%)	1 (5.6%)	3 (8.1%)	.692	5 (5.8%)

Note. Every main category could be only coded once per participant in the cohort.

$^a p$ = This is the *p*-value connected to the corresponding Chi-square test.

Type of Contact

Type of contact was one of the six main categories that emerged from the data. It was composed of the categories *social contact* and *solitude*. *Social contact* incorporated statements of feeling great when communicating or spending time with other people or a pet. 77.9% of the participants indicated that social contact contributes to their flourishing. On one hand, some participants mentioned that their time with their families was most valuable to their flourishing, such as participant 3031: *When I spend time together with the family, I have the feeling that I am experiencing "flourishing"*. Other participants felt that the time with their friends was the most important component, e.g.: *"I am always very happy when I am with friends and can be who I am. Say my honest opinion and you get the feeling that you are liked and that you are important to a person."* (1415). Nevertheless, not all participants mentioned one specific contact group. Some participants mentioned various contacts groups such as family and friends (e.g., 5127).

Besides social contacts, the opposite tendency was also present. Namely, spending time alone without having any social contact at that moment. Five participants felt that time for themselves is a factor that contributed to their flourishing level, and that me-time can be used for reflection (3124) but also as a source of relaxation: *"Another situation is when I go for a walk alone in good weather and bright sun. I feel like I'm experiencing 'flourishing' because I can just be myself without someone judging me or having to pretend to be there."* (1107). Yet, experiencing solitude or company as beneficial for one's flourishing did not have to be contrary. In fact, for one participant, both types of company were important as can be seen in the statement: *"When I have a healthy balance between work, social life and me-time"* (3153).

Flow

The main category of flow consisted of five sub-categories. The participants all identified specific actions as an ingredient to their flourishing, such as engaging in hobbies or

reading, listening to music or various other activities. Five distinct categories could be identified.

The category *activities* incorporated a wide range of actions as hobbies fall in this category as well as certain activities that were mentioned such as painting, baking or cooking. Therefore, the category *activities* was mentioned by 30.2% of the participants. For example, participant 1104 flourished when: *"(…) I can be artistically active and creativity is required. That happens to me when I paint, but also every day when I cook.",* or participant 3097 flourishes when engaging in renovations matters: *"I enjoy doing things with my own hands".*

The remaining four categories *sportive activity*, *nature*, *music*, and *meditation* all only incorporate codes with activities in relation to their category. *Nature* was the category that was second frequently mentioned. To fall into this category the naturalistic aspects had to be more evident than the activity itself, such as in the statement of participant 1505: *"I flourish when I can be in nature, whether it be walking in the forest, listening to the birds chirping, or especially now in spring to see how everything awakens and blossoms again.".* Others specifically referred to feel great when they engaged in gardening (participant 1105).

The category *sportive activity* was mentioned by 16.3% of participants. All these participants had in common that they experienced flourishing in relation to sport. A sportive activity was defined as an engagement in a form of sport such as handball or swimming. *"I play handball in a women's team and especially when I play handball, I notice that I can flourish"* was said by participant 3020. A similar statement was issued by participant 1405: *"I do my daily activities such as playing soccer. I escape the rut to do what I do best.".* Walks did not fall into this category if no sportive motive was explicitly mentioned.

The code *music* fell into the main category of *flow* as participants mentioned that activities such as listening to music, making music or dancing to music made them flourish. One example was mentioned by participant 5072: *"The music that is right for me can also trigger these feelings of happiness and joy".* Lastly, the code *meditation* emerged from the data, participants referred to meditation as a source for flourishing: *"I have moments of happiness when I forget the environment when I am in the flow when I am completely into tennis or meditation."* (5042). It was also mentioned that meditation helped the participants to feel relaxed and mindful (5168).

Personal Competencies

Personal competencies connected statements where participants mentioned that they felt content when they experienced that their own doing or their skills contributed to their

level of flourishing. These own capabilities could be executed actively, could be felt by the participants themselves or recognized by others.

A total of 27.9% of the participants referred to their *work* or profession as a contributing factor of flourishing, the category was most frequently mentioned in the main category. While some participants liked the success that they can have in their profession when doing their work well, e.g. *"I flourish (...) when I am successful in my job"* (1413), others appreciated their work because they enjoy their professions. The latter was mentioned by participant 3052: *"In my job as a remedial nurse in a residential home for people with disabilities, I often experience a feeling of flourishing, despite the often stressful everyday work"*. What was also mentioned was liking the profession because it enables one to spend time with colleagues e.g.: *"When I'm at work and my colleagues know how I function and don't seem to have a problem with that, on the contrary, we can laugh together" (*3030*)*.

While the following three categories incorporated aspects of work as well, their most important ingredient, their main focus, was placed on another, distinct aspect of the respective category. In the category *altruism*, for example, the main focus was placed on the fact that being of help to people and/or society contributed to the flourishing experience. Here it was voiced that making other people happy influenced the own level of happiness, e.g.: I "*get happiness from making other people happy*" (3078) or that helping people through their competencies or work made people feel good: "*I am very empathetic with others and I am happy when I can give them something, do something good for them (...)*" (5072). Also, the feeling of contributing to society was mentioned through acts like donating blood (1415), voluntary work (3011) or vegan eating (5168).

Next to that, the feeling of being proud of oneself was mentioned by participants. The feeling of being proud was mentioned by 12.8% of the participants in relation to work or personal success. Participant 3146 considered to flourish when: "*(...) I have successes in my life.*" which was similar to participant 3051 who flourished when: "*I myself have the feeling that I am doing something well or being good at something*". Others experienced proudness when they successfully finished a task (3011).

Furthermore, also the experience of others recognizing one's competencies or others being pleased with one's work was mentioned by participants. Participant 5121 wrote: "*When I notice that the others feel satisfied with me, I also feel much more comfortable in my own skin.*" These participants felt like the appreciation of others contributed a great deal to their flourishing. They felt good when getting praise for their work which could be in form of the positive feedback from their boss but also from the customers, e.g.: "*I also get this feeling*

when I get positive feedback, especially when it comes to school (grades) or sentences like "well done" at work or from people who are important to me. "(1415).

Mentality

The main category *mentality* emerged from the data as participants indicated that it is their own way of approaching situations or tasks which made them experience flourishing. The codes could be separated into four different approaching styles. One of these approaching styles was *endurance*. One participant (3001) said that since he has taken things seriously and was putting effort into making things work, he felt better and got more out of the experience. A similar experience of putting effort into learning something new was described by participant 5027: "*When I learn something new and feel like I'm slowly getting better at it.*"

Another way of approaching a situation was by being optimistic, which was mentioned by 9.3% of the participants. *Optimism* was characterized by perceiving flourishing when positively looking at situations. Participant 1505 said: "*I can decide whether I see things positively or negatively. The glass can be half full or half empty. You can see rain as bad weather or just as rain and dress accordingly and be happy that it is good for nature. I can choose to be happy*". This statement is in accordance with the statement of participant 3090 who mentioned that positive thinking *"makes it easier to get through the day"*.

The approaching style of *goal-orientation* was also brought up. The participants spoke about the fact that setting goals in their daily lives and the completion of these goals contributed to their flourishing as they felt good about themselves, e.g.: *"I also have the feeling of experiencing flourishing when I have achieved my goals, for example when I have successfully achieved my goals for sport, learning, nutrition, etc. for a week"* (3114). The approaching style of being spontaneous was not as frequently mentioned. Only 2.3% of the participants felt like having the freedom to choose and not sticking strictly to an agenda constituted their flourishing: "*Spontaneity is important to me in private, it gives me a feeling of freedom*" (5049).

Simple Joys

The main category of *simple joys* included aspects of flourishing that were attributable to little but meaningful moments in life. The most prevalent category with 12.8% was the category *me-time.* Being stress-free and having the possibility to unwind was mentioned as a contributing factor for well-being. For example, one participant (5042) said to experience flourishing when there is: „*Freedom and connection without pressure and time from outside, not only being able to function and react but to be able to act"*.

Next to that, some participants felt happy when they could experience a situation with one of the senses or enjoy a moment by being mindful. Participant 1207 mentioned to flourish *"(...) when, for example, I see a blooming cherry tree in the sun. I see the sun; the spring and my heart is warm"*. Two other senses were mentioned by participant 1509: *"When I listen to a nice melody or I breathe in a smell/fragrance that I know"*. However, there were also little things that were not connected to the senses but seemed situational, such as a coincidence (1101) or discovering something extraordinary (5084).

Also mentioned by participants was the situation of being an unexpected recipient of kind acts. These friendly encounters enlightened some participants so much that they felt that these moments contributed to their level of flourishing. Participant 1509 said that one situation in which the feeling of flourishing arises is when: *"I go shopping in the hectic bustle of everyday life and I smile at a person who is unknown to me and this person gives me a smile back"* (1509).

Sense of Self

Sense of self was the last main category that emerged from the data, it was composed of the categories *positive self-image*, *own needs* and *health*. The category *positive self-image* reflected that participants mentioned that their positive attitude towards themselves makes them experience flourishing. For example, the experience of *"self-love, the connection with myself, my "inner child", mindfulness, appreciation, gratitude, dealing with my values and the meaning of myself"* is what helped participant 5239 to flourish. A similar experience was portrayed by participant 5005: *"I'm fine when I'm in good contact with myself."*

Next to a positive self-image, participants reported that the recognition and realization of *own needs* constituted their well-being. Participant 5239 mentioned that: *"I think I always experience flourishing when I am really conscious and authentic with myself and do what fulfils me, what is good for me."* The last category was *health*, it was mentioned by 5.8% of the participants. One participant reported that the own health that was endangered by a disease was one of the main reasons why the person flourishes today (1501). Other participants were just grateful for their health and described their own health as a contributor to their state of flourishing, e.g.: *"I flourish when I am healthy and can gratefully accept it!"* (5237).

Comparison of the three cohorts

Chi-square independent tests were run for each of the main categories and categories to test for possible differences in the three cohorts (see Table 2). Merely the main category *sense of self* showed a significant difference ($\chi^2(2) = 8.36$, $p = .015$) between the three samples. *Sense of self* was mainly referred to in the sample after one year of COVID-19. For

the individual categories, only one significant difference could be found in the category of *unexpected acts of kindness* ($\chi^2(2) = 11.74$, $p = .003$). The category *unexpected acts of kindness* was only mentioned at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, while not evident in the other samples. In the remaining 20 categories, no significant differences were identified. However, some differences approached significance, which were the differences in *meditation* ($p = .062$), *positive self-image* ($p = .090$) and *nature* ($p = .086$). Strikingly, *meditation* was only mentioned in the most recent sample, where COVID-19 was ongoing for a year already. Moreover, the category *positive self-image* was only evident at the beginning of COVID-19 and after one year of COVID-19, while before the COVID-19 pandemic a positive self-image was not connected to the experience of flourishing. The same applies to the category of *nature,* nature was not frequently accounted for in the sample before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Discussion

The present study aimed to examine whether flourishers can identify signature ingredients in their life's that are contributing to their level of flourishing and if these factors were influenced by the current Covid-19 pandemic. The results indicated that there were six overarching main categories and 21 more specific categories present. These main categories were *type of contact, flow, personal competencies, mindset, simple joys and sense of self.* Between the three samples, there was a significant difference only in the main category *sense of self*. Looking at the 21 specific categories, except for one category, no significant differences could be identified between the samples before the COVID-19 pandemic, at the beginning of the pandemic and after one year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Main Findings

The 21 more specific categories can be considered signature ingredients of flourishing; hence, participants were able to label signature ingredients they perceived as crucial to their own flourishing. Moreover, the qualitative nature of this study was unique as it is seldom for research on flourishing (Hefferon et al., 2017). As signature ingredients are novel in their idea, research about signature strengths must be drawn upon. Here, it was shown that the identification of signature strengths influences the subjective well-being of a person (Proyer et al., 2013). In a similar vein, flourishers, already possessing a high level of well-being, are aware of factors that contribute to their level of flourishing. Moreover, they seem to engage in these actions that make them feel good. Similarly, research showed that the use of signature strengths is significantly associated with well-being and vitality (Govindji & Linley, 2007).

The mere existence of signature ingredients adds a different level to the existing literature about flourishing. Previously, the focus was rather on global conceptualizations to allow for the construction of scales (Hone et al., 2014) such as the MHC-SF. Yet, as there is still no consensus on what factors are decisive for flourishing itself (Huppert & So, 2013), it remains difficult to describe how signature ingredients should be defined specifically. Nevertheless, the author tentatively suggests that signature ingredients should not be seen as decisive factors of flourishing, but rather as a further concretisation of factors allowing to identify specific behaviours. Those, in turn, could act as a booster to promote flourishing, also in non-flourishers.

Specifically, this study revealed a total of six main categories and 21 signature ingredients, which, however, need to be considered more nuanced. Especially as some of the main categories seem to overlap with available measures or theories of flourishing.

A reoccurring topic that was part of the main category *type of contact* was *social contact*. Social contact seems to be omnipresent in the literature about flourishing, and many studies, in general, highlighted the importance of social contact and its effects on one's well-being (e.g. Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). Additionally, also the measures of flourishing, such as the PERMA model (Butler & Kern, 2016) or the MHC-SF (Keyes et al., 2008) and theories such as the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) include aspects of social contact. Therefore, it seems questionable whether *social contact* can be seen as a signature ingredient of flourishing or if it is rather a prerequisite for flourishing itself. As *social contact* was the most frequently mentioned signature ingredient in this sample and is omnipresent in the literature about flourishing, it seems plausible that social contact is rather a global factor for flourishing and not a specific signature ingredient of certain individuals.

Also, the main categories *flow*, *personal competencies* and *mindset* emerged relatively often and are no unexplored factors in the literature of flourishing. For example, the PERMA Model sees engagement as a crucial component of flourishing (Butler & Kern, 2016). They define engagement as being involved in an activity, which also applies to the category *flow* in the current study. Similarly, competence is a main component of the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The theory proposes that well-being originates from the fulfilment of three needs, one of which is competence. Therefore, the main category *personal competencies* corresponds with the literature on well-being and aligns with the fact that flourishers frequently mentioned signature ingredients that could be associated with competence. Moreover, the main category *mindset* encompasses the signature ingredients optimism and goal-orientation, both of which were previously associated with flourishing (Diener et al.,

2010; Howell, 2009). Nevertheless, as for these three main categories, the results of the current study showed that there are more individualistic interpretations of these concepts available. These signature ingredients were not demonstrated or considered in literature before, thus, the small, specific behaviours underlying the constructs are revealed for the first time. These, in turn, are crucial, as they are the translation of these constructs into specific behaviours which might be a gateway to promote flourishing.

The categories *simple joys* and *sense of self* also identified specific signature ingredients. Nevertheless, these ingredients do not seem to be widely apparent in the available conceptualizations of flourishing. Similarly, these signature ingredients were also not as frequently mentioned in the sample, suggesting that these signature ingredients may be more individualistic. As signature ingredients are supposed to be individual factors the low occurrence does not undermine their importance but rather implicates that they are not as global as previously mentioned categories might have been. *Simple Joys* suggest that flourishers generally can find joy in small situations. As the experience of positive emotions is an important part of flourishing and in turn also allows for a greater thought-action repertoire (Fredrickson, 2001), the ability to find joy in small moments could be particularly valid for flourishers. It would be interesting to see whether moderate mentally healthy individuals or languishers also suggest simple joys as signature ingredients of flourishing. Lastly, *Sense of self*, which included behaviours that were focused on the individual itself were least frequently mentioned by participants. In line with that, a study by Wissing et al. (2019) has shown that flourishers are generally more other-focused and not so much focused on their own needs.

Yet, the findings of the current study also have to be considered in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Here, the main category *sense of self* was noticeable. *Sense of self* was mainly mentioned in the sample after one year of COVID-19. This was a significant finding, and it seems plausible that the apparent change to more self-focused behaviours might have been induced due to the restrictions of the pandemic. The fact that the pandemic limits the possibility of social contact immensely might hinder flourishers to do good for their friends or families (Büssing et al., 2020), resulting in a shift of focus from others to the self. While this self-oriented focus of flourishers contrasts Wissing et al. (2019), who found that flourishers are generally more other-focused, their research did not consider the possibility of a pandemic. They based their information about flourishers on three samples that were gathered at the same point in time while the current study looked at three different time points. Nevertheless, the deviation from the findings of Wissing et al. (2019) needs to be interpreted

with caution as only a limited number of participants mentioned signature ingredients that fell into the main category *sense of self*.

Another explanation of this shift in focus might be that many professionals such as doctors and psychologists have recommended shifting the focus to the self through exhibiting self-compassion and being mindful during the pandemic (Peteet, 2020). Moreover, also the finding that *meditation*, categorized into the main category *flow*, was only mentioned in the sample of 2021, points into that direction as meditation can be seen as a mindfulness-based exercise (Büssing et al., 2020). Aside from these findings, only one category, *unexpected acts of kindness*, had a statistically significant difference in the comparison of the three cohorts. Nevertheless, the importance of this finding can be disregarded as the category was mentioned very limited times. Therefore, these findings suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic did not change the mentioned signature ingredients immensely. This also aligns with the findings of Perk (2021), who researched the same data pre and at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The current study could also not find a difference while adding a third time point to the data. Additionally, the absence of clear differences might be explained by the fact that negative life events, in general, do not seem to have a great influence on individuals' level of flourishing (Schotanus-Dijkstra et al., 2016). Moreover, flourishers often exhibit greater resilience and therefore have an exceeding ability to deal with adverse events (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005; Teschner, 2017). This might also aid them to successfully cope with a global pandemic.

Thus, the current study showed that the pandemic did not change the signature ingredients of flourishers greatly, suggesting that life events such as a pandemic do not impact the signature ingredients that these people experience as crucial to their level of flourishing. Nevertheless, a slight shift of focus was apparent and, therefore, it can be concluded that it is important to keep the dynamic nature of flourishing in mind (Wissing et al., 2019) and to comprehend signature ingredients as stable yet not as fixed behaviours. Especially social, contextual as well as intrapersonal and interpersonal factors (Wissing et al., 2019) should be accounted for when further researching signature ingredients of flourishing.

Strengths and Limitations

The qualitative research design can be considered a particular strength of the current study. Especially in the domain of flourishing, the amount of qualitative research seems to be limited (Hefferon et al., 2017). Since the current study is looking for idiosyncratic knowledge to further concretise behaviours that constitute flourishing, an approach that provides richness and depths of information is inevitable. Moreover, this research used an open question to

gather the data, which was broadly formulated so that the individuals could answer the question as unbiased as possible, potentially establishing important new insights. Similarly, this allowed for a particularly large sample considering the qualitative design. A further strength was the focus on only flourishing individuals, a selection criterion that is often not taken into account within positive psychology (Wissing et al., 2019). This decision also allowed to study the dynamic nature of flourishing more specifically by comparing flourishers in different samples drawn at different times.

Despite these strengths, there are also some limitations. One limitation was the lack of interrater reliability. This study was coded by one researcher only, hence, the consistency and reproducibility of the categories cannot be assured, which endangers the validity of this study. Moreover, the gender and age distribution were unequal. In the sample before the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of participants were male, while the opposite was the case in the sample after one year of the COVID-19 pandemic which included also older participants compared to the other two samples. At the beginning of COVID-19, however, the distribution of the sample was balanced. Thus, all samples differed, potentially affecting the degree to which the three cohorts are comparable. This could also explain the limited number of significant differences. In a similar vein, the generalizability of this study might be limited due to the different samples, which, however, were all based on German participants. Results might not be transferred similarly across different contexts, e.g. other cultures or countries. Moreover, the current study did not follow the same participants over time but gathered data of three different samples (before, at the beginning and after one year of the COVID-19 pandemic). Therefore, conclusions drawn about changes in signature ingredients during the pandemic must be considered with caution. A further limitation was that each category was only coded once per participant to identify signature ingredients. The frequency of how often the categories were mentioned in the three cohorts was not accounted for, therewith potentially losing the richness of the data. Nevertheless, for the identification of signature ingredients, the frequency of how often the signature ingredient was mentioned in the sample did not play a crucial role. A total of 21 signature ingredients could be identified, yet, due to a large number of categories, the between-group analyses consisted of small n, potentially resulting in low statistical power. Thus, these analyses should be interpreted with caution.

Future Research and Practical Implications

While this study gave first insights about signature ingredients of flourishing, this line of research is still at its beginning. Considering that it took several years and a lot of research to develop the list of 24-character strengths, the nature of signature ingredients needs to be

explored further. Drawing from the developmental process of signature strengths, a first step should be to collect a broad range of possible signature ingredients of flourishing. These might be distinct based on the culture of socio-demographic background. Lastly, an eventual goal should be an applicable classification of such signature ingredients.

For future qualitative studies to gain more knowledge about factors that contribute to flourishing, studies should secure interrater reliability. This would allow for a better implementation of a rating system to prevent possible overlap of the results. Moreover, the demographics of the sample cohort should be as equally distributed as possible to increase the comparability across samples. Additionally, studies have shown that the prevalence of flourishing differs between countries (Huppert & So, 2013). Hence, using a more inclusive sample consisting of different countries and cultures may lead to better generalizability of the results. For future research it could be interesting to account for the frequency of how often a signature ingredient was mentioned, learning more about the importance that is attributed to the certain signature ingredient. Moreover, by accounting for the frequency, a between-group analysis between different samples (such as participants from different backgrounds) could become more significant and informative. As a result, this would allow studying the dynamic nature of flourishing more precisely. Specifically, a longitudinal study, following one cohort across several years could lead to invaluable insights. Another line of research could be to quantitively measure the categories drawn from qualitative data to see whether these apply to larger samples and to allow for better comparison between socio-demographic variables.

The considerable amount of research that still needs to be done may be daunting but could be promising since signature ingredients of flourishing could have positive implications. The identification of signature ingredients could be used so that people gain awareness of positive factors in their lives. Moreover, interventions could be based on signature ingredients to further increase the well-being of individuals, this could have advantages on a personal and societal level (Hamar et al., 2015; Keyes & Simoes, 2012).

Conclusion

This study applied the idea of signature strengths to the domain of flourishing. Through identifying signature ingredients of flourishing, new individualistic insights of flourishing have been gained. While certain factors have previously been connected to flourishing, the results of this study depict more idiosyncratic views of factors that constitute flourishing. All in all, this study showed that signature ingredients of flourishing seem to be a valid proposition as overarching themes could be found in the data. However, more studies have to be conducted to learn more about signature ingredients and to differentiate signature

ingredients from the components that operationalize flourishing. Considering that signature ingredients could have similar positive effects as signature strengths, they could be utilized as means to foster optimal mental well-being. Secondly, this study showed no clear evidence that COVID-19 had a significant influence on the subjective factors that individuals consider as crucial to their well-being. Hence, suggesting that signature ingredients are stable over time. Based on this, interventions focusing on signature ingredients of flourishing could result in lasting changes in well-being. Still, future research is encouraged to further investigate signature ingredients of flourishing.

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