“I was expecting everyone to kind of come back together and we would sing Kumbaya:” Undergraduate Student Socialization Prior to and During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Johannah Choi, Valerie Esquivel, Grace Galusha, Katherine Hanna, & Sawyer Kelly

School of Communication, Chapman University

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Dr. Erin Craw

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Guiding Question

In what ways has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted small, private, west-coast students' social experiences on campus?

Rationale

It's unquestionable that the implications of COVID-19 have prompted countless communication researchers towards exploration of the pandemic's impacts in all facets of life. Of particular interest to researchers has been the pandemic's effects on young people's experiences of education. Prior research on college students' social experiences is generally presented as a function of, or in relation to, the pandemic's impact on college students' mental health. In 2021, Birmingham et al. conducted a quantitative study examining students' psychological and emotional reactions to and perceptions of stay-at-home order. Students overwhelmingly reported feelings of isolation, distress, and even depression during their experiences of distance learning; but the study yielded mixed reviews when it came to students' opinions of personal protective measures being implemented upon a hypothetical return. Knight et al. (2021) derived similar results from a qualitative analysis of students' emotional and academic experiences during lockdown periods in England. However, the study also indicated that students were inspired to engage in protective behaviors by pro-social messaging. Research has also pointed to a decline in students' mental health, with the pandemic's impact seemingly accelerating an already concerning trend. Students' mental health is directly associated with social and academic factors such as motivation, sense of belonging, ability to develop relationships, and stress management skills- all factors encumbered by the social isolation incurred by the pandemic (Plakhotnik et al., 2022). Data collected by the National Alliance of Mental Illness (NAMI; 2020) corroborates these claims, noting 20% of college students believed their mental health worsened as a result of

infrequent socialization opportunities and a lack of in-person instruction. Indeed, quite literally hundreds of pieces of academic writing have emerged in the last few years speaking directly to the pandemic's impact on students of all ages.

Diamanti et. al (2021) studied how Greek students' social interactions were halted tremendously and individuals struggled with distance learning and mental health challenges. As a result, social interactions during and after the post-quarantine period could continue to decrease for many college-aged students. Diamanti's study indicates that extended lockdowns have behavioral and relational implications beyond the lockdown period itself. Said implications present a compelling avenue for further exploration. Alghamidi et. al (2021) examined how university students' views of and communication about socialization had been impacted by the pandemic through a Social Impact Theory lens. Findings highlighted disproportionate impact on students' social, emotional, and environmental circumstances, with comparatively lesser effects on online study and educational experiences. Thus, the three aforementioned areas of highest transformation –social, emotional, and environmental experiences– merit specific focus in a research context.

Students have been forced to grapple with the roller coaster of transitions between in-person, hybrid, and distanced campus life, with each setting offering unique challenges. Upon entering what can be considered a "gray-pandemic," wherein students have returned primarily to in-person and socialization restrictions are in the process of being lessened or lifted, there emerges an equally complex social dynamic that students must navigate.

Socialization, (or lack thereof) although emerging a key factor in nearly all researchers' findings, wasn't qualitatively examined as its own experiential category. The majority of research is dedicated to the pandemic's lockdown-era; thus, chronological context emergent in

the loosening of social restrictions necessitates further exploration of students' experiences and perceptions of socialization within a gray-pandemic. College students exist within a nuanced transitional era. Leaving behind the rigid restrictions enforced during peak infection rates means that students' decision-making with respect to socialization is now more grounded in individual agency rather than adherence to regulation. Because of this, it's crucial to understand college student's current experiences with and perceptions of socialization during the grey-pandemic to better illuminate the new set of priorities, desires, and fears that gird college students' approaches to post-lockdown socialization.

Although previous research has demonstrated the detrimental effects of prolonged isolation on college student's mental health, there is less known about the ways in which these effects will ripple into students' choices and desires going into a less-restricted social environment. It is possible that current college students may be experiencing competing goals with respect to socialization desires, with potential desires for social connection and integration at odds with residual fears surrounding rising infection rates and the implicit threat of a return to lockdown. The pandemic has created new social and relational norms, fundamentally shifting interactive standards. College is constructed as a pivotal point in young adults' social development due to students' transition away from the immediacy of friend groups based predominantly on location. The gradual transition away from core familial dependence and beginning to individually build relationships that lie beyond the familial sphere also bolsters the power of college in students' relational development. Because of this, having this process disrupted by the pandemic means that students' social development and/or perceptions of relational construction may have significantly shifted. College students now exist in a dialectic between individual autonomy and enforced regulations. Less-restricted socialization

opportunities, coupled with the implicit degree of freedom in experiencing distance from the core familial unit means that students hold power in deciding how, when, and where to socialize. However, concerns about infection and remaining restrictions also necessitate flexibility on students' behalf. Because of this constantly shifting social landscape, in some cases, it may become difficult for individuals to find a community of students.

The current study seeks to gain better understanding of the nuances of this social transition through seeking experiential examples from the very individuals in the process of co-constructing a "new normal:" the students themselves. Although surveys could be used to gain an idea of student social satisfaction on campus, focus groups will allow for richer and more compelling option as we seek to understand the decision-making process of grey-pandemic socialization as well as students' longitudinal perceptions of pre, during, and grey-pandemic socialization trajectories. Focus groups are also more ideal than phenomenological interviewing because the collaborative element of them will allow participants to spark ideas for one another and present a more varied array of social experiences. Participants will be recruited from a diverse array of involvements and/or social groups on campus and as such, can provide a more multifaceted look at elements of bonding/socialization during the pandemic and now entering a transitional period.

Students are constantly seeking to classify what is acceptable and what is unsafe COVID-wise when it comes to social interactions and making memories in college. Trying to form connections with peers in college while simultaneously striving to abide by COVID-19 protocols can be challenging due to the limited spaces in which people can meet and personal fears surrounding both the virus and concerns about being forced to return to online instruction. Due to a lost year of in-person schooling, this fear of missing out on college opportunities also

exists. We hope to examine the relationships between desire for socialization, residual fear surrounding the pandemic, and the impact of isolation on students' social experiences. Our decisions surrounding both topic and context reflect our desire to explore the forefront of emergent pandemic-era research.

Methods

Three focus groups consisting of students from a small private university on the west coast were conducted via Zoom. Participants were predominantly female, ranged from 20-21 years of age and represented an array of different social involvements on campus (see Appendix A). To obtain the participants for our focus groups, we utilized network sampling from our team members' various social groups. Initial interest was garnered through informal recruitment (instant messaging/direct messaging). Each group member reached out to between three and four individuals, constituting a total participant pool of thirteen students. Students' participation was finalized via a formal email that includes all participants and research team members. Participants were given an explanation of our study's aims and an overview of focus group procedures (see Appendix B). This email also included scheduling software so that participants could choose the times and dates most convenient for themselves. All participants are current upperclassmen at a small, private, west-coast university who also experienced collegiate life at the onset of the pandemic. This means that our target demographic included juniors or seniors who were freshman or sophomores on campus at the beginning of 2020. They have experienced collegiate student life pre-pandemic, online classes throughout the pandemic, and the return to in-person instruction. The research team sent out a Calendly to the willing participants to find dates and times that they are available for a thirty to sixty minute focus group session. Team

member availability was cross-referenced with participants' submissions and moderator and assistant moderator roles were distributed accordingly.

We opted for small focus groups in order to allot each participant more time to speak. Although some elements of our study could be produced through quantitative survey questions, we were interested in examining the evolution of participants' socialization experiences over the course of the pandemic. Because of this narrative-centered approach, we felt that focus groups would be the ideal vehicle for producing nuanced, detailed data. We chose to host the groups over Zoom to allow for the highest degree of scheduling flexibility and accessibility for participants. Additionally, although it is harder to foster nonverbal immediacy on a digital platform, we believe that Zoom may make participants feel more comfortable in that they can join from a location of their choosing. The virtual platform also would rectify any potential discomfort caused by differences in masking preferences.

Focus groups ranged from 30-60 minutes and began with standardized introduction that aimed to reiterate the goals of our study and establish a safe sharing space for participants (see Appendix C) We prepared twelve open-ended questions (see Appendix D) to pose to participants pertaining to their social experiences on campus amidst the phases of the pandemic. However, in keeping with the emergent quality of this type of data and research, the moderator reserved the right to ask additional clarifying questions to enhance the groups and/or modify questions if necessary. Additionally, following each focus group, the moderator and assistant moderator prepared memos that summarized the conversation and main points of interest. These memos were discussed with the rest of the research team, and all team members consistently evaluated the questions for efficacy based on the trajectory of the conversations. We prepared a total of two opening questions, two introductory questions, three transition questions, three key questions

expected to take up the bulk of the time, and two ending questions. The researchers used Zoom's recording and transcription feature to establish a primary record of the conversation. This transcript was cross referenced with the audio recording and edited for accuracy. These technical facilitators allowed the moderator to focus solely on the conversations without having to take physical notes. In case of technical difficulties with Zoom's software, both the moderator and assistant moderator recorded the focus group as a voice memo on their respective cell phones.

Aside from the moderator and the assistant moderator, no other group members were present for each Zoom call. Each focus group consisted of three to four volunteer participants, the assistant moderator, and the moderator. While the moderator spearheaded the facilitation of the conversation, the assistant moderator kept their camera off and remained muted throughout the call. The assistant moderator ensured that the technology ran smoothly and took notes of interesting points to circle back to during the discussion. If the assistant moderator had a question and/or clarification they felt must be addressed, they were able to private message the moderator through the Zoom chat.

One purpose of excluding the additional group members is so the focus group is not as large and daunting for participants. When there are more people present, it can be harder for individuals to speak up and share ideas (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Although we did not formally incentivize participation in our study, at the end of each focus group, participants were thanked for their attendance and their confidentiality was reiterated. For this study, IRB approval was not needed.

Because we relied on convenience, social network sampling, our participant pool may not reflect as broad a range of experiences as we would ideally like to examine. Given more

recruiting time, and/or access to recruiting software, we would have liked to incorporate a more balanced representation of the different majors at [the university], as we recognize the potential that the specifics of a student's academic major may impact their perceptions and experiences of socialization opportunities. Additionally, our subject pool was overwhelmingly female, so we would have liked the chance to conduct focus groups with a more equal gender distribution.

In terms of the focus groups themselves, a potential point of bias lies in the fact that some participants may experience an inherently higher degree of familiarity with their moderator than others (ex. If two participants in a given focus group were recruited by that group's moderator, they may be more inclined to communicate openly than in a focus group where the participants and moderator are less familiar). However, we don't necessarily believe that directly matching the moderator with the participants they recruited is the best practice. This is due to the fact that although immediacy is crucial in leading successful focus groups, intense preexisting familiarity between the moderator and participants can foster an over-affirmation impulse within the moderator (excessive nodding, verbal agreement), which could skew results. Additionally, familiarity could cause moderators and participants to overestimate the intuitive shared meaning between them, leading the moderator to not push as hard for specificity and explicit articulation from the participants, and causing the participants to explain their experiences less clearly or assume that moderators will correctly infer meanings from their messages. Since we will be operating based on submitted availability, we cannot control the distributions of moderators and the participants they personally recruited. However, if a group coincidentally emerges wherein all participants were recruited by the moderator, alternative schedule rearrangement could potentially be an option.

Results

After conducting three focus groups with college students about their socialization experiences throughout the pandemic, researchers performed open coding on raw transcripts (see appendix E). Team members then compiled their findings to derive commonalities between codes and distill overarching themes. After discussion and consolidation of results, six main themes emerged: (1) environmental and emotional destabilization during the lockdown era, (2) differing priorities for expectation management before, during, and after lockdown, (3) self and socially constructed post-lockdown reintegration impetus, (4) emotional and relational difficulties with social reintegration post-lockdown, (5) factors that facilitated post-lockdown reintegration, and (6) complicated, semi-paradoxical relationships with university-sponsored events and organizations.

Environmental and Emotional Destabilization During the Lockdown Era

Participants reported feelings of environmental and emotional destabilization during lockdown. These consisted of both practical and logistical concerns, such as fears of infecting the self and/or others, and displacement brought on by changes in participants' physical environment (moving back home, only having contact with family members or roommates). Participants also reported feelings of emotional destabilization, prompted or exacerbated by environmental destabilization. These feelings were generally expressed in a physically articulated manner-demonstrating semantic congruence between physical and emotional displacement, and included rhetoric surrounding interruption and a loss of personal and social momentum.

Physical Environment Change

Participants expressed a relationship between physical and emotional dissociation. Many of our participants spent lockdown in contained social or familial groups. Despite affirming physical stasis as a necessary safety behavior, participants recognized the impact of physical

cloistering on their relationships with socialization. Zuri explained, “My family was really safe, I barely saw anyone for probably a year. Especially because we're on an island and so isolated, so we were extra careful.” Zuri’s verbal association between “being safe” and limiting social contact articulates physical dissociation’s complexity amidst lockdown. Like Zuri, many participants explained their concerns that interaction beyond their lockdown units were unnecessary risks. However, there was equal acknowledgement that confinement to a single social environment impacted their ability and motivation to socialize post-lockdown (more details in later themes). Participants also noted that physical displacement increased their experiences of emotional and relational interruption (further explored below).

Fear of Infecting Self

Specific fears regarding self-infection were notably absent from our canon of responses. Although participants expressed variations on desires “to be safe” or “to be cautious,” explicit articulation of singular concern for the self was infrequent. Desires for safety were generally described in conjunction with family units or roommates. Because of this nuance, we felt it relevant to include this ghost code as a notable absence. However, participants like Sarah still reported infection concerns upon returning to in-person events. She noted, “when [the university] started to change their mandates, their communication wasn’t the best, but I was still hesitant to attend events.” In agreement with Sarah, Natalie also stated “for me, when I saw other colleges still being online, and some hybrid, it kind of made me feel uneasy and lost of uncertainty with whether or not I wanted to attend social events.” Their comments are one of the few expressions of self-oriented infection concerns. It’s notable that self-oriented concerns were centralized around the return to in-person instruction, and altruistic-framed fear was grounded in the lockdown (these differing fear frames will be explored in a following category).

Altruistic Fear

In contrast to self-oriented fear of infection, participants reported comparatively higher concerns regarding infection of others within their social or familial groups. These concerns were especially directed towards family members who were immunocompromised, or in a high-infection-risk age range. Participants explained that altruistic fear impacted the degree of caution they'd apply when considering socialization opportunities. Participants' concern wasn't not solely for the health outcomes of spreading COVID-19, but also for infection's emotional implications. Zuri notes, "I feel like the guilt that I would feel if I were to give my grandma or my mom COVID– it would absolutely crush me." The "guilt" of transmission to a loved one supersedes Zuri's practical concerns about her own potential to be exposed to COVID-19. Despite participants experiencing negative emotional outcomes due to physical isolation, such isolation was deemed necessary to circumvent a worse relational outcome- giving COVID-19 to a loved one.

Interruption

In conjunction with the physical isolation necessitated by the lockdown, participants reported varying manifestations of interruption. These disruptions were both inter-scalar and cross-contextual, with participants noting interruptions in pre-developed quotidian routines, on-campus involvements, and ability to socially engage. However, participants also abstractly articulated interruption, noting that the sudden lifestyle changes necessitated by the pandemic constituted a parallel cognitive shift in momentum which further exacerbated feelings of destabilization. Brandon describes this duality in his experiences with on-campus organizations. For instance, Brandon said:

> I really started kicking into gear in the spring semester of 2020. But of course that was also the semester when we were sent home. So a lot of the things that I was wanting to do kind of just got disrupted, and there was a big old gap, for example, I was going to audition for a musical on campus and my audition day ended up becoming the day I went home with my family… I always think about what that day could have been. And then, when I transitioned into being fully online, I had no social life.

Brandon's example articulates the relationship between experiential and emotional interruption. Not only was a practical element of his involvement interrupted- his "audition day ended up becoming the day I went home," this logistical transition prompted emotional disruption wherein Brandon felt he "had no social life." The fact that Brandon's social life "started kicking into gear in the spring semester of 2020," highlights a cognizance of missed potential that exacerbates feelings of destabilization.

Differing Priorities for Expectation Management Before, During, and After Lockdown

Participants articulated difficulties with expectation management through the pandemi. Although participants recognized the pandemic yielded some positive outcomes, said outcomes later became sources of expectational stress when attempting to reintegrate into post-lockdown culture. Within this thematic category, there emerged a series of competing desires that posited socialization and academics as contradictory goals. These expectations were also considered in tandem with participants' personal projections (or lack thereof) for their involvement goals prior to college.

Pre-College Projective Ideation/Expectation (In)Congruence

Although participants reported varying levels of pre-college projective ideation (ranging from knowing exactly which clubs they'd like to join to engaging in no projective imagining),

expectation management emerged as a commonality regardless of ideative degree. For participants who reported high levels of ideation. For example, Annalise said:

> I felt like everything that I had been working towards or involved myself in at high school, really translated to my college experience… I envisioned what I wanted throughout high school, and made that possible for myself. And then it just sort of carried over, and fell right in line with all the involvements and activities [the university] had to offer.

The onset of the lockdown constituted an overt disruption of the goals she'd projected; and as such, to suddenly have that fulfillment disrupted was, in her words, "incredibly just, very distressing." Yet, participants who reported less projective ideation weren't immune to feelings of expectational disruption. Natalie "was really just focusing on figuring the whole transition aspect out first, and getting myself settled. So I didn't really make any specific goals as to what I want to do," and yet, even devoid of those goals, "by the time spring semester came around, I felt like I really got into the groove of things, I found my friend group." However, upon lockdown, Natalie felt she "had just been like, 'oh, like this is so great, I love college now! And then… yeah, Covid happened. So it was really disappointing," illustrating that a lack of pre-college ideation didn't protect participants from feelings of loss because the initial social and involvement momentum gleaned from exposure to on-campus life was enough to prompt a sense of investment that, when disrupted, incited similar feelings of disappointment as participants who'd engaged in ideation.

Balanced engagement

Participants frequently reported desires for balance when asked to articulate their experiences regarding involvement on campus. This search for equilibrium was consistent across

the pandemic's various stages. Although such desires were ever-present, participants' expectations and appraisals of their own ability to enact balance varied greatly over the course of the pandemic. Overall, participants consistently expressed desires for well-rounded, holistic involvement in campus organizations (joining multiple different types of clubs, engaging in extra-university socialization opportunities), but also wanted to be able to maintain academic standing. The creation of competition between these interests, and difficulty managing self- and socially-constructed expectations for them will be further expanded below.

Positive Outcomes During Lockdown

Although citing the lockdown's impact as an inhibitor of socialization post-lockdown, participants didn't wholly disregard the experience's positive outcomes. For one participant, physical isolation within the family unit reified connectivity:

> When I first went home I felt like the pandemic was actually kind of a good thing, because it really helped me to rekindle the connections that I had with people around me. So for example, I had a lot of time being stuck at home with my parents, with my dogs, with my grandmother, with my sister (Evan)

For Evan, the lockdown became a socialization opportunity rather than an inhibitor in affording an impetus for increased family time. Likewise, other participants reported feelings of increased connectivity to their lockdown unit. However, Evan's words are delivered with the benefit of hindsight. He notes benefits were predominantly perceived "when I first went home," indicating a potential shift in positionality as lockdown's duration increased. Evan's use of the word "stuck" to describe lockdown further indicates that, despite perceived relational benefits, said connectivity was more so a circumstantially positive appraisal of an overarchingly negative

situation rather than a wholly positive appraisal of lockdown. More discussion of participants' negative lockdown outcomes will follow.

Competition Between Socialization and Academics

In considering pre-college projective ideation (or lack thereof)'s impact in tandem with participants' perceptions of positive lockdown outcomes, there emerged a conflict in participants' expectation management for both social and academic opportunities post-lockdown. As will be explained in the following thematic category, participants experienced significant desire for social reintegration. However, such desire was contraposed against modified expectations for the self in regards to social involvement and academic performance. This incited an expectational reckoning wherein participants framed their social exploits and academic interest as oppositional. This opposition wasn't experienced as pointedly pre-lockdown, as Annalise states,

> before[lockdown] I'd say I had a really great balance…I just definitely felt connected, and I felt like if I had a really busy schedule, I was able to really dedicate my time very well and make it to favor whatever I wanted to complete throughout my day,

indicating that participants' experiences during lockdown were likely related to a shift in participants' self-expectations and their perceptions of their ability to enact aforementioned balance. In contrast, post-lockdown, Tara explained,

> I found myself struggling a lot with trying to figure out everything and balance everything again; and it did impact my grades, it did impact my overall well-being. I have a better grasp on everything now, but I feel like it was a very harsh transition from being home to going back.

Although Tara highlights positive expectation management, her comparative drop in balance-management confidence and academic performance reflects a larger sentiment surrounding participants' difficulties with not only readjusting to interpersonal social interactions, but with negotiating intrapersonal expectations.

Self and Socially Constructed Post-Lockdown Reintegration Impetus

Upon returning to in-person instruction and socialization, participants reported not only a feeling of desire, but *pressure* to socially engage in response to decreasing restrictions on in-person activities. Although participants reported desires to reintegrate with peers, they acknowledged that those desires weren't wholly self constructed– and were in part emergent in contrast to the lockdown's isolation. This comparative analysis generated greater reintegration impetus, prompting a form of hyperbolic socialization wherein participants felt that their own desires for socialization were augmented by the overarching climate. Within this theme, three predominant tones emerged: making up for lost time (overcompensating), seeking out social affinity groups, and differing frames for fear of infection.

Making up for Lost Time/Overcompensating

Although participants noted that their desires for socialization felt self-produced, the comparative lack of socialization opportunities during lockdown fostered a hyperbolized sense of social desire and need. Zuri described feeling "greedy for social interactions that I missed out on during the pandemic." Not only were participants experiencing social desires that they deemed natural based on self-knowledge of their own personalities, these impulses notably increased based on a desire to compensate for lost socialization opportunities during lockdown. This impetus inflation could be in part related to participants' previous articulations of difficulties

engaging in academic-social balance, as the increased prioritization of sociality may have disproportionately eclipsed participants' drive to focus on academics.

Seeking out Social Affinity Groups

Related to participants' desires to make up for lost social time was an expression of preference for companions with shared experiences. Although participants reported multifaceted on-campus involvement, participants also discussed the desire for opportunities to meet others with similar life and/or identity experiences. When discussing desire for connectivity, Natalie noted, "since I came from online Zoom classes, I really wanted to prioritize joining a sorority because I was motivated to come back to campus in person." Natalie described wanting to "prioritize joining a sorority" which speaks to a broader desire for social reintegration with others perceived as similar. This desire for affinity may be related to the extreme isolation of lockdown, as participants were devoid of connective opportunities beyond the immediacy of their lockdown unit. Because of this, participants may not only be seeking general social reintegration, they seek reintegration further compounded by, and grounded in the increased connectivity that stems from preexisting shared experiences

Differing Frames for Fear of Infection

Participants' impetus for post-lockdown socialization was bolstered by participants having different contextual frames regarding their fears of infecting themselves and others. As previously asserted, participants' concerns surrounding COVID-19 infections were much more grounded in fear of infecting loved ones rather than fear of being infected themselves. This differentiated framing was also relevant to participants' post-lockdown behaviors. Tara describes this hierarchy of concern explaining that, upon returning to in-person instruction, "I definitely do not want to give COVID to any of my friends, and I obviously don't want to get it myself. But I

felt less pressure, less anxiety about giving it to my mom or my grandma." For many participants, fear of infecting loved ones superseded all else, meaning participants had comparatively less concern when removed from the family unit. Given that having older or immunocompromised loved ones created higher degrees of fear regarding infection, it makes sense that participants express less concern for infecting their friends or themselves. This could be due to the perception of self-similarity to one's friend group- meaning that infection fear levels surrounding oneself would be transitively applied to the friend group. Compartmentalizing fear-frames indicates that participants may perceive fewer negative health and/or relational outcomes if friends were to be infected than if family members were to be. Thus, when removed from lockdown conditions, participants would feel similarly removed from the emotional distress caused by the guilt and fear of infecting family members. This in turn may generate increased pressure and/or permissiveness for social engagement- as participants perceive fewer potential consequences in an on-campus context.

Emotional and Relational Difficulties with Social Reintegration Post-Lockdown

Although participants affirmed desires for post-lockdown social involvement on-campus, participants also acknowledged emotional and relational barriers to their ability and motivation to socialize. However, these difficulties didn't supersede participants' desires to socialize, more so that these factors were considered in tandem with the transition back to in-person activities. This theme embodied some of the more diverse responses from our canon, as participants cited emotional, practical, and institutionally-oriented barriers to wholehearted socialization. Emotional barriers included social skill atrophy and loss of motivation to socialize. Practical concerns consisted of residual fear of infection, recognition of the pandemic as ongoing, and

stasis/overadjustment to lockdown conditions (which bridges both practical and emotional topics).

Social Skill Atrophy

Given continual exposure to the same individuals during lockdown, participants had trouble engaging with new people and experienced increased social awkwardness during in-person interactions. Participants' anecdotes tended to frame socialization as a skill set -almost akin to a muscle- that (while previously strong) had atrophied in response to isolation. Brandon's experience with difficulties socializing encompassed both his own abilities and his perceptions of others. In reflecting on reconnective attempts, he explained he was

> upset that a lot of the friendships that I had– I had just started getting to know these people from freshman year. Now there's a huge disruption; and I guess I was fearful that when I would return, I wouldn't have the same relationship I would have with them, and unfortunately that did come true. I came back, and I was expecting everyone to kind of come back together and we would sing Kumbaya, or do something, but people had moved on, and I was kind of upset by that.

The fact that Brandon was "expecting everyone to kind of come back together" reflects the hope that preexisting social skills and relationships would reignite naturally, without active reconstruction on interactants' behalves. However, without social momentum gained by constant in-person contact, Brandon and his friend group experienced relational atrophy, resulting in apparent abandonment or distancing from the friendship(s).

Loss of Motivation to Socialize - Stasis (Over-adjusting to Lockdown Conditions)

Participants noted that, despite lockdown's negative impacts, some found themselves perhaps becoming *too* comfortable with isolation conditions. Upon having "normal" daily life

interrupted, participants reestablished new routines to mitigate and recover from their experiences of disruption. However, leaving isolation behind then disrupted these new routines, and as such, bears an effectual parallel to the destabilization associated with the initial shift to lockdown and remote instruction. As Tara stated:

> I kind of got used to it[remote learning/being at home/closed social groups]. I got used to not going out, and the only person that I ever would really see or want to see was just my boyfriend…and I got used to it, I guess it's a good way, I just got accustomed, but also in a bad way.

The duality of Tara's commentary articulates the complexity of navigating routinization in an unpredictable era. Despite her affirmation that adjusting to isolation was positive ("in a good way") in terms of her coping skills, her dual recognition that such adjustment could function "also in a bad way" highlights the difficulty of demolishing a routine initially constructed to help deal with uncertainty. Essentially, the initial pandemic wave caused destabilization, and students adjusted; and then, upon returning to in-person life, students were asked to de- and subsequently reconstruct the new normal they'd worked to craft.

Residual Concern of Infection and Recognition of the Pandemic as Ongoing

Logistically, participants retained concerns regarding socialization by acknowledging that although lockdown ended, the potential for infection remained. Sarah noted residual caution's relevance, explaining, "Masks are still a thing and it makes some people anxious knowing that mask mandates are basically gone, but it's just a consideration that needs to be noted." Sarah's comments illustrate the stratification of concern regarding infection. Noting that "some people" are "anxious" at reduced masking indicates that individuals exhibit varying degrees of concern regarding potential for infection. Participants also shared fears that large-scale social events,

especially with increasingly minimal masking-mandates and/or vaccination requirements, still posed significant health threats.

Factors that Facilitated Post-Lockdown Reintegration

Despite aforementioned difficulties, participants were optimistic and positive when describing factors that facilitated post-lockdown reintegration. These factors were both self-produced by participants, and externally adopted from students' environments.

Graduality

Participants asserted that gradual reintegration allowed them a sense of comfort and mitigated residual fear of infection. For Evan, this graduality was reflected not only in the socialization opportunities he pursued, but the manner in which he conducted himself. Upon returning to campus,

> The safety protocols at [the university] itself are not as strict as they were before, so I don't really wear my mask. In classes I don't wear my mask anymore, when I go to my club meetings I don't wear my mask anymore. But when it was the first semester, when everything was still a little bit more strict, I made sure to abide by the rules and I was more COVID conscious.

Evan's words highlight the process-based elements of participants' socialization decision-making. In many cases, participants engaged in moderation behaviors rather than wholeheartedly returning to pre-COVID standards. Although Evan's example references his decisions surrounding masking, other participants expressed similar sentiments in regards to stage-based socialization. Although participants felt pressure to make up for lost social time, such pressure didn't exceed participants' aforementioned concerns. Thus, participants felt as

though residual fear and socialization decision-making played a major role in their attitudes when choosing to participate in such events.

Practical Safety Behaviors

Participants engaged in practical safety behaviors to prevent infection and increase their comfort level when making socialization choices. Such behaviors include hand-washing, wearing masks, and obeying university and state-offered guidance regarding conduct policies and capacity limits. For instance, Lorie said, "vaccines and boosters– all that has made me feel safer. Yes, I'm still very concerned about it and I do test myself fairly frequently. Even if I've had no exposures, just in case," indicating continued reliance on individually instigated safety behaviors to increase personal comfort. In some situations, participants felt institutional regulations didn't sufficiently quell their concerns, and as such, took additional measures to bolster their comfort when socializing.

Critical Thinking/Situational Evaluation When Making Socialization Choices

Participants also reported using contextual information when choosing which social events to attend, and how to conduct themselves in said events. The situational variance in participants' comfortability indicated that participants didn't perceive a single correct approach in navigating post-lockdown socialization. Tara explained her evaluative process as responsive to others' behaviors, stating,

> I still take COVID precautions and I still wear my mask. When I'm out, or in a crowded place, I wear my mask; and then I'll just do the small things like 'don't share drinks' and trying not to cough in front of everyone, or if I see someone coughing, be more cautious.

Tara's situational navigation posits participants as highly agentic beings in ensuring their own safety post-lockdown. Sentiments like these highlight individual motivation and self-efficacy in

promoting safety behaviors, demonstrating participants' perceptions of themselves as the most reliable metric for socialization decision-making. In many ways, this canon of responses indicates a desire to reassert self-control in the wake of uncertainty. The lockdown era was dominated by a sense of helplessness; devoid of vaccines and unsure of the larger implications of COVID-19 infections, many individuals experienced feelings of powerlessness. Because of this, it makes sense that upon returning to increased social interaction, individuals would seek avenues for reclaiming volition (the notion we have the power to impact our own health outcomes); and articulated critical decision-making becomes a key channel through which that search for agency is manifested.

Complicated, Semi-Paradoxical Relationship with University-Sponsored Events and Organizations

Although nearly all participants reported cross-sectional involvement in on-campus organizations, participants also framed their relationship with [the university] as complicated and somewhat amorphous. Despite affirming membership to numerous organizations, participants conceptualized their involvements as predominantly self-constructed, citing individual agency and proactivity as responsible for their involvement rather than effective engagement efforts by [the university]. Although this study predominantly focuses on socialization in the context of understanding transition between different phases of the pandemic, the research team also found it meaningful to include participants' responses (or lack thereof) to socialization opportunities offered during the lockdown period itself. These sparse comments were included to better contextualize complexity of the relationship between students and [the university] with respect to social facilitation. A discussion of the individual complexity categories (lack of interest in virtual events, use of university sponsored groups for socialization, post-lockdown social segmentation,

self-constructed social experiences, and disconnect from [the university] as an entity) follows below.

Lack of Interest in Virtual Events

Despite indicating awareness of university-sponsored events during lockdown, participants expressed little to no interest in these opportunities. Hannah simply stated, “I understand that [the university] tried making a social life via Zoom, but it was definitely difficult.” Part of this lack of interest may stem from a combination of overarching disconnect with [the university] itself (further discussed below) and previously addressed feelings of isolation, interruption, and social atrophy incumbent in the lockdown. These factors made motivation and desire to attend virtual events minimal.

Use of University-Sponsored Groups for Socialization

Lack of engagement with virtual events can’t be conflated with lack of engagement with university-sponsored groups as a whole. Our participants reported high involvement in a wide array of on-campus organizations ranging from interest-based groups (topical clubs), performance groups, (theater, acting, dance), Greek life, student government, [the university] programming board, and various academic or pre-professional groups as well. Brandon described a variety of these opportunities, including

> the school of communication honor society Lambda Pi Eta. So I've dipped into different realms, because I appreciate the leadership opportunities. I appreciate doing something that I used to do a lot when I was really young, drama[referencing membership to a theater group]. And then also more academic things as well. So I think it[involvement] can really positively impact your experience and make it much richer.

Students noted these events were grounded in both interest in the topics/subject matter, but also in the opportunity to meet and form social connections with peers. Thus, despite tepid relations with virtual events during lockdown, students' involvements ardently affirmed [the university's] role in constructing and facilitating socialization on campus.

Self-Constructed Social Experiences

However, despite affirming connectivity to clubs and organizations that were funded and overseen by [the university], participants established clear differentiation between [the university] as a social skeleton, and [the university] as an active agent in socialization. When asked to describe [the university's] role in his social opportunities, Evan replied:

> I am not too sure if I can fully give credit to [the university], because I want to give credit to myself for putting myself out there. But I feel like the events that [the university] holds are really great at getting people in one spot but not necessarily promoting that sense of communication between other people.

The contradiction participants' describe is crucial in understanding both the limitations of [the university's] connective potential, and further illuminating participants' reclamation of their status as agentic actors in a post-lockdown social culture. As previously stated, the loss of control and predictability during the pandemic's onset created a pervasive sense of destabilization, a destabilization participants attempted to rectify through coping with lockdown by adjusting to a new normal, and upon returning to campus, engaging in active decision-making and proactive safety behaviors to reinstill their sense of agency. The self-perception described here represents a continuance of that agentic mentality- the sense that, in the face of such instability, participants successfully self-constructed a social support group. Comments like these also indicate a larger disconnect from [the university] as an entity- the sense that students'

success at reintegration shouldn't be a metric for [the university's] connective efficacy (nuances of this ideation will be discussed below).

Post-Lockdown Social Segmentation (Homogeneous Socialization Opportunities)

Although participants affirmed that they too sought social opportunities to interact with others with shared experiences, participants also identified this tendency as problematic in facilitating multifaceted socialization. Thus, although participants were comforted by the presence of familiar individuals, this familiarity was counterproductive in empowering students to seek out new opportunities. This loss was especially key when contextualized by the knowledge of participants' increased socialization impetus post-lockdown. An increase in social drive may encourage students to seek out opportunities beyond their familiar circle. However, participants' comments seemed to undercut that exploration. Zuri noted that homogeneous event attendance made seeking new opportunities challenging, noting that on-campus events

> are pretty much always the same people. I feel like it's very much based off of your exposure, and I feel like a lot of its people you know are involved, and you'll go to support them kind of thing versus just privately seeing it[marketing for a new event] and be like 'Oh, that looks cool, I'm gonna go.' I feel like there's a need for a sense of security within your friend group.

Zuri's comments demonstrate the importance of having a social "security blanket" to aid in engaging with new opportunities. This need for support reintegration echoes the dynamic between adjusting to lockdown conditions and subsequently experiencing social atrophy. In both situations, participants articulated a vice/virtue continuum in that the same source phenomena could cause positive or negative outcomes depending on the situational context and the extremity of the phenomena (ex. seeking affinity groups creates increased comfort, but too much

homogeneity creates cliques). In this way, moderation between competing or even contradictory interests became a major reckoning point for participants cross-thematically.

Disconnect from the University as an Entity

Participants reported feelings of uneasiness towards [the university's] efforts to facilitate post-lockdown socialization. Although participants acknowledged the difficulties incumbent in this transition, participants sought more active engagement from [the university] itself in terms of publicizing social opportunities, and creating a culture wherein students felt confident enough to seek out new social opportunities. Hannah affirmed, "[the university] needs to do a better job at highlighting all groups on campus, especially when it comes to diversity groups. Which will ultimately help the overall social aspect." Despite being proud of their ability to reintegrate and self-construct social experiences, participants also wished for increased support from [the university]. Although the participants recognized the difficulty of engaging with a multifaceted student body, Evan suggested that holistic marketing may be a key option. He suggests that [the university]

> dial in on that sense of marketing and showcasing what [the university] actually has to offer, because see, I'm in AF[the student union] right now, and I'm looking around– they have TV shows and games, and they have some of these [club/event]posters, right? that show we have an orchestra playing, but they don't necessarily give live action clips of it, or no one around campus is actually talking about it. So maybe promoting that sense of 'Hey, are you doing this thing?' Or maybe having a news feed every single week outlining everything that [the university] is hosting

Evan's comments echo other participants' desires for increased engagement from [the university], an engagement that extends beyond merely being a space to physically host events.

Indeed, participants wanted [the university] to not solely be a space to host events, but an active player in galvanizing mass support for those events.

Implications and Future Directions

Although participants were proud of their abilities to navigate lockdown stress and subsequently construct and acclimate to a new "normal" post-lockdown, the lack of connectivity between students and [the university] discussions also illuminated an overall lack of connectivity. Although participants reported generally high involvement in university-affiliated clubs and organizations, the overarching perception of the university's social offerings was that they generated a social segmentation. To combat the homogenization of social groups, we asked participants directly what they would like to see the university do.

Participants' advice regarding increased university promotional support makes sense. Generally, student organizations and clubs are internally responsible for their own promotions- this means that inadequate funding, lack of marketing experience among members, and/or too small of a membership population to engage in mass marketing, could cause smaller clubs to be eclipsed by larger groups, necessitating increased university attention to supporting smaller and/or newer social groups. Although the university provides funding for larger organizations (UPB, SGA), it may be productive to establish funding allocations for smaller clubs exclusively for marketing purposes. From an administrative end, the university could implement a student marketing team of graphic designers, marketing, or public relations students who could be dispatched to various clubs and offer marketing services (both in-person and on social media). This support is especially crucial for groups that are just getting started, as having university-backed promotion would help gain momentum and new membership. By bolstering

less visible groups' marketing capabilities, students would be more able to take advantage of the new opportunities the university has to offer.

Another key concern lay in social homogenization. As Zuri previously noted in "*Post-Lockdown Social Segmentation,"* event attendees tended to be restricted to the same groups of people; many students would feel uncomfortable attending a new or unfamiliar event or club if they did not know anyone else in attendance, even if the content itself was appealing. Based on this commentary, although it appears that the university is succeeding at engendering participant buy-in and enthusiasm once they have been integrated into organizations or clubs, our findings indicate that the university could make more effort in attempting to engage with diverse audiences.

Many participants noted the importance of affinity groups with respect to creating enough confidence to attend various events, implying that, devoid of a social safety net provided by people with shared interests, students would be less likely to try out a new club or event unless they already had an interpersonal connection with someone in the group. To combat this, professors could be advised to give students in-class promotion opportunities for their involvements– perhaps building in a few minutes each day or week for students to share upcoming events with classmates. This initiative could address the issues of socialization confidence Zuri described in that, even if you think you don't know anyone at an event, hearing about it from a classmate increases familiarity and may make it easier for students to try out new opportunities.

Future research should look at students' specific desires regarding the university's degree and type of involvement in facilitating student involvement could present compelling exploratory avenues. Although the relational complexity between students and the university as its own

entity was only one theme within our study, the degree of nuance in participants' responses indicates that student-university relations merit further academic attention, especially if the university itself is characterized or conceptualized as an identity with its own role and "personality" in students' social experiences. Thus, we suggest further focus groups with questions specifically oriented in unpacking this dynamic.

Such research could also aid in addressing participants' comments surrounding homogeneous social scenes. Our participants tended to exhibit moderate to high degrees of involvement, meaning that the voices of the very students who the university needs to be performing outreach to, were not necessarily represented by this study. To rectify this, it may be productive to host comparative focus groups for hyper-involved versus uninvolved students, to better identify factors that promote student involvement, and to discover potential engagement deficiencies on the university's behalf.

Finally, participants' comments surrounding difficulties with expectation management post-lockdown illuminate a need for increased empathy and support from the university is assisting students with holistic reintegration (academic and social). In light of students' struggling under self-imposed expectations for academic and social performance, it may be productive to establish more concrete, university-generated programming and publicity for support services that both aid students in discovering a sense of balance, and help students engage in introspection with the goal of managing self-expectations in a more productive manner.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to better understand how the COVID-19 lockdown affected the lives of the university's undergraduate students, both academically and socially.

Specifically, we aimed to find differentiations between student life prior to the pandemic, in the midst of the pandemic, and throughout the return back to campus. After discussing with our focus group participants, we found many common themes that came to be as results of the national lockdown. One of these themes included destabilization during the lockdown, which was notable in both environmental and emotional circumstances. Environmental changes such relocating for quarantine purposes and the fears about safety/infection that came along with the pandemic caused a lot of uncertainty among students. Fear manifested itself in other ways too, such as through altruistic fear. Participants noted the constant guilt they felt throughout the pandemic, and they mentioned the worries they had about potentially infecting others with COVID. Along with a sense of guilt surrounding infecting others, particularly elderly family members, students expressed concerns they initially had about contracting the virus themselves; they were unsure about the health risks and long term consequences. Another common experience among participants was the feeling of having a major life interruption. Across the board, our participants mentioned that they felt like they were experiencing interruptions in their social lives, academic careers, and college experiences altogether. Participants discussed their priorities shifting as a result of the pandemic and how their expectations were lowered due to isolation and the disappointments associated with it. The general consensus was that college expectations and priorities were heavily altered due to the unprecedented circumstances. Regarding the return back to campus, “balance” was the key word used by the student participants. Finding a middle ground between managing schoolwork, trying to become more active on campus, and making up for time they felt was lost during the pandemic were prevalent themes.

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Appendix A

Participant Demographics

Focus Group 1		Major	Age	Gender	Involvements
	Lorie Hall	Communication Studies	20	F	
	Brandon Cook	Strategic & Corporate Com	21	M	Orientation leader, tour guide, Chapman on broadway,
	Alden Iannelli	Strategic & Corporate Com	20	F	social sorority, various clubs
		Major	Age	Gender	Involvements
Focus Group 2					
	Annalise Smith	Integrated Educational Studies	21	F	Disney Club, on-campus job, social sorority
	Zuri Murphy	Health Science	20	F	Hawaii club, attends various on-campus events
	Evan Canthe	Psych and SCC	21	M	Acapella group, Hawaii Club, Filipino Club
	Tara Green	Integrated Educational Studies/Psych	21	F	Swim
		Major	Age	Gender	Involvements
Focus Group 3					
	Sarah Hartman	Communication Studies	21	F	social sorority
	Natalie Green	Psych and SCC	20	F	social sorority
	Hannah Franklin	Communication Studies	20	F	Lamda Pi ETA

Appendix B

Recruiting Material

(To be sent as an email)

Hello!

We're reaching out to you because you had previously expressed interest in participating in a focus group hosted by members of a research team from SCC 301 (Interviewing and Focus Groups). If you're still interested, we'd love the chance to hear your perspectives regarding your social experiences before, during, and after the COVID-19 lockdown. Below is an overview of our study and information regarding why we're interested in speaking to all of you specifically.

What are we hoping to accomplish?

We're trying to better understand college students' perceptions and experiences of socialization throughout the pandemic's different stages, and how those various stages may or may not have impacted your social experiences and/or goals.

As university students who've experienced college life before, during, and after the primary lockdown, your stories will help assemble a better understanding of a truly unprecedented social era. The COVID-19 pandemic has left communication researchers with hundreds of new questions about college students' experiences in the midst of social flux; and hearing your firsthand accounts can help us begin to untangle the social complexities left behind.

How do focus groups work?

As a focus group participant, you'll be invited to meet with two members of the research team (a moderator and assistant moderator) and 2-3 other students from the university. From there, we'll pose a series of open-ended discussion questions about the pandemic's impact on your social

experiences. There are no right or wrong answers. :) We just want to spark conversation. Focus groups run between 30-45 minutes.

If you're interested in participating, please indicate your availability **here!** We don't want these discussions to disrupt your daily schedules, so we'll form our groups in accordance with your availability.

Thank you again for considering participating, your stories and conversations mean more than you know!

If you have any questions at all, please don't hesitate to respond to this email or contact the team member who initially reached out to you!

Have a lovely week!

Best,

Johannah, Grace, Valerie, Katherine, and Sawyer

Appendix C

Introductory Script

Moderator: Hello everyone, welcome to our focus group! Thank you so much for being here today, we truly appreciate you all taking the time to chat with us. My name is (moderator) and I'm here on behalf of a research team from SCC 301- Interviewing and Focus Groups. Joined with me today is (assistant moderator) who will be assisting with the process.

For our project this semester, we're trying to learn more about how the COVID-19 lockdown impacted the social lives of students like yourselves. Since we are in the midst of a transitional period in the pandemic with restrictions beginning to lift, research about this area is emergent and we are interested in hearing your firsthand experiences in navigating such new social terrain.

To this end, we want this group to be conversational. We have questions prepared but don't feel like you need to raise your hand, just jump in whenever you would like to contribute. We value all of your experiences and there are absolutely no wrong answers here- if your experience is identical to another participant's, that's absolutely fine, and if your experience is the exact opposite of someone else's that's fine as well, any and all stories or feelings are valid.

For the purposes of the project, we will be recording the conversation. However, your names and/or any identifying information will be removed from the transcript. The transcript and recordings will be confined to the research team so all of your identities will be confidential, so please feel safe to share anything you would like.

Also, since we are not on professional Zoom, our meeting will expire after 40 minutes. If we reach the time limit, we will email out a new Zoom link so that you can rejoin and finish the conversation.

Appendix D

Questioning Route

Opening:

Can you share your name, year, and major(s)? (2 minutes)

Describe what involvement on campus means to you. (3 minutes)

Introductory:

How would you describe your college social life prior to the COVID-19 pandemic? (4 minutes)

In what ways, if at all, did you see yourself becoming involved on campus? (4 minutes)

Transition:

In what ways (if any) did the pandemic impact your involvement on campus? (3 minutes)

What concerns (if any) did you have about socialization during the lockdown? (4 minutes)

What role have university-sponsored social events played in your social life over the past year?

Depending on what participants highlight, we could potentially follow up for comparison between virtual and in-person university events (4 minutes)

Key:

If at all, how has your desire for socialization been impacted by your experiences with the pandemic? (7 minutes)

What are the most significant changes in your college social life post-lockdown? (7 minutes)

If at all, how do COVID-related factors or concerns impact your choices about involvement on campus? (7 minutes)

Ending:

Is there anything that the university can be doing to improve student involvement experiences? (4 minutes)

Is there anything else about pandemic-era socialization that we are missing? (3 minutes)

Appendix E

Open Coding Table

FG 1	**FG 2**	**FG 3**
Codes: - High school to college comparisons - Loss of habits - Loss of motivation - Feelings of missing out on college experiences - Seeking affinity groups/ people to share experiences with - Feelings of isolation - Confusion in life - Academic stress - Virtual involvement - Wanting to make up for lost time after arriving back at campus - Worries about keeping college friendships post-pandemic - Disconnect from university - Disconnect from student-life - Zoom fatigue - Motivation to become involved in clubs -Overcompensating to make up for lost time - Confusion toward returning to normalcy - Lack of awareness for virtual events that were occurring - Lack of interest in virtual events in comparison to in-person events - Loss of social skills - Time for new hobbies - Negative outcomes of lockdown - Boredom - Lack of focus in online	*Codes:* -Balance -Desire for academic performance -Competing interests between social and academic lives -Multiplicity of involvement -Social cross pollination -Interruption -Loss of momentum -Ideation fulfillment going into college -Open minded entry into college/no expectations -Seeking affinity groups/people with shared experiences -Post lockdown social segmentation -Loss of social skills (atrophy) -Loss of social motivation -Difficulties reintegrating socially post pandemic -Making up for lost time/compensating -Fear of infecting self -Altruistic fear/fear of infecting others -Positive outcomes of lockdown -Physical environment change -Different frames for altruistic fear- not as worried about infecting friends as family members -Baby steps towards normalcy -Self-constructed social experiences -Use of university sponsored clubs for socialization	*Codes:* - Campus culture (Participation, Getting to meet different people) - Involved in multiple clubs - Worry about maintaining relationships - No social motivation - Detached from [the university] during pandemic - Difficulty participating in school life, while online - Felt deprived of a true college experience - Difficulty trying to balance social life and school life once back - Super excited to come back and make up for lost time - Motivation to become involved (Different clubs, Sororities) - Trying to find balance (Love social life, but also covid made them a bit introverted) - Comparing [the university] to other schools around area - COVID protocol - Hesitant about coming back (Safety) - The university needs to do better with inclusion (Highlighting other groups, diversity, inclusivity) - Needs to take others into consideration (Some may still be wary about COVID-19) - Some friends are worried about going to bigger events maskless - There should be guidelines for those who want to wear masks and those who do not

learning - Connecting with high school friends since they were local - Importance of becoming involved on campus in present-day - Wanting to be distanced from the thought of COVID	-Disconnect from the university as an entity -Awareness of virtual events -Lack of interest in virtual events -Engaging in practical safety behaviors -Recognition of the pandemic as ongoing -Residual caution -Stasis– over adjusting to the pandemic -Critical thinking/situational evaluation when making socialization choices -Using institutional regulations as baseline for making safety choices -Perceptions of social groups post lockdown as homogenous	