Gratitude and Nostalgia Among Minority College Students on Forming New Relationships During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Genesis Garcia, Danielle Greene, and Jocelyn Maeyama
Faculty Advisors: Royette T. Dubar, Ph.D. and Nicole K. Watkins, Ph.D.

WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY

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Introduction

❑ Establishing and maintaining social ties is an important developmental task of emerging adulthood (Tavernier & Willoughby, 2015).
❑ During the COVID-19 pandemic, public health regulations affected key aspects of university life for new students (e.g., orientation programs, living arrangements, and mode of instruction), which affected opportunities to form new friendships.
❑ The transition to university may be especially challenging for students from socio-demographic minority groups (Hoyt et al., 2021).
❑ The goal of the present study was to assess the perceived implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on minority students' ability to form new friendships at university.

Participants & Procedures

❑ N = 32 first-year university students (Class of 2024)who identified as a member of at least one socio-demographic minority group (e.g., race/ethnicity, LGBTQ+, first-generation)
❑ **Age:** *Mean* = 19.98 years old, *SD* = 1.28
❑ Participants completed an online interview (~ 50 minutes) via Zoom in January 2021.
❑ Interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim.
❑ Open-ended responses to the question: *"How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your ability to form new friendships at university?"* were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Results

Results of thematic analysis revealed 3 main themes.

1. Nostalgia for face-to-face connections (67%).
Participants expressed nostalgia for social aspects of the typical university experience and a desire to return to the "normalcy" of university life.

> *"I think it's a lot harder on large zoom calls for sure to talk to people individually and have you know more sort of- natural, like have relationships for naturally."*

2. Gratitude for opportunities to connect with others (63%).
Participants expressed gratitude for the networks created through sports teams, being part of a "Wesleyan bubble" with roommates, and the ability to connect digitally (e.g., social media, FaceTime). Importantly, some of these connections reportedly emerged out shared feelings of isolation.

> *"But in a lot of ways, like I met my friends in a way that I would not have without the pandemic. Like... somebody made like a LGBT 2024 group chat kind of thing."*

3. Challenges with digital communication and online learning (38%).
This theme captures both the personal and technical challenges with online communication, which included differences in time zones, Zoom fatigue, and government restrictions on social media accounts in China.

> *"So that's really bad, like every time I have to communicate with someone on Instagram I have to go on VPN."*

Results (continued)

4. Hopeful Outlook (25%).
Participants were excited and eager about the potential to engage with others in future semesters with less constraints.

> *"I pushed myself a lot and I like would ask people for snapchats and their like contact info anytime I saw someone in line."*

5. Desire for more fulfilling connections (25%).
Participants reported a desire to meet classmates who shared their identities and shared comparable interests. They wanted to feel more connected with their peers rather than creating connections based on their dorms.

> *"sometimes you feel like the people in that dorm we're only talking because there's no one else they could talk to."*

Discussion

❑ Various forms of digital communication were helpful for students as they built new relationships; however, students yearned for more diverse social networks, beyond their COVID-19 "bubbles".
❑ Understanding the long-term implications of interpersonal adjustment among students from diverse socio-demographic backgrounds will provide important information for developing effective interventions that support the optimal transition of minority students across their university years.