Pandemic Partnering: COVID-19's Impact on College Students' Dating Practices

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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to explore if and how college students' dating practices have changed amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Through eight focus group interviews (n=51), participants discussed their dating practices, use of online dating platforms, and navigation of health and safety protocols. A thematic analysis was used to identify and define major themes from the focus groups. Findings revealed four themes in how college students define dating, which were relational investment, exclusivity labels, dating progression, and the role of hookup culture. When addressing how the pandemic has changed the way college students date, six themes were identified: importance of communication, technology as a tool, impact of family, violating safety norms, negative affect expression, and gaining perspective. This thesis extends academic research on how dating is defined and how uncertainty in the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted dating practices of college students at a large U.S. university in the mid-Atlantic region.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on college students dating practices. It uses focus group interviews of undergraduate college students at a large university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Participants discussed their definition of 'dating,' use of technology and dating apps, and navigation of health and safety practices during a dating climate characterized by high uncertainty. Findings revealed four themes in how college students define dating, which were relational investment, exclusivity labels, dating progression, and the role of hookup culture. When addressing how the pandemic has changed the way college students date, six themes were identified: importance of communication, technology as a tool, impact of family, violating safety norms, negative affect expression, and gaining perspective. These findings have implications in how we understand dating, especially during a global health crisis.

DEDICATION

To my parents, thank you for the endless love and support.

To my sister, thank you for being a bright life in my life.

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the highly contagious virus called SARS-CoV-2 which is commonly associated with troubled breathing, fevers, chills, and loss of smell and taste, has yielded impacts stretching far beyond health (CDC, 2021). Its effects on interpersonal relationships between families, friends, and significant others has been extensive. Health guidelines from the CDC beginning in March of 2020 recommended preventative measures such as quarantining, social distancing, wearing face masks, and limiting attendance at social gatherings. These guidelines were aimed at reducing individual exposure to the virus and containing its spread, which has changed the way many individuals interact with the people around them, especially within the context of dating and in a climate of health uncertainty. My thesis will explore if and how college students' dating practices have changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, shedding light on how this generation of college students defines dating and navigates personal health decisions. The sample of interviewed college students comes from a large U.S. university in the mid-Atlantic region, and includes participants who have had experience with dating both prior to and during the pandemic.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, many young people have been criticized for taking health and safety measures lightly as many college students claim that if they contract COVID, they'll be "fine" (Gunia, 2020). Despite the early calls for quarantine measures during the spring of 2020, large groups of young people amassed in Florida for spring break to party, engaging in a variety of behaviors rendered unsafe during a pandemic. Sentiments from these individuals reflected a sense of invincibility: "if I get corona (SARS-CoV-2 or COVID-19), I get corona. At the end of the day, I'm not going to let it stop me from partying…We've been waiting for Miami spring break for a while" (Gunia, 2020).

Following spring break of 2020, there was a spike in COVID cases as the virus spread on the college campuses of the spring breakers who returned to their universities (Nietzel, 2020). Later in the year, college students and young people were criticized for throwing or attending large Halloween parties, which coincided with a 57% spike in cases from the previous month (Bacon & Shannon, 2020). A notable celebrity example of this was when 24-year-old, Kendall Jenner of the Kardashian family threw a Halloween party that exceeded CDC gathering limits. Although rapid COVID tests were administered to guests at the door, Jenner had scattered "do not post pictures of this event on social media" signs throughout the venue, anticipating that public backlash about the disregard of health protocols by party-goers might be severe (Cambell, 2020).

For many who do not view COVID as a threat to their health, or believe that they cannot get infected, their social practices resemble pre-COVID life more closely. Other college students have dramatically changed how they navigate social situations, and dating in particular, based on recommended health and safety protocols by the CDC, employers, or their universities. Some of these policies instilled at university settings include shifts to online asynchronous or synchronous Zoom classes, masks worn on campus, and protocols for reporting positive COVID tests and exposure. With waves of new strains of the virus, protocols have been fluid. For example, mask mandates have been instituted and rescinded. Events have been launched, postponed, and cancelled. There have been varying rules around testing. All of these circumstances have brought forth increased feelings of uncertainty. In addition to the changes in health protocols and social interactions, potential layoffs or changes in employment, issues with rent and housing, and other life changes have contributed to an atmosphere of high uncertainty for many individuals.

The type of safety measures individuals implemented and the level of strictness in which they were followed also seemed to vary from person to person during the pandemic. Some individuals live with immunocompromised family members, elderly relatives, or are at risk themselves and therefore were forced to dramatically limit face-to-face contact to protect themselves and loved ones. Many college students voluntarily, or as encouraged by their community and university, opted to "bubble" with a small group of friends or family to limit spread of the virus.

Certain college settings made limited contact or "bubbling" particularly challenging. For example, the potentially large number of people living in fraternity and sorority houses and college dorms made these locations highly susceptible to COVID spread (Vang et al., 2021; Borowiak et al, 2020). Increased risk of COVID outbreak in large living communities coincided with an increased level of monitoring and regulation: that gatherings would be limited in number, that larger social events would be held virtually, and that proper quarantine measures would be followed in response to exposure. Although these protocols were aimed at protecting students' health, they put strain on the social experience many college students expect in a university setting. This prompted many students to either blatantly disregard these measures, take health and safety risks based on social temptations, or follow the protocols stringently while enduring the social sacrifice required to do so. In many ways, individuals used a variety of communication in a way to gain information that would reduce their uncertainty about a partner and their treatment of personal health and safety during the pandemic.

Prior research has shown that affection is a fundamental human need; our relationships are especially important for not only how we feel, but also for our health and well-being (Floyd, 2017). Separation from friends and classmates because of completely online course loads,

cancellation of most social events, and placing extracurricular activities on hold has helped to limit the spread of COVID. However, these measures have also heightened feelings of loneliness and isolation, challenging individuals' emotional and mental health (Ducharme, 2020). These feelings may foster a need for meaningful relationships more than ever before. In the past, many college students may have filled that need with the initiation of new romantic relationships, or dating. However, living in the pandemic age has complicated that and my thesis will explore how college students make sense of some of these complications through the lens of uncertainty reduction theory and understanding of individuals' information seeking behaviors.

The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of how the pandemic has changed and continues to change the way college students engage in dating practices. As a graduate student living and dating in the pandemic, conversations with friends led me to questions such as: when college students initially were sent home in March, did individuals rekindle relationships with old flames out of convenience, familiarity, safety and comfort? Do college students go on in-person dates with new people in the pandemic or do they simply "window shop" on Tinder to pass the time? Are college students willing to risk contracting COVID to go on a date? Popular sources such as the *New York Times, Forbes,* and *National Public Radio (NPR)* have published articles to aid individuals in navigating dating safely. Their proposed solutions? Video dates, asking hard questions up-front, or taking a dating hiatus in order to dedicate time to self-improvement (Lee, 2020; Rubin, 2020; Sarmiento, 2020). Although these may be feasible options for many, the proposed suggestions may prove to be challenging, scary, intimidating or completely unreasonable for others.

Although this thesis specifically focuses on how dating practices have changed and are changing as a result of the pandemic, it may also reveal underlying assumptions that young

people have about the pandemic, its effect on their lives, and their use of technology to facilitate dating practices during the pandemic. This thesis also defines dating and the common practices that college students associate with dating and use to date. Unfolding through eight focus groups, this thesis examines how college students have navigated dating both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data was analyzed using an emic, inductive thematic analysis (Clarke et al., 2015). This research has implications for uncertainty reduction theory and expands the currently developing conversation about dating during the pandemic. The thesis begins with Chapter 1, which consists of a review of prior literature on dating and uncertainty reduction theory and leads to three research questions. Chapter 2 describes the method of study. Chapter 3 presents results from the thematic analysis. Chapter 4 provides a discussion of these results and their implications. Chapter 5, marks the conclusion and describes study limitations.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Dating

Although many dating aspects have been researched extensively, the actual definition of the term itself is quite murky and has only been researched in the contexts of the COVID-19 pandemic in a small number of studies. In addition, generational and cultural differences provide challenges in defining and conceptualizing dating in one unified way. Based on prior literature related to the topic, dating involves commitment between two individuals, which is negotiated through their actions and communication in a traditionally more romantic context (Krain, 1975; Tin-Toomey, 1984; Aldrich & Morrison, 2010; Weigel et al., 2011). The distinction between dating and friendship is that dating usually involves or leads to a romantically-related outcome, whereas friendship is more closely associated with solely platonic outcomes. The distinction between dating and something like "hooking up" or "friends with benefits" is that these terms are "used to describe intimate interactions outside of dating or exclusive relationships," whereas dating takes a more holistic approach to a relationship or potential relationship that usually encompasses more than just sexual behaviors (Hollman & Sillars, 2012).

Dating has a variety of definitions and conceptualizations rooted in prior literature, but is a term that connotes much uncertainty based on its lack of a clear, unified definition across populations. In this section of the literature review, the different definitions and conceptualizations of dating will be explored. This thesis will ultimately contribute to scholarship on dating by identifying how dating is defined by the college students who participated in this study.

Dating can be associated with two pre-marital categories of commitment: initiation dating and defined dating. Initiation dating involves behaviors that get to know a person better and test

a connection or potential future for the relationship, which is in line with Sunnafrank's (1986) predicted outcome value (POV) theory. POV theory states that individuals assess the potential of future relationships based on initial interactions, by assigning a value to future interactions which can either be positive or negative. This value then shapes an individuals' actions and behaviors, which will fall in line with their forecast for the relationship (Sunnafrank 1986, 1988). This theory is related to the seminal theory used in this paper, uncertainty reduction theory, as both look to understand the ways individuals may act to gain information about an unknown individual or situation (Berger & Calabrese, 1975).

When individuals develop relationships, they often consider criteria from three levels of attraction, according to Berger & Calabrese's attraction theory (1975). This theory describes that the three levels of attraction are: physical, proximity, and similarity. When considering a developing relationship, or actions involved in the initiation dating category, individuals may consider if they are physically attracted to the characteristics of the potential partner. Considering the COVID context of this particular study, something like masks could increase uncertainty, and create a barrier from assessing the physical category of attraction. Individuals may also consider how often they see or will see the potential partner (proximity), and how similar the potential partner is in regard to their own personal values, attitudes, or appearances. These criteria may influence the positive or negative assessment of a potential partner, which as explained in POV theory (Sunnafrank, 1986), would lead an individual to either initiate more dates or avoid interaction with that individual. Finally, initiation dating is not necessarily exclusive, or with just one person. Initiation dating may include behaviors like "talking" (consistent intentional communication through text, FaceTime, Snapchat, etc.) and going on dates, both formally and informally, as well as alone or in group settings.

Defined dating, as a category, is usually associated with a discussion about titles or a conversation that defines the relationship and solidifies it as an on-going commitment. Based on research applying POV theory, individuals who fall under the defined dating category may still reassess the value of the relationship throughout the time with their partner, especially when an unexpected event occurs, such as a global pandemic (Sunnafrank, 1986, 1988; Ramirez et al., 2010). Defined dating may include the same behaviors as dating initiation, but also account for more label-related behaviors such as referring to one another as a significant other, boyfriend, or girlfriend, celebrating anniversaries, and meeting a significant other's families and friends.

The two categories, initiation and defined dating are not necessarily separate and concrete. These categories are fluid and highly dependent on an individual's interpretation and experiences in prior relationships as well as their socialized expectations of a dating norms and dating scripts (Rose & Frieze, 1993). Ultimately, much of the way individuals understand and behave when dating is rooted in the social norms of the culture they are living in, the media they consume or cultural standards they perceive.

In addition to examining dating in terms of two categories, other research explores this term in stages, or a progression. In an article by Stets (1993), the four stages of dating were defined as: the casual stage, somewhat serious stage, serious stage, and engaged relationship stage. The casual stage is characterized by high uncertainty, predominantly surface level information sharing, and low levels of both conflict and love, which in the context of many young people, may encompass the term "talking" (Stets, 1993). Depending on the level of motivation an individual expresses to pursue a relationship, they may take this stage more or less seriously, and choose to move to the somewhat serious stage if inclined.

The somewhat serious stage begins to incorporate dependence between partners, increases in affection and conflict, and a decrease in uncertainty as partners get to know each other better. In the serious stage, partners show more trust, attraction, and love, as well as higher, but more effectively managed conflict (Stets, 1993). The engaged stage is categorized by intense love and conflict with goals of planning a future (Stets, 1993).

In comparison to the categories of initial and defined dating, the casual stage and somewhat serious stage from Stets' (1993) conceptualizations may fall under initial dating due to their high levels of uncertainty and lower levels of commitment. The serious and engaged stages would likely fall under the defined dating category, as individuals in these stages may have more intense commitment, lower uncertainty, and deliberate goals together as a pair.

One final way to understand and conceptualize dating is to situate it in terms of relational stages, in another progression-type model. Pierce (2009) outlines five stages to a relationship: development, maintenance, deterioration, repair, and dissolution. The development stage looks at initiation and beginnings of a relationship, which is similar to the initiation dating category in regard to its high uncertainty. From there, the maintenance stage may either continue the initiation dating process of getting to know a potential partner or it may maintain a previously defined relationship. Maintaining a defined relationship may include behaviors like continuing to gain information about each other, integration into each other's lives, and planning future steps in the relationship. This particular stage can be linked to motivation to be in a relationship; if one is motivated by partnership, support, security or companionship, they may be inclined to maintain and build the relationship. In either the maintenance or the development stage, deterioration and dissolution can occur. Problems arise within relationships that lead to re-evaluation (Sunnafrank 1986, 1988; Ramirez, 2010); partners may realize that the relationship is

either progressing in an unwanted direction or not progressing at all. When deterioration of a relationship occurs, partners may choose to repair the relationship or to dissolve it, which could also be seen as forms of relational maintenance.

Despite the different ways individuals may define the term, there is a level of agreement that dating, in any sense, involves some level of commitment. Commitment is explained as a constructed and maintained behavior by partners involving ongoing communication and expression (Weigel et al., 2011). Expression of commitment between partners includes behaviors such as talking about the future, showing affection, working through problems together, maintaining integrity, spending time together, and engaging in "routine behaviors that reinforce their commitment" and may occur more in partners who are more motivated to date (Weigel et al., 2011, p.39). When individuals communicate their commitment through these behavioral indicators, it leads to lower relational uncertainty, and increased relational commitment and stability (Weigel et al., 2011). In initiation dating, or casual development stages of a relationship, there may be a high amount of uncertainty around the level of commitment between partners (Aldrich & Morrison, 2010). It goes without saying that human beings are not mind-readers; therefore, unless communication occurs between partners, the level of commitment is only assumed, which can lead to uncertainty, discomfort, and misunderstandings.

Prior literature on commitment and dating has shown that individuals will not discuss commitment-related topics such as exclusive dating when uncertainty is high in order to protect face, or one's external perception of self, and avoid embarrassment or the shame of rejection when disclosures about feelings go unreciprocated (Aldrich & Morrison, 2010). Protecting one's face is a major component of Goffman's theory of self-presentation (Goffman, 1955); facework describes how individuals make efforts in order to maintain a positive perception by external,

social groups around them (Aldrich & Morrison, 2010). While maintaining face is important in the formation of relationships, face threats, such as rejection or embarrassment, are perceived as opportunities for relational erosion (Kunkel et al., 2003). An example of this concept is that an individual may avoid initiating a conversation about what direction the relationship is headed in fear of their partner responding differently than what they may hope. Rather than risk feelings of embarrassment from rejection or risk dissolution of the current relationship, this individual will avoid communication about this topic altogether, saving face and potentially just delaying dissolution.

When surveying the ideas related to, conceptualizing, and defining the term dating, it is evident that dating is fluid and can progress and regress as a type of romantic relationship. Dating is related to commitment, which is communicated through a variety of dating-type behaviors. Overall, the literature on dating demonstrates a challenge in defining the term clearly. How an individual defines dating depends on the demographics, experiences, and cultural context of the individuals employing the term.

Online Dating

Online dating is a form of computer mediated communication (CMC), where an individual can create a profile representing themselves in order to find potential partners. Online dating profiles tend to include personal information such as a person's name, age, height, interests, and sexual orientation as a form of digital self-presentation (Tong et al., 2020). From there, the platform facilitates online messaging between users, which can eventually lead to meetings or face-to-face dates (MacNeil-Kelly, 2020). Online dating apps and platforms such as Tinder, Bumble, Hinge, eHarmony, and Match.com, all come with their own purposes; some lend themselves more towards serious romantic relationships, while other platforms come with

more "hookup" related intentions (Portolan & McAlister, 2021). For example, Tinder is notorious for its identity as a primarily "hookup" app in college student populations, whereas Hinge is "made to be deleted," meaning its purpose is finding a quality romantic relationship that would warrant one to delete their online dating profile entirely.

Research suggests that online dating is growing in prevalence, to the point where it has surpassed the number of people who meet through face-to-face means (MacNeil-Kelly, 2020). Prior research on online dating also found that individuals who use the Internet for more tasks are more likely to date online and interestingly, individuals who are trusting of others are significantly less likely to take part in to online dating (Kang & Hoffman, 2011).

During the pandemic, Internet usage can be seen as the lifeline to human communication where many tasks are accomplished online. Since the pandemic, there has been an overwhelming increase in online dating, as well as an evolution in the way online dating platforms are used (Wiederhold, 2021). Individuals took advantage of "virtual dates," which involves actions such as Facetiming while playing virtual games, using the Netflix "party" collaborative watch feature, or DoorDashing meals and eating together over Zoom (Wiederhold, 2021). Prior to the pandemic, dating platforms facilitated in-person dates, but evolved to cater to health and safety protocols in the pandemic by encouraging virtual dates instead. In spring of 2021, Bumble, an online dating app, released "Night In," which added a game night and trivia component to their video date feature to encourage socially distanced dating (Porter, 2021). More individuals joined dating apps during the pandemic to find a consistent "lockdown partner," as casual sex in a pandemic for many individuals was an off the table health risk (Portolan & McAlister, 2021).

Additionally, in a study by Bryant & Sheldon (2017) the major reasons college students used online dating platforms were for "fun," "relationships," and "hookups" (p.1). This study

also found that those who reported higher amounts of self-esteem were less motivated to take advantage of online dating for hookups and women were more likely to use online dating platforms for relationships than men (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017). These pre-COVID findings serve as a strong base to explore and compare how the use of online dating platforms may have changed since the beginning of the pandemic.

In a study by Winking (2021) on online dating during the pandemic, three major findings emerged: 1. "Enforced social distancing did not change the desire for individuals to form intimate connections [online];" 2. Participants gave up social distancing to ultimately meet their online matches; 3. "Interviewees felt guilt about meeting up [with online dates]" (Winking, 2021, p.89-90). Building on prior research about online dating and the developing scholarly and popular conversations about the impacts of COVID on dating, this thesis will extend the academic conversation about online dating during the pandemic.

Navigation of Personal Health

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, young people have been criticized for behaving in ways that increase the risk of contracting the highly contagious virus, such as partying, playing recreational sports, and attending large social gatherings (Gunia, 2020). This is often attributed to an invincible attitude of "it won't happen to me" or "I won't get that sick." There is a developing negative stigma around COVID contraction due to irresponsible health practices or failure to observe safety measures that draws many parallels to sexually transmitted disease (STD) contraction research. In a study by Gold (2004), results suggested that college students practiced safe sex inconsistently, despite a high level of knowledge about STD prevention and risks. Similarly, people have been made aware of preventative practices to limit the spread of COVID, yet individuals continue to engage in risky behaviors.

Holman & Sillars (2012) called the widespread sexually transmitted infection (STI) contraction by college students a "hidden epidemic," which is enabled and perpetuated by hookup culture, or pervasiveness of casual sex and low commitment relationships on college campuses (p.206). An article by Boudewyns & Paquin (2011) outlines the beliefs and intentions college students have about getting tested for STDs. Their findings suggested that attitudes about testing were the strongest determinant of whether or not someone got tested and that men reported getting tested less frequently than women (Boudewyns & Paquin, 2011). As this thesis seeks to better understand dating practices in college students, it may also shed light on if and how the attitudes and behaviors around health and safety measures in the "hidden epidemic" of sexually transmitted diseases are mirrored during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Prior research has demonstrated that identities with negatively held stigmas are often associated with lower predicted outcome value (POV), or lower value for future relationships (Horan et al., 2009; Tatsuya, 2016; Mottet, 2000). Online disclosure of negatively stigmatized identities led to low predicted outcome values, as illustrated in research on schizophrenia disclosures on Facebook (Tatsuya, 2016). In instances where contracting COVID is negatively stigmatized and can be attributed to carelessness in preventative practices, it is possible that individuals may be more inclined to associate low predicted outcome values to relationships with individuals they meet online who disclose having COVID, or appear to be engaging in risky behaviors that could lead to exposure.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory

Berger & Calabrese's (1975) uncertainty reduction theory (URT), is an interpersonal communication theory that was first developed to understand the "process that occurs when strangers interact" (Redmond, 2015). In this process, strangers begin in a state of uncertainty

about one another because they have no expectations or prior interactions to draw from. From there, individuals may engage in uncertainty reducing behaviors in order to limit feelings of anxiousness of the unknown and to make sense of the potential relationship or situation. This theory has been extended to encompass more than just initial interactions, but also to account for a variety of unexpected events that may arise later in a relationship. One of the central ideas of URT is that individuals do not like to live in uncertainty and will actively seek to reduce it when possible, however the extent of the reduction efforts made may vary depending on the situation. Uncertainty occurs when there are a multitude of possible alternatives or explanations. In interpersonal communication this may manifest as self-uncertainty, or insecurity in your own behaviors, or relational uncertainty, which is a lack of confidence in predicting or explaining issues in a relationship (Redmond, 2015).

In an initial interaction or unexpected event, individuals may draw from seven variables in order to reduce uncertainty. Berger and Calabrese (1975) identify these to be: amount of verbal communication, nonverbal affiliative expressiveness, information-seeking behavior, intimacy level of communication content, reciprocity, similarity, and liking. These variables rely on an array of interpersonal strategies, which include the passive strategy, active strategy, and interaction strategy (Redmond, 2015). Passive strategy is rooted in observation, such as watching body language and nonverbal communication of a new person to gain information about them. Active strategy involves asking a third party for information about the new person, which can also include searching for this person on the Internet or social media. Interaction strategy is when an individual directly asks questions to a new person or self-discloses information to prompt reciprocal disclosures (Redmond, 2015). The type of strategies used may depend on the value of reducing uncertainty about this new person as well as the personality of the information-seeker.

The applications of uncertainty reduction theory have predominantly been focused in interpersonal communication and health communication contexts. In interpersonal communication, URT has been used to understand the development of relationships, as well as on-going and established long-distance dating relationships (Parks & Adelman, 1983; Weigel et al. 2011; Theiss & Solomon, 2008; Maguire, 2007). Research suggests that the problems that can arise as a result of uncertainty are magnified in romantic dating relationships (Theiss & Solomon, 2008). Additionally, increased uncertainty can lead to a decrease in intimacy and attraction, which often has implications for the future of the relationship (Theiss & Solomon, 2008).

Other research using URT has expanded its application online. In a study about online dating, researchers interviewed participants about the amount of uncertainty they had while changing modalities from online to face-to-face dating (Wickelgren et al., 2019). The findings demonstrated that individuals had little anxiety talking to a potential partner online, but increased anxiety as these interactions moved face-to-face (Wickelgren et al., 2019). In other research about online platforms and uncertainty, which was explored by looking at posts on Facebook, findings demonstrated that increased levels of self-disclosure online helped reduce uncertainty, and increase prediction about an individual's attitudes (Palmieri et al., 2012).

In the context of health, uncertainty has been explored in a psychology context with specific research about the COVID-19 pandemic. The outbreak of COVID-19 warranted feelings of fear and uncertainty about personal and global health and safety, navigating health protocols, the rollout of vaccines, as well as the progression and variants of the virus (Macpagal, 2020). A positive correlation was found between fear of COVID and intolerance of uncertainty, which is often accompanied by depression, anxiety, and high amounts of stress (Bakioglu et al., 2020).

Fear and uncertainty about COVID were reported as higher in women and individuals who have chronic illnesses (Bakioglu et al., 2020).

In response to COVID-related worries, research has revealed ways that individuals can manage and reduce this uncertainty, along with the mental health impacts that accompany it. Studies have shown that actively taking part in positive psychology practices such as support groups and intervention programs has helped individuals reduce or manage COVID-related uncertainty (Macpagal, 2020; Bakioglu et al., 2020). Other effective measures to reduce uncertainty during the pandemic include taking time for preventative mental health activities (hobbies, relaxing, family support), reinforcing feelings of hope, and engaging in health-information seeking behaviors (Macpagal, 2020; Bakioglu et al., 2020).

In light of the prior literature on dating, online dating, and health and safety navigation, uncertainty reduction theory and its applications in dating and in health contexts, this thesis aims to explore how COVID-19 has impacted college students' dating practices. In doing so, it also fills a gap in the literature about the relationship between COVID-19 and dating. While previous studies have explored impacts of COVID-19 on dating (Wickelgren et al., 2019; Winking, 2021), there is scant literature addressing the experiences of college students, which is the focus of this thesis. In order to address this research gap, this thesis will explore three main research questions:

Research Questions

RQ1: How do college students define dating?

RQ2: How has COVID and its safety precautions and protocols changed the way college students engage and are motivated to engage in dating practices?

RQ3: How does uncertainty impact the ways college students have navigated dating, as defined

by the interviewed sample, during the pandemic?

CHAPTER 2: METHOD

This thesis uses a methodological approach that includes two main components: focus group interviews (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Focus group interviews were used as a method of data collection that would lead to understanding of how college students define dating as well as ascertain their perceptions of and experiences with dating during the pandemic. An inductive thematic analysis was used to analyze the transcribed focus group interview data and identify key themes that define and describe the experiences and perceptions of college students. Inductive thematic analysis means that analysis, though sensitive to disciplinary knowledge as described in the literature review, is grounded in the data rather than existing concepts or theories (Clarke et al., 2015). This organic approach allows for the analysis of identified themes to produce meanings that are deeply connected to the data and yield original ideas that extend the scholarly conversation about dating during the pandemic. Below, I will describe the methodological approach of this thesis in detail.

Thematic Analysis

According to Braun & Clarke (2006), a thematic analysis is a "qualitative analytic method" that serves as a tool "for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p.77, 79). Its flexibility in analyzing different types of data, its theoretical freedom, and ability to yield rich qualitative results lends itself to being an appropriate method for this study. Thematic analysis is a research method that organizes and describes a set of data based on codes, which are categories and patterns that the researcher creates through engaging with the data throughout the process of analysis. Thematic analysis also provides an opportunity for interpretation and meaning making within the cultural context of the data set (Thomas, 2020).

When carrying out a thematic analysis, Braun & Clarke (2006) identify six major steps researchers must undertake. The first step is that the researcher must familiarize themselves with the data, which includes reading the data several times, and taking preliminary notes on items that may stand out. Next, the researcher must begin to generate initial codes. This may include going through the data with the intention of noticing features that relate to the original research questions, interesting pieces of data, or data that repeats itself. The third step is to search the data for themes, which essentially includes bringing codes together into related and relevant categories. After that, the researcher must review themes to ensure that the data extracts and data set are cohesive; additionally, developing a thematic map may allow researchers to visually identify how themes connect to one another.

The fifth and penultimate step is for the researcher to define and name the themes that result from working with the dataset. This includes continuous refinement and analysis of the data to generate a working and applicable definition of each theme or category. The final step is for the researcher to produce the report. In this last part of the thematic analysis, a data extract will be selected that can serve as an exemplar for each particular theme in a final paper (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.87).

Qualitative studies related to dating have used thematic analysis as an effective method of analysis. For example, in a study on interracial couples, thematic analysis allowed the researchers to consolidate findings into manageable themes (Bell & Hastings, 2011). Another study used thematic analysis to explore online dating habits during COVID following interviews of five Portland, Oregon singles (Winking, 2021). It identified three themes from their findings, which were: "social distancing did not hinder the desire to form intimate connections, the idea of socially distant dating was interesting though many gave up after an attempt, and though people

still met up, there was guilt around the experience" (Winking, 2021, p.89). The aforementioned studies demonstrate the suitability of thematic analysis for this thesis.

Focus Groups

In order to carry out the thematic analysis and address the research questions, this study utilizes focus group interviews as the method of data collection. Focus groups are a form of qualitative interviewing, defined as "small groups of people with particular characteristics convened for a focused discussion of a particular topic" (Hollander, 2004, p.606). Focus groups can collect a variety of viewpoints in one dynamic discussion either in a complementary, or shared and agreed sense or in an argumentative one, where participants' viewpoints clash (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). Focus groups are guided by a moderator, who poses questions and prompts discussion to the group of participants. They occur traditionally in a neutral location and last between 30 minutes to 2 hours and may be audio and/or video recorded (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019).

Conducting focus group interviews provides a dynamic way to produce rich data that can encompass a variety of viewpoints and experiences. In a 2014 study on perceptions of beauty and ugliness, focus groups were used to uncover young women's thoughts and experiences in a highly descriptive and enlightening way (Goldman & Waymer, 2014). Another communication study that used focus groups explored how mothers talked to their sons about testicular cancer (Foster, Graham, Ball, & Wanzer, 2014). Similar to the previously mentioned study, focus groups allowed for conversations not only with the moderator, but also between participants. Interactions bring light to what is relevant and what resonates as important to multiple individuals at once. A major reason why I selected this method for data collection was because of the opportunity for dialogue, which can illuminate a variety of viewpoints on a new topic,

(Wilkinson, 2015). In contrast to a one-on-one interview, focus groups allow for interactions between participants. These interactions may include agreement, disagreement, or elaboration on responses among participants (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). For a personal and potentially intimate topic such as dating practices during COVID, participants in a focus group may be more comfortable and feel less pressure to give extensive responses for every question, compared to one-on-one interviews where participants may feel inclined to provide a response for every question, even if uncomfortable. The present study was conducted using focus groups over Zoom. This allowed the researcher to check any indistinguishable speakers in the video recording during the review of transcribed data.

The priorly mentioned focus group studies were conducted face-to-face, in the same physical space, which raised challenges identified by Foster et al. (2014). These researchers found that it was challenging to distinguish participant voices in recordings following data collection and during transcription (Foster et al., 2014). However, conducting a focus group study online and with video allowed the present study to maintain an accurate record of *who* was speaking and see their body language while also protecting the health and safety of both the participants and the researcher. Moreover, because the present study utilized Zoom as a platform for focus group interviews, it has the potential to contribute to knowledge about the growing use of online focus group interviews as an effective data collection method.

Participants

After a thorough Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval process, this study used the Virginia Tech SONA Communication research participation system in order to recruit undergraduate student participants. In this system, Virginia Tech students are able to register for communication related studies after creating an account. Many of these students are either

communication majors or are enrolled in a communication-related course that encourages, requires, or offers extra credit for their participation in a research study throughout the course of a semester. Following review and approval from the School of Communication Research Reviewer and the IRB, a call for participants was distributed via the SONA system. Registered students were able to view a description of the study and requirements for their eligibility. Eligible participants were required to be between the ages of 18 and 25 and have engaged in dating practices both before and during the pandemic (See Appendix A). Eligibility was intentionally broad and vague to encourage a wide range of participant experiences and interpretation of "dating." While 64 students registered to participate, 51 students actually attended their focus group session. 40 participants presented as female and 11 participants presented as male. Participants were not asked about their sexual orientation, nor their gender identity; however, one participant did self-disclose a non-heterosexual sexual identity.

Protocols & Procedures

All eight focus groups were carried out in the spring of 2021. Students who chose to participate in this study were prompted to register for one of eight focus group time-slots, which took place across four days from April 27, 2021 to May 3, 2021. Once a timeslot reached 8 participant sign-ups, registration closed. Each timeslot filled to max capacity, however not every registered participant attended their designated timeslot. After registering, participants received a unique link to a Zoom meeting, created by the researcher.

At the time of each focus group, I admitted participants into the Zoom meeting using a password-protected Virginia Tech computer and verified their registration for the study. About five minutes after the designated timeslot started, I distributed to the consent sheet to participants for their review in the chat function of Zoom as a PDF attachment (Appendix B). I then gave a

brief description of the goal of the research, the format of the focus group, and explanation of verbal consent. After each participant was finished looking over the consent information, I requested verbal consent for their participation and consent to be audio and video recorded. Participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential, stored on a Virginia Tech, password-protected computer, and only used for research purposes. Finally, I asked for verification that each participant was older than 18 years of age and younger than 25. Once each participant offered their consent for these measures and verification of their age, I began recording the focus group interview through Zoom's recording function.

As the moderator, I guided the participants through a list of pre-prepared, mostly open-ended interview questions (Appendix C) in a semi-structured fashion. The questions covered themes such as: defining dating, dating pre-COVID, dating during COVID, health and safety measures, online dating, and future of dating & reflections. In order to gather a variety of viewpoints, at times I prompted responses from all participants. The focus group interviews lasted for approximately 45 minutes. The longest session was 54 minutes and the shortest was 43 minutes. After moving fluidly through interview questions, where I was able to use, skip, or adjust the question wording, order, and number asked, I would indicate the end of the session by asking for final thoughts. Following the focus group, the I verified participation credit in the Communication Research Participation SONA system for those who attended their designated timeslot and uploaded the focus group recordings to a Virginia Tech-approved computer.

Following the completion of all eight focus groups, the next step in this process was to transcribe the recordings in order to have a source of written data to use for the thematic analysis portion of the method. Focus group recordings were downloaded to the transcription site, Transcribeme.com and submitted for automated word-for-word transcription. Once completed,

the transcriptions were downloaded as Word document files. These files identified the unique speakers and the time-stamp for each response for each of the eight focus groups. For increased accuracy, I went through the transcriptions while reviewing the focus-group recordings and adjusted any errors in the transcriptions.

After collecting the data from the focus groups and downloading the focus group recordings into the online transcription service, Transcribeme, I carried out a thematic analysis of the transcribed data. When carrying out the method of analysis, I first read through the focus group transcriptions three to four times, using open coding techniques (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). During the open coding process, I took notes on common findings and eventually arrived at a point of saturation. Saturation is the point where there is no new information intake during review of data. From there, responses were organized into codes corresponding to question topics, which include dating definitions, pre-COVID dating and during COVID dating. After organizing these responses, I highlighted related data extracts in different colors and begin to sort these extracts in a way that established preliminary codes, which were then categorized into themes. A distinction to make in this section is that I did not "pick out" themes that would back up any predetermined theories, concepts, or ideas for this research, but instead constructed themes through working with what presented in the data through my analysis.

After reviewing the themes from the transcripts, I selected the strongest data extracts to represent each theme. These themes are reported in the results chapter, Chapter 3 of this thesis. In Chapter 4, I discuss the findings and explain how the themes resulting from my analysis contribute to the larger scholarly discussions about college students' dating practices, online dating, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The discussion also includes contributions for qualitative methodology. Understanding the benefits and drawbacks of video-interviews may allow

researchers to consider online platforms in the future for their legitimacy and flexibility, rather than out of health-related or geographic necessity.

Reliability

In qualitative research, and particularly in a focus group method, it is nearly impossible to replicate a study with the same conditions, type of participants, and contexts. For these reasons, reliability cannot truly be ensured (Tracy, 2013), but through the process of self-reflexivity, consistency can be maximized to the fullest extent of the researcher's abilities throughout the data collection and analysis process. As the researcher, I am the instrument of analysis. Thus, I made sense of the data, particularly, how the themes addressed the research questions and contribute to research (Vaismoradi et al., 2013) on COVID-19 and its impacts on college students dating.

Although reliability cannot be assured in qualitative research, trustworthiness remains an important goal. Trustworthiness can be maintained in qualitative research by ensuring a systematic approach to data collection, description and analysis. Diligence when carrying out Braun & Clarke's six steps to a thematic analysis (2006) ensured that this thesis' findings capture the dataset accurately and address the research questions that are the focus of the thesis (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

This study used a qualitative thematic analysis in order to explore three research questions about college students' dating practices during the pandemic as well as their definitions of dating. Data was analyzed inductively from transcriptions of the eight focus group interviews of college students (n=51) that took place in spring of 2021. The first section of this chapter specifically looks at the four themes centered around how college students define dating. The second section of this chapter specifically unveils emergent themes that are related to dating during the pandemic.

I. Defining Dating

In order to best address RQ1, participants were asked to define dating, as well as some of the behaviors associated with the term. Their definitions of dating identified several key themes: relational investment, exclusivity labels, dating progression, and the role of hookup culture. These four themes will be defined and explained based on analysis of focus group data and by using exemplars.

Relational Investment. The first theme that was prominent throughout the dataset was that dating, as defined by the college student participants, requires emotional and behavioral commitments that are viewed as either being in a serious relationship or moving towards a serious relationship. The emotional commitment involved with dating was described using terms such as trust, attraction, and love. One participant explained: "I feel like it's like having an emotional connection with someone and wanting to spend time with them, be around them all the time and be the person that they trust and tell things to."

In this exemplar, as well as among other data extracts, it was an apparent expectation that dating involves more than an indifferent attitude towards a partner. Dating indicates a deeper emotional investment. This deeper emotional investment was also described as being future oriented. This meant that dating in the present including the emotional and behavioral investments that come with it are oriented towards a long term, and at times marriage-oriented goal. One participant noted that they viewed "dating to date" as an inaccurate use of the term. Instead, dating was found to be more of a serious foundational action towards building a future with their partner. Another participant contributed to this perspective by saying, "I feel like sometimes when people think about dating in college, a lot of people like to focus on dating to marry because of society's like, 'You can find your love in college.'"

In addition to the emotional investments, findings also demonstrated the importance of behavioral investments, which included time spent with partners and engaging in activities together. When describing what people who are dating do, participants listed actions such as going on formal dates or casual hangouts, meeting their partner's friends and families, and attending events together. Actions involving technology were also found to be a major part of how college students conceptualized dating. Constant communication via texting, Face Timing, or Snapchat were commonly emphasized as an integral part of dating.

Exclusivity Labels. The second theme that was identified when exploring participant definitions of dating was the importance of both partners engaging in a conversation that labels the relationship as exclusive, official, and as "dating." For example, one participant stated, "I feel like if I was just going on dates with someone, I would describe it as seeing someone, but they're not my significant other yet until there was a conversation about it." Another noted, "dating is

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like you've had the conversation to establish boyfriend and girlfriend. I feel like that's what you say when it's agreed on both parties that it's going to be more long-term"

Consistently, participants noted that communication *must* occur for individuals to be considered dating or exclusively seeing one another. Up until that point, partners were described as having the liberty to "do what they want" and explore other potential partners without commitment and in a more casual way. Exclusive dating was described as being "one on one," and indicates building towards a typically more serious relationship.

Findings also indicated that when navigating the conversation about labels and exclusivity, partners recalled situations similar to this one: "My current boyfriend, he was just like, 'Do you want to make this official?'" Another participant explained, "I wanted to know, just because we didn't really know each other that well but we were still talking, what his intentions were. So, I kind of phrased it as, 'So are we exclusive?'"

Participants also shed light on the potential negative consequences, discomfort and uncertainty that may come with this conversation. If one partner initiates a conversation about labels with desire for the relationship to become "official," but their desire goes unreciprocated by the other partner, it was found that participants may avoid the conversation altogether. One examples of this is when a participant explained, "I think it's hard for people to have that conversation because say they have a really good friendship-- they're almost scared to lose that friendship with that conversation, because the feelings might not be mutual."

In another example, a different participant said, "the talking stage is complicated. I personally hate it because sometimes you'll be talking to someone and you'll basically be dating. But as soon as you ask to put the label on it like you're exclusive or you're dating, it just doesn't work out."

Dating Progression. Analysis of focus group data also shed light on the theme of dating as a part of a relational progression. As individuals engage in relational investment through their behaviors and emotions, while getting to know a potential partner better, they may eventually choose to have the conversation about officially dating. The most common way participants conceptualized this progression was that individuals begin in a "talking" stage that may progress into the dating stage if a conversation about exclusivity occurs. Focus group findings demonstrated that the talking stage is where individuals are not exclusively tied to one partner, and lack strong definition of the relationship. In this stage, individuals may talk to other potential partners on dating apps, at events and social functions, or by Snapchat, Facetime, text, or other communication channels. One participant spoke to the untethered nature of the talking stage:

> With talking, I personally think that you're free to talk to other people. But, if you were to go on a date or do anything with anyone else, it's kind of wrong. But it's also you're allowed to unless you put a label that you're exclusive and you don't want each other seeing anyone else. So, unless you're exclusive, basically you can do whatever you want.

Because of the lack of definition and investment in this stage, individuals may also terminate communication formally or informally with who they are "talking" to. While talking can lead sequentially towards dating, it may also end in this stage through ghosting (cutting off all communication with a potential partner), dwindling communication, a conversation about the relationship being a dead end, or a conversation about staying "just friends."

Also in the talking stage, individuals seek to reduce uncertainty and gauge interest in potential partners by engaging in information-seeking behaviors. This may occur through conversations during formal dates or more casual hangouts, and through consistent communication via text, FaceTime, social media messaging, dating apps, or Snapchat. When

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discussing the progression from talking to potentially dating, participants identified some typical talking progressions involving technology. For example, when considering how their technology use may progress with a potential partner, one participant said, "they might ask 'Oh what's your Snapchat?' And then after you talk on Snapchat for a little bit, they're like, 'Oh okay, let me get your number so we can really have a conversation.'"

Other participants added that technology progressions may be oriented toward reducing identity uncertainty, particularly when meeting first on dating apps:

> I think that it's helpful to use Snapchat first if you're meeting someone off of a dating app and you want to see who they are before you give them your phone number. You want to see if they're real.

One interesting finding that several participants mentioned was the tendency to use several different platforms to talk to the same partner or potential partner at one time, which may involve completely different conversations on each platform. Overwhelmingly, it was found that participants viewed there to be a progression to dating and to the technology used during this progression. Findings suggest that official dating follows a talking stage which occurs through a combination of constant communication via text, messaging platforms, or Snapchat and face-to-face interactions. Findings also reveal that official dating may be a precedent to an increasingly formal title or stage such as engagement or marriage, and uses technology more for maintenance and update-oriented communication rather than getting to know the other person.

Role of Hookup Culture. The final dating theme that was identified from the data is how college students' definition of dating is situated within the context of hookup culture. Hookup culture was brought up or alluded to numerous times throughout the focus group interviews and can be described as the tendency for individuals to engage in sexually-focused relationships.

These relationships tend to be short-lived or fleeting, oriented around sexual experimentation or desire, and often go undefined. Participants noted that hookup culture is a function of an options-based dating scene, which includes the large number of "options" at bars, parties, social events or dating apps. An example of this sentiment is apparent when a participant explained, "I feel like because a lot of people have a lot of options nowadays, nobody really wants to commit and have that conversation, decide if they're dating or not." Another participant added, "In college, if you're just hooking up with someone, that's kind of the norm. You don't really have labels as much."

Results demonstrated that hookup culture was viewed as a barrier to exclusive dating. Because college students assumed hooking up to be the default goal of potential partners, many expressed hesitancy or avoidance of conversations about exclusive dating. College students also perceived hookup culture to be something unique to their generation's dating experiences. Participants assumed that their parents experienced more exclusive dating than hooking up. One participant shared her experience with this topic, saying "I always get my mom asking me, 'Oh, has anyone asked you out on a date?' I'm like, 'Mom, it doesn't work like that anymore.' It's normally just more of a hookup culture." While hookups on their own were not noted as a relational stage, some of the challenges with exclusivity and labelling in dating relationships suggest a deep-rooted connection to the perceptions of hookup culture in college students.

Research question one was aimed at understanding how college students defined dating. Based on the analysis of related focus group interview responses, the four defined themes reveal that college students view dating as an action that requires: relational investment such as consistent technology-mediated "talking" or dates, a conversation about labelling and defining the relationship as "exclusive," a progression from talking towards labelled dating, and

navigation of the relationship within a culture of in-person and online dating options and emphasis on hooking-up rather than monogamous dating. Having described how the interviewed population of college students defined dating, the next section will reveal how this group navigated dating during the COVID-19 pandemic.

II. Dating During the Pandemic

This section of Chapter 3 defines and explains the six themes that emerged regarding dating during the pandemic, which are: importance of communication, technology as a tool, impact of family, violating safety norms, negative affect expression, and gaining perspective. These themes are specifically aimed at addressing RQ2 and RQ3.

Importance of Communication. A prominent theme that appeared throughout the dataset was that participants expressed an increase in the importance of communication in their relationships during the pandemic. Findings illuminated that the quality and quantity of a individuals' communication through face-to-face and/or technology-mediated modalities greatly impacted the outcome of the relationship. In other words, effective communication tended to aid relational maintenance and increase relational strength in the face of the increasingly uncertain circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. This occurred through in person and/or technology-mediated communication.

For example, participants described using text message conversations throughout the day to update partners about what they are doing, daily Facetime calls at the end of the day, or Netflix party dates where couples in separate locations simultaneously watched and messaged throughout movies or shows. Although these technological communication tools could be used prior to the pandemic, they were used in an increased amount for couples who were forced into long-distance due to quarantining measures or for those who may live with at risk family

members. On the other side of the communication spectrum, ineffective communication often led to relational termination or failure to begin dating in the first place. Ineffective communication using technology included shallow or surface level communication (such as one word, short, or vague text responses) or failure to respond to messages in a timely manner. During the pandemic, in-person meetings of new partners became increasingly limited, which led to an emphasis on effective technology-mediated communication in dating relationships. Ineffective in-person communication often focused on miscommunication about COVID precautions (e.g. both partners wearing masks, communication of COVID exposure, etc.). Prior to the pandemic, conversations about health and safety may not have occurred as early and directly as they did during the pandemic.

For individuals who were exploring potential partners, communication was essential in navigating boundaries. During the height of the pandemic, many individuals did not just consider their personal boundaries with risking COVID contraction, but also the boundaries of the members of the household in which they were residing. When engaging with new partners, participants described a more drawn out "talking" stage in order to gain more information about the individual that would allow them to assess whether or not this individual is someone trustworthy and worth risking COVID exposure for. Open communication was also noted as being important in conveying comfort level in exposure to plan dates. For example, one participant explained:

> You may say something like, "okay, we can go outside for our first date to meet up for the first time." And if it seems chill and everything seems good, then next time try being unmasked. But also setting those expectations so that if something happens, or you found

out you came in contact with someone, there's communication like "just let me know," so we can handle it from there.

In existing dating relationships, communication was used to maintain both long-distance relationships and geographically close relationships. In long distance relationships, communication using technology was described as being more frequent in quantity and more creative in the variety of platforms used. One participant noted:

I'm either FaceTiming her or doing something with Netflix Party or texting her. I'm also in architecture so I'll take pictures of stuff that I do, and then I'll send it to her to let her know what's going on in my day so she can feel like she's a part of it.

This example, along with others, illuminated how effective long distance dating communication often relied on multifaceted technology approaches that included a verbal or text component, as well as a visual communication component (FaceTime, Snapchat, Nextflix Party).

In addition to long distance communication, for those who were seeing their partners more than ever as a result of the pandemic, communication of time and space boundaries became more important than pre-pandemic. One participant explained a conversation about time away from their significant other:

It's saying that I do need time to myself because my boyfriend is clingy. When I tell him that, "Yeah, I need space," he initially feels like it's because I don't like him. But I always have to assure him that, "No, it's just I want some time to myself," or like, "I need to study for my test," and other things like that.

While positive and effective communication proved important, ineffective communication, on the other hand, led to the demise of many dating relationships or potential dating relationships. Ineffective communication during pandemic dating was found to include: failure to disclose

COVID comfort level or exposure, failure to have substantial conversations (more than small talk), failure to respond in a reasonable timeframe or quantity, failure to be transparent or open.

One participant shared a specific example demonstrating how failure to disclose COVID contact led the individual not to engage in future dates:

> I went on a date and then I got Covid from it because the person was with someone who tested positive and didn't say anything. This showed not being respectful of other people's health. Now every time I go out, even though I am vaccinated now, I still make sure like, "Hey, you haven't been around anyone that's been positive, right?" Just because I had that little fun experience.

Other participants explained how a lack of transparency often decreased relational trust or how a partner's failure to put in communicative effort (willingness to engage in difficult, substantial, consistent, or deep conversations) weakened the connection of the relationship—both of which eventually contributed to termination of the relationship. While many of these factors may occur in a traditional (non-pandemic) relationship in any context, findings illustrate that the unique climate of the pandemic led many individuals to prioritize communication as being more important than before.

Technology as a Tool. The second theme that emerged was the prevalence and necessity of technology as a tool in pandemic dating. Findings revealed that individuals used technology more while dating during the pandemic, and the way technology was used in dating also changed. While components of this theme are related to the importance of communication in dating relationships during the pandemic, technology became a lifeline for continuing many distanced pre-existing relationships and beginning and building new relationships during this time.

With the shutdown of many places where individuals would typically meet and the CDC's call for limiting gatherings, the opportunities for meeting new partners was reduced. Subsequently, findings from the focus groups suggested increased movement to online dating platforms. Participants disclosed either increased use for a period of time on dating apps such as Tinder, Bumble or Hinge, or a decision to join a dating app as a result of diminished in-person dating opportunities. When using dating apps, participants disclosed that they used the descriptions and photos on an individual's profile to discern whether or not this potential partner may be a safe dating choice. Later on, participants also noted that they would make decisions whether or not an individual had disclosed their vaccination status in their bio. One participant noted:

> If you're talking to someone on Tinder, maybe, starting out with getting to know how many people they see. You can tell on people's profiles, if they go to huge parties and if they have a lot of friends, and they're seeing a lot of people, or if they only have a few friends, or they have close friends that are all safe. You can kind of make that decision there just based off of what kind of person they look like.

Other participants commented on the variety of technology channels they used for communication with partners or potential partners. These included: Snapchat, texting, voice calling, Facetime, Facebook messenger, Discord, Instagram messenger, and Zoom. To avoid monotony in relationships, individuals got creative how they used technology, in ways such as having FaceTime dinner dates or activities done together, separately. A participant added, "we're actually using voice calls because actually, you can call overnight. It's just really nice to wake up to them and be able to talk because there's time zone differences in our long-distance relationship."

While technology was an important tool in facilitating communication during a time of isolation and separation, it did bring up communication challenges, primarily in miscommunication of messages. Nonverbal communication such as body language, gestures, facial expressions, and tone were noted as being tougher to distinguish through technologically mediated communication. An example of this is:

I am a pretty sassy person. A lot of people don't get that over text and they take it as I'm being a bitch. I think definitely people maybe got the wrong impression of me, which would not happen in person, because people can read facial expressions and hear the tone of voice significantly more in person than a call or text.

Impact of Family. Many participants explained the impact that the personal health and boundaries of their family had on their dating practices. In March of 2020, on-campus college students were sent home as a result of quarantining measures. As a result, this population of young adults, typically between the ages of 17 and 21 returned to their family homes and under the rules and jurisdiction of their parents. Most participants explained that they did not stop dating or trying to meet potential partners just because they had returned to living with their parents. However, results found that many participants were forced to change the way they dated based on the rules set by their families.

While at school, many college students enjoy the freedom of going on dates without needing the permission of family members; but when students returned home, they also returned to rules of their families. For this reason, participants noted having to follow the health protocols to the comfort level of their family—which varied in levels of strictness. While some families allowed their children to live a life similar to pre-COVID, others put restrictions on how many individuals and which individuals their children could see, and others completely shut down

social interaction. Much of this depended on personal health decisions. Some other families were extra cautious because of grandparents, immunocompromised, or high-risk members in a household. Several participants explained that their parents restricted their social freedom in order to limit possible exposure or contraction of COVID, which in some situations meant less time with significant others. One example of family restrictions is described in an exemplar below:

My sister was pregnant throughout the pandemic. I had to have a really hard conversation with my parents because to be safe, it wasn't just the people I was seeing-- it's who my partner was seeing. If I didn't know everyone that he was seeing, then my parents said I couldn't see him. It was hard because I had to end up choosing between spending time with him and being able to see my family because I wouldn't be able to see my sister if I had seen him. And then, my mom wouldn't be able to see my sister either, which was just kind of hard. My partner ended up quarantining so that we could see each other and I could see my family. But that ended up being really hard on him and his mental health, too, because he was excluded from his friends who weren't quarantining. It was really difficult for us to make a compromise on something that you can't really compromise on.

Some parents restricted the total number of people their children could see. Several single participants described that in this situation, they had to consider choosing between friends and a potential partner from an online dating platform in order to stay within the number of people their parents had restricted them to. Others described their parents' restrictions of meeting new partners and risking exposure:

I tried to convince my parents to let me see someone who they didn't know and had never

met by saying, "oh, I'm going to go get food with this person." Their response was,

"when did you meet him?" and I'm like, "I haven't met him yet." So, they said, "no, don't

go. What if they have COVID or something?"

Overall, the pandemic forced many college students to negotiate boundaries and follow

the restrictions and household rules set by parents. This level of parental restriction was often

met with increased frustration and negative emotions about both the pandemic and dating, which

is described in more detail in the negative affect expression theme. Due to the fact that so many

participants expressed an overwhelming fear of exposing someone in their household to COVID,

this potential risk lowered many individuals expressed motivation to date.

Violating Safety Norms. Another theme that was identified through analysis of the focus

group data was how violations of health and safety norms often had negative implications for

potential partners. In this section of the interviews, many participants discussed red flags or

dealbreakers during COVID dating. The common red flags discussed were not wearing masks,

unwillingness to compromise about safety levels on dates, and not taking the health protocols of

the pandemic seriously.

For many participants, a major red flag of pandemic dating occurred when a partner or

potential partner did not wear a mask during times of mask mandates. Several participants

disclosed that failure to wear a mask during times of mandates led them to evaluate the potential

of the dating relationship or potential relationship negatively. Results revealed that failure to

wear a mask during these circumstances symbolically indicated character traits such as

selfishness, disrespect, and lack of consideration for others. Other participants added that a

common dealbreaker was taking the pandemic lightly or saying the pandemic was not real.

Participants noted that when individuals continued to live pre-COVID lives and failed to make follow guidelines aimed at protecting those around them, it was a turnoff:

> I would say a huge deal-breaker for me would be them acting like everything is normal, still going out with friends, still going to clubs, parties, just not aware of their surroundings or potentially what could happen. I think that would turn me off a lot. And then I would think about how they are in other parts of their life. Do they really care about the people around them? Do they really care about their health in other ways? I think that would just be a huge red flag for me.

Multiple participants disclosed a termination of a dating relationship due to differences in how seriously each partner took pandemic health and safety measures. While on the surface, health and safety were discussed in relation to protection from the virus, at a deeper level, many participants related these actions to quality of character—care for those around them, respect, and even love. One noteworthy example demonstrates this idea:

> When I was dating my ex-boyfriend, I learned a lot about who he was and how he treated people because of the pandemic and that it wasn't an issue for him. He didn't take it seriously and he wasn't concerned about his family or my family, and he wasn't understanding why I wasn't able to come visit him. And I think that I realized that I wasn't getting the kind of love that I deserved out of that relationship and I wasn't getting respect. I found out that he's not the person I thought he was. In a way, it was really eye opening, and I feel like you really saw people's true colors in a way that you couldn't see it before something as big as that happened.

One final part of navigating safety during the pandemic was centered around meeting new people. Due to the closures of many businesses, dating options were often shifted to outdoor

activities: walks, hikes, picnics, etc. Several female-identifying participants brought up the issue of safety and the risk of going on a date with someone new in an outdoor setting:

> The problem is sometimes if you're meeting someone that you've never met before, when you're communicating with them, you hope that they get the message correctly. I know when I would make plans with a guy I wanted to see in the park, I wanted to make sure that he wasn't going to, like, murder me in this park.

Although this sentiment was often delivered in a light or humorous way, these findings reveal the safety risks that come with the pandemic's shift to outdoor dates, which are heightened by the fact that potential partners tended to be strangers from online dating apps.

Negative Affect Expression. Findings also illuminated prominent, negative affect that was expressed by participants when discussing dating during the pandemic. The three most expressed emotions were found to be frustration, awkwardness, and guilt.

Overwhelmingly, participants expressed a sense of frustration about pandemic dating—from the restrictions, to distance from loved ones, to the challenges in meeting new people, to having to rely on technology for social interaction, to lack of control over the circumstances of the world around them. Participants commiserated together in their irritation of the unfortunate circumstances that had derailed their "normal" social life and expectations of dating and relationships in college, as one participant notes:

> I'm just so sick of using my phone and social media because it's all we have. You don't get to be in person and have face to face interactions. I'm so sick of texting people about my day and texting people how I am. It's like I'd much rather just see you and hang out with you and talk to you like how it used to be.

The next negative emotion commonly expressed was by participants was guilt. Findings demonstrated that many participants still were motivated to date, amidst their understanding of the risk of COVID contraction. However, when participants did meet up with a potential partner, they felt guilty for putting the individuals in their household at risk. Several participants used the phrase "I know this is bad, but…" when talking about dates that were not outdoor, distanced, or masked. An example of this can be seen when on participant said:

> People felt really, really guilty or shameful if they were exposed knowing they had seen people. And that kept a lot of people from seeing people they cared about because they wanted to avoid the potential guilt that they would feel if they had COVID or exposed that person to COVID. My roommates got COVID at one point and I felt really guilty about telling people that I had been around that they were exposed from me. Even though I didn't have it, I still felt that second-hand shame of potentially getting someone sick.

Overwhelmingly, individuals did not express guilt about contracting COVID, but instead expressed guilt about exposing those around them, such as family members or roommates.

The final negative expression that was frequently brought up was awkwardness. Findings from the focus group interviews illuminated a general feeling of discomfort in expressing comfort level with COVID-related protocols, navigating conversations about exposure, and dating during a time of heightened uncertainty. In pre-pandemic times, personal health was not viewed as a typically essential or common topic to discuss early into dating relationships. However, based on the circumstances of the pandemic, college students were forced to have these conversations or deal with the guilt of not voicing their comfort level. One participant noted that usually these conversations felt awkward, but were worthwhile to have:

As far as dating goes, I know that it was awkward to figure out what people wanted to do, so I figured it's just best to ask them before you see them. That kind of cleared things up, but it was still very awkward. If I wanted to see them or see any guys, I would have to be like, "Okay, but it needs to be in a park. And you need to sit six feet away. And we can talk, but we should wear masks." That was really awkward because even though they agreed with me, I felt kind of uncomfortable telling them my boundaries, even though it was totally fine.

Other participants noted the general awkwardness of meeting someone new during mask mandates:

On the first date that I went on with him, we were about to leave and I had my mask on, so he was like, "Should I kiss you or--?" So, I had to actually take my mask off for that scene, which was a little bit awkward, but that is something we all have to deal with.

Gaining Perspective. The final theme that emerged from the analyzed data was how individuals gained valuable takeaways and new perspectives on dating despite the uncertainty and challenges of the pandemic. Even though many negative emotions were expressed by participants, results highlighted how participants were able to find value and meaningful takeaways from their experiences of dating during the pandemic, as well as their motivation to stay in, terminate, initiate, or avoid dating relationships. Many participants explained that the pandemic revealed individual values in relationships. The couples that withstood the pandemic reported increased strength in their relationship.

Individuals who went into long-distance relationships as a result of the pandemic expressed improvement in communication skills and appreciation of space, or not being together all the time. Other dating relationships failed, and partners explained the value of how the

pandemic exposed their former partner's true colors. And for those who lived with immunocompromised, elderly, or cautious members of their household, their prioritization and commitment to these relationships decreased motivation to date. For many participants, the pandemic gave them the space to evaluate their relationships, and participants assessed and reassessed the motivation and commitment of their relationships. For example:

> I feel like the pandemic kind of made you realize the people that you really want to be around or the relationships that you really want to put effort into and how valuable those are. The periphery people that you used to see every day and you thought you were really good friends with—you realize they know nothing about you and they kind of fall off the face of the earth.

> Overall, participants revealed how the pandemic exposed the nature of their close relationships, and allowed them to evaluate and realign their personal values. While gaining this perspective did result in termination of relationships for some or avoidance of relationships altogether for others, it also fostered increased closeness and strength in relationships when shared values and commitment to these values did occur.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This chapter explores how the findings of this thesis relate to and have implications for the topics of dating and online dating, uncertainty reduction theory, and college student navigation of personal health. This chapter outlines where findings extend literature or theory on a topic, where findings diverge from previous literature, and where these results are specifically attributed to the conditions of the pandemic.

Implications for Dating & Online Dating

Two major goals of this study were to better understand how college students defined and conceptualized dating, which was proposed in RQ 1, and to understand how college students navigated dating during the pandemic. Findings revealed a multifaceted definition of dating that both converged with and diverged from prior literature about the term, as well as provided insight on the changes in dating behaviors, decisions and values based on pandemic dating experiences.

In this study, college students defined dating as part of a romantic relationship progression, where two partners engage in behaviors to demonstrate commitment and have had a conversation defining the relationship as being exclusive. Similar to the dating models that were organized as stages or progressions (Pierce, 2009; Stets, 1993), participants in this study also understood dating to be an early step of a relational progression. However, college students noted that the most important factor distinguishing dating from any earlier step was the conversation to label and define the relationship as monogamous.

While the relational progression models explained by Pierce (2009) and Stets (1993) describe somewhat serious, casual, and developmental stages in early parts of romantic relationships, these steps would be described as "talking" by the interviewed sample. College

students situated "talking" as a prerequisite to dating, which is considered a less serious and non-exclusive step in their conceptualization of relational progressions. Talking was defined to be a pre-dating phase where individuals are gaining information about an unfamiliar partner to reduce uncertainty about their identity and evaluate their potential as a significant other.

A major component of talking, as defined by college students, was the essential role of technology. Individuals noted that when using dating apps, there were also mini-progressions that occurred through technological means. For example, participants noted that they would start talking to a potential partner they had "matched" with on a dating app first within the platform's messaging feature. Next, they may exchange Snapchat usernames and message through this picture sharing app. Female participants explained that as a safety measure, using Snapchat helped them to verify that the stranger they met on the dating app was in fact, a real person and the person their profile showed they were. Using a platform like Snapchat also serves as a buffer from giving out personal information to a stranger, like a phone number. After that, messages may evolve to texting, calling, or FaceTiming, which may then progress to in-person dates. While this study sought to explore the dating stage, it was clearly shown that talking is an essential stage of pre-dating that has implications for our understanding on how college students use technology in interpersonal relationships and in their navigation of personal safety.

In addition to the implications for the conceptualization and definition of dating, this study also shed light on a how individuals navigated interpersonal communication during an unprecedented time in recent history: a global pandemic. Pandemic dating limited in person meet-ups, forcing more individuals to rely on online dating and to improve their use of technology-based communication with partners. Many participants noted that pandemic was the first time they made a Tinder, Bumble, or Hinge account, which is in line with findings from

Wiederhold (2021). Compared to pre-pandemic dating, college students expressed lower motivation to date, explaining that the allure of dating apps wore off as time went on, and that moving back home became a major deterrent from serious pursuals. Several participants noted that seeing individuals from their high schools on dating apps was a frustration when trying to date in their hometown, as they would rather meet "new" people online in many cases.

A final implication of this pandemic dating study converges with findings from Ramirez et al. (2010). The authors explain that when an unexpected event occurs within a relationship, partners will reassess the potential positive or negative future outcomes of staying with that partner, as explained by predicted outcome value theory. The pandemic, being an unexpected event, caused many participants to reconsider the goals of their relationship. For example, some couples who were forced into long-distance relationships, without knowing when they would see their partner again, were forced to weigh their future goals and values in the relationship. While some relationships passed the test of pandemic dating and distance, other dating relationships were terminated, catalyzed by the circumstances of the pandemic.

Implications for Navigation of Personal Health

Through the lens of dating relationships, this study illuminated the ways college students navigated personal health decisions as well as their expectations for their potential partners' health decisions. In previous findings by Boudewyns and Paquin (2011), despite knowledge about condoms preventing STDs, college students still took health risks and did not wear them. Similarly, this thesis extended these findings about romantic relationships and risk. Many college students risked COVID exposure or contracted COVID by going on dates during strict quarantines or failing to follow health and safety protocols on dates with new individuals, which was in line with previous findings about pandemic dating (Winking, 2021). Based on

participants' expressed guilt, which also converged with the previous study on COVID and dating (Winking, 2021), it was clear that participants were aware of risk, viewed these risks negatively, yet still took part in risky behaviors. This expression of negative affect is likely to continue into the post-pandemic world, as individuals expressed feelings of missing out on dating opportunities as a result of the pandemic, frustration over the circumstances, and exhaustion over the dead-ended conversations in an options-based dating culture.

One factor that was shown to deter certain participants from engaging in risky dating behaviors, such as in person, unmasked, or not-socially distant dates was the role of immunocompromised, pregnant, or elderly household members. The external pressure or boundaries set by family members enforced limited outside contact. Additionally, there were internal pressures such as avoiding the guilt associated with potentially exposing at-risk family members. Such concerns led many college students to avoid potential COVID exposure through dating. Based on the findings from this research, the potential guilt that would come with exposing an at-risk family member to COVID outweighed the desire for many college students to risk in-person dates with potential partners. Dating apps have addressed the health concerns individuals may have about new partners by adding a vaccination status section to individuals' profiles. This demonstrates not only the importance of communicating safety and comfort, but also new directions of safety norms and personal information online.

The final health implication of this study relates to navigation of safety protocols and its link to attraction theory. Participants reported that failure to wear a mask when mandated, engaging in risky social behaviors such as attending large parties, or generally denying the severity or existence of COVID were deterrents from dating a potential partner. More interestingly, during the pandemic, many participants noted their interpretation of these personal

health decisions as nonverbal communication of values. Following the recommended health

protocols and communicating comfort level was explained to invoke respect, curtesy, and care.

Thus, personal health practices became an area for attraction evaluation by potential partners in

the category of similarity—or in other words, if potential partners value the same health

behaviors as each other, they would likely be more attracted to each other.

Implications for Uncertainty Reduction Theory

This thesis also has implications for Berger & Calabrese's (1975) uncertainty reduction

theory. More specifically, this thesis applies the theory in the unprecedented health context of the

COVID-19 pandemic and ways individuals used information seeking behaviors to reduce

uncertainty. Prior literature on mental health during the pandemic has shown the many ways the

pandemic has contributed to a climate of high uncertainty. As mentioned earlier in the literature

review, the act of dating also produces high uncertainty. Exploring the topic of dating during the

pandemic provides insight on how individuals navigate a unique circumstance of exorbitantly

high uncertainty, specifically with personal health and interpersonal relationships.

Prior to focus group interviews, it was clear that the fluidity of protocols as well as not

knowing when the pandemic would end, when vaccines would roll out, or how the virus would

progress, contributed to high uncertainty. However, during the focus groups, participants

identified another high-uncertainty climate they were living in as college students: hookup

culture. A major source of uncertainty in college students' dating practices was the socialized

behaviors typical in a hookup culture, that predominantly focused on options-based, untethered,

and more physically oriented relationships. Participants noted that dating in a climate of not

knowing who else a potential partner may be talking to or hooking up with, and not knowing if

the relationship is strictly physical or could develop into defined dating led to much uncertainty

and frustration, or negative affect. This level of uncertainty, when added with COVID uncertainty, are likely the reasons participants relied on direct conversations early into new relationships as an information seeking behavior. These conversations were aimed at defining the relationship or determining relational goals. To reduce uncertainty about a potential partner's actions, an open and direct conversation about the goals, expectations of partners, and decisions to be exclusive were demonstrated to be effective for participants' relational satisfaction and reduction of dating-related uncertainty.

In order to reduce COVID-related uncertainty, participants used open conversations with a partner or potential partner as an information seeking behavior. Addressing comfort and safety were essential measures in limiting uncertainty about potential exposure or COVID-contraction. Participants who asked for information about recent COVID exposure and expressed comfort levels with safety measures such as outdoor dates or mask wearing, were able to gain information about the risk involved with going on a date and reduce uncertainty about the health practices of the individual they would be going out with.

For those who were not motivated to date during the pandemic, reducing uncertainty and the mental strain that comes with it, meant reducing exposure to new people. Controlling exposure by only seeing a select few, or a "bubble" of individuals, allowed some participants to reduce their potential guilt of possibly exposing a household member. For those already in relationships during the pandemic, especially those who were forced into a long-distance relationship, technology was an important means of gaining information about their significant other and reducing uncertainty. Using texting, FaceTime, Snapchat and calls, individuals could gain information and foster closeness to their significant other, regardless of distance.

Individuals were able to find ways to reduce and manage their uncertainty during pandemic dating. This required a careful approach to dating and the disciplined effort to avoid certain social interactions. Nevertheless, the unprecedented nature of the pandemic meant that a level of uncertainty was going to be ever present. While uncertainty could not be eliminated or even greatly reduced in some cases, this study illuminates some of the extensions of uncertainty reduction theory in a relevant and unique context as well as some of the technology-mediated or health-related interpersonal interactions that were found.

CHAPTER 6: LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Limitations

One limitation of this study was the unequal distribution of gender amongst participants. 80% of participants presented as female, or 40 out of 51 total interviewees. This gender imbalance, in who voluntarily chooses to speak about dating topics, could be considered a finding in itself. This statistic reveals that a majority of responses in this study are derived from the perspective of women, which limits a more diverse representation of voices in terms of gender identity. Another participant identity limitation was that all participants were students from a large U.S. university in the mid-Atlantic region. Because the call for participants came solely from one university's research participation system, perspectives from other geographic locations or similarly aged participants not currently enrolled at a university were not included in this study. In addition, this study did not account for race or sexual identity demographics. Future studies can build on this research by addressing its limitations. Based on the limitations of this study, it would be fruitful for future researchers to explore a more diverse sample of participants and to account for demographic information in order to parse out results that could potentially vary on gender, race, geographic location or sexual identity.

Based on the findings from this study, future researchers may consider examining generational definitions and conceptualizations of "dating." As this study illuminated some of the ways both the pandemic and technology have impacted dating, it may be beneficial to further explore exactly if and how the pandemic has changed dating in comparison to the experiences of participants' parents and grandparents. This information may encourage adjustment of the dating models that were explored in the literature review of this thesis; amending how the steps of

dating progression models are defined in order to account for technology, and particularly dating apps. Thus, this study's limitations reveal a variety of important directions for future research.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to explore how college students defined dating, as well as if and how their dating practices changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study also enhanced understanding of how college students navigate uncertainty and attempt to reduce it, and how they treat their personal health. After completing a thematic analysis of transcribed focus group interviews, results revealed the conceptualization of dating as a progression which involves a level of relational investment. These findings were in line with previous research about dating. Dating was also found to be greatly influenced by hookup culture, which often led to a high level of uncertainty. With a lack of certainty about relationship goals, level of interest, and if a potential partner is seeing other people, this study revealed that dating requires an official conversation about exclusive partnership and the nature of the relationship.

When participants were asked about dating during the COVID-19 pandemic, findings demonstrated the importance of communication in dating relationships during the heightened uncertainty of a pandemic. Findings also revealed a strong display of negative affect based on the unfavorable conditions brought on by the pandemic. While technology has already been an area of prominent communication research, this study emphasized some of the new and innovative ways college students used technology to initiate or maintain dating relationships during COVID-19. For many, technology was the lifeline to maintaining a relationship their partner. For others, technology was the sole pipeline to meeting new partners in an isolated, quarantined world.

Health and safety practices was another prominent area of exploration throughout this research. The violation of safety norms was a place of evaluation in dating relationships for many college students. Willingness to wear a mask, follow health and safety guidelines, and communicate COVID contraction or exposure are just a few of the criteria participants used to evaluate potential partners or re-evaluate current partners, which is in line with the tenets of predicted outcome value theory, applied in a convergent context of health and interpersonal communication. The rules set by family members, as well as pre-existing health conditions of family members also played a role on how participants navigated dating, as well as their motivation to date seriously.

This study's application of uncertainty reduction theory allowed for a greater understanding of the motivations to date and behaviors of dating individuals during unknown and unprecedented circumstances of a global pandemic. This study unveiled the information seeking behaviors used in pandemic dating, which included increased and direct technology-mediated communication and online dating platform use, as well as direct conversations about health practices, safety and comfort, and relational goals.

Finally, this study revealed that college students gained perspective from their dating experiences during the pandemic; they felt that they better understood their personal needs and values in a relationship, as well as the importance of effective communication in successful dating relationships. From an interpersonal communication perspective, these findings are a great indicator of the importance of research on college student dating through the theoretical lenses of the communication field.

Appendix A: Eligibility Requirements

The purpose of this research is to study how or if the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted your dating practices as a current college student. This study will be conducted in the form of a focus group, where a moderator will ask you questions about your dating practices both before and during the pandemic. Focus groups will be conducted online through Zoom or a similar video conferencing platform. Focus groups will take approximately one hour in length. Individuals who participate in the study will not be identified in the final research reports, and all information used in the study will be anonymous. Any discomfort associated with this study would be minor and no more than that experienced in everyday life. Participants are not required to provide answers for questions they do not feel comfortable answering.

This study is open only to participants ages 18 and older who have participated in dating practices - face-to-face / in person or online - prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. By participating in this study, you are contributing to a new body of knowledge about how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting dating and communication. Sharing experiences about common dating practices may be seen as a potential benefit and enjoyable experience for participants.

Eligibility Requirements: Participants must have engaged in dating behaviors both before and during the pandemic. Participants must be at least 18 years old, but cannot exceed 25 years old to complete this study.

Information Sheet for Participation in a Research Study

Principal Investigator: *Dr. Nneka Logan,* nlogan@vt.edu *,* 540-231-1749
IRB# and Title of Study: IRB# 21-118 COVID & Dating

You are invited to participate in a research study. This form includes information about the study and contact information if you have any questions.

- ## WHAT SHOULD I KNOW?

If you decide to participate in this study, you will complete a focus group. As part of the study, you will take part in a Zoom meeting where you will answer questions about your dating practices both prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. You will be required to keep your camera on throughout the entirety of the focus group session, however, you may change your screen name to a number or pseudonym to help conceal your identity upon entry. Your responses will be recorded for research purposes only and may be used in future research papers.

The study should take approximately 60 minutes of your time.

The risk associated with this study is no more than what you experience in your everyday life. You are not required to provide answers for questions that you do not feel comfortable answering.

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

- ## CONFIDENTIALITY

We will do our best to protect the confidentiality of the information we gather from you, but we cannot guarantee 100% confidentiality.

Any data collected during this research study will be kept confidential by the researchers. All participants of the focus group will be told that information revealed during the session should remain confidential. Your focus group will be recorded through Zoom. The researchers will de-identify your Zoom name from your responses and code the transcripts using assigned numbers. The recordings will be uploaded to a secure password-protected computer in the researcher's office. The researchers will maintain a list that includes a key to the code that will be stored for 3 years after the study has been completed and then destroyed.

- ## WHO CAN I TALK TO?

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Dr. Nneka Logan at 540-231-1749. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact the Virginia Tech HRPP Office at 540-231-3732 (irb@vt.edu).

Please print out a copy of this information sheet for your records.

Appendix C: Focus Group Script/Interview Guide

Greet participants as they arrive.
After all participants have arrived, welcome them to the focus groups for IRB# 21-118 COVID & Dating.
-Send a PDF version of the "Consent Sheet" in the chat for participants to refer to as you talk about it.
-Goal for study: better understand how college students have navigated dating during the pandemic
-Video & Audio will be recorded
-Option to change Zoom name to "initials, first name, or number" which you may do at this time
-I encourage you to answer as many questions as you would like. If there is something you are uncomfortable answering, you are not required to provide an answer.
-Safe and confidential space
-Must be 18 or older, but no older than 25
-If you do not have an opportunity to answer a certain question, you may have another opportunity in a related question
-Stories/anecdotes are welcomed

Verbal Consent
Do you have any questions about this research?
Do you agree to participate in this interview?
May I record our discussion?
[Each member focus group interviewee should say their screen name, age, and whether they agree to participate and be recorded.]

I will now begin the recording and start the focus group.

General

*How do you define *dating?*

What types of dates did you go on prior to the pandemic?

Pre-COVID:

*What *actions* would you describe to be as "dating" practices? (ex: "talking," Snapchatting, attending social events together, dates…)

*How and where did you meet potential partners? (in class, grocery store, bars, online…)

*In what ways did you use technology, social media, or online dating platforms to meet and interact with potential partners, prior to the pandemic?

During COVID, General Thoughts:

What type of dates did you go on during the pandemic?

*Since the pandemic began, how have your dating practices changed?

Describe your motivation and feelings towards dating during the pandemic. Are you more or less inclined to date? Have you been more or less hesitant to go on dates? Has it been more or less difficult to date?

Have any of the conditions of the pandemic caused you to stop dating or talking to an individual or to become less serious about the situation?

*What is the worst thing about dating during a pandemic?

*Are there any good things that have come about as a result of dating during a pandemic?

*What are some deal breakers for dating during a pandemic?

Health/Safety:

How did quarantining and lockdown impact your dating practices?

How has social distancing and limited gatherings affected your dating practices?

*How has mask wearing impacted your dating practices?

*How have the health risks of COVID impacted the way you've navigated dating? What, if any, precautions do you now take when initiating a new potential relationship?

*Has anyone ever challenged or violated your health/safety expectations on a date? If so, how did you react?

*Have in-person outdoor dates impacted your view of your personal safety? Have you felt more, less, or equally safe since the beginning of the pandemic?

*Is there a stigma around people who have contracted COVID that makes them less desirable to date?

*What makes you believe a potential partner is a safe choice to date? How do you determine this? What criteria or conditions convince you someone is a safe dating choice?

How do you know when to let a new partner into your "bubble"?

*How has your use of space, personal space, or PDA changed during the pandemic? Has this impacted your dating practices?

Online Dating:

*Has your use of online dating platforms (like Tinder, Bumble, or Hinge) changed or remained the same since the start of the pandemic? Got account, used account more frequently/seriously, extended to other platforms, shared more less info, met up with matches more/less)

*Would you say that the pandemic has caused you to rely more on technology such as social media and dating apps to meet potential partners or maintain romantic relationships than before?

How has your use of text, Snapchat, Facetime, Zoom, or dm'ing changed with potential partners during the pandemic?

*Are there any differences in how you assess potential partners on dating apps during the COVID-19 pandemic as opposed to pre-pandemic?

*During the pandemic what, if any, personal protocols you take when meeting someone by online dating practices?

*Is your intention to meet up with new individuals higher or lower than prior to COVID? Please share an example or story.

*Has the way the world has moved online impacted your inclination to "shoot your shot?" Give an example.

Future/Reflections:

*Have you ever felt guilty about going on a date or are there any dating practices you regret during COVID?

*How do you think the vaccine will affect dating practices among college students?
*How do you think the pandemic will change dating among college students going forward, for years to come? In other words, what do you think the lingering effects of the pandemic will be on college students dating habits?
*Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you for your participation. Please remember that responses from this session are to remain confidential. Feel free to reach out to me with any questions at *send email in chat* Thank you for your contribution to the field of interpersonal communication, I hope this was an enjoyable research experience for you all!

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