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Gabriel Velez

Erin Hoekstra

Samuel Nemanich

Jody Jessup-Anger

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# Bringing Covid to College: Incoming First-Year College Students' Making Meaning of the Pandemic

Gabriel Velez

College of Education, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, USA

Erin Hoekstra

College of Arts and Sciences, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, USA

Samuel Nemanich

College of Health Sciences, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, USA

Jody Jessup-Anger

College of Education, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, USA

Max Herteen

College of Education, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, USA

## Abstract

As time passes from the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, new cohorts of emerging adults transition to college, carrying with them experiences and effects of the pandemic on their lives and

development. This study uses semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis to investigate how a cohort of 36 young people made narrative meaning of the pandemic in relation to their identities. Data were collected at the beginning of their first year at college and focused on their experiences of the pandemic, its impact on their lives, and the lessons they took away from it. Findings demonstrate that even amid deep and varied challenges, young people coped in nuanced ways and some built narratives of personal growth, development, new social identities, and maturing values. The study contributes to greater depth in understanding the impacts of the pandemic on young people as they develop into emerging adults.

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected young people across geography, socioeconomic status, age, and other demographic characteristics. Its physical toll has touched the well-being of individuals, families, and communities, while economic, political, and social responses and reverberations have reshaped the lives of people across the globe. For those who were adolescents in 2020 and are now emerging adults, these impacts came at a formative time in their life-course, when social, academic, and physical changes lay the groundwork for future trajectories and identities (Arnett, 2014). The pandemic has massively disrupted these processes for many young people, and a growing research base highlights the impacts on their mental health, academic achievement, and social lives (Hussong et al., 2021).

As these young people age and move on in their lives—including engaging in significant culturally-situated developmental markers like going to college, finding employment, and starting families—it is unclear how experiences from the pandemic may shape their feelings, thinking, and choices. Other research on past momentous sociopolitical moments demonstrates that adolescents during these times can experience long lasting effects on their identities, psychologies, and life choices (Elder, 1974). Furthermore, theoretical literature speaks to how it is not simply the experiences young people have, but also how they make meaning of these events that lay important groundwork for how they understand themselves and their desired trajectories (McLean & Pratt, 2006; Spencer, 2006).

For the current study, we investigated how a sample of United States (U.S.) emerging adults transitioning to college in fall 2021 discussed the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on their lives, with a focus on how they described its reverberations in their family, school, and social lives. The current literature broadly demonstrates significant challenges for young people during 2020 but focuses less on how they made sense of these experiences and what psychosocial impacts they carry with them as they become emerging adults. Our goal was to contribute to holistic understandings of how the pandemic influenced young people's developmental trajectories by investigating their meaning making processes: how they interpret, process, and integrate experiences into their sense of self (Spencer, 1999). We used reflexive thematic analysis on interviews with 36 students beginning their first year at a midwestern university (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Our findings contribute to literature that complements statistical impacts and outcomes thorough qualitative exploration of young people's psychological processing (e.g., Scott et al., 2021; Velez et al., 2022). These quantitative studies tend to focus on measures of distress and mental health concerns, leaving less room to understand growth opportunities that young people may have felt they experienced from these challenges. This work has applied implications for educators and others who work with these emerging adults (particularly in

higher education), as well as for understanding how living through the pandemic at a key developmental period may influence long-term outcomes for this generation.

### The Developmental Context of Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood

Adolescence and emerging adulthood are formative times, marking a shift across multiple domains including physical, psychological, social, cognitive, and cultural processes. Internally, individuals experience cognitive growth that facilitates abstract thinking and executive functioning, which in turn promotes deeper consideration of the self (i.e., identity), social systems and structures within which one is embedded, and how these two will interact to shape who one will become (i.e., future selves) (Dahl et al., 2018; Kuhn & Franklin, 2007). This growth continues well into emerging adulthood and thus is also a marker of the college years, which provide a social structure influencing how young people make sense of themselves and their societies (Arnett, 2015; Stewart & Brown, 2019). Social dynamics—with the increasing importance of peer relationships and changing family roles—are also intertwined with cognitive changes that link to identity and future thinking (Eder & Nenga, 2006; Spencer, 2006). For many adolescents and emerging adults, school and academics often structure these social dynamics while also defining future possibilities. Interactions with peers and adults in educational settings help define emerging senses of self, and extracurricular activities, academic achievement, and college-going supports can shape educational trajectories into emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2015; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Spencer, 1999). These dynamics also shift in the transition to college as young adults enter new social spaces on university campuses (Azmitia et al., 2013).

Situated within the predominant cultural context of the U.S., adolescence marks a time of change between childhood and early adulthood. Dynamics in adolescence—particularly in the later years—lay the groundwork for psychosocial processes and trajectories in emerging adulthood (McLean, 2005; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). For emerging adults who attend college, the transition to higher education offers new opportunities for social and academic identities and independence, although sometimes the transition is fraught with uncertainty (Tinto & Goodsell, 1994). In emerging adulthood, successfully finding a social niche and adjusting to new environments and expectations are key developmental tasks and build on foundations of identity and social support from high school (Arnett, 2007; Azmitia et al., 2013).

These and other factors are important for emerging adults' mental health. Rates of mental health decline have been growing in recent years for both adolescents and emerging adults on college campuses. One study using data from 373 institutions found that rates of depression and anxiety increased over 110% from 2013 to 2021, with over a 100% increase in students with at least one mental health problem (Lipson et al., 2022). The driving forces for these changes are not clear, but the crisis speaks to the need to consider developmental factors and the mental health and psychosocial dynamics of emerging adults on campus. In other words, attentiveness to students' experiences and frameworks as they transition to college can help develop more effective support on campus (Azmitia et al., 2013; Halliburton et al., 2021).

Emerging adults' development generally and the transition to college specifically are contextualized and influenced by broader socioecological systems. An individual's psychosocial processes are influenced both by their immediate and intimate experiences—with family, peers and adults in

schools, neighborhoods—as well as more distal discourses, norms, and dynamics in the broader society (Spencer, 2006). These systems impact emerging adults both directly and indirectly through shaping their immediate contexts (e.g., school, neighborhood) and the lives of those in these spaces (e.g., professors, peers). While there is diversity in young people’s experiences and how they interpret and respond to them, shared narratives and discourses can also emerge (Lilgendahl & McLean, 2020; McLean & Pratt, 2006), especially when salient, widespread historical events or shifts ripple across these ecosystems. One example is Elder’s work (1974) on the generation who experienced the Great Depression as young people. He demonstrated that how different social positions during this era were associated with varied experiences in family and schooling, which ultimately impacted their perspectives on themselves and thinking about education and jobs, as well as their life trajectories

Overall, this literature highlights the need to understand developmental processes in times of disruption/rupture by considering young people’s perspectives, challenges, growth, and needs as emerging adults who attend college. Given dramatic shifts and reverberations across ecosystems, studies on emerging adults’ perspectives on how they experienced and made sense of the pandemic can lead to more effective student supports and richer understandings of young adult trajectories.

### The Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The intense and far-reaching effects of COVID-19 on adolescents are undeniable. There is broad evidence of many young people confronting new challenges related to disrupted and changing modes of schooling, uncertainty and frequent changes in social and health-related protocols, the experience of quarantine and fewer opportunities to engage in socializing and develop social competencies, altered economic opportunities, and illness and death in families and communities (Hussong et al., 2021). The pandemic has affected many of their support systems, disconnecting them from friends, making relationships with teachers more difficult, and intensifying family dynamics (Branje & Morris, 2021). Relatedly, while rates of mental health concerns were increasing for young people before the pandemic, depressive and anxious symptoms have become more prevalent and hospitalizations for mental health-related concerns have risen (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP], 2021; Samji et al., 2021). For example, compared with data from 2019, there was a 31% increase in emergency department visits for 12- to 17-year-olds for mental health issues from March to October 2020 (Leeb et al., 2020). Much of the research and attention in this area has focused on overall rates and correlates of better mental health outcomes (e.g., Rogers et al., 2021; Samji et al., 2021). There is extensive work highlighting how individual factors (e.g., emotion regulation, active coping styles, exercise) and peer and family supports (e.g., connectedness, parental involvement) are related to more positive mental health outcomes (see Hussong et al., 2021; Luthar et al., 2021). Still, statistical correlations and outcomes can be effectively complemented by exploring how youth understand themselves, their experiences, and their supports (Branje & Morris, 2021; Hussong et al., 2021; Velez & Herten, Forthcoming).

A growing research base demonstrates both patterns and diversity in what was salient in U.S. adolescents’ experiences. One study of over 400 youth found that participants experienced increased negative emotions emerging from disruptions in peer and family relationships, as well as limitations in their day-to-day lives (Rogers et al., 2021). In another survey of over 800 adolescents, participants’ most reported challenge was academics (around a quarter of participants), followed by mental health

and family and friend interactions (Scott et al., 2021). A third large-scale survey study explored themes in meaning making, with similar findings related to social disconnection, inadequate virtual communication, and connections between interruptions in daily life and mental health (Velez et al., 2022).

As time passes, however, there is a need to better understand how these experiences and meaning making have developed as educational, family, and social dynamics change and young people's transitions to college shift. A strengths-based focus on adolescents' meaning making and coping can help identify ways to promote growth and coping, particularly in key arenas of everyday life such as secondary schools and colleges (Luthar et al., 2021; Soria & Horgos, 2021). Empirical work from early in the pandemic has illuminated ways that interpretation and meaning making may relate to young people's mental health and coping. For example, one study found that participants who used humor and cognitive reappraisal demonstrated no association between COVID-19 impact and psychiatric symptoms, unlike peers who did not report these strategies (Kuhlman et al., 2021). This finding is intriguing, but the study also focused on a sample ( $N = 88$ ) with significant adverse experiences before the pandemic.

Many of the quantitative studies of youth during the pandemic—including those reviewed above—are focused on elevated levels or high rates of distress or mental health issues. Such static measures may mask ways that young people's responses to these experiences and psychological processing of them may lead to growth. Other qualitative work with broader populations has found that a focus on meaning making with young people may also reveal opportunities for positive understandings of the pandemic's overall impact on their lives (Velez et al., 2022; Velez & Herteen, Forthcoming). Two specific studies involved multiple cross-sectional surveys and one longitudinal interview project with adolescents from across the country during the spring and fall of 2020, asking how participants were experiencing the pandemic, emotions they were feeling, and how they felt it was impacting their lives. While there was significant mention of challenge across these participants, some adolescents began to develop narratives highlighting areas of personal growth, increased gratitude, and closer friend and family bonds.

The research base on young people's resilience and coping has focused on quantitative outcomes and correlations, which may hide growth and positive responses that are important for psychosocial development. The current study builds on these findings by looking at cohorts of young people as they age and go to college. Previous findings highlight the depth of challenge presented by the pandemic but also the ways it presented possible connections to resilience, coping, and growth. This study contributes to understanding how challenges and coping might arise in adolescent psychosocial processing as they face a novel challenge, namely the transition to college. The current study thus extends the literature through a qualitative investigation of young people's meaning making, an appropriate method for understanding how young people carry experience with them in their development (Power & Velez, 2020). To this end, the focus is broadly on allowing young people to discuss their processing, rather than focusing on statistical measures of mental health challenges, coping, or correlates. This work can be helpful for understanding and supporting developmental trajectories as the pandemic stretches on and future cohorts become emerging adults and transition to college.

## Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

Psychosocial development is an interactive process between an individual and the many layers of their socioecological context (Bronfenbrenner, 2009). People agentically interpret and respond to experiences, interactions, discourses, and dynamics in the broader society and with people and settings of their everyday lives. This is an iterative and agentic process of making sense of and navigating social worlds in relation to one's sense of self and place within these contexts (Spencer, 2006). Adolescents and emerging adults are just beginning to define identities in these ways, and this meaning making lays the groundwork for their self-narratives and understandings of who they are and who they are going to be into the future (McLean, 2005; 2008; Spencer et al., 1997). Attention to these meaning making processes offers an important window into vulnerability and psychosocial growth. Rather than assuming outcomes based on contexts (e.g., that in-person school disruption means academic challenge) or that quantified outcomes represent the impacts on individuals (e.g., increased rates of anxiety or depressive symptoms), a focus on how young people are making sense of their experiences draws attention to how they are coping. In other words, it provides insights into their attitudes and behaviors that may actually be adaptive given their thinking about the demands and stressors they are facing, the supports they have, and who they are and can be (Spencer et al., 2006).

In this study, we applied this framework to explore how a sample of emerging adults made sense of the pandemic and its impacts on their lives. We examined the narratives they constructed at the time of a significant life transition: attending college. We chose the transition to college given its role in defining educational, personal, and career trajectories for emerging adults (e.g., Azmitia et al., 2013). Although the transition to college itself is not the focus of this paper, we believed that in interviewing participants who were undergoing a transition, we might encounter students who were particularly reflective about their experiences as they were on the precipice of embarking on new experiences. Our study was embedded within multiple contextual dynamics. The study took place in the late summer of 2021, when there was a lull in COVID-19 cases, a subsequent easing of restrictions in the U.S., and most schools and colleges returned to primarily in-person instruction. Situated within these contexts, in our investigation we asked, how did these emerging adults make meaning of their experiences of the pandemic? Within this broader question, we sought to focus on what was salient within their experiences, what impacts on family, school, and peer relationships they experienced, and how these experiences influenced the ways they described themselves. This attention is driven by the theoretical framework and the importance of family, school, and peers in the developmental processes of adolescence and emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2014; Spencer et al., 2006).

## Methodology

To explore these research questions, we conducted semi-structured interviews with a sample of incoming students at a private, midwestern university in the days before they started their first semester and into the first few weeks of classes. These interviews were part of a broader mixed-methods investigation of the impact of COVID-19 on students transitioning to college and their experiences on campus. This paper draws on interview data because of the focus on meaning making and narratives about the pandemic's impacts on their lives.

## Procedure

Participants were first-year students were recruited in August of 2021 via summer and orientation programming before the start of their first year on campus. We also specifically recruited via programming that served underrepresented groups on campus, including minoritized racial/ethnic groups and first-generation students. Emails were sent describing the study and inviting students to fill out a screening questionnaire. We then invited 40 participants to a semi-structured interview based on the goal of getting a sample with racial/ethnic, socio-economic, and first-generation diversity in line with the overall student body.

Researchers conducted 60–90-minute virtual interviews via Microsoft Teams. Participants were asked about experiences with COVID-19, health and wellness, and thinking about the first year at college and their future. The protocol was developed collaboratively by the research team based on the overall project objectives to investigate student experiences and processing of the transition to college, as well as through inspiration from other studies of college student meaning making (Lilgendahl & McLean, 2020). Questions on COVID-19 included how participants' lives were different, the challenges they faced, their personal or familial experiences with COVID-19, and their schooling. The interview ended by asking participants what they thought they would remember from the pandemic in 5 years. The complete interview protocol is available as Appendix A.

Interviews were recorded and Otter.ai online software was used to create a transcription. The main author and a research assistant who participated in conducting interviews both read over transcripts while listening to recordings to correct any errors and become more familiar with the data. All procedures were approved by the researchers' IRB and participants were compensated for their time with \$25 electronic gift cards.

## Sample

Thirty-six participants responded and completed interviews. Half of the sample identified as White, with 25% identifying as Latino/a/x, 11% Asian, 6% Black/African American, and 11% other or biracial. We also asked whether they received free/reduced school lunch in high school (25% did), their parents' highest level of education (25% did not have a parent who completed a college degree), and whether they lived on campus (83% indicated they did, mirroring the overall campus rate of 89%). The sample ended up being slightly more diverse than the overall incoming class, which, according to institutional data, was 64% White, 18% Hispanic/Latino/a, 6% Asian, 6% Black and 5% other or bi-racial. The institution also reported 24% first-generation for the whole class. The sample was slightly unbalanced by gender in relation to the overall class, with 69% identifying as female, compared to 58% female of the overall 2021 first-year cohort.

## Analysis

Two of the researchers conducted inductive reflexive thematic analyses using NVivo (version 12) software to identify patterns in how participants described experiences of the pandemic and its impacts on their thinking about themselves (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Velez et al., 2022). First, each researcher read over transcripts multiple times to become familiar with the data, taking notes on general impressions of common experiences or descriptions across interviews. Answers to each question were coded based on semantic meaning to identify different foci in the interview protocol



(e.g., past experiences with COVID-19, their thinking about their first year in college). The researchers then discussed and developed a shared definition of what meaning making would entail within the dataset based on the theoretical framework described above. For this study, responses came from prompts across the protocol whenever references to meaning making of the pandemic were discussed.

First, the researchers independently coded a random subset (10%) of interviews to identify responses pertaining to meaning making. All fragments coded as meaning making were collaboratively reviewed by the researchers, and any discrepancies were discussed and resolved via discussion and reflection on the positionalities and perspectives of each researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Thomas & Harden, 2008). Then, the researchers divided the rest of the transcripts, coded them for meaning making, and made notes of any confusion or questions. The research team next met to discuss these points and initial themes that resulted from the process. These discussions included considerations of differences by first-generation status, race/ethnicity, and gender, as well as the researchers' subjectivity in the process. The primary author for this study then returned to the entire dataset of meaning making segments, rereading the fragments and their contexts within the interview to refine and develop themes. The researcher also reviewed meaning making codes by the demographic categories listed above to consider different patterns of shared meaning across these groups. Finally, these themes were presented to the entire research team to check with their notes, the primary researchers' assumptions, and initial impressions they had documented while conducting the interviews.

### Positionality

The research team was a multidisciplinary group of four academics in higher education studies, rehabilitation science, sociology, and developmental psychology, as well as two doctoral students in sociology and education. The primary authors on this paper are experienced in qualitative methods and have conducted previous studies on adolescents' experiences of the pandemic (Velez et al., 2022; Velez & Herteen, Forthcoming) and college students' aspirations and career thinking during the pandemic (Hoekstra, in preparation). Their expertise was particularly supplemented by a co-researcher with expertise in higher education and the transition to college (Jessup-Anger, 2011).

The entire team conducted interviews, meeting regularly before and during the interview process to discuss challenges and share notes. During these conversations, we also focused on strategies and possible impacts of our positionalities to be attentive to the different dynamics that might have arisen when a first-year student was speaking to a graduate student peer versus a faculty member. We checked our analyses and findings with anecdotal stories from our own experiences with first-year students. We also shared preliminary takeaways with other faculty and student affairs professionals on campus and solicited feedback. We particularly sought out voices of those who worked with underrepresented groups (e.g., first-generation, minoritized groups due to race/ethnicity), many of whom identified in these ways as well. Given that most of our research team did not hold these identities, we thought it was important to check in with those who were closely connected to these groups of young people. Our overall goal was thus to strengthen the reliability of our findings through triangulation (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007).

## Results

Thematic analyses resulted in the identification of four patterns in how participants made meaning of pandemic experiences (see Table 1). First, they detailed how the pandemic generated or deepened mental health struggles that often resulted in learning how to cope or greater self-understanding. Second, many participants described challenges from early in the pandemic as leading to personal growth and changes in perspectives that they framed as valuable for the future. Third, participants noted experiencing disruptions in their social lives, which led to changes in friend networks with deeper bonds. Fourth, participants spent increased time with family during times of stress, and for many this resulted in feeling closer to their relatives, having family become more important, and recognizing family as a key social support. There was more variation in the last theme, and there were some differences by demographics that are noted below. All names used are pseudonyms.

**Table 1.** Themes and Example Quotes.

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Example Quote</b>
Mental health challenges and coping	Acknowledging, you know, what I am worried about, and working through ways to feel less anxious and stuff like that. Learning how to cope with anxiety and panic attacks and stuff like that, because I never really experienced anything like that before this past year and a half.
Personal growth and perspective changes	My journey through quarantine, finding out who I am, what I want to wear, what music, I want to listen to how I identify myself—just that journey because those are things that will be still there.
Shifts in friendships and social identities	Before the pandemic, I really thought the people who I saw every day—like we were good. But the peak throughout this pandemic, the people [that] have actually reached out to you to check on your well-being or just want to say hello, just stopped by. I feel like figured out those are my rules.
Family was a support as they became closer and more important	She helped a lot when I was frustrated with an assignment, when I was frustrated with, you know, virtual [life]. It was nice to have her there to talk about it and to help as best as she could with the questions I had, or when I was upset because I couldn't go out or things were closing or anything.

## Mental Health Challenges and Coping

Many participants explicitly detailed struggling emotionally and mentally early in the pandemic. They frequently described recognizing what they were going through as emotional or mental challenges, often applying labels to these feelings and discussing coping strategies they developed. At times, participants drew on language of mental health. Others more generally detailed feeling extremely lonely or unmotivated. The pandemic was described not simply as causing or deepening challenges to mental well-being, but also as a time when they learned how to manage these feelings. Participants who identified as female were more likely to report mental health challenges than males, but more often explicitly noted experiences of growth.

For some, the pandemic deepened already existing feelings, while others experienced new effects on their mental wellbeing. Flor, a Latina, described how her struggles with anxiety increased during the first few months of the pandemic:

As a person with anxiety, it's already pretty hard for me to focus. It's pretty hard for me to be on a phone call with someone or video call and stuff like that. Just the idea of going to class...virtually was so exhausting and just so anxiety-inducing that sometimes I couldn't even get up off my bed to go to school, or sometimes I would have to end the call and be like, I'm sorry, my internet went down, but I was like about to burst into tears.

Other participants expressed feeling the pandemic caused new mental health issues related to isolation, uncertainty, and challenges with online schooling. Fred, a White male, talked about stress produced by not knowing what would come next: "are we going to wear masks? Are we going to stay home? Are we going to I mean, like even in the past few months, are we going to get vaccinated?" Similarly, Jenny, a White female, noted

During COVID I started seeing a therapist online and that was amazing for me because my anxiety and stress levels were insane. I started having panic attacks, which was something I'd never dealt with before... especially during those months in quarantine, it just really made you think. You just had way too much time on your hands.

It was clear from our interviews that the pandemic heightened mental health challenges for most of our participants, regardless of whether they had these challenges prior to the pandemic.

At the same time, Fred, Jenny, and some of their peers described developing coping strategies from these difficult times. Many expressed feeling mentally stronger or noted nuanced overall takeaways. Fred, who listed a multitude of questions related to pandemic uncertainties, went on to describe how he had to deeply reflect on how he felt about these questions and learn to manage his feelings amid the stresses that came with these beliefs:

I had to try to grow a lot of fortitude and resilience, because...And I've had to learn to know when to just take a step back and be like, Okay, I'm not going to get anywhere, like getting upset and getting really emotional.

In a similar way, Jenny detailed how she learned how to better handle moments of being alone, saying “I am getting better at just spending those moments in silence and just reflecting on the day, and that was too much at first.” At the end of the interview, she summarized her feelings by saying, “there’s negative things that came out of that, but also positive ones. I think I’m better at taking time to myself to just sit in silence, and just process things that are going on, which is always really healthy.” The sentiment of challenge producing coping and understanding of strategies and one’s ability to cope echoed across participants. Lily, a White female, described the early pandemic as causing her to lose motivation and struggle with “crying all the time because I was like, my senior year is ruined and stuff like that.” On reflection later in the interview, she added, “COVID, which is like a challenge I overcame, is probably going to be one of the hardest I will ever face, I mean, but I am stronger than what I thought.”

Just transitioning to college, these participants specifically detailed lessons about effective coping strategies or new perspectives related to mental and emotional wellbeing that they were carrying with them into this new stage in life. Jordyn, a White female, noted, “Originally, I was like, extremely frustrated and sad.” She went on to detail that as time passed, “I changed my perspective on things, and I became more gracious for what we were given.” She stated that as she goes on in life, this perspective is something she will try to apply and will serve her because she is able to tell herself, “It’s not the end of the world...just enjoy what you have.” Alexa, an Asian female, talked about hitting a “downward spiral” before going to therapy. From the experience, she described feeling, “like I’ve been really like been more in tune with my emotions and everything, like just overall better, more emotional person within the past year.” In talking about lessons from the pandemic, Jenny added she became better at coping. With her therapist, she developed “certain strategies”:

I feel like safe and comforted and everything and I don’t have to like, you know, worry about things. Acknowledging, you know, what I am worried about, and working through ways to feel less anxious and stuff like that. Learning how to cope with anxiety and panic attacks and stuff like that, because I never really experienced anything like that before this past year and a half.

Related to this point, several White participants noted increased awareness or direct engagement with mental health as a topic. The depth of challenge from the pandemic produced, as they described it, a beneficial outcome by making them and their peers more able to discuss and navigate mental wellbeing. Jeff, a White male, talked about struggling with extreme loneliness because of the separation from friends. He then added, “A lot of people were talking about mental health. And I think, before COVID, mental health was kind of something I viewed as shameful or, like taboo to talk about. But after COVID...so much more open and talking about it.” Other participants were not as explicit, but similarly described being more aware or more comfortable with these topics. Laura, a White female, mentioned how she realized she did not prioritize mental health before the pandemic:

I would never really put like, anything that I was going through above school and through the pandemic, I kind of learned to like taking a step back and taking a breath and asking for help, or telling a teacher that you might need an extension on something...isn’t like a horrible thing to do. Your teachers are also human beings. They’re going to understand that you’re not perfect, and you’re not always going to be having a good day, every day.

It is important to note that none of the participants who discussed mental health in this way identified as Black or Latino/a. Our interview protocol explicitly asked about mental health. Some of these participants mentioned challenges with stress and anxiety but did not elaborate on takeaways or coping lessons that they felt emerged from these experiences.

### Personal Growth and Perspective Changes

A second theme was how difficult moments and experiences, especially from early in the pandemic, either caused participants to shift perspectives or develop new habits and strategies. They talked about these changes as growth and as successful ways that they adapted or coped. Many noted these skills, ideas about themselves, or ways of thinking about their life were takeaways they would carry with them into their futures. This theme was differentiated from the first: while the first described specifically coping and responding to mental health challenges, this second pattern among participants was broader in describing strategies, perspectives, and values that changed as a result of changes in their lives related to schooling and socializing.

Several participants, overly represented by males in the sample, described becoming more independent because of the loss of structure and routine with quarantines and remote and hybrid schooling. Ben, a Middle Eastern male, said that he became more independent because of “having a routine and then like that kind of like being interrupted. So, you had to figure out how to move forward on your own.” He added that this was true as the pandemic went on in terms of taking over his own schedule, like driving himself to basketball practice and becoming more self-disciplined in terms of academics: “especially with like, zoom classes and stuff like that. That’s the biggest thing where it’s like, you kind of have to hold yourself in check. Making sure you’re paying attention to the lectures and stuff like that.” Others echoed these sentiments, talking about becoming more independent and able to regulate their own learning more effectively. Anna, an Asian American female, described feeling like the pandemic actually “gave me a lot of my own personal growth, like having to be more independent and that kind of stuff.” She went on to detail concrete strategies she learned for handling tasks on her own:

I’m a little bit better at kind of taking things apart and looking at it step by step, instead of just becoming immediately overwhelmed with what I have to do. I’m a bit better at realizing, okay, I need to do this first, then this, then this afterwards, and then I’m done.

Others, like Sandra, a Latina, described learning to be more independently organized in response to the loss of structure from school: “I’m maybe a little more organized just because I think having so much flexibility, I found it the most beneficial to just like be pretty scheduled ... which I think I will probably take with me.”

Participants also noted disruption in their everyday lives and how related stressors led to different ways of thinking about themselves, their lives, and others. Challenges, isolation, and worries related to the pandemic were motivators of personal growth. These ways of describing the pandemic’s impact were explicitly linked to identity and sense of self for some participants. For example, Anna said, “it gave me the chance to kind of reflect on myself and improve my own skills and improve on myself,” while Alexa talked about a main takeaway being, “my journey through quarantine, finding out who I

am, what I want to wear, what music, I want to listen to how I identify myself—just that journey because those are things that will be still there.”

Many participants described increased gratitude from the pandemic. Participants detailed how their thinking about themselves and their lives shifted during the pandemic. Some said this emerged from being more open-minded and appreciating the fleeting and uncertain nature of life. For example, Lupe, a Latina, described how she learned to appreciate opportunities and felt a stronger desire to take advantage of them:

There is now greater uncertainty...So I was really learning to have this appreciation for everything that's given to me, everything that I have, every opportunity that comes across. I'm really thankful for it because I'm like, oh, it's a once in a lifetime. So, whatever comes across good or bad, you need to be able to respond, make the most of it, and be grateful about it, because everything's kind of uncertain, especially now...I think it impacted me in a positive way because now...I've become a little bit more like open minded or open to doing things that I wouldn't have normally.

Similarly, Tina, an Asian American female, detailed how the challenge and uncertainty of COVID forced her and others out of a flow and inertia. She expressed feeling now that she and others more deeply value the people, places, and experiences in daily life:

I heard somebody say that when times are going good, humans are used to having a nice environment and having a really easy life. Like, God put something that's difficult for us to kind of come over and for us to work. I think that's a really good way of looking at it. Because I feel like we all are looking at the negatives and how our lives are so difficult. We can't have what we all took for granted. I think it made us value a lot of what we do take for granted. I know I would complain about going to school or would complain about going to practice and stuff like that. And now it's like, I'm so grateful...I mean, we all have difficult stuff in our lives, but we were kind of just like, I feel like almost in a rut. We all kind of took things for granted and were really happy with how everything was going and stuff like that. And I think COVID kind of made us realize how much we do take for granted and how really anything could ever happen.

Echoing the sentiments of Lupe and others, Tina added, “accepting that we can't change [things] was really important.”

In a similar vein, Ashley described how a classmate's death due to COVID caused her to rethink how she led her life and be more intentional about how she approached it:

It really made me think about like today and living life to the fullest because you really don't know when you're going to pass away from anything. Could be a heart attack—anything. So, it definitely changed my outlook on life because I'm not lazy person in general, but sometimes I would just waste my time doing pointless [things], scrolling through Instagram and Facebook. I don't do that anymore because I'd rather be outside and like go for a walk. I don't know. Just enjoy life, I guess.

Participants like Tina, Lupe, and Ashley expressed that these ways of thinking about life and themselves would remain with them; these were elements of who they now are, rather than passing thoughts. Darrell, a Black male, encapsulated this feeling in his assertion that the pandemic would affect him positively into the future because he learned

How to adjust to know new things and adapt to changing to new changes, you know. So even though it hurt me, at the moment, it was just temporary. I was able to fix it over time, but it just prepared me for new things in the future.

Overall, this second theme entailed different ways that participants described changing their perspectives, values, or way of approaching life—areas they saw as deeply connected to who they are—due to pandemic-related experiences. Male and female participants described this meaning making, but the former were more likely to emphasize becoming more independent.

### Shifts in Friendships and Social Identities

In a similar vein, participants described the isolation and stressors of the pandemic leading to shifts in perspectives on their friends and peer relationships more generally. They described the early part of the pandemic as straining their connections with peers; logistical challenges like quarantines prevented physically getting together, extracurriculars were canceled, and school was remote. At the same time, they detailed social and emotional dynamics that made them need their friends more and reconsider how they felt about and interacted with others.

Some participants talked about new social identities emerging from changes in the norms of social interaction. They described thinking differently about the importance of socializing and friendships, as well as what they needed in these areas of their lives. For example, Ben talked about experiencing a shift in how he cared about what others' thought:

I think I had the most development character wise during the pandemic just because I—my mental health got so much better. Just because I just kind of like stopped caring what people think about me, if I had to put it like that.

For some participants, this change involved new ways of thinking about being alone and enjoying solitude more. Megan, a White female, described how being alone led to positive changes in her thinking about what socializing meant to her: "I don't rely on having as many friends and going out with them all the time. I'm totally fine with being alone...I just kind of realized that I don't really need anyone except for myself, my family." Some, like Lupe, were surprised or felt they learned from and enjoyed not having to interact with others:

I feel like I was doing very good being at home, not having to really talk to anyone. That was a good thing for me. It wasn't necessarily like, oh my gosh, I really need to talk to people, I miss people, I need to see my friends, I need to communicate. I was okay being at home. I felt like I had more time to myself.

Others described how the experiences of being isolated, as well as how friends and peers responded during those times, led them to think differently about who their main social connections were and what they needed out of these relationships. This point is reflected in Tina's statement: "You kind of realize who you really cared about and who was willing to be there for you even when you weren't



able to go out and hang out.” Tina elaborated further, saying it was illuminating how peers responded to different moments in the pandemic, including personal ones like birthdays and decisions like vaccination and masking. She said it “showed people like who their true friends are and if they are going to help people really.” She added:

Like vaccination wise and stuff, I think it’s taught us a lot about the people around us. I personally had a friend who didn’t get vaccinated, but she would not wear a mask in public. So, the ethics of that showed me who she I feel like really was as a person.

In a similar vein, Jason, a Black male, concisely stated, “I learned who my real friends are.” He described how his growth in understanding what “real friends” meant to him was tied to how they responded during difficult times in the pandemic:

Before the pandemic, I really thought the people who I saw every day—like we were good. But the peak throughout this pandemic, the people [that] have actually reached out to you to check on your well-being or just want to say hello, just stopped by. I feel like I figured out those are my rules.

In summary, a third theme involved changes to social life, in terms of deepening relationships and one’s understanding of self and their needs in relation to others. With the latter, many respondents specifically noted becoming more comfortable being alone.

### Family as an Increasingly Important Support

A final theme was strengthened family bonds and new understandings of the role family played in participants’ lives. They all noted the pandemic, especially in the beginning, led to more time with parents and siblings. While many suggested the increased time and isolation from others involved stress and conflict at times, they generally described taking away positive feelings about their family and greater appreciation for these relationships.

For many participants, family relationships had been positive prior to the pandemic, but interview descriptions highlighted how shared challenges and coping support provided by caregivers and siblings were connected to changes in how participants felt and thought about these bonds. Clara, a Latina female, talked about being closer with her family and especially her mother, who was a “role model” and important source of guidance for handling challenge:

She helped a lot when I was frustrated with an assignment, when I was frustrated with, you know, virtual [life]. It was nice to have her there to talk about it and to help as best as she could with the questions I had, or when I was upset because I couldn’t go out or things were closing or anything like that.

Other participants spoke more generally about their thinking about family: feeling gratitude for family and valuing relationships with relatives in a new, deeper way. These feelings were tied to concerns about health that the pandemic brought up or seeing what other families endured. Laura, for example, noted feeling closer to family, “because I just realized how valuable that time spent with them is and how easily it can be taken away.” Similarly, Liam, a White male, said, “I’ve grown in appreciation for my family,” attributing this to seeing how the stressors of the pandemic created problems for friends’ families:

Through all the differing opinions in my family and the different amounts of fear that some people had and some didn't, I realized how strong my family relationship is, and how much I should appreciate that because I also watched a lot of other families break apart and have problems. That was really hard for me to see my friends go through so much like that. It really made me grow in appreciation for the life I have and the life I share with my family.

Another example was Kyle, an Asian-American male, who wanted to “prioritize my family,” especially given health concerns and stress from the pandemic:

It's gonna sound bad, but I think I need to be a little selfish here and just focus on my family. Put my family first. And then if I can, then I can worry about other people. So, I think COVID kind of helped me prioritize certain things like, okay, I'm gonna make sure my family is healthy, that I stay healthy for my family.

Importantly, participants also acknowledged being stressed by family at times. These concerns, however, were often interwoven with narratives of growth in family relationships or learning how to effectively balance family with personal needs in a way that led to more positive bonds. Frank, a White male, encapsulated these two sides in his reflection on family dynamics:

It just made all of us become a lot closer. Me and my siblings got a lot closer with having to be stuck at home during the school year every single day together. But at the same time, it also caused it to be a little bit more challenging because we were spending a lot more time together than we used to. So just taking the time to have my own space and spend time by myself really helped to not be overwhelmed, but also to spend an adequate amount of time with them.

These examples demonstrate the third theme: that increased time with family and the stressors of the pandemic made participants feel closer with family and value their family in different ways.

## Discussion

In this study, we investigated emerging adults' meaning making of the pandemic as they transitioned to college. COVID-19 deeply marked these young peoples' academic, social, and personal lives during their last 2 years in high school, a formative time for psychosocial development. Our aim was to explore how they made sense of the pandemic's impacts on their lives as they undertook a key life transition. We framed our investigation using developmental literature highlighting the role that such coping processes can have in defining identities and shaping academic and personal trajectories (Azmitia et al., 2013; Bronfenbrenner, 2009; McLean, 2005; Spencer et al., 2006). Using reflexive thematic analysis, we identified four themes: the disruptions of the pandemic led to mental health struggles, though these often produced greater self-understanding, identification of coping; many participants identified positive areas of personal growth and perspective shifts in response to challenges faced because of the pandemic; social lives had been upended, but ultimately resulted in stronger bonds and new social identities; and family grew in importance and as a priority to participants.

The findings related to mental health deepen the scope of current research and focus on this generation and the pandemic's impacts on them. There has been widespread attention—in popular media, scientific communities, and medical professions—devoted to mental health crises and challenges for young people, particularly in reference to the social isolation, uncertainty, and disruption of the early part of the pandemic (Livingston, 2022; Naff et al., 2022; Samji et al., 2021). As an important note, research before the pandemic had indicated that rates of anxiety, depression, and other issues were rising among adolescents and emerging adults (e.g., Kalb et al., 2019). In this study, participants noted feeling anxious, stressed, and even depressed, which for some resulted in clinical diagnoses or accessing therapeutic services. They connected these feelings to loneliness, disruption in routines, and the uncertainty and flux caused by the pandemic, findings that mirror with other research, (Samji et al., 2021; Soria & Horgos, 2021).

Many of these quantitative studies focus on measuring depression, anxiety, loneliness, and other psychological struggles young people experience. Such a framing makes it difficult to understand how young people may have felt they learned or grew from challenge. The current study findings highlight possible opportunities to support young people's coping, growth, and strengths. As the theoretical framework highlights, all people are vulnerable, but heightened vulnerability and risk do not lead deterministically to negative outcomes (Spencer et al., 2006). Instead, developmental trajectories are influenced by how people make meaning: interpreting challenges and supports and coping in ways that become part of who they are (Spencer et al., 1997; 2006). Mental health diagnoses or struggles may create spaces for growth and learning about oneself and further defining identity in positive ways (e.g., Frydenberg, 2018). The emerging adults in this study demonstrated this potential in how they talked about deep struggles during the pandemic leading to changes in their thinking about themselves, their perspectives on life, and their friends and family. Importantly, not many participants had intimately experienced death or extreme disease of a close friend or loved one because of COVID-19.

We found differences by demographics that may reflect broader patterns and experiences in relation to mental health, as well as discourses and resources related to it. It is important to note, however, that such analyses break the sample down into smaller groups and it was not always balanced (i.e., 69% female to 31% male). Research on mental health and youth points toward different ways that highly stressful events may manifest for young males and females, though meta-analyses have shown that adolescent and emerging adult females experienced increased anxiety and depression in the early part of the pandemic (De France et al., 2021; Racine et al., 2021). Our findings mirror this other work, though as noted, these female participants were also more likely to couple their descriptions of mental health challenges with explicit references to recognizing their own resilience or describing what they saw as positive takeaways (e.g., therapy, developing coping strategies).

While some Latino/a or Black participants described struggling with mental health, none noted that they felt growth or coping strategies emerge from their issues. Generalizing this finding or assuming it reflects a broader reality is limited by the study design. Still, ample evidence demonstrates Latino/a and Black families and communities broadly faced more intense impacts from COVID-19 that intensified already existing inequities in multiple domains of life (academic resources, health care access, mental health services; e.g., Shim & Starks, 2021; Wilder, 2021). Beyond the pandemic, in 2020,

racial discord and injustice was on the forefront of the national conscience in the U.S. Furthermore, youth with these identities often face considerable obstacles and inequities in accessing mental health resources, including significant stigma attached to discussing or using these services (Lipson et al., 2022; Sapiro & Ward, 2020). It is possible that our sample represents Black and/or Latino emerging adults who were less directly impacted by the pandemic (e.g., did not lose a close loved one).

Intersecting with our finding about family, many of these emerging adults had strong support networks that may have helped contribute to resilient and growth outcomes (Azmitia et al., 2013; Luthar et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2021). There has been considerable evidence that family supports were key protective factors against the most negative psychosocial consequences of the pandemic. In a cross-sectional study early in the pandemic with emerging adults, Liu and colleagues (2020) found that parental support—emotional and material—was associated with lower PTSD and depressive symptoms. In a study spanning pre-2020 to after the pandemic's start, Campione-Barr and colleagues (2021) found that close relationships with parents were related to positive adjustment. Other research indicates significant numbers of young people may have experienced increased family time as positive. In a mixed-methods study of over 400 adolescents, about a fourth noted family as positive in qualitative responses, while quantitative measures demonstrated some perceived overall increases in family support and decreases in conflict during early 2020 (Rogers et al., 2021). At the same time, it is clear that family life was a source of stress for many others, whether due to elevated concerns about family (e.g., health, finances) or being confined together (Luthar et al., 2021; Wray-Lake et al., 2020).

In our study, some participants noted increased tension with families during quarantines, but also described learning more about themselves and their own needs through this tension, as well as feeling closer with family because of these experiences. The in-the-moment experiences of family may have varied, but over time and into their college experience, their perspectives had shifted, and these relationships were more central to who they were and what mattered to them. While there is evidence that the transition to college can already facilitate reflection on family relationships (e.g., Azmitia et al., 2013), these young people's meaning making seems to indicate that the pandemic made the support that already existed more tangible, and because of that tangibility they wanted to prioritize and nurture family relationships. This finding connects with our theoretical framing in that the narratives young people develop about themselves and their identities across adolescence into emerging adulthood demonstrate meaning making that moves beyond the experiences themselves (McLean, 2005). In other words, the challenges and struggles became part of a story about who these young people were and what they valued, a story which was more nuanced and included recognition of growth.

Our findings on these emerging adults' social lives similarly provide insight into how experiences early in the pandemic may have taken on different meanings for young people over time. Ample evidence demonstrates that many young people experienced the first year of the pandemic at the time as negatively affecting their social lives. Across studies, large numbers reported feeling more lonely and disconnected from friends (Branje & Morris, 2021; Rogers et al., 2021; Romm et al., 2021), and virtual spaces did not meet their social needs (Hussong et al., 2021; Velez et al., 2022). These experiences were also integrally linked to their mental health, with differences by race/ethnicity and gender that may have been reflected in these participants. In general, much attention has focused on increased

social isolation, difficulty in reforming social connections, and decreased opportunities to build social skills after remote and hybrid schooling, along with social distancing and health-related measures (Hussong et al., 2021).

This study contributes to current literature and the attention to distress and mental health by illuminating some ways young people may have coped and made meaning. Participants broadly describe the pandemic as having changed their perspectives on their friendships and, for many, on their social identities. They described these changes as growth and development, leading to better understandings of what they want in friends and what matters to them and, for some, the growth of stronger peer relationships. Friendships and peer interactions are salient in adolescence and emerging adulthood, especially in relation to identity and social development (Berndt, 2002). The experience of the early pandemic was undoubtedly challenging for many adolescents, but it is also possible the perspectives on their social lives they carry with them to college as emerging adults may be more nuanced and provide them greater depth and clarity in their social identities.

## Implications and Conclusion

This study raises areas of consideration for educators, administrators, and policymakers who work with or shape systems around emerging adults in college. One takeaway is listening to young people's narratives and descriptions of the pandemic while creating spaces for them to process and share. This framework is supported by developmental literature on young people's meaning making (e.g., McLean, 2005; Schwab & Syed, 2015; Spencer, 2006). Broad outcomes and data are needed—especially for public health interventions and understanding generational impacts and trends—but there is also diversity within meaning making. Our findings on mental health and social life show how experiences that qualify as a quantitative negative outcome in the short term (e.g., a diagnosis of depression, feeling isolated from friends) may be processed and made into a lesson about coping or personal narrative of growth. This perspective fits a lens of post-traumatic growth (Janoff-Bulman, 2004), but more work is needed to consider this framework, especially as the study took place while COVID-19 was still disrupting life. Still, these takeaways can be valuable for student affairs professionals, faculty, and other adults who work with emerging adults on college campuses to foster resilience and continued personal development. They can create spaces for students to reflect on and share coping and growth, especially given the general emphasis on negative impacts and challenges.

A second implication is considering what beginning college might entail for emerging adults who have (re)forged bonds with family and friends through the pandemic. Family and social support is related to adjustment and continuity during this transition, which entails many logistical, psychological, and academic changes (Azmitia et al., 2013; Dennis et al., 2005). Our findings show that some young people's perspectives on these relationships and the importance to them was changed by the pandemic. How this intersects with their transition to college may depend on many factors—e.g., the distance from home of the college, if they commute or not, where their friends attend—but may be a valuable space for reflection and action by educators, staff, and administrators. In the U.S., there are deeply embedded narratives of college as part of the process of the independence associated with adulthood (Lilgendahl & McLean, 2020), but it is possible that the changed perspectives and thinking about family and friends during the pandemic may impact this narrative for the current generation of college-going emerging adults.

## Limitations

Overall, this study suggests possible ways emerging adults' meaning making of the pandemic may demonstrate coping even amid challenges, stressors, and changes. There are noteworthy limits to its generalizability. First, while the sample was generally representative of the institution the students attended, the size—particularly of subgroups such as first generation students—prevented saturation in more fine-grained, comparative analyses. Further work should explore patterns within subgroups, especially as the pandemic has more deeply impacted minoritized communities (Wilder, 2021), and there is evidence of important gender differences as well (Craig et al., 2022). Second, the sample of emerging adults we interviewed are college-going, which could be considered a resilient outcome given the challenges during their high school time. Therefore, our sample does not capture those whose challenges and lack of supports interrupted their educational trajectories or those who chose not to attend college. Still, across the U.S., many young people are going to college as emerging adults, and it is important to capture their experiences and meaning making, even if their coping and supports may be different than their peers. Further research can compare meaning making processes across these groups.

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## Footnote

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