“Emotional Distancing”: Change and Strain in U.S. Young Adult College Students’ Relationships During COVID-19

Miranda P. Dotson1, Elena Maker Castro2, Nina T. Magid3, Lindsay T. Hoyt4, Ahna Ballanoff Suleiman5, and Alison K. Cohen6

Abstract
We analyzed qualitative data from 707 USA college students aged 18–22 in late April 2020 regarding if and how their relationships had changed at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most (69%) participants experienced relationship changes, most of whom (77%) described negative changes: less overall contact, feeling disconnected, and increased tension, some of which was due to conflict over pandemic-related public health precautions. Physical distancing from social contacts also created emotional distancing: it was harder to maintain affective connections via online platforms and within the isolating context of shelter-in-place. Due to emerging adulthood being a sensitive window for social development, the COVID-19 pandemic-induced emotional distancing could have long-term ramifications for this cohort’s relationships over the course of their lives.

Keywords
college students, COVID-19, relationships, social distancing, emerging adulthood, relationship strain

Introduction
The college campus is an important context for social development of a large segment of youth during the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood: over 40% of youth aged 18–24 in the United States were enrolled in college in 2018 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Emerging adulthood, a period of transformation between the ages of 18–29, known for unprecedented identity exploration and individuation (Arnett 2021), is a sensitive window for social development. This paper examines how, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, relationships drastically changed for early emerging adults aged 18–22, disrupting the campus-centered social interactions and relationships that many college students find quintessential to their experience and development (Kuh, 2011; Fish et al., 2016).

The transition experienced by emerging adults from adolescence to adulthood is shaped by their different social relationships with peers and adults (Barry et al., 2016; Shulman & Connolly, 2013). In the context of USA college students, such exploration and identity construction typically occurs in social environments specifically constructed to support increased independence, peer learning, establishing relationships with non-familial adults, and academic engagement (Kuh, 2011; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009). The society and university-wide exodus from in-person interactions to the online space while sheltering-in-place are of particular interest when examining the long-term effects of the pandemic on the relationships and social experiences that contribute to emerging adults’ identity construction. At the start of the pandemic, for example, many emerging adult college students may have experienced a “developmental mismatch” if they returned to their childhood living environments or other familial settings. During a time when college students experience increasing independence and autonomy, living primarily on campus with peers who share the same developmental stage, many of them abruptly returned to lockdown with parents and other family members—altering the normative developmental trajectory for many college-going emerging adults (Suleiman, 2021). Furthermore, both the risks

1Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Northeastern University, Boston, MA, USA
2Department of Human Development and Psychology, School of Education and Information Studies, University of California Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA, USA
3Department of Biology, Brown University, Providence, RI, USA
4Department of Psychology, Fordham University, New York, NY, USA
5Department of Public Health, California State University Sacramento, Sacramento, CA, USA
6Department of Epidemiology & Biostatistics, School of Medicine, University of California San Francisco, San Francisco, CA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Miranda P. Dotson, Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Northeastern University, 360 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA 02115, USA.
Email: dotson.m@northeastern.edu
and opportunities of social media impacting social relationships (Uhls et al., 2017) have likely been exacerbated during the pandemic as these platforms became the central space for peer social interaction.

In addition to change in developmental setting, pandemic-related restrictions more generally reduced the autonomy emerging adult students had established at college, resulting in the significant loss of independence and disruption of normative developmental trajectories of social relationships. The loss or weakening of affective connections in peer relationships in the absence of daily, in-person interactions manifests through what we will argue is emotional distancing, in which many extrafamilial social life for emerging adults was relegated to an online format during a socially turbulent period, and often resulted in abrupt and unprecedented social estrangement that is unique to the pandemic and may have long-term implications for the development of emerging adults.

**Current Research on College Students During COVID-19**

Many emerging adult college students experienced significant difficulties in their mental health and social lives since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Research during the COVID-19 pandemic found that college students in the USA faced lower levels of social interaction compared to pre-pandemic experiences and higher reported rates of loneliness as a direct result of the pandemic (Son, et al., 2020). Indicative of developmental mismatching in living situations during lockdown, students, especially first year, also reported declines in mental health while sheltering-in-place with family members (Hall & Zygmunt, 2021). While much of the emergent qualitative research focuses specifically on college students’ mental health (Farris et al., 2021; Halliburton et al., 2021; Molock & Parchem, 2021; Patterson et al., 2021; Sommerlad et al., 2021), our study complements this work by qualitatively exploring the impacts of the pandemic on college students’ relationships. Lastly, pre-pandemic research has established that relationship strain experienced in emerging adulthood can lead to adverse mental health outcomes that persist later in life (Sheets & Craighead, 2014).

It is important to further investigate how, at the cusp of adulthood, the developmental trajectories of emerging adult college students’ relationships changed within these new environments for social interaction. Our study centers student voices to document how emerging adult college students’ relationships were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, contributing to burgeoning research in understanding how this global and historical pandemic event marks the development of this cohort of emerging adults.

**Methods**

**Study Design and Sample**

We collected data from full-time college students from 49 states and Washington, DC (Table 1) between the ages of 18–22 in late April 2020 to share their experiences during the pandemic via a Qualtrics survey that included both open- and close-ended questions. Voluntary participants were recruited to the study solely on Instagram, using four advertisements targeted to the 18–22 age group, which appeared on the platform between April 25–29, 2020. The advertisements were paid for using funds from research grants awarded to authors four and 6 (funding sources listed in acknowledgments). This recruitment method was useful to recruit students from a diverse range of geographic, socioeconomic, gender, racial/ethnic, and institutional backgrounds. All surveys were completed April 25–30, 2020, before the first round of reopening in the USA began in May (Cohen et al., 2020). To help confirm their current affiliation with an institution of higher education and required age range, participants were required to provide an “.edu” email address and their age and year in college. Participants then received a link via email to the Qualtrics survey. After completing the survey, participants received a $10 Amazon gift card (Cohen et al., 2020). Further details on study recruitment and survey procedure are available elsewhere (Cohen et al., 2020). Although the study is qualitative in nature, we include descriptive statistics (i.e., simple percentages) on participants’ race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and year in school to help situate the data within our findings (Table 1).

**Reflexivity**

Centering the voices of participants and letting the “data speak for itself” was a guiding value that underlay this research. While this specific study is not rooted in participatory methodology, the authors all share a methodological preference for participatory approaches, which is visible in our use of open-ended questions and examination of what participants chose and found most relevant to share about their lives during the pandemic. The authors shared some communities and experiences with the students in the sample. At the time of writing, Author 1 was a full-time fourth year undergraduate student, although, unlike many of the students in the sample, she was not sheltering-in-place with her family. As a doctoral student, Author 2 returned to shelter-in-place with her family. Author 3 was a full-time, third-year undergraduate student, who initially sheltered-in-place with family, and later with other emerging adult college students. Authors 4–6 are junior faculty who work with undergraduate, emerging adult students, some of whom sheltered-in-place with family members. All authors identified as White, cis-gender women from middle to upper socioeconomic classes.

**Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Data**

This paper draws from open-ended, text-box responses (with no word limit and no word minimum) to questions about how relationships had changed during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. We first asked participants, “Have your
relationships to others changed during the shelter-in-place/social distancing/confinement portion of the COVID-19 pandemic? Participants answered yes or no. Participants were then prompted to “Describe how your relationships have changed and to what degree” (if they responded yes), or “Describe why your relationships have not changed” (if they responded no). Providing a response was required, so no responses were left blank. Sixty-three participants (13.4%) provided responses that were less than 10 words. However, their insight, albeit without much detail, still helped to affirm and inform overall thematic trends present in the data. Over one-third (n = 239) of participants reported that their relationships did not change as a result of the pandemic. This paper presents findings from the subsample of the 66.5% (n = 470) of students that reported that their relationships had changed, and 79.4% of these students (n = 373) shared negative changes to their relationships.

We approached the qualitative data through engaging a thematic analysis, in which we highlight the “particular patterns of shared meaning across the dataset,” and highlight the collective stories told by our interpretations of the data by grouping similar or parallel experiences into larger thematic narratives (Braun & Clarke 2019). Authors 1, 3, 6, and 2 emerging adult undergraduate research assistants reviewed the open-ended responses and developed inductive, qualitative codes to categorize these data based on observed recurring and multiple themes in the responses (Charmaz, 2014). The research team met to discuss the definitions of each of the codes, and refined these definitions to form a codebook (see online appendix). The codes and codebook were continually refined throughout the process of coding, and the research team met regularly to ensure comprehensive and uniform coding of the qualitative responses, and disagreements about codes were resolved through collectively refining codes during full-team meetings. It was possible for responses to be coded for more than one theme; responses were coded for an average of three themes. Although consensus in coding is not a pillar of Braun and Clarke’s (2019) thematic analysis, Authors 1 and 3 later re-double-coded 10% of the data to calculate percent agreement, to ensure that we were applying the (collaboratively constructed) codes from a shared viewpoint. Our inter-rater reliability was 89%, above the 85% threshold deemed acceptable (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This percentage was more a reflection of coding errors than true disagreement; all inconsistencies were discussed and corrected in the final coded data.

Two central themes, or “creative and interpretive stories,” (Braun & Clarke 2019) emerged from our thematic analysis of the data: college students’ individual experience of negative emotional shifts and interpersonal strain in their relationships since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. We collapse these two themes and their dimensions into our overall finding that these negative emotional changes that occurred within college students’ relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic can be framed as emotional distancing, or abrupt and unprecedented social estrangement unique to the pandemic. Responses were coded for “relationship strain” any time a student mentioned experiencing difficulty or negative outcomes in a relationship: new or increased conflict, tension in their relationships; mention of a relationship ending; and/or discussion of feeling disconnected from people in their lives, including less contact or difficulty in maintaining relationships.

The authors selected the pseudonyms of quoted participants (Table 2). The participants quoted typically had responses that were approximately 40+ words long. We found

**Table 1. Study Sample Demographics.**

|                          | Whole Population (n = 707) | Participants Who Reported Emotional Distancing (n = 373) |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| Class year               |                           |                                                        |
| First year               | 27.7                      | 27.7                                                   |
| Sophomore                | 26.3                      | 28.8                                                   |
| Junior                   | 23.3                      | 21.8                                                   |
| Senior                   | 22.6                      | 21.8                                                   |
| Gender identity          |                           |                                                        |
| Women                    | 61.0                      | 65.9                                                   |
| Men                      | 34.4                      | 29.0                                                   |
| Transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, or other (fill-in blank) | 4.6 | 5.1 |
| Race/ethnicity           |                           |                                                        |
| Non-Hispanic White       | 54.3                      | 61.6                                                   |
| Non-Hispanic Asian/Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian | 20.4 | 17.5 |
| Multiracial              | 10.0                      | 9.4                                                    |
| Hispanic/Latinx          | 8.9                       | 7.0                                                    |
| Non-Hispanic Black       | 5.2                       | 3.2                                                    |
| Middle Eastern/North African | 1.1                   | 1.3                                                    |
| Living with at least one parent while sheltering-in-place | 76.0 | 78.8 |
that these longer, descriptive quotes are illustrative of the
trends within the full sample, but provided richer data. Thus,
we feature storytellers that capture experiences with emotional
distancing that reflect what their peer participants also en-
countered. And while 35% of participants who shared longer,
descriptive quotes identified with a community of color, none
identified as Black (which is not too surprising, given that Black
participants only made up 5.2% of the entire sample, and 3.2%
of those who reported emotional distancing). However, given
the sociopolitical context of the COVID-19 pandemic dis-
proportionately affecting Black communities (Poteat et al.,
2020) and the intersecting crisis of police violence (Liebman
et al., 2020), we also identified some shorter quotes from Black
participants that we included in our paper. All quoted partic-
ipants were assigned a pseudonym that reflected their self-
reported gender identity. Quotations were corrected for small
typos and any italicization was by the authors for emphasis.

Findings

In line with the language of social and physical distancing, we
refer to the widespread negative emotional effects and strain
that impacted students’ relationships during the first months of
the COVID-19 pandemic as emotional distancing. Qualitative
analysis of participants’ responses revealed three overarching
elements of emotional distancing: less or no contact, feeling
disconnected, and more tension or disputes with peers and/or
family members. Of the participants that reported emotional
distancing, 78.8% were sheltering-in-place with at least one
parent. Most of the participants (68.5%) in our study self-reported that their relationships had changed, whether positively or negatively, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Approximately half (79.4%) of participants (n = 373) described negative changes to their relationships, which largely consisted of descriptions of diminished contact or engagement with friends and peers outside of their household. The majority of participants who described negative shifts (and 35.5% of the entire study sample) reported accounts of relationship strain, in which participants specifically outlined difficulty maintaining social or emotional connections with their peers (e.g., increased disputes, feeling disconnected from loved ones, and difficulty maintaining the same relationship dynamics).

Participants reflected on many types of relationships in
their responses. Over half (52%) of participants discussed relationships with friends or peers (e.g., roommates, classmates, and co-workers), 16% of participants discussed their romantic relationships, and a total of 28% mentioned relationships with family (e.g., parents or siblings). Only 1% of participants discussed relationships with their professors. Approximately 31% of responses did not include enough information to determine specifically which relationships were discussed, though context allowed us to infer that many reported on peer relationships.

Less Contact or Engagement

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, various structural
shifts took place that changed how emerging adult college

| Pseudonym | Race/Ethnicity                    | Gender   | Sexual Orientation | Year in School |
|-----------|----------------------------------|----------|--------------------|----------------|
| Adriana   | Asian                            | Woman    | Heterosexual       | First year     |
| Amy       | White and Asian                  | Woman    | Heterosexual       | First year     |
| Anna      | Asian                            | Woman    | Heterosexual       | Second year    |
| Azul      | Latinx                           | Genderqueer | Queer          | Second year    |
| Breana    | White                            | Woman    | Heterosexual       | First year     |
| Camila    | Latinx                           | Woman    | Pansexual          | Second year    |
| Caroline  | White                            | Woman    | Bisexual           | First year     |
| Chase     | Black                            | Man      | Heterosexual       | Second year    |
| Christina | White                            | Woman    | Heterosexual       | Fourth year    |
| Don       | Asian                            | Man      | Heterosexual       | First year     |
| Eva       | White                            | Woman    | Heterosexual       | First year     |
| Iman      | Black                            | Woman    | Heterosexual       | Second year    |
| Jasmin    | White                            | Woman    | Pansexual          | First year     |
| Kira      | White                            | Woman    | Heterosexual       | Second year    |
| Nora      | White                            | Woman    | Heterosexual       | Third year     |
| Malia     | Asian, Native Hawaiian, and White| Woman    | Bisexual           | Fourth year    |
| Omar      | Middle Eastern                   | Man      | Gay                | First year     |
| Prisha    | Asian and Indo-Caribbean         | Woman    | Queer              | Second year    |
| Sam       | Black and White                  | Genderqueer | Queer          | Third year     |
| Sofia     | Latinx and White                 | Woman    | Heterosexual       | Fourth year    |
| Vanessa   | White                            | Woman    | Heterosexual       | Fourth year    |
students engaged in their relationships. The transition to online communication was the most pervasive structural change cited by participants. For many, this transition to the virtual space posed new difficulties in maintaining the relationship dynamics that they had pre-pandemic, often resulting in less contact and/or engagement with peers with whom they previously frequently socialized with in-person. Jasmine shared that,

None of my relationships have [been] supported by in-person interactions, and that’s really difficult. My friendships and connections have to be sustained through online sources and phone calls. I think we are still close, but it’s harder to actively maintain relationships this way. I miss my friends and I miss being at school.

Although Jasmine still felt “close” to her friends with whom relationships were sustained remotely, she noted that this was significantly harder to achieve than in-person engagement. Among participants who described experiencing strain in their relationships, many cited a similar struggle to Jasmine’s as they tried to stay connected while physically distant from their friends and loved ones. Azul also described difficulty transitioning their relationships to the virtual space. According to Azul,

I have to video call my friends to talk. I see them less often now than before because it’s hard to schedule times to talk. I’m worried the negative emotions my friends and I are experiencing are dulling our relationships, though maybe they’ll be stronger after all this is over. It’s difficult for me to respond to my friends and is sometimes easier to ignore them.

These virtual boundaries around social connection meant less contact overall for Azul, as it was “hard to schedule times to talk.” Furthermore, the emotional stress experienced at the onset of the pandemic was a contributing factor to having less social contact, as Azul feared that the abundance of “negative emotions” experienced by them and their friends would have a “dulling” effect on their relationships. Like Azul,

Iman chose to avoid communication with her friends to mitigate potential strain in her relationships due to emotional distress. She wrote, I am super stressed about everything going on and have noticed I’ve been in a bad mood. I avoided talking to people for the first few weeks of sheltering in place because I didn’t want to negatively affect someone else.

Rather than turning to her friends as a source of support, Iman sought to isolate herself in order to avoid sharing her experiences with negativity. This voluntary self-isolation, on top of the structural isolation from shelter-in-place orders, is potentially informative of a significant shift in Iman’s relationship development with her friends, where they do not occupy supportive roles in her individual development. Overall, the restrictions on in-person social contact and the onset of negative emotions during a socially turbulent period had the compounding effect of overall less contact with friends, an experience relayed by many emerging adults in our study.

Conversely, even more contact with friends was not always experienced as an inherently positive relationship outcome. While Iman, Azul, and Jasmine noted difficulty in maintaining the same level of contact with their friends, Amy described how her increased contact with friends did not mitigate the negative emotions she experienced at the onset of the pandemic. According to Amy, “I message and call my friends a lot more often than I did before, but the lack of face-to-face interactions has left me lonelier and more depressed.” Just as Jasmine noted that it is “harder to maintain relationships” virtually, Amy also underlined how a “lack of face-to-face interaction” meant that virtual communication was an insufficient substitute for in-person engagement. Overall, the pandemic induced socio-emotional disruption, where an abrupt, mass transition to virtual communication platforms impacted the frequency with which participants contacted their friends and peers, and increased feelings of social estrangement was the overwhelming result.

**Feeling More Disconnected**

In addition to difficulty maintaining the same levels of contact, many students described feeling emotionally distant or disconnected from friends and loved ones. Vanessa captured this emotional disconnection from physical distance succinctly.

Not only am I physically distant from my friends and boyfriend, but we are growing more emotionally distant from one another. We talk a lot less and about things that are superficial. I feel like we are growing apart because everyone is so stressed.

Similar to Iman and Azul, Vanessa noted less contact and increased feelings of emotional stress among her friends that adversely impacted her relationships. Nora described a similar experience with emotional distancing. Nora wrote,

I just feel a little more disconnected from everyone in my life. I think this amount of isolation has reduced a lot of my friends’ capacity for social interaction, so I feel like I’m communicating with them less.

While Vanessa and Nora both referenced an experience with emotional distancing to less contact with friends, Nora related this unexpected disconnectedness to widespread “isolation,” likely in reference to the shelter-in-place orders that limited and strongly discouraged physical contact with anyone outside of one’s household. Christina also made a direct connection to isolation induced by the COVID-19 pandemic when describing newfound disconnection in her relationships. Christina explained,
Now that we are approaching over a month in home isolation, I have found myself falling out of regular communication with friends. There is nothing to talk about in some instances besides COVID and how [it’s] affecting school in a logistical, stressful way and less that feels like venting with friends. It’s painful to see relationships drift and it’s insanely lonely. Reaching out is challenging by virtual means alone.

Here, Christina builds upon Jasmine, Nora, Vanessa, and Amy’s reflections. Not only was isolation while sheltering-in-place physically lonely, but virtual communication with friends was inadequate in maintaining the same emotional connections that were possible in person, which often had the result of less contact overall. Feeling “disconnected” from friends in the wake of physical isolation from shelter-in-place orders often went hand-in-hand with reports of less contact overall, as peoples’ “capacity for social interaction” changed, or rather struggled to adapt, in the mass transition to the virtual present within and outside her physical environment.

More Tension and/or Disputes

Participants frequently cited increased tension or strain within their relationships as a direct result of the pandemic. Malia detailed how the tensions that arose in her relationships were present within and outside her physical environment.

Being cooped up in a trailer with my immediate family has simultaneously brought us closer and put tension on things. My partner and I haven’t been in physical contact since mid March and that is also starting to drag our morale down. Overall I think it’s impacted my romantic relationship most because my partner and I are very physical people who rely on touch for reassurance and a variety of other things. Not having them here with me while we experience this traumatic and historical event has been hard. Beyond that, my family and I have made do with what we have and settled into a new normal that works for us.

Similar to Malia, participants that discussed their romantic relationships often cited pandemic-induced tensions. Breana experienced increased both tension in her romantic and family relationships, and reconnection with her friends:

I have not been able to see my boyfriend for around two months. I worry about him a lot and I worry about losing him and our beautiful relationship. My family life is more tense. My friends and I are closer in some ways we have been checking up on each other to support one another through this time.

Breana’s fears of losing her romantic partner were a reality for some of our participants. Sofia experienced a break-up induced by the pandemic. She shared, “My significant other ended our relationship. We had been long distance before, but with the new restrictions, our time apart was extended and he no longer wanted to deal with that.” While romantic relationships were not at the forefront of discussion by our participants, 8% of those who experienced emotional distancing also reported experiences with strain in their romantic relationships. Similar to Nora and Christina’s reflections on the impacts of isolation while sheltering-in-place, Sam reflected that,

Most of my relationships have a lot of stress being put on them. My mood has been one of isolation and it’s making it hard to stay motivated to contact the people I care about. I’m collapsing in on myself with stress and it’s taking a toll on the people I love.

For Sam, the increased tension they experienced within their relationships derived from their mood of “isolation” and the increased emotional burden of stress that ultimately was “taking a toll on the people [they] love.” Just as Iman and Azul identified “stress” as the central reason for contacting their friends less, Sam implied having less contact with their friends as they faced difficulty “stay[ing] motivated” to contact them, showing that the ultimate reason for why “most of [their] relationships have a lot of stress being put on them” is due to new emotional stress that arose as a result of isolation induced by sheltering-in-place. Sam’s experience also exemplifies how the different facets of the negative emotional shifts (e.g., less contact, feeling disconnected, and increased tension) that occurred as a result of the pandemic were negative changes that corroborated each other.

Pandemic Safety-Related Strain

The COVID-19 pandemic provoked a variety of new health behaviors that aimed to limit the spread of the virus, such as wearing a face mask and limiting excursions outside of one’s household, and who chose to partake in these behaviors was sometimes politicized. The subgroup of participants that experienced pandemic safety-related strain was of particular interest given their novelty as a type of relationship strain caused specifically by the pandemic. These disagreements manifested due to beliefs about which personal health behaviors ought to be followed, and/or how the pandemic should be approached by governing institutions. We see these descriptions of relationship strain due to pandemic-related disputes or disagreements as early evidence of incidences of relationship strain induced by the COVID-19 pandemic that may have only become more exacerbated in the months since. Caroline provided a testimony that is particularly illustrative of how relationships can face unique strain in the wake of the pandemic. Caroline detailed,

My dad lost his job due to COVID 19 and now has...a new job. However unlike his previous job, he will be working at a
hospital... We live in a pretty small house and he sleeps in the same bed as my mother... I am afraid he will contract the virus and bring it back home and I believe he should take the same steps that health workers have been doing in their own homes. Like social distancing even in the house, showering after returning from work, and not preparing our food. However he will not listen. So I have been trying to distance myself with failure. He is also a high risk group (over 65 and high blood pressure and kidney stuff, etc) so if we get it in our household at least one of us is dying. It is... mentally straining because he doesn’t seem to understand why I am wary of his potential disease.

Caroline’s experience is particularly illustrative, as not only was her family economically impacted by pandemic-induced job loss, but this economic impact that spurred her father’s new position as a frontline worker subsequently situated her at-risk family in closer proximity to the virus. Thus, the stakes of pandemic safety-related disagreements for Caroline’s family were particularly high, and as Caroline suspects, should someone in their household contract the virus, “at least one of us is dying.” Anna also discussed engaging in purposeful distancing in her relationships where there was discord over COVID-19-related safety measures. She explained, “I’m distancing myself from some friends (not just physically) because I see on social media how they continue to ignore the stay-at-home order and I don’t respect them for it.” Whereas Caroline experienced strain with her father over conflict to practice physical distancing within their household, Anna described purposeful emotional distancing from friends that published content about their offline lives that, according to Anna, neglected stay-at-home orders. Anna and Caroline’s responses show that disagreements over COVID-19-related safety could be a source of continued strain for any relationship.

**Strengthened Connections**

While most of our participants cited negative changes to their relationships, some described improvements or positive outcomes in some aspects of their relationships (e.g., spending more time with family, more frequent connection with certain friends, or embracing a newfound supportive role for loved ones). Omar shared,

Some relationships with peers I was friends with out of convenience have completely diminished. However some relationships with friends I do not see often have grown much stronger through this time over text and call.

Omar’s experience was characteristic of many students who described how some relationships weakened while others flourished. Similarly, Kira noted that,

It is hard to keep up with college friends at times. It is nice to be back with my parents. I am also getting closer to a friend from home that I hadn’t really been talking with as much before.

Like Omar, Kira cited a difficult time maintaining relationships with friends from college who she had become physically distant from, whereas she experienced strengthened relationships with those in close physical proximity, like her parents and a “friend from home.” These gives-and-takes were common among many participants who experienced a reinforcement of some of their relationships while simultaneously experiencing strain or estrangement in others. Sometimes, positive changes arose from new dimensions of a friendship created in part by the social conditions of the pandemic. Prisha wrote,

I feel like I’m becoming more of a listener to my friends who are struggling in isolation and cannot confide in family. My girlfriend and I are now long distance which makes things weird when we are on different schedules.

As the pandemic creates conditions of “isolation” and emotional distancing from peer relationships, some individuals, like Prisha, found themselves in new, supportive roles as they try to mitigate the emotional and mental hardships experienced by friends. For Don, the shift to virtual platforms for communication came with unexpected benefits. He found it easy to communicate more clearly in the digital space.

Since I can’t meet them in person, I’ve had to talk to my friends online a lot more. Because I am usually able to formulate what I want to say more easily in text rather than by speech, this makes me able to get to know the other person a little better. However, the loss of physical contact has also reduced the closeness slightly because talking online is an asynchronous task most of the time.

For Don, the pandemic provided a unique opportunity to develop relationships via a medium that was more desirable for him, given his preference for text versus oral communication. Yet, like all of the participants quoted in this section, Don still noted a give-and-take experience while describing a positive change. In Don’s case, the main disadvantage to a positive change in his relationships was a reduction in feelings of closeness; indeed a salient dimension of emotional distancing experienced which many other participants also experienced. Overall, 17.7% of our sample described positive changes to relationships. As the participants quoted above demonstrate, many of these positive changes co-occurred with negative changes. For some, the pandemic presented new opportunities for strengthened connections with peers and family. Yet for most, the net effect was that the pandemic created conditions that adversely impacted how emerging adults were able to engage in their peer relationships. Positive changes to relationships were largely the exception to the widespread experience of emotional distancing.

**Developmental Mismatching**

Some participants reported new tensions arising in their households where, once college students living and exploring
the contours of their new adulthood independently (and often with peers of the same birth cohort), they now found themselves in the isolating shelter-in-place environment with family members at a different developmental stage in their lives. More than three quarters of the emerging adults in our study sample sheltered-in-place with at least one parent (Cohen et al., 2020) and 78.8% of participants described emotional distancing. Adrianna illustrated how this developmental mismatching can arise from the abrupt transition from independent to communal family living. She explained, “I’ve come to grow increasingly frustrated with my family because my time living apart from them has made me grow accustomed to one way of living whereas they have another.”

Dana expressed similar frustration with having to re-adapt to living with family after a brief encounter with the new freedom of college life. She wrote, “It is too much time with my family after not spending any time with them. And everyone is always in the house so I don’t feel like I have my own space.”

As Camila describes how the bulk of her daily social interaction consisted of her peer relationships, and how this suddenly changed to family relationships, her experience exemplifies how this abrupt shift in habitual social reactions meant that participants were often developmentally mismatched from the family members with whom they sheltered-in-place. However, it was also common for participants to describe feeling closer to family members while sheltering-in-place with them. Chace contrasted feeling closer to family with feeling more distant from friends. He explained, “I talk to some of my friends a lot less and some not at all. Some friends I’ve gotten closer with. My parents and I have gotten a lot closer and have given me lots of support.” It was not uncommon for participants who described feeling closer to family members while also feeling disconnected from their friends and peers. Like Chace, Eva described feeling closer to her family members given their new physical proximity. She wrote,

I have gotten quality time with my family which has made us feel closer. My relationships with my friends are struggling. We do not get quality time with each other anymore and it is hard to connect over video chat.

Similar to Chace and participants quoted in previous sections, Eva framed her strengthened affective connection to her family in contrast to the weakened connections to her friends, citing “quality time” as the central factor in maintaining close relationships, and difficult to attain virtually.

### Discussion

This paper examines how emerging adult college students’ relationships changed—often negatively—in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. For many, if not most, of emerging adult college students, the processes of individualization (Moran, 2019), nourished by a campus environment (Sankar-Gomes, 2005), were disrupted at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As our data demonstrate, the structural changes that arose in wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which included the closure of college campuses, shelter-in-place orders, and a transition to (mostly) virtual engagement, engendered largely negative social and emotional shifts in emerging adult college students’ relationships. Our findings also show that the virtual environment is no substitute for in-person creation and management of relationships. In the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, the social outlets that youth encounter in emerging adulthood, known for being a time of unprecedented social exploration and expansion, have suddenly been “reduced to the size of a laptop screen” (Suleiman, et al. 2021). For many participants, their experience with emotional distancing was induced by such structural changes that required transitioning their relationships to the virtual space. Within these virtual spaces (e.g., text messages, social media, and Zoom), participants described their encounters with emotional distancing as they struggled to maintain the same affective connections with their peers in the same ways they had been able to in-person. This “disembodied” online social experience can have a repertoire of offline psychosocial effects on individual wellbeing. Previous research indicates while online chat can be an effective technology for positive communication outcomes, a preference for disembodied communication is associated with decreased social support and psychosocial wellbeing in the offline space (Kang, 2007). Our findings concur that while the virtual space can provide useful avenues for social interaction in the absence of in-person opportunities, the disembodied space was largely insufficient for maintaining affective connections in the structurally isolating shelter-in-place environment. Thus, this unique manifestation of emotional distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic can be situated in this social-ecological context, in which emerging adult college students left their on-campus environments—the central arena for college students’ development as individuals and emerging adults—and largely confined themselves to physically smaller, isolated, and sometimes developmentally mismatched environments. The emotional distancing that emerging adult college students faced with their peers may form new foundations for how emerging adults in college undertake relationships and transition into their adult lives.

Ultimately, our findings support and build upon emerging research among younger adolescents that suggests that
adolescents experienced social and emotional changes in their relationships with family, friends, and/or peers during the COVID-19 pandemic, and more often than not, these changes were negative and associated with less perceived friend support, depressive symptoms, anxiety, and loneliness (Philpot et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2021). While Rogers et al. (2021) focused on adolescents ages 14–17 who were likely already living with family members prior to the pandemic, our study features early emerging adult college students aged 18–22. Unlike younger emerging adults, as the majority of students in our study sample reported living with at least one parent at the onset of the pandemic (2020), as well as the majority (79.4%) of participants that reported emotional distancing, it can be inferred that many emerging adult college students were uprooted from campuses to shelter-in-place with family members from whom they had spent months/years prior developing independently. Therefore, emerging adult college students found themselves at a unique “developmental mismatch,” where instead of independently exploring relationships with new friends, romantic partners, and other peers on a college campus, this landscape was traded in for isolated environments in which the primary interpersonal relationships were ones that were central during childhood and emerging adult development (i.e., family members).

To the best of our knowledge, our study is among the first of its kind to document interpersonal conflict over COVID-19-related safety measures among emerging adults. While a relatively small percentage (6%) of participants in our study reported interpersonal conflict over COVID-safety measures, we expect that these experiences have become more prevalent as the pandemic has continued and as young people engaged in varying levels of COVID-19-related risk behaviors (2021). This early evidence of COVID-19 safety-related relationship strain is also informative because this is likely a growing group, and confirms extant literature about interpersonal tensions that arise due disagreements about safety during the pandemic (Forti, 2020; Brady, 2020).

Given the particular importance of social relationships at the developmental stage of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009; Barry, et al., 2016), this widespread phenomenon of emotional distancing may have far-reaching developmental and mental health implications for emerging adults. How this unprecedented—and in some ways, traumatic—experience of emotional distancing may impact this generation of college-age youth in their adulthood should remain a critical dimension of future research. Furthermore, understanding the effects of a pandemic that catalyzes emotional distancing in the sphere of interpersonal relationships can help us not only prepare for the social and emotional impacts of future epidemics, but it can also catalyze research on supporting social life and emotional health for individuals that experience isolation and/or social difficulties outside of a pandemic situation.

**Limitations**

Due to the open-ended nature of our questions, it is possible that more study participants experienced shifts in their relationships that could be categorized as emotional distancing, but did not opt to describe this in their responses. For example, many participants wrote vague phrases like “less contact” as their response, and while we cannot know what that exactly means, we can infer that this refers to relationships outside of their immediate shelter-in-place environments. It is also possible that participants who described strain in their relationships did not explain the full extent of how their relationships had changed since the pandemic. Furthermore, given that our survey took an average of 35 minutes to complete, it is possible that some participants encountered survey fatigue (Porter et al., 2004) and did not extensively respond to the open-ended questions. Additionally, some participants indicated that they interpreted our questions about relationships to be asking specifically about romantic relationships. It is not clear how much this impacted our data as most participants mentioned relationships other than romantic relationships. But, some may have only described change in romantic relationships, despite experiencing emotional distancing in their other relationships. Thus, the responses provided likely do not cover the entire scope of students’ experiences with relationship changes since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and there may be underreporting of emotional distancing. Further, the data were collected in the early days of the pandemic in the USA and may reflect an underestimate of the number of emerging adults experiencing relationship strain if the data were collected at present. Additionally, while we required that students prove their current full-time enrollment by providing a .edu email address that belongs to a post-secondary institution, we recognize that this is not failsafe, as alumni often still have access to student emails after graduating. Lastly, while we know that nearly 80% of students were sheltering-in-place with at least one parent, we do not have information about their living situation (i.e., residential or living off-campus) prior to the pandemic.

Our data were collected in late April 2020, a little over a month after the onset of many college campus closures and other shelter-in-place guidelines went into effect in the USA. At the time of our data collection, use of online social platforms spiked (Friedman, 2020), although a significant disinvestment from social media use in the later months of the pandemic has been reported (Molla, 2021; Feehan, 2020). Thus, responses for our study were collected at a time when online communication may be distinct from how emerging adults interact virtually today. However, the social implications of the pandemic are only likely to have increased as the pandemic continues and physical distancing guidelines largely remain in place across municipalities nationwide.

Finally, our purposive sampling of illustrative quotes revealed an overrepresentation of participants identifying as women and transgender and gender diverse, although more than 30% of participants in the full study sample identified as men. Despite this gender skewing among participants cited in the paper, our consistent findings in this relatively large sample suggest that these experiences of emotional distancing...
are widespread across demographics. However, this research opens a door for further inquiry into students’ relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ensuing social, emotional and developmental impacts from widespread emotional distancing, which may differ across the relational identities of gender, race, and sexuality.

**Future Directions**

For emerging adults who pursue a higher education, college can be a significant social experience in the pathway into adulthood. The emotional distancing experienced by emerging adult college students within their interpersonal relationships in Spring 2020 constitutes a distinct formative experience that is now part of this generation’s development. It will be important to monitor how emerging adults’ experiences with emotional distancing have evolved over the course of the pandemic, and especially to examine how emerging adults are engaging in new relationship-building practices in spite of the environmental conditions of the pandemic that favor emotional distancing. Such examination into the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic-induced emotional distancing should not only concern emerging adult college students, but the larger population of emerging adults who are not necessarily college educated, yet frequented social milieus (e.g., community groups, bars, and office/work spaces) that were closed for extended periods during shelter-in-place orders and thus also experienced a similar loss of social, in-person infrastructure.

The chemistry of relationships was significantly altered for college students during the COVID-19 pandemic, so much that it will be important for researchers to maintain sight of this historic period when conducting future research on the social and emotional experiences within interpersonal relationships and among college-attending and other emerging adult communities.

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**Open Practices**

The raw data, analysis code, and materials used in this study are not openly available due to privacy restrictions set forth by the institutional ethics board but can be obtained from the corresponding author following the completion of a privacy and fair use agreement. No aspects of the study were pre-registered.

**ORCID iDs**

Miranda P. Dotson @ https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7565-1869
Alison K. Cohen @ https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9848-934X

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Author Biographies

Miranda P. Dotson is a PhD student in Sociology at Northeastern University.

Elena Maker Castro is a PhD student in Human Development at University of California, Los Angeles.

Nina T. Magid is an undergraduate student in Biology at Brown University.

Lindsay T. Hoyt is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Fordham University.

Ahna B. Suleiman is an Assistant Professor of Public Health at California State University Sacramento.

Alison K. Cohen is an Assistant Professor of Epidemiology and Biostatistics at University of California San Francisco.