First Year, Online University, and the Trouble of Digital Community

By

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a novel learning environment for all universities; however, this novelty is twofold for first year students. The aim of this project is to explore the experience first years have had as online distance learners, and how this context has shaped their perceptions of university. Previous literature has found that first year is a time of identity shifting and changing friendship networks, both of which are necessary transitions for students to make as they adjust to university. Thus, analysis focused on how students were engaging with their peers online, and how peer-engagements shaped their perceptions of their integration into the university community. After conducing semi-structured interviews with students at the University of British Columbia and Dalhousie University, I found that online interaction between students was not conducive for connection. Framing interactions using the concept of sociability, I concluded that conversations were often forced and purposeful and as such were being conducted in a way that did not allow students to simply talk and get to know their peers. It was for this reason that students often had a difficult time seeing themselves as a part of the university community and as a university student in general. The isolation of online learning was further complicated by the fact that many of the students had drifted from high school friends. Though previous studies suggest this is common for many students, no university friendships were filling the gaps. Therefore, students had little emotional support from the university community.

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Introduction: Welcome to Orientation

The transition from high school to university is considered to be a time of excitement for post-secondary students (Wilcox, Winn, Fyvie-Gauld, 2015). However, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic provoked much uncertainty surrounding this transition. Great progress has been made to make learning accessible in online modules and call-in class sessions, with universities working tirelessly to create a learning environment that is as normal as possible while still respecting public health guidelines. Although these efforts are not in vain, the burden of distance learning has been an issue for students and faculty alike. For first year students (FYS) who are newly emerging into this learning context, it is likely the negative effects of the isolation related to the pandemic are especially potent. It is for this reason I explored how first year students are engaging with their fellow peers, and what kinds of connections they are fostering.

Out of these areas of interest, I developed two research questions: 1) How do students engage with one another when partaking in online distance education? 2) How do peer relationships impact perceptions of university? To answer these questions, I conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with first year students who have directly transitioned from high school to university to explore how the novelty of the pandemic and the implementation of online distance learning has shaped the ways students engage with one another. This research comes at an important time, for online modes of learning will likely remain in place as the spread of COVID-19 continues at a concerning rate. As someone with a close family member currently in first year, I have witnessed first-hand the disappointments and the stress that have so far dominated their experience. Knowing that they will continue their post-secondary education in a pandemic society motivates me to contribute to the growing body of literature pertaining to the sociology of education that can better inform universities.

Literature Review: Please Open Your Textbooks

How to Be A Student 101

     New university students enter into a space where they are no longer supervised by parents, but still have a great deal of pressure from the expectations and goals. Therefore, management of daily life and navigation of emerging relationships in the university context become skills students must hone for their first year out of high school to be fulfilling (Clydesdale, 2007). The introduction of seemingly unhindered access to certain drugs, alcohol, and sexual and/or romantic relationships, mixed with the reality of financial responsibility, career anxiety, and academic obligations (such as classes and assignment deadlines) creates a complicated and messy arena for FYS to navigate (Clydesdale, 2007). The workload alone is an overwhelming adjustment; assignments around every corner, and the transformation into an active learner who takes responsibility for their education is a difficult and exhausting process to go through (Kidwell, 2005). To mediate this, students come to see themselves as more mature and independent, capable of dealing with the issues of everyday life on their own (Clydesdale, 2007).

     However, with shifting priorities and changing identities, the relationships FYS have with parents and peers begin to shift and change with them. Parents become less present but more appreciated by students with their increased autonomy, friendship circles become smaller but closer, and new perspectives on romantic and sexual ideals are all common experiences amongst new university students (Clydesdale, 2007). Adapting to these changes can prove to be difficult, and for students who have poorer social networks and higher rates of loneliness, involvement in organized social activities can mediate the social transition from high school to university (Bohnert, Aikins, & Edidin, 2007). Thus, access to events such as orientation or residence meetings and organizations such as university sports teams or clubs are essential for many

students' adaptation to the university community. Not only do these organized events allow students to meet peers, but they serve as spaces where information and knowledge about university life can be shared. Therefore, the university space creates potential for fostering both emotional support and informational support for FYS. However, when students are currently not able to access these types of organized events and are not physically present with their peers in classes or in residence, it is not apparent how they are adapting to their new learning environment. When most of the FYS in 2020-2021 are remaining at home or in the very least are isolated in their rooms with little in-person peer engagement, how their social networks are changing, or not, is of great relevance to understanding the current university context.

Primary and Secondary Support

A key point of this project is to examine they types of support FYS are receiving while engaged in online distance learning. Peggy Thoits (2011) identifies two forms of social support: primary support and secondary support. Friends, family, significant others, and other close interpersonal relations all constitute primary support and provide the individual with emotional encouragement that makes them feel valued, loved, and cared for (Thoits, 2011; Thoits, 1995). Secondary support is provided by institutions or organizations which give informational support by distributing facts or advice for how to solve problems (Thoits, 2011). These two forms of support are invaluable for aiding the FYS transition to university.

The Importance of Friendship-Primary Support

Studies exploring the experiences of FYS and their social support have been conducted to predict student retention rates (Schlossberg, 1989; Kantanis, 2000; Thomas, 2002; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005; Rayle & Chung, 2007). Although my research is not aimed at exploring the retention rates of FYS, the reasons why they chose to stay, or leave, are relevant. The beginning of university is demarcated as a transitional period for the emerging post-secondary

students and requires the student to develop their academic, social, and personal domains to better fit into the context of university (Medalie, 1981; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Although the transition is often overwhelming, strong friendship networks have been found to be powerful mediators of stress for FYS (Schlossberg, 1989; Katanis, 2000; Buote, 2006; Buote et al., 2007; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005; Rayle & Chung, 2007). Friends serve as validating and reaffirming forces for FYS, for they allow students to feel as though they matter (Schlossberg, 1989; Rayle & Chung, 2007) and provide safe spaces for them to air the stress and anxiety associated with the novel learning environment (Buote et al., 2007). Friendship networks also serve as a site of knowledge exchange where students relay information related to assignment expectations, classroom etiquette, and the general ins-and-outs of university life that are not obvious (Awang, Kutty, & Ahmad, 2014).

It is clear from the literature that the development of strong friendships is an important component of the FYS experience and serves as an invaluable coping resource. However, with the current conditions of online distance education, these connections are harder to foster. Having a majority of post-secondary students learning online is new for universities and researchers alike, so there is a gap in the literature relating to how these primary supports are facilitated in this novel learning environment. My research aims to fill this gap.

Online Distance Education - Secondary Support

As previously mentioned, secondary support groups consist of institutions and organizations that provide formal and impersonal knowledge to individuals (Thoits, 2011). Universities are examples of secondary social support groups, as they provide students with access to services including mental health counselling, academic advising, financial advising, and health/wellness resources. These services are meant to target the specific issues students face; while primary supports provide more emotionally based strategies for coping with stress in

general, secondary supports will give "feedback about the person's interpretation of a situation and guidance regarding possible courses of action" (Thoits, 2011, p. 146). Thus, university services provide students with solutions in a more formalized and standardized manner. As such, universities have organized social supports for students engaged in online distance learning to help them cope with the uncertainty and isolation associated with this isolating mode of education.

Distance education has been a component of university education well before the COVID-19 pandemic. In the 1970s, mass revisions were made to models of education to improve communication technologies, support services, and foundations meant to support distance education in universities which now serve as the basis for our current approach to distance learning (Keegan, 1990, p. 4). Keegan (1990) reflects on earlier definitions of distance education and synthesizes them to identify the six key characteristics of distance learning. He lists them as (1) the separation between the teacher and student, (2) the involvement of an educational organization, (3) the use of media to carry out educational content, (4) two-way communication between the student and teacher, (5) the possibility of meetings, and (6) the participation in an industrialized education which is separate from other forms of education (i.e. traditional learning) (Keegan, 1990, p. 38-39).

Although this form of learning has been around for some time, there is little research on FYS who have transitioned directly from high school to university who engage in online distance learning. Distance education has been utilized mostly by adults who are employed while attending school, or who started families and could not afford to leave for long periods of time (Galusha, 1998). Therefore, my research serves to fill the gap surrounding FYS experience of engaging in online distance learning.

The Class on Class

Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural and social capital facilitates social science research in education (Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007; Lehmann, 2007; Lehmann, 2009; McMillan, 2014). The concepts help provide an understanding of class differences in post-secondary student experiences. Bourdieu argues that capital extends beyond the economic dimension. Cultural capital is acquired through the individual's class to give them certain competences and tastes that fit with their social context (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital is the resources one has access to as a result of their membership in a particular social group (Bourdieu, 1986). For my analysis, I focused on how these two forms of capital and how they lend themselves to FYS perceptions of university. Through implicit socialization processes, universities unconsciously reinforce the middle-class culture for all students (Lehmann, 2013). This is an issue for students who are from different socioeconomic backgrounds, as they initially lack the social and cultural capital needed to thrive in the middle-class university setting (Lehmann, 2009).

Reay (1996) asserts that working-class students in university are in constant conflict with their sense of self: "[a]ssimilation constitutes betrayal, while holding on to aspects of working-class identity marks out our unacceptability" (p. 445). Indeed, the demarcation of 'working-class' serves as a way for the middle-class to draw a distinctive line between themselves and the 'outsiders' (i.e. the working-class) to reinforce their dominant values (Skeggs, 1997). It is for this reason that class may cause additional stress for the individuals from a lower socioeconomic status. Studies have found that working-class university students will change their physical appearance, adjust political views, and distance themselves from their family and high-school peers to hide their working-class roots to avoid stigmatization or discrimination (Lehmann, 2014; Aries & Seider, 2005). Students who begin to adopt middle-class forms of capital often feel alienated from their families and peers who had for so long been their primary support network

(Lehmann, 2014; Read, Archer & Leathwood, 2003). Therefore, the feeling of being an 'outsider' (Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003) is exacerbated by these diminished social ties. Moreover, FYS who come from a working-class background often feel isolated from their middle-class peers, as they do not have the same lifestyle or values (Lehmann, 2007) which makes connecting socially a difficult or impossible task. This tension has been labeled as *habitus dislocation* (Baxter & Britton, 2001), which is a "painful dislocation between an old and newly developing habitus, which are ranked hierarchically and carry connotations of inferiority and superiority" (p. 99). Students are caught in the throes of two competing worlds, the one they are growing out of and the one they have yet to be integrated into. First year acts as a form of transitional suspension, for they are not yet middle-class, but they are also not fully working-class either.

Sociability of Students

Finally, since friendship is an important component of my project, I used Simmel's (1949) definition of sociability to frame how students are engaging with one another. Sociability in its purest from is a playful and amicable way of conversing that does not have an ulterior motive. It sees conversation as "talking as the end in itself," (Simmel, 1949, 259) and thus creates a space where social cohesion can flourish. Without a "business-like" orientation, sociable conversations are casual and free-flowing, allowing individuals to talk about any topic that can be switched once conversation is exhausted. Although it is meant to be playful and casual, sociability is not completely detached from reality. Indeed, "All sociability is but a symbol of life, as it shows itself in the flow of a lightly amusing play; but, even so, a symbol of life, whose likeness it only so far alters as is required by the distance from it gained in the play" (Simmel, 1949, 261). In short, rather than veiling reality entirely, sociability creates distance between the seriousness of life and those conversing. This allows the topics to be grounded in

social life while also granting individuals the playful and amiable disposition that sociability thrives on. Since sociability is important for social cohesion, I explored how it presents itself in the online setting.

Methods: Intro to Interviewing

My analysis is based on 10 qualitative semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. The interviews, which I conducted over Zoom in January 2021. Qualitative interviews allowed me as the researcher to learn from the participants and provide them with a space to let their experiences be heard (Wilkinson, Bouma, Carland, 2019). Whereas a quantitative study would need to paint a picture for the participants in a survey format, qualitative interviews give them the opportunity to bring up the issues they feel are relevant without much influence from the researcher (Wilkinson, Bouma, Carland, 2019). Moreover, qualitative studies reveal to the researcher "relevant aspects, details which can be abstracted from the totality of details that make it up so that we can answer some questions we have" (Becker, 1996) about the object of study. Especially when examining the experiences of students and how students have adjusted to an online university education, it is important that the participant is able to elaborate on their experiences and feelings about this transition. As the researcher, I am also able to probe and explore in greater detail the participants' responses that may be unclear otherwise. Qualitative interviews allow for greater fluidity and expression in the participants responses, which is important for my exploration of how social networks have impacted their experience of beginning univeristy during an uncertain and stressful time. Especially because this study has implications for the treatment of mental health of students, taking a qualitative approach which takes into account the experiences, beliefs, and motivations of the participants (Rich & Ginsberg, 1999) will better inform the practical use of this knowledge.

The participants for this study are FYS who have directly transitioned from high school to university, and who are enrolled full-time at the University of British Columbia (UBC) or Dalhousie University. There were no exclusionary criteria for race, ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status. I chose to interview students who directly transitioned from high school to university because much literature suggests that these students in particular experience a great deal of uncertainty and stress as a result of this change (Medalie, 1981; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005; Buote et al, 2007; Gibney, Moore, Murphy, & O'Sullivan, 2011; Awang, Kutty, & Ahmad, 2014). I sought to recruit students from two groups: dorm room students and students living at home. This distinction was made to examine how students living in different contexts access primary and secondary supports, what these supports look like for them, and which type of supports work, or do not, and why. FYS in these different contexts likely have access to different types of in-person primary support, so it is important to distinguish the two groups to examine how different social networks impact their experiences.

Participants were recruited in two ways. UBC students were recruited through the help of an orientation group leader. I provided them with a recruitment post which they circulated to the official first year group chats for Arts Collegia students and announced it on their Canvas learning community (i.e. online class pages). I also used snowball sampling, staring with my brother who is a FYS at UBC. He provided my contact information to peers that he knew either from high school or his orientation group. Dalhousie students were recruited through recruitment posts made on first year sociology and anthropology class pages.

I conducted my interviews using a semi-structured interview guide, which covered the topics of context (where they are currently living while studying), socioeconomic status, stress, social networks, and university resources (Appendix D). The main theme of the interview was

how students are engaging with their peers and close social contacts, and how those engagements impact their experiences surrounding their online education. Therefore, exploring stress, social networks, and university resources is key for examining the research questions. However, previous literature has found that class and socioeconomic status play a large role in the various ways students experience university life (Aries & Seider, 2005; Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007; Lehmann, 2007; Lehmann, 2009; Lehmann, 2014; McMillan, 2014), thus, taking into account the role of class is crucial for obtaining a full picture of how stress is experienced by FYS.

Data analysis followed the systematic coding process as outlined by Strauss (1990). Based in grounded theory, systemic coding consists of three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding acts as a 'springboard' which allows the researcher to make broader speculations about the data and compare it to other domains that may further enrich the contextualization of the findings (Strauss, 1990, p. 57). Axial coding requires the researcher to identify the main category to which all concepts will be linked, which will aid in finding complex links with related categories (Strauss, 1990, p. 57-58). Finally, selective coding has the researcher choose the categories that are central to the research project, and sub-categories are linked to the core categories allowing the links between variables and categories to be intensified and enriched (Strauss, 1990, p. 59). My research looks at student perspectives of stress but also considers the contextual and structural conditions in which they are situated. Strauss suggests the following ideas for examining the conjunction of these elements:

> "[T]he grounded theory researcher must engage in coding that results in the detailed codes connecting specific conditions with specific interactions, strategies, and consequences. When examining the data bearing on the structural conditions, a researcher must ask: 'But

what difference do these structural things make for interaction and when examining the more interactional type of data, the researcher must ask: 'But what helps to account for these phenomena, including not only the more immediate structural conditions but the larger 'macro' ones?'" (p. 60)

I transcribed all the interviews and analyzed them using grounded theory strategies, aided NVivo 12 software.

The risks associated with my research project were minimal. Discussing stress may have caused a small amount of discomfort to participants, as it may have reminded them of negative feelings. This discomfort may have been more likely for members of groups that have traditionally been marginalized in university settings, such as students from working-class backgrounds or first-generation university students, students who are racialized, Indigenous, or LGBTQ+, and students who deal with disabilities during university. However, my questions focused on how students are coping with university which puts it in a more positive and manageable light. That being said, it is possible that some students may have felt drained or uncomfortable during or after the interview. I assured participants at the beginning of the interview that we could pause or stop the interview at any time and if they are uncomfortable with any questions, they did not have to answer them. I also ensured that I had a list of student resources offered at UBC and Dalhousie that I could share with them (e.g. mental health counselling) if any issues arose.

The Future of University

For the new post-secondary students in this study, their first-year experience will be memorable, however it is unlikely their memories will be similar to any previous generations of first year students. This research aimed to give FYS an opportunity to share their triumphs and

tribulations in university thus far, in the hope that their stories will inform how universities create

policies and resources in the coming years. Since it is unlikely that post-secondary education will

return to the previous state of normalcy anytime soon, gaining an understanding of what is

working and what needs improvement is invaluable not only for the universities, but also for

future students. It is difficult to point fingers at administrators for not meeting the demands of

students during a novel pandemic, however, it is possible to suggest areas of growth and

improvement for the subsequent semesters. Listening and taking into account what students are

saying about their education is the only way universities can truly thrive in the midst of a global

disaster.

Analysis: Talking to A Blank Screen

I aimed to interview 10 FYS; five from UBC and five from Dalhousie. I also attempted to recruit

five students living in dorm rooms and five living in family homes. However in the end, eight of

the students I spoke with were living at home and two were in dorm rooms, both of which were

UBC students. One of the students, Frances, who lived in a dorm room, had only just moved in at

the start of the second semester when our interview took place. All of the students attending

UBC were living in Vancouver, British Columbia. The Dalhousie students were more spread out

with three living in the Halifax Regional Municipality, one living in a small town two hours

outside of Halifax, and one living in the United States. Of all 10 participants, seven identified as

female, two identified as male, and one identified using both she/her and they/them pronouns.

There was a diverse range of degree aspirations amongst the students, however, seven reported

being in a Bachelor of Arts Program (see Appendix E).

Three main themes emerged from my analysis: a lack of socialization, a lack of

sociability, and a semblance of sociability.

Lack of Socialization

Cultural Capital at Home

The literature explains that students from a lower socioeconomic status (SES) have a hard time with social and cultural capital because they feel like they have to conform to the middle-class norms. However, because they exist in their own environment and do their work in their own unique context, there is no comparison to other FYS. Students expressed class awareness in the online setting through economic capital. Students reported being stressed about money or would just bring up being worried about money in relation to their university outcomes.

> "I think one of the big stressors for me as far as university is money 'cause like, there's always, like, tuition is expensive and student loans are annoying to deal with 'cause it's just like, so, the process was so annoying. And moving was exciting and like, but there was a couple of unexpected things in terms of money -- ah!"
>
> Frances, residence student, University of British Columbia (UBC)

> "In high school, if I got a zero on project, like what was going to happen to me? Like literally like what was gonna happen versus like here I can, I could like fail the class and then I would like lose out on money which is a big driving force, it's just so much money right. So I think the repercussions of not trying your hardest are bigger and so that definitely plays a factor in the high school versus university change."
>
> Georgia, home student, Dalhousie University

Students did not mention cultural issues such as comparing how other students worked or what activities students did in their free time; it is likely the cultural capital component was not fully

recognized. Therefore, there was less class comparison occurring between students as a result of online learning. It was less of an alienating experience, as the students were usually interacting with their families or high school social networks and not having to change their class identity to fit in with new social contacts and with the middle-class norms of university.

Self-Efficacy and Working Alone

Because students were studying in an isolated environment, they were not socialized in the way a student in normal circumstances would be. Students often felt like they had figured out how they needed to work to keep on top of things because everything was more self-directed, so the tools and skills they developed could apply regardless of their class. They did say that they don't really feel "like a university student, they are a student at university." My contention is that this is indicative of feeling like an outsider from the university community at large, I also see it as freeing, because they are not confined to the very classist expectations of what it means to be a "university student." Therefore, many students had to learn how to navigate university-style learning in their own ways. Without friends and peers around them to help, the first-year students I interviewed spoke about having to 'adapt' their previous learning styles to fit with their new context.

> "I've always learned better like when I'm around other people because I felt like, um, if I don't understand something I can just go to them for help, they can come to me for help and I can just build myself up by learning with someone else and so with online school I guess I didn't really have that luxury. Like I said I had to adapt learning by myself, and using outside resources like check on YouTube just to try to learn new things by myself and I guess go out of my way to kind of further my understanding of certain topics"

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Ana, home student, UBC

Students acknowledged that their organizational skills or ability to know how to access resources while in high school were transferable to the university setting. Students who felt prepared by high school still expressed feeling stressed with new workloads and grading systems, however they reported being able to manage their stress and did not see it as being as significant of an issue in comparison to students who felt more overwhelmed by their new learning environment.

> "I've always been very disciplined in terms of doing like, homework and studying and stuff, so that part wasn't really that difficult for me. And because I was just at home, I just kind of spent all my time doing my work, like I didn't really have anything else to do. So I didn't find like academic that challenging… like I found that my previous classes had prepared me really well, like the courses I took in high school."
>
> Frances, residence student, UBC

Even if the students indicated that they did not feel high school prepared them very well, most of them felt that they had, to some degree, adopted a work ethic that allowed them to perform well in their studies. The stress during the beginning of the year was more palpable for FYS who did not feel as prepared going into university. However, by the time they entered their second semester most felt that they had found strategies and habits that fit their learning style. There was a sense of confidence that they had found their footing, or in one students' case "the right pens to use" (Georgia, home student, Dalhousie). Although online learning can be isolating for these students, the independence granted by an individualized learning environment has allowed them

to engage in habits and strategies that fit them more than the university culture would normally. Georgia was one of a few students who had jobs and described how having classes online meant that she could still work while going to school without much interruption. With many of the first-year classes pre-recorded, students had the ability to watch lectures whenever and therefore did not have to sacrifice time at work for time at class, or vice versa. Therefore, some of the barriers for learning at university that are associated with class were not as apparent in an online setting.

No Community, No Problems

Independent learning seems to serve as a buffer for the class dissonance that many students face when being socialized as university students. Although these students are able to practice their own learning habits, many of them felt uncomfortable when applying the label of 'university student' to themselves. Being isolated from the campus and learning alone either in their homes or in dorm rooms did not allow the students to form new identities that relate to their university experience.

> "When I think of myself I'm like ya I'm just Diane and I only recently started thinking of myself as kind of different than high school Diane. I didn't really have some sort of snap like 'oh my god I'm a university student' I still haven't, I don't know if I will. It might just be a gradual thing. I just think I'm a student at a university"
>
> Diane, residence student, UBC

> "…there is a mild disconnect that I experience just because I haven't been there at all and I don't really feel like an authentic UBC student yet because it has all been online. And so I know that I am obviously! It's just uh, you know… I guess all the online acceptance letters and stuff, it isn't quite enough to feel fully like, immersed in the community and like I…

sometimes I can't, I don't feel super confident in saying like ya I'm a UBC student or like

ya I'm a Thunderbird [sports mascot] or whatever"

Ciaran, home student, UBC

As Ciaran highlights, there is something more to being a university student than simply being

accepted into the university. Hannah, a home student at Dalhousie who is currently living in the

U.S., explained that she felt she "academically feels like part of the community" but because she

was "not a part of any societies or anything," she did not really see herself as a part of the

university community at large. All the students I spoke to mirror a similar sentiment: because

they were not engaging with other students, attending university organized events, or becoming

members or clubs and societies in an in-person setting, they could not feel like they were truly

university students who were a part of the university community.

"I think because of that I'm not super involved with like, events and having parties with

people and stuff like that. I feel like I'm not super um, involved in the community but I

also think in university everybody's doing their own thing so it doesn't really bother me. I

don't feel excluded in any way I just think this was my version of university at the

moment"

Janet, home student, Dalhousie

Janet acknowledged that because of the isolation online university perpetuates, it was hard for

students to physically gather. Her saying that "this was my version of university at the moment"

is something that most of the other participants mentioned. Janet touches on the belief that this

type of experience is not a permanent one and will likely change as schools slowly begin to hold more in-person classes. Therefore, it is understandable that these students are not fully able to recognize themselves as 'university students' because of the ever-shifting foundation they stand on. A lack of integration by means of peer engagement is one piece of this. The other piece is the transient nature of this academic year; students know that their learning environment is likely going to change dramatically over time, and therefore fully adjusting to this learning environment is not worth the struggle. As Kassidy explains:

> "...when I get into university in person I feel like it will be a completely different experience. So like this year is preparing me for something isn't gonna help me next year."
>
> Kassidy, home student, Dalhousie

The individualized state of university has left students in a limbo, not fully integrated but still a student at university.

Lack of Sociability
The social networks that people have made at university, specifically students who are living at home, embody the 'secondary support' sector more than the primary support sector. If students are reaching out to one another, it is because they do not understand something in class, need clarification on specific terms or problems, or need an assignment explained. Student interactions, then, are goal oriented.

Discussion boards are an example of goal-oriented interactions. Classes have asked students to introduce themselves using online discussion boards to promote interaction and engagement. Students discussed their irritation when having to write short posts on class pages to introduce

themselves to their classmates. However, the students are not really engaging with the person so much as students are using their post, and by extension them as a person, as a means to an end. Thus, the university setting is facilitating a social network of utility between students.

> "I had teachers that were very adamant about them. Um, one teacher in particular had us write a pretty hefty paragraph and then respond with textual evidence to other peoples' posts. So it really wasn't a conversation, I looked at it more as an assignment, um I didn't see it as meeting people I guess. So it was pretty rigid and not, I didn't enjoy them just because you were trying to get participation points from a discussion board."
>
> Hannah, home student, Dalhousie

Conversations in classes were directed by professors and were often centred around class material, thus conversations were not social. The synchronous online classroom is purposeful and rigid in how it requires students to interact; when students enter the session their microphones are muted, their cameras are likely off, they only speak when told to do so, and are given prompts for how conversation should unfold. Thus, student interactions have a business-like quality (Simmel, 1949) in which there is an objective result the students are working towards, which in this setting would be participation marks or assignment completion. There is little room for the 'play' necessary for sociability to thrive, and as a result the conversations students have led to utility-based relationships rather than seeing "talking as the end in itself" (Simmel, 1949, 259).

'It's Just not the Same Thing'

Students were making connections, but with the exception of Diane in residence, all students acknowledge that they had not made friends. Even outside of classes, events that the universities ran for students to meet one another did not seem to work as well as students had hoped. Students said that online events are "just not the same thing" (Ciaran, home student, UBC) because they require more effort to participate in. The Dalhousie students all explained that they either did not join orientation events or dropped out after a day or two because none of the activities were doing what in-person interactions could achieve. While the UBC students did tend to stick with orientation activities, none of them seemed particularly impressed with the results. Much like class discussions and break-out groups, orientation or other university-run events were based around a particular activity or topic and therefore conversations were directed and prompted. As Isabelle explains, conversations outside of the online environment allow for people to use their surroundings as natural prompts, which leads to more free-flowing and interchangeable topics of conversation.

> "when you're in person there's more leeway for conversation I guess? Like, I don't know, if you're walking past and you see a sign for an improv show or something, that just directs conversation and you can be like 'oh I was on an improv team once.'"
>
> Isabelle, home student, Dalhousie

In the online setting, students are told why they are participating in events, and by virtue of the directed nature of these engagements, the orientation is more 'business-like' rather than social. Ciaran reported that some of the events UBC held involved students playing a popular online game together, and therefore conversations would be directed towards playing the game. The ability for students to discuss things like their involvement in improv teams, in Isabelle's case,

would not likely come up naturally when playing an online game. The conversations hinge on what is available to the students; when the events require students to complete a task, there is not much room for students to engage in free-flowing conversations. Conversations are directed towards the task at hand, and even if the task is to simply meet people it becomes a goal rather than something that organically occurs.

Even in a residence setting, students still had to negotiate the interactions they had with their peers due to the current COVID restrictions.

> "…when she [her friend] invites people to dinner because we always eat together and we're like in a bubble, uh, she literally, we all ask 'is it okay if this person comes to dinner also we think they're, we think that they're 'clean'… Like every time… she brings people in, she's like 'ya I asked them to dinner because I know they just finished quarantining so I don't think they're a risky person to eat dinner with'
>
> Diane, residence student, UBC

Diane's experience is distinctive in the context of this study in that she is one of two students that I spoke to who live in residence and therefore had more opportunities to meet new people at university. However, much of the organic mingling of peers that occurs in residences was not happening because of the negotiations students and their small bubbles had to do amongst themselves and potential friend candidates.

To Reach Out or Not Reach Out
Many students, from both UBC and Dalhousie, discussed the discomfort or awkwardness they felt about reaching out to other students over social media. Ben, a home student at UBC

explained that reaching out so a classmate meant he had to "awkwardly reach out and DM [direct message] them." Frances highlighted a similar issue with reaching out to peers over social media.

> "…it was still really hard for me because it was really difficult to [be] like 'okay so I talk to you on Zoom and I kinda want to connect with you further but like, I don't know really know how to just chat. Should I just send you a private message on Zoom or like find you on Instagram?' And if I had found someone on Instagram or if we had like, exchanged social media and was it like, is it weird to just message you like we don't really know really know each other, we haven't really met each other. So it was still really challenging."
>
> Frances, residence student, UBC

Frances mentioned that even though she may have had a class with a student, they "haven't really met each other" because of the anonymity online classes perpetuates. Other students also discussed the discomfort they felt when thinking about reaching out to their peers. Initiatives such as asking for cellphone numbers or social media information was typically seen as "awkward," "forced," or "uncomfortable" because they did not feel they knew the other students well enough to ask for personal information. Frances, along with other students, highlighted that a "lot of people don't have their cameras on Zoom so it's just like a name and a black square, and you don't know who they are." Asking a black square to exchange phone numbers is understandably daunting, as there is little that students can glean about their peers with just a name attached to their blank screen.

Stress and Emotional Burden

For FYS, being able to connect and relate to their peers is a key mitigator for stress (Wilcox, Winn, Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). While the stressor these students face is not much different from students who have done classes in-person, they must cope with stress in much more isolated and individualized ways.

"…through high school you had people or friends who also felt the same way. So you could go to class and be like 'oh my god I was up until 1 AM crying over this math assignment that I just couldn't figure out' and someone would go 'same!' and so you'd have that comradery with them whereas now it's like I'll have a panic attack and be like 'nope sit down and do your essay!' So it's definitely different 'cause you're not talking about it, you're not seeing other people having similar and/or different reactions to stuff."

Hannah, home student, Dalhousie

Without in-person classes or a space to congregate, FYS are stressed alone and are having to deal with novelty without the support of other students. Even with friends from high school, many of the students, specifically the UBC students, indicated that they were hesitant to reach out to their peers because they did not want to "burden" them with their stress.

"I guess everyone is kind of dealing with their own things so I guess it's kind of hard to reach out to my friends because when I try to reach out to them they're like 'oh I'm dealing with my own things' and your like okay cool I'm not gonna, you know, bother you anymore."

Ana, first year home student, UBC

A lack of motivation was mentioned as a reason for not meeting new people at university, however this struggle was also reflected in students' ability to reach out to any peers. FYS experience a great deal of stress from school and shifting identities as young adults; forcing

oneself to pick up the phone to text of call someone for emotional support requires much more

effort than seeing a friend in class and having a casual conversation that can lead to an

emotionally validating interaction that students often need.

A Semblance of Sociability

Two students that I spoke with did have more frequent interactions with their peers which

did open more opportunities for more casual conversations. Frances at UBC and Georgia at

Dalhousie were privy to program-specific orientation activities and had more synchronous

classes compared to students in general programs. The interactions these participants were

having with peers were still more goal-oriented, however there were more opportunities to reach

out to fellow students for help and advice. As a result, they used language that signaled a sense

of confidence in their abilities in school and were able to look more positively towards the future

of their university experience.

"I definitely have found that my faculty at UBC is really helpful um, and like I was

taking a course last term, it's like a faculty specific course that's intro kind of and the

professor who teaches it really cares about making the transition to university easier so

there were a lot of resources introduced there that were helpful"

Frances, residence student, UBC

"…just by nature of our very specific program, so there's some people who are just outta

high school like me or going right into it but there's some people who have, like this is

their second degree or they're in their second year or whatever so it's a combination of

things and people are really kind of blending their knowledge and expertise and stuff. So

I feel like they are pretty supportive and stuff as much as they can be in this setting."

Georgia, home student, Dalhousie

Students did not see these co-operative friendships as less valuable, rather they served as a resource which made navigating a new learning space more manageable.

"I think the group that we made has like, I don't know, 15 people in it so it's mostly like, 'hey did you see that thing that they posted, or like do we have class this week', like that kind of stuff. But it's nice 'cause those answers can get like those questions can get answered really quickly too so that's kind of the relationship that we kind of built there is good"

Georgia, home student, Dalhousie

For Frances and Georgia, the more frequent interaction with peers has allowed them to get to know their classmates better than students who have had little orientation involvement and few live classes.

Parental Support

Most of the participants mentioned the role their parents played in helping them manage their transtition in both emotional and practical ways. I specifically asked students who they felt their main source of emotional support was, and all but three reported it being one or both of their parents. Within the context of online learning, this finding does make sense. Most of the existing literature on students transitioning into university suggests that students turn to their friends more and their parents less for support. However, when students are not meeting new people and feel they cannot turn to friends for support due to concerns of being a 'burden', parents are the closest and safest place to turn.

"[I was speaking with m]ostly family cause that's mostly who I was seeing every single day. But um, friends sometimes, but I wasn't making that many new friends at university and so, like, as the term went on I kind of relied on friends less just 'cause you know, everyone was drifting apart. We weren't seeing each other every day and we weren't in the same classes anyone and so, ya mostly just family"

Ben, home student, UBC

Conversations between parents and students were more casual and open-ended. Students discussed how being able to 'vent' or explain to their parents their downfalls and successes was important for coping and managing their stress. Importantly, parents were often instigating these conversations by bringing up such topics at dinner or when seeing the students throughout the day. Little no effort was being made to start conversations around how the student was doing, they were simply talking for the sake of talking.

Waiting It Out

Students seemed to be optimistic for the future of their university experience, choosing to see the following years with in-person classes as a more effective way of meeting people.

"I would have been more open with making friends, if I'm being totally honest [laughs]! I definitely could have tried a little bit this year. But a lot of my thing is like out of sight out of mind, so like if you're in front of me, like next to me I will make friends with you, so in person is definitely like good for me socially. So yeah, I think there's a little bit of disappointment 'cause I wasn't able to. But I know also knew in the future it would

change. So I could always do it in like in the future I could make better connections and stuff"

Georgia, home student, Dalhousie University

Nearly all the students suggested that if they had the opportunity to be in residence or could sit next to someone in class, they would be more willing and able to make friends. Without those options available, waiting it out to put the effort into something they knew would work better was the more effective strategy than awkwardly reaching out to someone over Zoom.

Conclusions: Learning to Be Alone

To reiterate my research questions, how do students engage with one another when participating in online distance education and how do peer-relationships impact perceptions of university? Students in this project made it clear that they were not engaging much, if at all, with their university peers. Unfortunately, this years incoming cohort has embarked on a bleak journey. It was difficult for me as a researcher and a student to hear these FYS bluntly remark on how they had not made any friends since starting university and how isolating their experience had been so far. The structure of online classes and events made it difficult for students to feel that sharing personal information was natural or organic and contrasted online conversations with sitting next to a classmate in lecture. Conversations were seldom free-flowing, instead they were prompted and directed which made interactions feel forced. Buote et al. (2007) found that student friendships formed when students were able to bond over shared interests, values, and experiences. The students in this study never truly got the opportunity to explore their interests, values, and experiences with their peers. Since conversations were driven by class content or the

object of the social event (such playing a video game), there was little space for engagement to be personal. This has implications for FYS students' integration into the university community. Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld (2005) note that university friendships come to replace parents and high-school friends as the main social support of students, which helps buffer the stresses and anxieties of entering a novel learning environment. For the group of students in this study, university peers did serve as a form of more formal secondary support to provide information which helped students complete assignments (see Thoits, 2011). However, the emotional primary support that is invaluable for students to adjust to university and safely navigate their shifting identities as mature post-secondary students was lacking. The first years I spoke with noted they did not feel as though they were truly a part of the university community because of how little they interacted with their peers. Some went so far as to say that they did not feel like an authentic university student, which makes sense; it is hard to be socialized without being social.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size is small and thus cannot be generalized. Because the students mostly came from family homes, the sample also is not evenly balanced, neglecting the experiences of students living dorm rooms and international students living in significantly different time zones. Second, there is a potential for sample bias. Students who are more socially active may not have had the time to participate in this study, and thus this project may not represent the experience of students who were able to meet with their peers more frequently.

Even with limitations, this project highlights the lack of primary social support FYS have in pandemic era university learning. Isolation in one's first year likely has serious implications for retention rates, self-efficacy, and stress in subsequent years of university education. Future

studies should continue to explore how FYS whose education began online perceive university as schools begin to open slowly with restrictions lessening.

I did ask students how they felt regarding the universities' efforts to get students connected with each other. Since many of them had not made friends, they were not very impressed, however they all did convey sympathy towards the attempts. It is difficult to make suggestions for how to mediate the issues around lacking of student interaction when we are in the thick of it because so much of it stems from the rigidity and awkwardness of online engagement. However, universities should consider implementing orientations and social events for this year's incoming class to allow them to meet in person once public health authorities have deemed it safe to do so. Creating spaces where students can freely engage with one another without restrictive discussions is imperative for their integration into the university community, and it is my hope that they will get that opportunity sooner than later.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Email to UBC Jumpstart Leaders

Hello, [insert name]

My name is Mary Berger and I am a fourth-year undergraduate student doing an honours degree in sociology at Dalhousie University in Halifax. For my honours project, I am interviewing first year students to explore how they understand and cope with stress while engaged in online learning. I am also comparing students living in dorm rooms to students who are living at their family homes, because each group might have access to different kinds of support. In January I will be starting to recruit participants for this research.

I am reaching out because as a Jumpstart orientation leader, I am hoping that I could ask permission to have you post a short recruitment poster in your orientation group. I would like to post a single call for participants in January. The post will include my contact information, a description of who I am looking for to participate (first year students who have directly transitioned from high school to university), a brief description of the study, and that voluntary participation involves a single interview up to one hour in length.

I appreciate you taking the time to read over this message, and if you have any further questions please feel free to reach out. I look forward to hearing back from you!

Mary Berger

Appendix B – Recruitment Post

Hello! My name is Mary Berger and I am a fourth-year undergraduate student doing my honours degree in sociology at Dalhousie University in Halifax. For my honours project, I am interviewing first year students to explore how they understand and cope with their stress while engaged in online learning. I am also comparing students living in dorm rooms to students who are living at their family homes, because each group might have access to different kinds of support.

If you are a first-year student who has directly transitioned from high school to university and are interested in sharing your thoughts and experiences with online distance learning since starting at UBC, I would love to speak with you! Participation involves a single interview that will take about one hour to complete, and all aspects are completely voluntary. If you decide to participate, your identity will be kept confidential in all aspects of the research.

If you are interested in participating, or have any questions about the project, please email me at mr246005@dal.ca. Thank you!

Appendix C – Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

How First Year Students Perceive Online Distance Learning

You are invited to take part in research being conducted by me, Mary Berger, an undergraduate student in Sociology, as part of my honour's degree at Dalhousie University. The purpose of this research is to interview first year students who have transitioned directly from high school to university about their experiences related to online distance learning. I am comparing students who live in dorm rooms and who live in family homes to explore how the experience of online distance learning may vary between these two contexts. While the experience is the key feature of my project, I am also exploring how stress is understood and dealt with differently in this context. I will write up the results of this research in a paper for my class, called the honours thesis.

As a participant in the research you will be asked to partake in an interview during which you will be asked about your experiences with online distance learning at university. The interview will take about an hour in length and will be conducted over a Zoom call. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded using the Mac software Audiohijack. If I quote any part of it in my honours thesis, I will use a pseudonym, not your real name, and I will remove any other details that could identify you from the quote.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You do not have to answer questions that you do not want to answer, and you are welcome to stop the interview at any time if you no longer want to participate. If you decide to stop participating after the interview is over, you can do so until March 1. I will not be able to remove the information you provided after that date, because I will have completed my analysis, but the information will not be used in any other research.

Information that you provide to me will be kept private and will be anonymized, which means any identifying details such as your name will be removed from it. Only the honours class supervisor and I will have access to the unprocessed information you offer. I will describe and share general findings in a presentation to the Sociology and Social Anthropology Department and in my honours thesis. Nothing that could identify you will be included in the presentation or the thesis I will keep anonymized information so that I can learn more from it as I continue with my studies. No identifying characteristics will be kept in the information once the thesis has been completed.

The risks associated with this study are no greater than those you encounter in your everyday life. With the risks associated with in-person meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic, the interview will take place over a Zoom call. There is a risk of loss of personal privacy from the use of internet-based communications. The risk is no greater or lesser than when using applications such as Skype and Zoom for other purposes.

There will be no direct benefit to you in participating in this research and you will not receive compensation. The research, however, will contribute to new knowledge on how first year students experience online distance learning, and how the context they are in shapes that experience. If you would like to see how your information is used, please feel free to contact me and I will send you a copy of my honours thesis after April 30.

If you have questions or concerns about the research please feel free to contact me or the honours class supervisor. My contact information is mr246005@dal.ca. You can contact the honours class supervisor, Dr Martha Radice, at the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Dalhousie University on (902) 494-6747, or email martha.radice@dal.ca.

If you have any ethical concerns about your participation *in* this research, you may contact Catherine Connors, Director, Research Ethics, Dalhousie University at (902) 494-1462, or email ethics@dal.ca.

Participant's consent:

I have read the above information and I agree to participate in this study.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix D – Interview Guide

<u>Introduction for Interviewees</u>
Begin by thanking them for their participation and going over the consent form again. Ask them if they are comfortable being recorded for the interview.

<u>Consent</u>
1. Would I be able to get you state your consent for the recording?

<u>Context</u>
2. Are you living at home or in a university dorm room?
    a. Who are the people you see every day (friends, family, etc)
    b. Are any of them also doing post-secondary schooling right now?
3. Are you living in Halifax currently?
    a. If yes-Have you always lived in Halifax or did you move here for school?
    b. If no-where? are you living in a different time zone?
4. Were you planning on living where you are right now or did the pandemic impact your current living arrangement?
5. What made you decide to go to Dal?

<u>Socioeconomic Status (Class)</u>
6. Are you the first member of your family to attend university?
7. Do you feel like your high school provided you with resources to know what to expect when you got to university?
    a. What sort of options would teachers or guidance counselors provide students for post-secondary?
8. When you started university, how did you feel about making this transition? How prepared did you feel?
    a. Who did you turn to for the most emotional support during this transition?
    b. Did you feel like you could talk to your parents about how you were feeling about starting school?
9. How were your parents able to support you as your transitioned into university?
    a. Were your parents able to provide you with information that was helpful for starting university?
10. Do you feel like you've changed in anyways since coming to university?
11. Do you feel like you've had the tools and skills needed to navigate university?

<u>Social Network/ Social Support</u>
12. How was the first week of school for you regarding meeting new people?
    a. What sort of activities did you participate in to meet people
13. What expectations did you have going into university in terms of making friends?
14. Now that you've been in university for a while, do you feel any differently than when you first started?
    a. If yes, what contributed to that change?
15. How has it been for you in terms of connecting with new students?
    a. What sort of strategies or personal pursuits did you try to make new friends?

16. How has online school contributed to your ability to meet new people?
17. Have any of your relationships you had prior to starting university changed in anyway?
    a. If yes, how so?
    b. If no, what have you done to maintain those relationships?
18. How supported do you feel by the people you've met while at university
19. How do you feel you fit into the university community?
20. Who do you feel is your main social support for when you're feeling stressed?
    a. How has your support networks changed since you've started university?

A) Stress
21. How would you personally define stress?
22. Do you feel like you have experienced stress since you started university?
23. How do you feel like stress onset by university has impacted your life?
    a. What is the biggest contributor to your stress?
24. How stressed would you say you have been since starting university? Has it been any different from when you were in high school?
25. What sort of things do you do when you are feeling stressed about school?
    a. Have your coping strategies changes since you've started university?
26. Who do you currently turn to when you are feeling stressed if you want to talk to someone about it?
    a. How are they able to help you deal with your stress?
27. What would you say is the most stressful part of doing online distance learning right now?
28. Do you feel like you've found any aspects of online distance learning positive or useful?
29. Do you think if classes were in-person your stress levels would be any different?

University Resources
30. Have you ever used any resource that the university is offering when you have been feeling stressed? For example, have you gone to a counsellor, academic advisor, student accessibility, or anything that the university has advertised as being a mental health resource for students?
    a. If yes, what was your experience like?
    b. If no, is there a reason why you have not?
31. How often have you spoken to professors on an individual basis?
    a. Did they help you deal with your stress? If so, how?
32. As someone who is living [wherever they are] how accessible do you feel mental health resources are?
33. How has Dal informed students about mental health resources?
34. How do you think Dal has done in terms of getting students connected to one another?

Concluding remarks
Thank them again for their participation. Ask them if there is anything else they would like to add in relation to their experience of stress while at university.

Demographics
    35. What are your preferred pronouns?
    36. Can you describe to me your parent(s) or guardian(s) educational background?
    37. What is your current major or what are you planning on doing if you're undeclared?

Appendix E-Participant Description

Ana	She/Her	UBC	Home Student	Undec. BA
Ben	He/Him	UBC	Home Student	Comp Sci BSc
Ciaran	He/Him	UBC	Home Student	Undec. BA
Diane	She/Her	UBC	Residence Student	Undec. BA
Frances	She/Her	UBC	Residence Student*	Sustainability Bsc
Georgia	She/Her	Dalhousie	Home Student	Recreation, BSc
Hannah	She/Her	Dalhousie	Home Student	Undec. BA
Isabelle	She/Her or They/Them	Dalhousie	Home Student	International Development, BA
Jackie	She/Her	Dalhousie	Home Student	Undec. BA
Kassidy	She/Her	Dalhousie	Home Student	Undec. BA

*Lived at home in the first semester but had just moved into residence at the time of the interview