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# Completing College in a Covid Moment -- Expectation vs. Reality for the Class of 2021's College Experience

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## Introduction

The ideal residential college experience consists of components which aid students in reaching their maximum developmental potential socially and academically. Highly social structures such as communal living, interactive class engagement, countless social events, and collaborative team environments, depict a friendly, welcoming environment for students to learn and flourish. With the addition of a prolonged, reality-shattering global pandemic, this study recognizes the value in recording the vast, multi-tiered disparity between the Class of 2021's expectation and reality. In total, the research collected aims to observe and evaluate how this altered reality is perceived through the lens of current seniors at Butler University via depth interviews. This perception is observed through a myriad of consumer behavior concepts, with specific emphasis on emerging adulthood, ritual behavior, rites of passage, and liminality, viewing the senior students as consumers and the Butler University college experience as the product. The theoretical framework presented in *Emerging Adulthood* (Arnett, 2000) in partnership with those in the *Ritual Dimension of Consumer Behavior* (Rook, 1985), allow the opportunity to explore the college experience in terms of its observed cultural significance and anticipated attributes, while dissecting the meaning behind the participants' behaviors exhibited while navigating the Covid-19 moment.

The term *emerging adulthood* is used to describe the distinct or impressionable ages of roughly 18-25, a period of time where individuals view themselves in a limbo between releasing adolescence and fully embracing adulthood (Arnett, 2000). This stage of life, rich in instability and self exploration, is all the more amplified by the endless opportunity for trying new things

and frequent participation in rites of passage observed in the college campus environment. Here, individuals are able to congregate and form the highly-anticipated culture that the traditional college experience is dependent on. With that being said, all significant social components, such as roommate dynamics, dining hall access, cohort class lectures, sports events, social gatherings, campus organization celebrations, and so many more, are now altered or canceled for the Class of 2021. Such changes have significant implications for these students. For instance, How does this affect these individuals' satisfaction with their college experience? What aspects do they place the most value on? How have they reacted to this intensely disappointing surprise? How are they coping? Are they implementing supplemental versions of activities? If so, which ones? And how? And why? And do they help? What impact does this disappointment surrounding expectation vs. reality have? This study seeks to answer these questions through providing an opportunity for these students to voice their perceived college experience, or lack thereof, as they reflect on their individual behaviors throughout the altered school year. Realizing these individuals were abruptly restricted from their last chances to engage with the traditional aspects of the college experience, this research aims to discover how the Covid moment influenced the senior students' perceptions of college experience and the behaviors they employed.

Furthermore, previous studies of rituals in post-industrial societies argue the importance of significant rites of passage, such as graduation, in that it marks important social status transitions and stimulates a great deal of psychological involvement (Rook, 1985). Many researchers agree, life stage transitions require the successful completion of specific events, this is the general basis of understanding rites of passage and their influence (Dukes, 2018;

McCracken, 1986; Rook, 1985; Scheer et al., 2007). An altered graduation ceremony is just one example of the countless meaningful, long-anticipated, rite of passage rituals current seniors are afflicted by due to Covid. This study expands on this concept, viewing the college experience, both as a whole and its individual components, as rites of passage while observing how students have adjusted. An individual's perceived success of an educational experience, and its importance, vary depending on a range of factors such as the students' major, social connections, campus involvement, and leadership positions (Dukes, 2018). While each student maintains their personalized range of ritual importance, there are also external traditional elements and societal expectations at play. The onset of a global pandemic has resulted in every student in the Butler University Class of 2021 having endured expectation inconsistencies with their anticipated senior college experience rituals. Moreover, though it is likely some students would have apathetically opted out of participating in senior rituals in a normal year, no student in the Class of 2021 had the ability to choose. When considering the longevity and persistence of the pandemic's consequences, questions exist in regard to how students perceive their senior year experience in relationship to the ideal expectations. This study dives into the impact of losing these rituals, and what the staggering gap between expectation and reality means for the Class of 2021 in their process of emerging adulthood.

Depth interviews were conducted with the intention of gaining the most authentic, descriptive recollections of students' individual experiences. These accounts were then compared and contrasted to present the observed points of convergence and divergence among the students. Through the depth study of Butler University Class of 2021 seniors' adjusted college experience observed in the Covid moment and the insights found in each

informant's specific behaviors and attitudes, this study yields an enhanced understanding of the informants' behaviors and associated rationale. Findings discuss the discerned descriptive data patterns which offer two categories of student behavior, *university-affiliated* and *externally-affiliated*. The layout of this study will continue with an explanatory literature review to further explain each of the study's background research structures. Next, the methodological approach will be elucidated and its qualitative nature defended. Following this, the aforementioned findings will be expounded through both inter-informant and intra-informant analysis. Then, implications of these emergent themes and their significance are discussed. Lastly, limitations of this specific study are noted in partnership with overarching conclusions and suggestions for future studies.

## **Literature Review**

### **i. Theoretical Argument**

This body of research employs pre-existing theory surrounding ritual behavior and emerging adulthood to understand the patterns observed by college students. As detailed below, each overarching topic contains various concepts which can be used to interpret consumption behaviors and their significance. Whereas these studies offer meaningful insights to the field of consumer behavior, none deliberate college student behaviors from a Covid moment frame. The primary research conducted aims to expand on the theoretical frameworks provided in this literature review to bridge this gap.

### **ii. Ritual Behavior**

## Overview

Ritual consumption behavior is first explored by Dennis Rook's Model of Ritual Experience (Rook, 1985). This article expands ritual beyond its religious predisposition, describing ritual as "a positive and meaningful aspect of both everyday and extraordinary human experience" (Rook, 1985, p. 252). Rook's defining ritual secularly and including events with symbolic, expressive, episodic nature, paved the way for modern consumer rituals to be observed and discussed. His work differentiates ritual behavior from habitual behavior, deeming ritual a more collective, structured experience which elicits behavioral response. Furthermore, he depicts the four tangible elements of ritual artifacts, ritual script, ritual performance roles, and ritual audience (Rook, 1985, p. 253) with the intention of providing an additional mechanism to observe and investigate consumer behaviors. Rituals take various forms depending on primary behaviors, intentions, and needs of those experiencing them at the time. Rook's original ritual experience list contained ten ritual types, categorized by the five primary behavior sources: Cosmology (religious, magic, aesthetic), Cultural values (rites of passage and cultural), Group learning (civic, small group, and family), Individual aims and emotions (personal), and biology (animal) (Rook, 1985, p. 254). The catalog has since been expanded and varies across sociological, psychological, and behavioral fields of study. This body of research contributes new insights for observing the cultural values surrounding rites of passage with potential to encompass individual aims and emotions through divestment rituals.

Psychologists observe ritual as having the ability to regulate emotions, performance goal states, and social connection to others (Hobson et. al, 2018). From the collective, social regulation lens, rituals allow an individual to "participate fully in the social world by affiliating

with fellow group members, reaffirming one's position in the group, and sharing in important social conventions and cultural knowledge" (Hobson et. al, 2018, p. 270). Relatedly, researchers propose 1) Experiencing an emotional, goal-driven, or social deficit should elicit more ritualistic behavior and 2) Enacting rituals should thereby reduce such aforementioned deficits (Hobson et. al, 2018). An extreme depiction of this is seen in reactions observed following collective rituals in which experiencing shared pain caused participants to feel closer to other group members (Hobson et. al, 2018).

### Rites of Passage and Liminality

Of the multitude of ritual types, rites of passage such as graduation and marriage, reflect a lens of cultural value and remain a societal hallmark. Rook describes rites of passage as collective, symbolic devices that accentuate the predictable, permanent quality of a status change across life stages (Rook, 1985, p. 255). Arnold van Gennep first introduced the concept of liminality in his seminal work, *The Rites of Passage* (1960) where he denotes a common pattern of societal separation (preliminal), transition (liminal), and incorporation (postliminal) in which participants are removed from an old role, face transitional trials, and then emerge with a new role. Victor Turner continued this research but centered his rite of passage studies around the concept of limen which translates to "threshold" and therefore the associated term liminality (Turner, 1994; Bigger, 2009). Turner viewed this threshold as a mentality of "betwixt and between" during life stage transitions (Turner, 1994). The individual is at the door, shedding his or her old identities, but has not entered through the new door where his or her new way of being exists (Dukes, 2018; Gibbons et al., 2014). "During the liminal time, the individual exists in a state in which the past is left behind but the future state has yet to

emerge” (Gibbons et al., 2014, p. 424). Liminality, or the feeling of being between, is a key element of rites of passage in that consumers are feeling stuck between two places and neither feel appropriate. Turner emphasized the importance of liminality in that its purposeful, liberating pause on other societal motions allows participants the freedom to fully transition.

More recent studies explore the potential for permanent liminality where the consumer is stuck in the transitional phase and never solidly arrives at the postliminal phase (Szokolczai, 2000; Thomassen, 2009; Appau, Ozanne, and Klein, 2020). While original definitions note the temporary nature of liminality in rites of passage, observed delays in life stage transitions have resulted in instances where liminality depicts persistent or even permanent nature. Appau suggests liminality “becomes permanent for the consumer when incorporation and separation continuously repeat” (Appau, Ozanne, and Klein, 2020). This research provides groundwork for observing extended liminality on the basis of neither separation nor incorporation is ever completed for consumers. The idea that permanent liminality can result from a contiguous and ongoing struggle between separation and incorporation provides significant insights for other prolonged rites of passage where an individual does not fully move from one cultural category to another.

### Missing Rites of Passage

Blumenkrantz and Goldstein describe rites of passage as “one of the most powerful ecological tools available to community psychologists” (Blumenkrantz and Goldstein, 2010, p. 42). The authors use this as a basis for supporting their conceptual framework for positive youth and community development and, consequently, the negative impact communities lacking structured rites of passage display (Blumenkrantz and Goldstein, 2010). “In the absence

of meaningful community-based rituals, youth will define and create their own marker events based on peer or media values, many of which may be destructive both individually and communally” (Blumenkrantz & Goldstein, 2010, p. 43). The researchers concluded their observed students lacking structured, positive rites of passage engaged in negative supplemental behaviors such as increased substance use. Relatedly, in Rook’s four-component assessment of ritual vitality, graduation was labeled “well defined and vigorous” in the script, role, and audience categories (Rook, 1985, p. 256). Previous studies of rituals in post-industrial societies argue the importance of significant rites of passage such as graduation in that it marks important social status transitions and stimulates a great deal of psychological involvement (Rook, 1985, p. 253).

Rituals in college are observed through larger scale events like graduation, but also include rites of passage throughout the college experience. Being that cultural meaning is created and transferred through these rites of passage, their absence results in decreased connection among consumers. Closely related is the concept of school belonging. Dukes illustrates a comprehensive study delineating the impact rites of passage such as extracurricular activities can have on students’ sense of belonging during the developmental years (Dukes, 2018). The concept of school belonging reveals four defining attributes being positive emotions, positive relationships, ability/willingness to participate in groups, and harmonization (Dukes, 2018; St. Amand, Girard, & Smith, 2017). School belonging is associated with the student’s perception of being included, accepted, supported, and integrated by other individuals within their school environment (Arslan, 2018). Dukes

highlights the importance of extracurricular involvement to create said integration through rites of passage.

Authors deem rites of passage a critical aspect of healthy development, relating them to the consequential life trajectories for “success (responsibility, financial independence, healthy relationships) or difficulties (crime, unemployment, irresponsibility)” (Scheer, et al., 2007, p.14). In their investigations studying the impact of youth development programs, the researchers conclude a strong need for using such programs to build healthy rites of passage. Lasting positive impact is achieved through framing these events as important and providing “special meaning for the adolescent in the context of community and culture” (Scheer, et al., 2007, p.14). Similarly, Gavazzi and Blumenkrantz (1993) conducted case study examples of how an adolescent’s involvement in a rites of passage primary prevention program allowed subsequent, therapeutically-based intervention efforts (Gavazzi and Blumenkrantz, 1993). Most notably, the researchers observed that the adolescents who had positive, successful rites of passage experiences had the ability to adapt successfully to transitional events. This is especially significant when considering the opportunity to avoid persistent/permanent liminality through fully transforming teenagers and reincorporating them into the social realm as successful adults (Gavazzi and Blumenkrantz, 1993).

As observed, rites of passage present vast implications in the human development process, largely due to the associated progression through the liminal space when involved in these rituals. Additional constructs such as divestment ritual behaviors, and the relationship between school belonging and extracurricular involvement provide added factors to contemplate in students’ consumer behavior patterns. Considering the interactivity of these

constructs is necessary when observing what their presence/absence means for adolescents' transformation into adults. Awareness of these coinciding elements bestows a helpful frame for understanding the value of rites of passage as well as adolescents behaviors surrounding them. Whereas there is significant study delineating the importance of positive rites of passage during an adolescent's development, this study aims to expand this research through the lens of emerging adulthood.

### **iii. Emerging Adulthood**

#### **Background**

Amplifying the importance of these rites of passage observed during the experience of “betwixt and between” is the co-existence of the theory of emerging adulthood. The concept of emerging adulthood was developed using pre-existing research which aimed to determine and describe the phenomenon of transitioning from childhood to adulthood. This period of adolescence has garnered significant research attention historically, but especially now due to the recent generational shift seen in millennials' tendency to prolong this transition (Stewart et al., 2016; Fingerman, 2017; Kuron, Lyons, Schweitzer, and Ng, 2015). Over the span of half a century, this transition period has been defined, redefined, and assessed by a plethora of scholars. Most notable, however, is Dr. Jeffery Arnett (Arnett, 2000) who coined the term and has since developed it for two decades. Arnett outlines the common, but not universal, five distinct features of emerging adulthood as: the age of identity explorations, the age of instability, the self-focused age, the age of feeling in-between, and the age of possibilities (Arnett, 2004).

The age of identity exploration depicts the tendency of emerging adults to continually explore various life experiences in an attempt to decipher who they are and who they want to become, “particularly in the areas of romantic relationships and careers, where they are focused on finding a person whose qualities would make for a suitable life partner and finding a job that will provide them with a sense of personal fulfillment” (Arnett, 2004, p. 8-9; Feeley, Halliburton, and Mastroianni, 2010). The age of instability is characterized by the constant limbo that comes with complications in emerging adults’ life plans and the consequential revision of various components such as changing majors, occupations, partners, friends, and locations (Arnett, 2004, p. 10-11). The self-focused age describes emerging adults’ likelihood to delay traditionally significant adult responsibilities like marriage and parenthood in an attempt to most “enjoy the opportunity to exercise the freedom they now have without their parents governing their every move” and focus on their own personal needs (Arnett, 2004, p. 12-13; Feeley, Halliburton, and Mastroianni, 2010). Very similar to the liminal space, the age of feeling in-between is used to explain the phenomenon emerging adults experience in that, despite their increased independence and maturity, they do not yet fully identify with being an adult, but they also no longer fully identify with being an adolescent (Arnett, 2004, p. 14-15). Lastly, the age of possibilities illustrates emerging adults’ steadfast optimistic view of the future and belief that they will accomplish their dreams and overcome past circumstances, such as unhappy home life, in an effort to become the person they’d like to be (Arnett, 2004, p.16-17).

With this framework comes Arnett’s careful emphasis on the heterogeneity of the period in that the ages are interconnected, fluid, and experienced in different ways by different individuals. Accompanying this variance is each individual’s experience with the concept of a

quarterlife crisis as originally noted by Erickson (1950) in his discussion of the identity crisis present during these formative years. Arnett links this idea to his finding that “even among the most advantaged emerging adults, such as the graduates of 4-year colleges and universities, their extraordinarily high expectations for the workplace—their aspirations of finding work that not only pays well but also provides a satisfying and enjoyable identity fit—are difficult for reality to match and often require compromises of their hopes and dreams” (Arnett, 2004, Arnett, 2007, p. 71). He ultimately settles this discussion claiming “the evidence of rising well-being during the course of emerging adulthood indicates that most people adapt successfully to its developmental challenges” (Arnett, 2007, p. 71).

### Emerging Adulthood in College

Arnett provides an all-encompassing, refreshed perspective in his tenth anniversary, second edition of *Emerging Adulthood* (Arnett, 2015). Here, Arnett combines outside studies with his own research with updates detailing progressions discussing social class, media behavior, and new distinctive life-stage issues. The second edition makes it a point to mention that the American college experience “is the emerging adult environment par excellence” due to its being “expressly designed for the identity explorations that are often part of emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2015, p. 219). Arnett supports this claim by citing various residential college hallmarks such as exploring diverse curriculum while choosing a major, researching/testing various potential occupations, and navigating a population that is highly concentrated in potential romantic partners with few time constrictions. Arnett interprets those university settings as “a social island set off from the rest of society, a temporary safe haven where emerging adults can explore possibilities in love, work, and worldviews with many

of the responsibilities of adult life kept at bay” (Arnett, 2016, p. 219). Furthermore, Arnett states that students entering college have goals of developing career readiness, enjoying their share of collegiate fun, and being inspired by new ideas to ultimately contribute to their personal growth (Arnett, 2016).

Conclusively, the researcher argues that students’ new, independent experiences socially and intellectually “combine to transform emerging adults who entered as freshmen into graduating seniors who have taken great steps toward becoming an adult” (Arnett, 2016, p. 219). Overall, the observed framework provides understanding for the college moment in that college seniors are making major life decisions, with very limited knowledge, in an unprecedented global pandemic which has resulted in a much different, disrupted senior experience.

Specifically, the study will answer the following two research questions:

*RQ1: How do Butler University seniors perceive their original ‘college experience’ expectations vs. their current Covid moment reality?*

*RQ2: What coping behaviors, if any, are Butler University seniors using to create a meaningful college experience despite the potential expectations vs. reality disconnect?*

#### **iv. Application**

Chiefly, while there have been countless studies on behaviors revolving around ritual consumption and emerging adulthood, this study offers new insights to these academic conversations by exploring the relationship between these topics as examined through depth

interviews with college seniors during the current Covid moment. This study contributes additional, updated discourse to these pre-existing consumer behavior structures with the provision of an unprecedented, reality-altering pandemic environment. Accurate answers to the presented research questions are only obtainable through studies conducted in this new, drastically-altered space. Whereas potential memory recollection distortion restricts informants to discussing current perceptions, this study allows a level of relevance only attainable through studies completed in this current Covid moment.

## **Methodological Approach**

Whereas the marketing community has historically discounted aspects of qualitative research as too time-consuming, intrusive, or “soft data,” it has been increasingly accepted as valuable and effectively utilized in the field (McQuarrie, 1990; McCracken, 1986; Morgan, 1988). As anthropologists detail, the qualitative approach provides a deeper understanding of the individuals observed in that it provides research discovery, discovers variable-rich patterns, and collects a more extensive pool thought (McQuarrie, 1990, pg. 116). Seeing as though this project was meant to unearth the feelings of a small sample of students, interviews proved more appropriate than quantitative study methods. An exploratory, inductive approach was utilized to expand the existing scientific understanding surrounding consumer coping behaviors, ultimately developing a theory describing why college seniors exhibited the supplemental behaviors presented. To support each depth interview, informants completed a pre-screener questionnaire with additional background information useful for tailoring probe questions and making connections in the discussion portion.

Modeled by McCracken's schema structure (1986), the research was collected through a four-stage approach to best ensure effective theory integration, thorough research aggregation, and accurate findings conclusions (McQuarrie, 1990, pg. 116). Stage 1, review of analytic categories, consists of a literature review describing the current concepts, theories, and generalizations associated with ritual consumption behavior and emerging adulthood. Stage 2, review of cultural categories, compiles the investigator's preliminary assumptions, reviewed to aid in repressing potential "everyday knowledge" bias concerning the topic at hand (Calder, 1977, p. 356). Stage 3, discovery of cultural categories, yields descriptive informant details via the pre-screener documents and depth interviews. Stage 4, discovery of analytic categories, identifies the behavioral basis for which the informants were analyzed via the findings and discussion research processes. The analysis component was then conducted by first using an intra-analysis approach to move through each individual research concept as noted in the interview guide, recording the informants' specific perceptions of their attitudes and behaviors. Then, an inter-analysis approach was utilized to combine more general observations and overarching data themes across the participant group as a whole. Findings were then triangulated with the incorporation of the extant theories outlined in the literature review to divulge moments of reinforcement, disconnect, and extension in the discussion section.

As noted in the aforementioned schema, both data types, secondary and primary, were incorporated. Secondary research was used in compiling a literature review delineating the frameworks and applications of ritual behavior and emerging adulthood. Descriptive, primary research was collected via a qualitative, depth interview study of seven Butler University senior

students. The use of qualitative methods provided a detailed, authentic representation of the seniors' self-reported attitudes and behaviors which resulted in a more appropriate, inductive explanation of the phenomenon being studied. This proved to be the most neutral way to develop theories from the collected data with the objective of recording senior students' sentiments and perceptions regarding their behaviors. Through this methodology, insights surrounding the research questions of *"how do Butler University seniors perceive their original 'college experience' expectations vs. their current Covid moment reality"* and *"what coping behaviors, if any, are Butler University seniors using to create a meaningful college experience despite the potential expectations vs. reality disconnect"* were recorded and theorized.

The depth interviews allowed each participant to display their collection of personal beliefs regarding the issues without the risk of groupthink or echo chamber effects sometimes observed via a focus group environment. This provided the added benefit of individuality, but also the limitation of no community discussion of collective experiences. Overall, a recreated version of this project would likely benefit from a mix of methods with the intended result of a more centralized investigation of seniors' experiences on a broader level.

All research protocols, including a recruitment flyer, consent form, pre-screener questionnaire, and depth interview guide, were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board prior to the primary research process induction. Following approval, subjects were selected using purposive convenience sampling to obtain detailed knowledge about the specific senior experience for Butler University's Class of 2021. Students were recruited via social media direct messaging, email, and text. Students with acquaintance-level background connection to the interviewer were chosen intentionally to collect more meaningful responses.

Being that Covid's impact and consequential coping behaviors are very personal and potentially sensitive topics, this approach was implemented to make informants more comfortable and more trusting, therefore inspiring more authentic responses. Following each informant's interest confirmation, they received, reviewed, signed, and returned the informed consent document via email before taking part in the research project.

During March 2021, individual interviews via Zoom were conducted with informants. Overall, a flexible research design was implemented to best accommodate this cross-sectional study observing students' final semester of senior year. It seemed both important and necessary to include seniors from various backgrounds on campus to get a more collective narrative of the current sentiment surrounding the senior class. With that being said, the sample included students who represent Greek life, independents, minority groups, and various colleges/majors. It did not seem relevant to have an exactly representative population of women to men featured in the study due to the pandemic presumably affecting both traditional genders equally. This study was conducted on a completely inclusive basis, excluding no one based on ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender, religion, or any other demographic data. The sample study was relatively small to better showcase the collected behaviors and how they operated in the lives of these individuals. Paired with the use of qualitative research, the small sample ensured more depth and understanding of the nuanced experiences and world views of the informants.

Key variables regarding the sample population were recorded via an attached spreadsheet detailing the noted demographics above. Due to the limitations of Covid-19, all methods took place remotely through password-protected Zoom meetings. Students were

interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide to best evoke both consistency and accuracy of their personal experiences. Key concepts observed were documented through recorded individual in-depth interviews with the subjects. All participants were informed of the recordings upon participant agreement and all of the transcripts were being stored in a password-protected drive so only approved research collectors had access to the students' information. Relatedly, all participants were given aliases in the study interpretation for confidentiality. After reviewing and validating the accuracy of the transcripts, the student sentiments from the interviews were analyzed and then cross-referenced. Findings were analyzed through the lens of inductive, thematic analysis to identify the important aspects of the consumer experience the Class of 2021 seniors at Butler University have endured. Common themes observed during the process were duly noted and further discussed in reference to the aforementioned consumer behavior ideologies in further sections.

## Findings

### i. Overview

Both research questions presented were addressed through the interview guide questions utilized across the seven depth interviews with Butler University, Class of 2021 seniors. The seven-question interview guide served as a basis for consistently collecting relevant insights from each student. Responses to these questions are divided into the two sections of "perceived disconnect" and "supplemental behaviors" to best accommodate research question 1, *"how do Butler University seniors perceive their original 'college experience' expectations vs. their current Covid moment reality?"* and research question 2, *"what coping*

*behaviors, if any, are Butler University seniors using to create a meaningful college experience despite the potential expectations vs. reality disconnect?"* respectfully. Throughout these sections, the core themes are observed and analyzed to provide subsequent discussion, implications, and conclusions.

## **ii. Perceived Disconnect**

### **College Experience vs. Butler University Experience**

Informants' responses will be sectioned to provide a chronological mapping starting with their perceived original expectations, followed by their perceived disconnect due to the Covid moment. Next, concluding analysis of said disconnect, observing its origin, catalyst, and overarching themes, is provided. When asked to recall their original expectations for their college experience at Butler, thematic consistencies emerged describing college experience-specific components as well as Butler University-specific components. Perceived original expectations surrounding their anticipated college experience present themes of enhanced social life, long-awaited freedom, and endless opportunity to explore.

Upon their original campus arrival students envisioned themselves flourishing socially. Students recalled high anticipation of making new friends, developing new social circles, and socially flourishing in general. The particular vocal inflection detected was widely representative of each informant's satisfaction in this realm. For example, student A, somberly remembered her excitement saying "I really thought I'd finally find people to connect with, you know? Like actually have a solid friend group to hangout with," she continued, beginning to describe her disconnect saying, "that was a mistake." Long-awaited freedom was described

with a nostalgic flare as students recalled their anticipation to move out, create their own spaces, and take the next step in developing their future life path. This ideology was consistent in responses such as one student saying, "Honestly I think I was most excited to just do whatever... I wanted whenever I wanted to," and another recounting, "Oh my God I was so excited to finally be on my own. I had been looking forward to that my whole life." Endless opportunity to explore was observed through students' wishes to expand their horizons in all areas of life. There were repeated quotes depicting desire for new opportunities such as one student saying "I had never left the United States before, so I was so excited for my study abroad experience", as well as more general wishes like one student saying, "I was basically willing to try anything at that point."

At the same time, perceived original expectations surrounding their anticipated experience at Butler University present themes of collaborative academic cohorts, accommodating administration leaders, and high quality education. Involved campus life depicts informants' expectations for components like getting involved in campus organizations, enjoying small class sizes, participating in collaborative group work, and having close faculty connections. One student recalled her excitement for joining campus organizations saying, "I was so pumped when my older sister told me about the 'pitch perfect style' block party for joining all the clubs." Accommodating admin describes expectations reflective of university marketing's display of the Community of Care and BUBeWell elements like supportive mental health resources and inclusive class dynamics. One student recalled her campus tour visit saying, "Butler was my number one choice because it seemed like the professors and administration actually cared about me as a person" she continued "when my

tour guide told me all about the community of care I realized I needed to be that big fish in a small pond and Butler was a good place to get that.” Another student noted “my older brother absolutely loved his professors when he went here and I wanted that same experience.”

High-quality education describes the students’ expectations to achieve a highly-esteemed degree, valuable education, and develop significant postgraduate opportunities and connections through professors, alumni, and career services. “I had an offer for a full ride at IU but decided to take out loans and come here instead so I could build my network” one student noted. Similarly, another student recalled rationalizing her choice stating, “it was worth it to me because I knew my degree would mean more.”

#### University-affiliation vs. External-affiliation

When asked to describe how the altered reality of the Covid moment impacted these original expectations, an interesting array of disconnect-attributing responses were observed. Perhaps most interesting is the emergence of two response categories of university-affiliated and externally-affiliated students. Whereas students across the board displayed the aforementioned overarching expectations surrounding their anticipated experiences for Butler University and college in general, their individual experiences between campus arrival and the onset of Covid led them to fall into one of these two categories. The overarching categories help provide context for understanding and interpreting the impact that Covid had on each student’s individual perceptions and behaviors. As a whole, university-affiliated students perceived a vast, emotionally-taxing disconnect in their college experience due to Covid, whereas externally-affiliated students explicitly articulated they did not perceive one at all.

With that being said, both groups displayed sentiments reflecting perceived disconnect between their Butler University expectations and actual reality before the onset of Covid.

University-affiliated students represent informants who established and maintained close ties to university-centered organizations, cohorts, and lifestyles pre-Covid. Before the Covid moment, these students were actively participating in campus organizations, held leadership positions, had on campus jobs, had strong faculty connections, and spent most of their time on campus, engaging with other Butler students. These strong campus affiliations across seemingly all major life aspects caused the Covid moment to massively influence university-affiliated students' perceptions surrounding their college experience. Such high campus involvement resulted in sentiments such as informant F saying "I literally didn't know what to do with myself until we moved in our senior house that summer" or informant C's description of "I never thought I'd miss the endless BUDM all-nighters in Jordan." Their expectations of maintaining their enhanced social life, utilizing their long-awaited freedom, and maximizing their endless opportunity to explore were crushed as they were replaced with isolation, moving back in with their parents, and stay at home orders. Seeing as though university life was the center of everything for university-affiliated students, Covid cancelling campus life changed everything for university-affiliated students.

Contrastingly, externally-affiliated students depict informants who had already transitioned to externally-centered organizations, cohorts, and lifestyles pre-Covid. As a result of this, externally-affiliated students perceived no impact on their college experience due to Covid. Both informants were consistently apathetic in describing the impact of Covid on their perceived college experience. Whereas university-affiliated students displayed strong opinions

about adjusting to online classes and decreased campus connection, externally-affiliated students gave minimal, emotionless accounts. Unlike university-affiliated students, it appears having an externally-based cohort of friends at other schools and previous dissociation from campus life allowed these students to be relatively unaffected by University restrictions on social life and freedom. "Trying to foster campus relationships just wasn't worth it anymore. I didn't fit in, and I was tired of pretending like I did" student B revealed when explaining his lack of time on campus. He continued, "Like, for me, my 'college experience' was already over when Covid hit." Both external-affiliated students attributed their lack of campus engagement to their social lives expanding beyond the university. Conversations attributed all personally-consequential college experience impact to losing their abroad experiences. "My biggest experiential impact was having to leave my study abroad trip, like honestly 'college experience' was the last thing on my mind... I was getting deported," student C elaborated. Another responded saying, "I was there for me, I was working, living my best life... I basically forgot I was a member of Butler University." Little was found regarding externally-affiliated informants' online class experiences, each noted spending most of their academic time focused on contributing to external internships. Notably, both external-affiliated students secured high-profile post-graduate opportunities before senior year began, limiting their perceived need to excel academically and potentially expanding their apathy toward college life. When asked about altered classes, one student simply stated she was, "just going through the motions until I get my diploma and get out of here." With this in mind, despite their required adjustments with online classes and rapid abroad experiences, neither externally-affiliated informant disclosed a perceived disconnect due to Covid. Somewhat

similar to the other grouping, these students also faced the expectation restraints of isolation, moving back in with their parents, and stay at home orders, but did not perceive them as inhibiting their college experience.

Notably, the ability to shift between these categories is present, seeing as each student described entering college with high expectations and intentions to be very engaged with the campus opportunities Butler has in store for them. It is likely that the categories of university-affiliated and external-affiliated exist on a spectrum and could vary depending on significant moments/periods in each students' life. However, the onset of an extremity like Covid provided more polarizing ideologies through students not having a normal campus life to affiliate with. With that being said, the recorded sentiments simply depict the statements and associated implications communicated by the students' responses during the time of the depth interviews. Interestingly enough, neither externally-oriented student viewed their abroad experience as part of their college experience. Furthermore, all students reported perceived disconnect regarding some aspects of the Butler University experience to be an ongoing phenomenon which began pre-Covid but was greatly amplified with its onset.

### [Butler University Disconnect](#)

In regard to involved campus life specifically, externally-affiliated students reported perceived disconnect early on when they felt excluded from the originally anticipated involved campus life. One student remembered this disconnect saying "I thought my sorority would give me the greatest friends of my life, quite the opposite actually." Whereas this is what motivated their college experience dissociation, it greatly impacted them at its onset, but was a nonissue by the time Covid struck in that they had developed livelihoods entirely separate

from the university. Dissimilarly, university-affiliated students reported perceived disconnect surrounding involved campus life only after the onset of Covid through issues with online classes, seemingly impossible work loads, “insufferable group projects”, and professors who “were trying their best, but still not accommodating student needs.” Overall, widespread burnout was observed as a result of this intense and isolating academic experience, especially considering there were not any social elements like community-centered events to help alleviate the burden.

Points of parity are seen when delineating both university-affiliated and externally-affiliated students’ current perceptions of the originally anticipated accommodating administration and high quality education. Both response groups negatively described university administrators’ priorities describing false portrayal of motives, caused by “money-driven admin,” and low priority on students’ mental health. Students explained these ideas using cancelled spring break, failed BUBeWell weekend, finals week spanning a weekend, charging full tuition in an online pandemic environment, and hosting the NCAA tournament but placing harsh, copious restrictions on student life as examples. Sentiments surrounding the originally expected high-quality education reflect the only consistency observed throughout the six expectation components depicted (enhanced social life, long-awaited freedom, endless opportunity to explore, involved campus life, accommodating admin, augmented networking opportunities). Both response groups positively noted the four years of consistent networking opportunities and high-quality education, as well as the increased opportunity to connect long-distance via zoom in the Covid moment. One student noted this sentiment saying, “I

know I've gotten a better education than my friends who went to state schools... I think it's a combination of the class materials and the focus on networking opportunities."

### Disconnect Evaluations

Aside from the actual onset of Covid itself, what caused the disconnects observed between students' perceptions of their original expectations and perceptions of their current reality? Potential answers are found in students' responses to interview guide question 1: "Let's start with you telling me a bit about yourself and what brought you to Butler." One by one, each student detailed their preference for more intimate learning environments, excitement for community engagement, and pride associated with being a Bulldog.

Remembering the students' recollections of the expectations that brought them to Butler University, it is logical to conclude how a socially-limiting Covid moment would greatly impact their perceived experiences. For all of the informants, their Butler University college experience reality did not reflect their initial expectations. For some, the college experience disconnect prevailed long before Covid, as seen with the external-affiliated students.

Contrastingly, others faced this harsh reality disconnect throughout the pandemic moment as seen with the responses of university-affiliated students. For all, Butler University fell short before Covid and the pandemic amplified the observed disparity. As observed, the qualitative lens provides insightful personal narratives for each informant's Butler University college experience. Keeping these in mind, the following section depicts the coping behaviors that manifested as these students tried to navigate their Covid moment reality.

### iii. Supplemental Behaviors

## Overview

When considering each student's observed points of perceived disconnect, paired with the impact of a global pandemic, the potential emergence of supplemental behavioral change was hypothesized. While originally planning to compare and contrast pre-Covid behaviors versus Covid behaviors, another timeline emerged from responses. Interestingly enough, when asked to describe their Covid moment behaviors adjustments, students gave accounts of how their behaviors had changed from the onset of the pandemic until the present moment. This shift provides insights sharing students' original Covid behaviors, and more specifically, their chronological development. This process reveals what behaviors were continued, stopped, replaced, used as replacements, and the relationships between.

## Behavioral Developments in the Covid Moment

Noting that spring break 2020 marked the beginning of these students' Covid moment, each presented original behaviors on a personal level rather than academic. Whereas each was physically removed from campus at the beginning of the pandemic as the University shut down, the recorded behavioral themes of implementing self care measures, engaging in high-involvement virtual communication, and hosting "Covid-friendly" events are representative of how students initially coped with the Covid moment. Students mentioned implementing self care behaviors including learning new hobbies, engaging in meditation practices, prioritizing mindfulness/intentionality, increasing time spent outdoors, daily journaling, revamping fitness routines, initiating more regimented sleep schedules, seeking nutritious food options, and preparing materials for the upcoming semester. One student humorously recalled the "extensive, 3-hour" self care routine she started at the beginning of

the Covid moment saying, "It's like I thought I was an influencer or something." When asked about continued habits, she attributed her need for discontinuing once classes started senior year. "I guess I was going strong for a few months there... I try to do certain parts, like yoga, pilates, and face masks, at least once a week still." Interestingly enough, a different student shared that she "discovered a new love for self care" including her recording the process through videography to "track her pandemic progress." As the pandemic continued, she eventually rebranded her Tiktok account and began creating "get ready with me" and "spend the day with me" videos to reflect that of an influencer, even securing a brand ambassador deal with a jewelry company.

Engaging in high-involvement virtual communication was another common behavior among the students and included mentions of "Netflix parties," where each viewer could remotely screen share the same movie, and frequent, multi-person Zoom/Facetime calls. One student recalled creating weekly themed Zoom parties to supplement the socialization he experienced during the "Wine Wednesdays" he hosted pre-Covid. "We kept it up for about two months but it really just wasn't the same... it got tedious, especially once summer jobs started." He continued, "people didn't seem like they wanted to come anymore, like I even figured out how to screen share my party playlist and made a kahoot to try to up the vibes... it just wasn't worth it after awhile though." Considering the various planning, preparation, and engagement in such an activity sheds a light on the costs students associated with these added virtual communications.

Similarly, another thematic behavior observed at the onset of Covid was hosting "Covid-friendly" events such as socially distanced picnics, virtual continuation of club

organization meetings, coordinating in-car meet ups, and organizing drive thru, and open house parties. One student gratefully recalled the surprise birthday party drive thru parade her bestfriends coordinated to safely celebrate her special day, "I loved it so much, it meant so much to me that they would go through all that trouble just to make me happy... I actually organized one for my younger cousin later that month because mine went so well and made my day so much better." Relatedly, another student was able to facilitate an altered version of his friend group's annual camping trip by suggesting they all park their cars in a circle and hang out/camp in each separate bed/trunk area to accommodate social distancing recommendations. "Honestly I think you can make anything 'Covid-friendly' if you try hard enough," he continued saying, "my friends were willing to do whatever it took to maintain that tradition."

### Discontinued Behaviors Throughout the Covid Moment

All students communicated a perceived shift regarding their supplemental behaviors in some capacity as senior year progressed. While intentions of continuing many of the aforementioned coping strategies remained, all informants presented responses indicative of a decline in their ability to consistently maintain the various habits they initially employed with intentions of creating a "healthier" lifestyle. Interestingly, informants were much more self-aware in discussing their perceptions in research question 1 in comparison to their supplemental behaviors in research question 2. Being so, the depth interview provided the first time these students deliberated the "why" behind their current replacement behaviors. Students could easily list the behaviors they stopped and why they chose to do so. However, the same informants could not readily do the same for the replacement behaviors they started.

This expands this insight in that not only was there decline of initial healthy behaviors, but a seemingly subconscious implementation of negative coping mechanisms which function to replace or distract students.

For example, some denoted their conscious decision-making process surrounding initial self care behavioral habits such as giving up their fitness routine, dropping their new hobby, and quitting their “healthy food kick.” These students readily indicated rationales associated with these discontinuations, such as one’s arguing, “it [daily running] was too much work, especially since I wasn’t even allowed to see anyone.” Another student recalled that her new plant collecting hobby “wasn’t fun anymore.” She provides contextual support of her hobby’s depreciating benefit stating, “it was so expensive and they just kept dying... yeah they’re basically just dried sticks sitting in gray soil as of right now,” she continued. Furthermore, the self-proclaimed “plant mom” highlighted the concept of initiating self care behaviors due to their popularity in the media. The student references how there’s even a trend called “Tik Tok made me buy it” where users purchase certain items/try specific challenges using the same sound. As she elaborated:

Honestly, I stopped doing Tik Tok-inspired things as a whole, like impulsively buying five plants or the entire Morphe skincare line, because it was all just too much to keep up with... like now that I think about it, most of the self care I did was completely because I saw people doing it on Tik Tok... I think it was just really exciting to have that communal aspect of trying a new thing together, even though it was mostly just strangers on the internet.

With that being said, overarching rationale for discontinued behaviors reflect the presence of some cognitive cost/benefit analysis conducted by each student. Overall, findings show that, as the Covid moment progressed, the benefits of these behaviors depreciated while the associated costs increased. Moreover, benefits which inspired students’ participation in

these original supplemental behaviors includes factors such as uniqueness, timeliness, and proximity. Associated costs include environmental stressors, capacity requirement, level of involvement, and monetary contribution. As depicted previously with initial self care behaviors, this cost/benefit analysis theme is seen in recollections for why students stopped initial behaviors regarding the other categories of engaging in high-involvement virtual communication and hosting “Covid-friendly” events as well.

### Replacement Behaviors in the Covid Moment

The original behavioral theme of implementing new self care mechanisms showed variance in the actual behaviors which students considered most personally beneficial/important, general maintenance as a whole, and what specific elements each student personally deemed worth maintaining. Being so, some students continued some aspects while stopping and/or replacing others while other students simply stopped and/or replaced self care altogether. Potentially a result of their having less university-related obligations, both external-affiliated students reported the continuation of “the important parts” of their new self care behaviors. One went into further detail proclaiming, “one of the biggest things I’ve learned throughout the pandemic is that self care should be your number 1 priority... part of my self care routine is to give myself permission to rest if I don’t have the time or energy to get all of them [the self care tasks] done.” Further displaying the spread of responses, one student admitted eventually replacing her morning self care routine with an extra hour of sleep, while another admitted to eventually violating her self care boundary of getting enough hours sleep. The second recognized the existence of this phenomenon unprompted saying, “it’s really interesting how different people define their own self care

goals... like even with my closest friends, mine is completely different because I spend so much time on stuff for school I guess." She continued, "I realized how much more time they had on their hands when my goal was to sleep more and their goal was to sleep less." Each student's specific self care behavior priorities, preferences, and functions differ in that they are representative of each informant's own lived experiences. Alongside this intra-informant self care behavior range, is the conclusive inter-informant focus surrounding self care behaviors.

The overarching theme of engaging in high-involvement virtual communication was replaced with engaging in low-involvement virtual communication methods such as watching Netflix alone, passively communicating with friends through social media direct messages, opting for single player mode in video games, and less engaged 1:1 Facetime calls. This shift utilizes the cost/benefit analysis being that the initially developed communication methods required high capacity availability and level of involvement from students in an increasingly stressful external environment. Moreover, benefits which sparked interest for these behaviors in the first place began to dwindle as these trends became familiar, and students' began to experience pressures from classes and internships, high levels of burnout, and intermittent connectivity errors due to bandwidth issues. As time went on and these Covid-moment-catered platforms became frequently used across various aspects of life, these initially exciting behaviors soured for students. Students displayed a desire for social interaction, but no longer deemed highly involved virtual communication methods as worth the energy involved to achieve that. Notably, all students who reported initially using Zoom to socialize indicated quickly developing "Zoom fatigue" from constantly doing online classes, internships, networking calls, and organization meetings. "We [her friend group] realized our

Zoom hangouts just weren't worth the extra energy after about a month" one student articulated. Another argued, "If I'm going to get ready, do my makeup, do my hair, I might as well actually see my friends in person... Zoom and Facetime just aren't worth all of that, like I'd rather be sleeping."

The overarching theme of hosting "Covid-friendly" events was replaced with attending parties at other schools, going to bars, planning alternative spring break trips, and increased substance use. Remembering the shift from high involvement virtual communication methods to low involvement communication measures, it is important to observe how the replacement behaviors here require equal, if not more, involvement to accomplish social interaction. This insight highlights the continued emergence of the cost/benefit analysis through students' willingness to exert more energy to achieve socialization, but this cost of high involvement must be outweighed by the benefit of in person events/activities. One student rationalized this shift saying, "I just couldn't do it [the lack of socialization] anymore." Another expressed reaching his "breaking point," saying "college is about connections, that's why I chose Butler." These sentiments echo loudly in an environment where students are facing such unprecedented stressors on their mental wellbeing and have begun to view the Covid moment as "hopeless" and seemingly "never ending," with "no light at the end of the tunnel." The compounding of these heartwrenching circumstances have resulted in implications of the aforementioned negative replacement behaviors, specifically those attempting to provide social connection among students. This is reflected by the extent to which these replacement behaviors and related rationale behind them extend. One student described his inner debate surrounding these negative behaviors saying, "of course I don't want to get Covid again and of

course I don't want to put anyone in danger, but like-- it feels like my actual mental health is in danger. I think a lot of my friends are feeling that pain too. We're not meant to be so alone like this." Another student displayed a similar sentiment asking, "How do you balance your mental health with your physical health if one requires something that hurts the other? It's just a lose-lose situation."

## Discussion

Evocative of the original research goals of observing the potential disconnect between seniors' expected college experience versus their Covid moment reality and supplemental coping behaviors, key insights were highlighted to propose contributions for the theoretical frameworks and existing research ideologies discerned in the literature review. Specifically, this study is informed by and seeks to extend the frameworks of emerging adulthood and ritual behavior. Being so, this study provisions new data and accompanying implications regarding the perceived disconnects and supplemental consumer behaviors shown in the informant group.

Where it was initially hypothesized that students would engage in supplemental behaviors to modify traditional rituals such as virtual greek life formals or mini homecomings, informants presented behaviors reflecting different behavioral adjustments. The shared variety displays behaviors intended to fulfill students' socialization desires and improve their sense of identity. These benefits of ritual behavior provide students with a means to effectively enter a new stage of life. The connection observed between students' desired in-person socialization and finding alternative ways to re-invent their sense of community highlight the

unique process for achieving behaviors which brought them their desired outcome.

Implementation of supplemental ritual behaviors has provided grounding for students in their time of betwixt and inbetween, helping students regain some sense of identity. The displayed behaviors show the importance of elements surrounding individual rites of passage, not just the ritual as a whole. In that students ultimately deemed all virtual supplemental behaviors unworthy. Furthermore, the Class of 2021 students collectively deemed their socialization desire unaccomplished if the social interaction was not in-person. Since the ability to publicly host in-person social activities is greatly limited, this resulted in the need for benefits to be collected through the more indirect approach of managing loss through self care mechanisms and preserving students' self identity.

Ultimately, students successfully coped not by replacing the lost rituals, but by limiting the damage this experience of ritual loss caused. This insight, combined with the eventual decline of what initial supplemental behaviors were created, is vital in the delineation of the presence of divestment rituals observed in this study. Divestment rituals are defined as the steps people take to gradually distance themselves from things they treasure (Rook, 1985). As the duration of the Class of 2021's Covid moment senior year continued, burnout levels rose while pandemic restrictions increased. The result exudes behaviors constructed to create distance between the negative feelings surrounding lost senior rituals and culmination of their Butler University college experience. Whereas the external-affiliated students already perceived their college experience to be over and furthered their distance, the onset of the Covid moment provided a most life-altering impact for the university-affiliated students who then built their college experience perceived disconnect from the ground up. It can be

speculated that both groups decided, whether intentionally or accidentally, that creating and maintaining supplemental behaviors reflective of sacred rituals was not worth the additional sorrow they would bring. Students' behaviors indicated their sentiment that it is ultimately better to distract themselves from their perceived disconnects than to attempt to gain satisfaction from virtually-adjusted versions. In the new Covid moment, these disconnects fostered new rituals that supplemented, but changed over time. Whereas students described a form of cost/benefit analysis to determine behaviors' worth, benefits which inspired students' participation in the highly involved initial supplemental behaviors include factors such as uniqueness, timeliness, and proximity. Associated costs include the overall environmental stressors, capacity requirement, level of involvement, and monetary contribution needed to implement the behavior. As noted in the findings discussing students' replacement behaviors, it appears behaviors deemed worthy enough to maintain throughout the Covid moment, or to replace the initial supplemental behaviors, must fulfill students' desire for community through engaging in-person components or enhancing their self preservation in some capacity. Conclusively, these insights provide analysis and understanding for the Class of 2021's perceptions and behaviors as they found themselves reconfiguring cultural blueprints and transitioning their actions to accommodate these unexpected changes as a result of the Covid moment.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

While most students in the Class of 2021 still have approximately three to four years left of emerging adulthood as it is currently defined, (18-25 years of age), future research studies

might speculate implications of these students' completing their college experience during the Covid moment. Students in the Class of 2021 hold a very distinct position in withstanding almost half of their college experience impacted by the Covid moment. Potential articles facilitating a longitudinal study of this cohort with findings surveying alumni support would be interesting to compare with their 2021 sentiments describing perception disconnect in their college experience and their Butler University experience. Additionally, a long-term study analyzing these students' success with life stage progression could contribute meaningful insights for understanding future implications of abruptly losing a major rite of passage and the consequential period of extended liminality. The qualitative nature of these results are indicative of a wide breadth of experience, but none that are generalizable. Follow up quantitative surveys could be successful in garnering more widespread sentiment of the Butler University Class of 2021 and therefore seniors experiencing the Covid moment across the country. Moreover, additional methods such as subsequent focus groups with the interviewed students could help extend the scope of their recollections and sentiments through a more collective, overarching lens. Being that Butler University is a relatively small, liberal arts college in the Midwest, very different sentiments could be observed at larger institutions such as Indiana University or more technical, less community-centered institutions like Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology.

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