

# **Undergraduate Students' Experiences and Perceptions of Subjective Well-Being during a Global Pandemic in an Online World**

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## **Abstract**

This quantitative study focuses on how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected undergraduate students' perceptions of their subjective well-being as well as what it means to live the 'good life'. For this research, we examined how the various online and offline leisure activities participants engaged in may have altered these perceptions. This is better understood by using the theoretical lens of symbolic interactionism and its focus on the meaning-making process. By using an online survey, we collected responses from 19 undergraduate students from McMaster University. According to our findings, undergraduate students spent more time online during the pandemic than they had previously. Responses indicated that offline leisure activities were better able to enhance subjective well-being than online leisure activities. Perceptions of the 'good life' were also most often perceived as correlated with spending time with friends and/or family. This research may provide insight into the ways current university environments and social support services can be improved within the unique context of a global pandemic.

## **Introduction**

### **Topic**

Understanding how people experience and make sense of the world they live in is an area of research that often looks over well-being as its major component. The topic this study explores draws on the concept of subjective well-being (SWB) as it relates to the current unique circumstances of the global COVID-19 pandemic. We followed up on undergraduate students' SWB during this time to understand how their engagement in self-isolation from the outside world and the use of online technology affected them and their idea of what it meant to live the 'good life'. In the past year, many were forced to set aside plans for the future and adjust to these unprecedented circumstances. There also appears to be a recent increase in the emphasis placed on the importance of maintaining one's mental health and well-being. This paper will look into greater detail of how SWB is a factor in measuring where students' perceptions of their life's satisfaction trails.

### **Social Psychological Context**

Ed Diener's (1984) article states SWB takes this idea of "how and why people experience their lives in positive ways" (p. 542). SWB as a focus in our study will

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concentrate in response to “determine what is the ‘good life’ (Diener, 1984, p. 543). There are three hallmarks in this area of study that Diener (1984, p. 543) uses to explain SWB: “It is subjective [in which it is based on] the experience of the individual, it provides a positive measure, and measures [...] all aspects of a person’s life” (Diener, 1984, p. 544). There are also three components found within SWB: “life satisfaction judgments, positive affect, and negative affect” (Diener, 1984, p. 547). Both aspects take into consideration the trait of happiness. As indicated in the article, it is important to include a comparison of life satisfaction with happiness and well-being. Although we look at the level of contentment in one’s life during this pandemic, we are also considering their importance of social contact. Diener (1984, pp. 566-567) explains that one’s SWB is not solely dependent on social contact or social participation as it is not the only component that progresses happiness. However, as every individual needs these contacts to survive and function in the world we live in today, it does play an effective role in a positive SWB (Diener, 1984, pp. 556-557). You do not need to be an extrovert to be happy but, although it is uncertain, it could be a reason in which they are more sociable in social settings than introverts (Diener, 1984, p. 557).

### **Statement of The Problem**

We are interested in how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed McMaster undergraduate students’ ideas of what it was like to live the ‘good life’ and if people have felt their SWB has changed. Our focus is to explore the types of leisure activities undergraduate students partake in and how it affects their well-being.

### **Purpose**

This topic was chosen as a focus in our thesis project to allow readers to understand and consider the sociological and psychological components of well-being. Our motivation in conducting this research follows from this idea of looking at how others may have spent their time at home during this lockdown. Many may have been laid off from work as non-essential companies shut down or remained closed to stop the spread of the virus. Others may have faced restrictions in meeting their loved ones. There is also the stress of shopping for essentials like food, water, medicines, toiletries, and cleaning supplies, while also ensuring that they are being healthy and safe, or even having enough money to buy these essentials. A variety of factors are reflected on to understand the experiences of well-being during this time.

Although we focused on leisure activities and their preference for online or offline activities, we also hoped to acquire an understanding of how social media has played a role in their positive or negative SWB. It is very easy to get caught up online with how others live their lives. During this time of the pandemic, many use online formats to communicate or stay connected with family and friends. We wanted to consider others’ experiences while being in ‘lockdown’ and how each individual coped and managed their mental well-being. “Have you approached others in person during this time?” “Have they taken a series of offline leisure activities to help pass time?” “Has the greater use of the online world been overwhelming and affecting their well-being?” These are some of the questions we hoped to learn more about from our participants. An online component may allow the individuals to practice isolation, however, some may not find an overall satisfaction within these restrictions of social distancing. We hoped to learn what

mediating factors affect SWB to its greatest extent. We understand that there are different perspectives involved. We hoped to take into consideration each individual's anonymous response to provide a solution in how they can manage their well-being if they are not able to do so themselves.

### **Outline of Paper**

In this paper, we begin with the literature review that gives a general overview of what research has been done in the area of SWB and leisure, as well as the effects of online affiliation. We then propose our theory on how using the lens of a symbolic interactionist perspective will play a role in conducting this research. We discuss how symbolic interactionism has structured our research on SWB and its contribution to the online world during this global pandemic. Using a micro-level of analysis, we recognize each participant's personal definition of leisure activity and what it means to live a 'good life'. In this section, we explain symbolic interactionism and Blumer's (1969) premises. In the methodology section, we have stated the research questions and outlined the stages of our data collection and data analysis. The methodology section will also discuss potential ethical issues, and potential challenges we faced during the completion of this project. We then present our results using graphs to show what was gathered from our questionnaires. This is followed by a discussion section where we analyze and interpret the findings presented. We provide a broader significance in linking our results to our theory and for any previous research that may have been conducted in our area of study. Next, we discuss any limitations to our study. The paper concludes by sharing some potential significant insights and our final remarks about the study.

### **Literature Review**

There is a plethora of research available regarding studies done on SWB. This literature review summarizes some of this research and relates it to what we hope to find in our research. Some of the topics that are discussed are how leisure enhances and diminishes SWB, the relationship between SWB and affiliation, and how gaps in this research have shaped our study.

### **SWB and Leisure**

Multiple research studies have shown that leisure activities promote SWB. Macchia & Whillans (2019) conducted cross-national data analyses between 97 countries from 1989-2016 and found that "countries that valued leisure over work showed greater national life satisfaction" (p. 3). Newman et al. (2014) conducted a study about psychological factors that promote SWB and found that "people greatly value leisure and most likely believe it will promote their well-being" (p. 556). Even amongst a more specific population, such as college students, King et al. (2020) said that students at a U.S college reported high "SWB scores when they were engaged in active leisure" (p. 112). From these research studies, we can conclude that leisure activities and SWB correlate. But whether it is a positive correlation or a negative one depends on the activity itself. Newman et al. (2014) quoted other studies listing certain activities that say SWB positively correlates with leisure. These activities include visiting family and friends, sports, playing games, watching television, and more (Newman et al., 2014). Some very recent studies done during the COVID-19 pandemic also say that spending time in nature, walking, and supportive

interpersonal interactions enhance well-being (Lades et al., 2020). Positive affect was greatest when spending time outdoors and pursuing physical activity (Lades et al., 2020). Brand et al. (2020) conducted a cross-national survey during the pandemic looking at exercise and SWB and concluded that physical activity and exercising frequently promote a better mood.

Leisure activities can help individuals protect themselves from the negative effects of a crisis. During the 2008 financial crisis, Macchia & Whillans (2019) found that people who “valued leisure more than work reported higher life satisfaction” (p. 5). This could have been because people who were more financially secure prioritized their time and spent money on time-saving services to help protect themselves from stress (Macchia & Whillans, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic was a cause for a lot of stress for many individuals. Various online purchase and delivery services became popular as people did not want to step outside of their homes. To lower the negative effects of stress, people instead spent money to prioritize their time during this crisis which could have affected their SWB.

However, not everyone is financially secure to protect themselves from stress using money. This is where the term subjective becomes very important. Leisure activities are prone to subjectivity, and this plays a role in whether or not some leisure activities promote well-being or decrease it. Newman et al. (2014) defined subjective leisure as activities where the “individuals perceive themselves to be engaging in leisure; and leisure broadly covers activities or time that are construed as leisure by individuals” (p. 557). An example of this includes an activity such as exercise that might not promote SWB because some people may not see exercise as leisure.

### **SWB and Affiliation**

Most activities listed in the sections above are activities that can be done in groups. Newman et al. (2014) found that “social affiliation may be the strongest predictor, or perhaps the most consistent predictor of SWB, across various contexts” (p. 569). This can be because social activities encourage positive emotions and inhibit negative ones (Newman et al., 2014). Previous research has also found that “leisure time with friends increases immediate well-being, while leisure time with a spouse increases global well-being” (Newman et al., 2014, p. 569). In contradiction to this, when Lades et al. (2020) conducted their study during the pandemic, they found “reduced emotional well-being levels during interactions with one’s spouse or partner” (p. 7). They concluded that this could have been because of adapting to new routines at home. However, there is more evidence that tells us social affiliation overall has positive effects on well-being. For example, if we look at Maslow’s work, his “hierarchy of needs argues that affiliation (termed belongingness and love at the middle level) is necessary at various stages for an individual’s well-being.” (Newman et al., 2014, p. 563). Moreover, Macchia & Whillans (2019) found that “people who value leisure more than work likely spend more time socializing” (p. 6).

If we look more specifically at a population, King et al. (2020) found similar results in their study on U.S. college students who reported higher SWB when they were with others. They also found that “students with social networks or support appeared to be better adjusted, less lonely, and happier” (King et al., 2020, p. 108). Agbaria & Bdier (2020) conducted a study about internet addiction and social support amongst Israeli-

Palestinian college students in Israel. They found that “social support was a protective factor against internet addiction” (Agbaria & Bdier, 2020, p. 1). Previous research has also stated that “social relationships may help adolescents and young adults function as helpers and supporters, enhancing their self-esteem and making them feel as though they have something to contribute to society” (Agbara & Bdier, 2020, p. 1). This increases their autonomy, which Newman et al. (2014) found is a psychological mechanism to increase SWB. In sum, SWB and leisure activities can show a positive correlation because these activities provide individuals with opportunities to experience positive emotions and experiences, protects people from negative effects of stress, and promotes multiple psychological needs that enhance well-being (King et al., 2020; Macchia & Whillans, 2019; Newman et al., 2014).

### **Online Affiliations and SWB**

Social affiliations can be made offline and online. Social networking sites (SNS) allow individuals to stay connected to people across the world. Sabatini & Sarracino (2017) conducted a study in Italy about the relationship between online networks and SWB and found that “the main reason for joining a network is the strengthening of individual social capital” (p. 458). An individual’s social capital can enhance their well-being by providing them with a sense of belonging to a social group. Pang (2018) conducted a study to explore the relationship between an SNS called WeChat and SWB among overseas Chinese college students studying abroad in Germany. WeChat is similar to WhatsApp in the North American context. Apps like these are a part of some individual’s daily lives that allow people to stay connected with friends and family and share pictures, videos, and more. Their study found similar results to previous research that said, “social networks can influence individuals’ subjective well-being development by enhancing positive perceived social support” (Pang, 2018, p. 2150). This study found that WeChat provides users a “way of receiving emotional support from other contacts, enhancing the feeling of belonging” (Pang, 2018, p. 2153). SNS allow people to “stay in touch with both loosely and closely tied people” (Pang, 2018, p. 2153). SNS can influence individuals’ perceptions “of social integration, bonding relationships, and bridge relationships, which subsequently enhance their sense of subjective well-being” (Pang, 2018, p. 2153). However, this perception could also adversely affect SWB regarding social trust (Sabatini & Sarracino, 2017). Some people value the time and social affiliations made online, while others do not.

### **SWB the Online Affiliation and Leisure**

SWB and leisure activities can also have a negative correlation. For example, while being alone, engaging in social media use reduces emotional well-being (Lades et al., 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools and non-essential businesses closed to help stop the spread of the virus. People had to self-isolate at home either by themselves or with family members. School and work moved online, and there was more frequent internet usage. The study conducted by Lades et al. (2020) in Ireland found that “social media use and informing oneself about COVID-19 [were] both associated with elevated levels of negative affect” (p. 7). Their research findings matched previous research that says, “Internet addiction appears to be significantly associated with lower levels of SWB” (Agbaria & Bdier, 2020, p. 1). Moreover, Sabatini & Sarracino (2017) found that “online

social networks stimulate social comparisons in a way that may be detrimental for self-esteem and life satisfaction” (p. 460). This is contradictory to what Pang (2018) found in his study that said, “spent on social media would consequently lead to better subjective well-being” (p. 2154). In sum, SNS have both a positive and negative correlation with SWB similar to leisure and SWB.

One of the areas where there is a gap in this research is how social distancing affects SWB. During social distancing, it is hard to get together with people in person. Research says that leisure time spent with others enhances SWB most effectively. Sabatini & Sarracino (2017) found that “SNS also has a positive impact on well-being because it increases the probability of face-to-face interactions” (p. 475). But what happens when we cannot be with each other face-to-face? We turn to SNS to help us stay connected, which provides us with some, but very limited, face-to-face contact. There may be some who feel this contact is sufficient. This is where the term ‘subjective’ is important again. There are two contradicting arguments made by researchers about how spending time online can affect SWB. Some research says it enhances well-being, while other research says it has negative consequences.

No research has been done about specifying this online time as leisure time in a world where we cannot get together face-to-face. Research needs to be done on the idea of bringing together online and offline leisure activities and SWB. During the COVID-19 pandemic, time spent on leisure activities and online could have also affected people's perceptions about living the ‘good life’. No research has been conducted on whether or not people's perceptions about living the ‘good life’ have changed or not during a global pandemic. This could be affected by many factors including leisure activities and time spent online. The research is also lacking in studies done in Canada about leisure and SWB. Also, most of the research is done with a psychological perspective in mind. Symbolic interactionism, which is more sociological, has rarely been used to study this topic.

### **Theory**

For our research, we adopted a more micro-level framework by using the lens of symbolic interactionism. We chose this method due to the subjective nature of the theory and how it approaches individual experiences and connections, as opposed to broader social foundations. By using symbolic interactionism as a framework for analysis, we were able to form a better understanding of how students spent their time while in self-isolation, and how they were able to make sense of the world they were living in during this unexpected and unusual situation. This theory was the best approach to our topic as we looked at SWB, leisure, and life satisfaction, all of which can be open to individual interpretation.

Symbolic interactionism has its origins in the early 20th century through academics such as George Herbert Mead, Charles Cooley, Erving Goffman, and Herbert Blumer. As the name suggests, the underlying focus of this theory is on social symbols. These symbols can range from the use of verbal or physical language to objects, or any type of stimuli that carries meaning within a cultural framework (Charmaz et al., 2019). Similarly, symbolic interactionism works to show how the creation of the world we live in, as well as our understanding of it, is a constant process that is formed through interactions and the meanings that we construct from them (Meltzer et al., 2015). During the pandemic and its subsequent social distancing guidelines, undergraduate students have been removed

from their regular daily activities and instead have been asked to spend much of their time at home. The use of symbolic interactionism during our research gave us a frame of reference for analyzing how students have managed to adapt to their new circumstances. Our study looked at how changing socialization and leisure structures influenced the SWB of undergraduate participants.

The emphasis on meaning-making within symbolic interactionism is one of the primary tenets behind the theory. This framework claims that through communication or interaction with their surroundings, individuals create an understanding of their experiences (Meltzer et al., 2015). These meanings are then able to be modified through further interactive processes, as individuals are able to consistently negotiate how they view the world when their circumstances change (Charmaz et al., 2019). Symbolic interactionism also works to connect individual experiences with the greater social context. This theory argues that people as individuals are products of exchanges with the broader societal framework in which they are situated and in turn, society is created by the small-scale interactions of its citizens (Meltzer et al., 2015). Symbolic interactionism is a constant give-and-take between society as a whole and individual actors.

Undergraduate students are constantly interpreting using these meaning-making processes. Ideas about their environment are not stagnant, as academic studies allow for a consistent flow of new information through classes or interpersonal discussions. This is especially true in the current global climate with the incorporation of COVID-19 protocols into daily life. Our research was able to use a symbolic interactionist perspective to better understand how undergraduate students have interpreted the unprecedented external situations that they are facing. The study we conducted looks at how undergraduate students have interpreted the unprecedented external situations that they are facing, and whether or not they have created new meaning from these processes.

### **Herbert Blumer**

Within symbolic interactionism, several tenets work to explain social phenomena. One of the founding scholars within the field, Herbert Blumer (1969), is noted as the person that originally coined the term symbolic interactionism within the field of social psychology. In his works, Blumer (1969, as cited in Charmaz et al., 2019) noted three premises within symbolic interactionism that better clarified social phenomena. Firstly, he argued that individuals react to things based on the significance that those objects carry for them (Blumer, 1969, as cited in Charmaz et al., 2019). This can help to explain the experiences of the undergraduate participants in our research in several ways. For example, individuals participate in leisure activities based on their interpretation of this concept. Each person has a different definition of what constitutes leisure, from reading to physical activity or sport. The fluidity of symbolic interactionism helped us to interpret the information that was given by each participant, as these definitions are socially constructed through individual experience (Blumer, 1969, as cited in Charmaz et al., 2019).

For his second premise, Blumer (1969, as cited in Charmaz et al., 2019) stated that an important factor of the meaning-making process within society is how we interact and infer context through our peers. Due to the changes in socialization capabilities with regards to recent social distancing bylaws, there have been significant fluctuations in the way we interact with each other. Communication methods within social structures have

been altered within the last year to prioritize online or technologically interactive meetings over in-person contact. This raised questions as to the impacts of increased isolation on McMaster's undergraduate community. Through the use of symbolic interactionism, our research was able to provide data to better comprehend how the changes in interpersonal communication have affected this demographic, and how modifications to social interactions have impacted overall SWB.

Finally, Blumer (1969, as cited in Charmaz et al., 2019) argued that individuals play a significant role in creating their own lives by being able to interpret the meanings that they encounter and make their own judgments. An example of this is how undergraduate students are able to form a personal understanding of the pandemic and how it affects them individually. This is consistent with the works of Stryker (1987) who contended that individuals are capable actors in making their own decisions about their lives, regardless of the societal structures already in place. Using this premise, we were able to see how undergraduate students are interpreting the new meanings associated with the pandemic and how this is affecting their life satisfaction.

The use of symbolic interactionism helps to mitigate a formal understanding of a subjective social phenomenon. This theory emphasizes symbols, meaning, and interpretations within daily life. By using the three premises laid out by Blumer (1969, as cited in Charmaz et al., 2019), our research works to better comprehend the lived experiences of undergraduate students at McMaster. Symbolic interactionism was a useful tool for our research as it helped us to navigate the adaptations and interpretations that arose in student life during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. It was specifically useful within our research at helping to understand participants' definitions of leisure, life satisfaction, and well-being, as well as how these meanings have changed over time.

### **Methodology**

Our research used a quantitatively based research methodology with a focus on the effects of different types of leisure activities on undergraduates' well-being and perceptions of the 'good life'. We wanted to know what kinds of leisure activities undergraduate students partook in during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how it affected their SWB. Also, how did students' perceptions about living the 'good life' change during the pandemic? We used an online anonymous survey, hosted on the McMaster Research Ethics Board approved LimeSurvey to conduct our research.

### **Ethical Concerns**

Eliminating the risk of any ethical issues is always a priority of any research study. For our particular research, there were several potential ethical issues that were noted. Firstly, it must be noted that investigators had peer-to-peer relationships with each other, as well as with participants, which could have potentially created a conflict of interest. A social risk was the loss of privacy if participants did not have a private space to fill out the survey. To minimize this risk, participants were able to take the survey at any time and place of their choosing. A psychological risk of our study included unwanted self-realization for the participant. The survey questions could have brought up unwanted feelings surrounding difficult experiences the participants may have had during COVID-19. We managed this risk by informing the participants they could take the survey at the time and place of their choosing. Participants could skip questions if desired, as well as choose to stop the



survey at any time or not submit their completed survey. We also put maximum effort into ensuring that our survey questions were worded correctly to minimize psychological and social risks. The contacts of support services were provided for students to make use of if needed. It must also be noted that using an anonymous online survey reduced some of the social and psychological risks, as there was no identifiable information that could be linked to the individual. The research conducted posed no risks greater than those in everyday life.

Another ethical issue is informed consent. Informed consent is complete understanding from the participants that they understand what they are getting involved in and are voluntarily providing information. Being informed is crucial in ensuring no deception is involved in the research. With our research project, by completing and submitting the survey, consent was implied. A letter of information detailing the research project was distributed so that participants were fully informed on what they were getting involved in. Additionally, in terms of participation, the decision to be involved was entirely up to the individual as our recruitment was solely based on volunteers. Questions were designed for minimal risk to participants to prevent harm. The survey was only to be completed by those 18 years or older. Throughout the research, we did not come across any gatekeepers for this research project. We took into consideration that our participants were all over 18 years old, implying that parents and guardians were not potential gatekeepers.

### **Steps in the Research Process**

Our research process spanned over eight months, beginning mid-September and concluding at the end of March. With lockdown protocols that enabled many students to turn to online learning formats as schools remained closed, group meetings were also held virtually. Every week, we met to discuss each stage of our project. First, we identified a relevant topic that we were interested in. This was a decision made very much within the context of the current global situation. We focused on the impact that online and offline leisure activities have on students' SWB in light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. We wanted to understand how the various ways people spent their time, both online and offline, affected individuals' views of what it meant to live the 'good life' and whether this had changed during the pandemic.

Generally, there are not a lot of resources and studies available on this topic because the subject is so recent and there is much research that has to be done on it. While there are studies conducted on the impact of leisure and online activities on individuals' SWB, few were written in relation to COVID-19. This new context may provide important insight into SWB that previous research lacks. We also wanted to look at individuals' perceptions of the 'good life' in relation to these activities, which appears to be a topic that is also not well-researched.

Based on our literature review we developed an area of interest with three research questions. We predicted that students' ideas of living the 'good life' and perceptions of SWB will have been negatively impacted by the increased isolation caused by the pandemic, regardless of an increased time for leisure. With this in mind, we then determined appropriate, clear, and concise questions to ask subjects to gain the information we were seeking and to ensure questions posed the least amount of risk possible to participants. These questions asked for socio-demographic information as

well as research-related data. As a group, we submitted our Ethics Proposal on October 19, 2020, and after several rounds of revisions, the research was approved by the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB#: 0327) on November 16, 2020.

The next step was to gather the data we needed. The plan was to recruit a minimum of 20 anonymous participants to complete the online survey. The optimum number of participants was 75. All group members were involved in the recruitment of participants. We used various clubs and organizations within McMaster University to recruit participants for the study. These included the DeGroot Business Society, Engineering Society, Humanities Society, Science Society, Social Sciences Society, McMaster Life Sciences, Class of 2022, Class of 2023, Social Psychology Society, PNB Society, Health and Aging Society, Sociology Society, Human Behaviour Society, Anthropology Society, and the Political Science Association. Recruitment took place using emails to group leaders to request posting permission. Once this was obtained, we shared the recruitment poster with their group members. Participants accessed the link to the survey through this poster. The survey was 25 questions long and took approximately 15 minutes. We met weekly to review data and plan for oncoming results. This included checking the number of anonymous responses that came forward and designing a layout for the final paper.

### **Data Analysis**

We began data analysis on February 12, 2021, after we expired our survey. We began analyzing our data using LimeSurvey and Microsoft Excel. We tried to use PSP, a software similar to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). However, we found it more comfortable using Excel for data analysis and to create our graphs. We first used the graphs provided by LimeSurvey to briefly analyze our data and interpret some of our findings. We then transferred all our data to an Excel spreadsheet and began running descriptive tests. We used a Microsoft word document to keep track of all our variables and variable codes. The first tests we ran were for our sociodemographic variables. These variables included age, gender, race/ethnicity, year of study, and faculty. We used Excel formulas to find the mean, median, and mode of our sociodemographic variables, as well as frequencies. Following this, we looked at the variables which applied more specifically to our study and determined what could be compared. We conducted crosstabs on Excel to identify any relationships between some of our variables. For our qualitative data, we used descriptive coding using Excel and Word. A Word document was used to keep track of common themes found within qualitative answers and Excel was used to run descriptive tests. The final step in data analysis was creating bar graphs and pie charts in Excel for the results section of the final paper.

### **Summary of Section**

In sum, this research project was carefully designed to abide by all the rules mentioned in the MREB protocol to eliminate risks. This included how we formulated our questions in our survey, as well as informing all potential participants about the minimal risks involved before they agreed to participate. Once the survey was complete, we sent it out to our recruitment groups and started gathering and analyzing our results. We began our final paper on March 19, 2021 and divided the discussion and results section into different themes: offline leisure, online leisure, living the 'good life', and changes in SWB.

## Results

### Demographics

The sample size for this study was 19 McMaster undergraduate students (n=19). For the sociodemographic portion of the survey, participants answered questions based on age, gender, race/ethnicity, year of study, and faculty.

### Age

Participants needed to be 18 year of age or older to partake in our study. 21.05% (n=4) were 19 years old, 31.57% (n=6) were 20 years old, 10.52% (n=2) were 21 years old, 15.78% (n=3) were 22 years old, 5.26% (n=1) was 23 years old, and 15.78% (n=3) were 25 and up.

### Gender and Race/Ethnicity

We asked our participants to self-identify in terms of gender and race/ethnicity. All our participants identified as female. 26.31% (n=5) identified as South Asian, 63.15% (n=12) identified as Caucasian, and 5.26% (n=1) identified as mixed race.

### Year of Study

5.26% (n=1) of our participants were in their 1<sup>st</sup> year of study, 26.31% (n=5) were in their 2<sup>nd</sup> year, 26.31% (n=5) were in their 2<sup>nd</sup> year, 26.31% (n=5) were in their 3<sup>rd</sup> year, 5.27% (n=1) was in her 5<sup>th</sup> year, and 10.52% (n=2) were returning students.

### Faculty

Our participants came from all the faculties at McMaster. The majority of them (n=8) were from the Social Sciences faculty (42.10%). 10.52% (n=2) were from Business, 10.52% (n=2) were from Engineering, 21.05% (n=4) were from humanities, and 10.52% (n=2) were from the sciences.

### At Home During Isolation

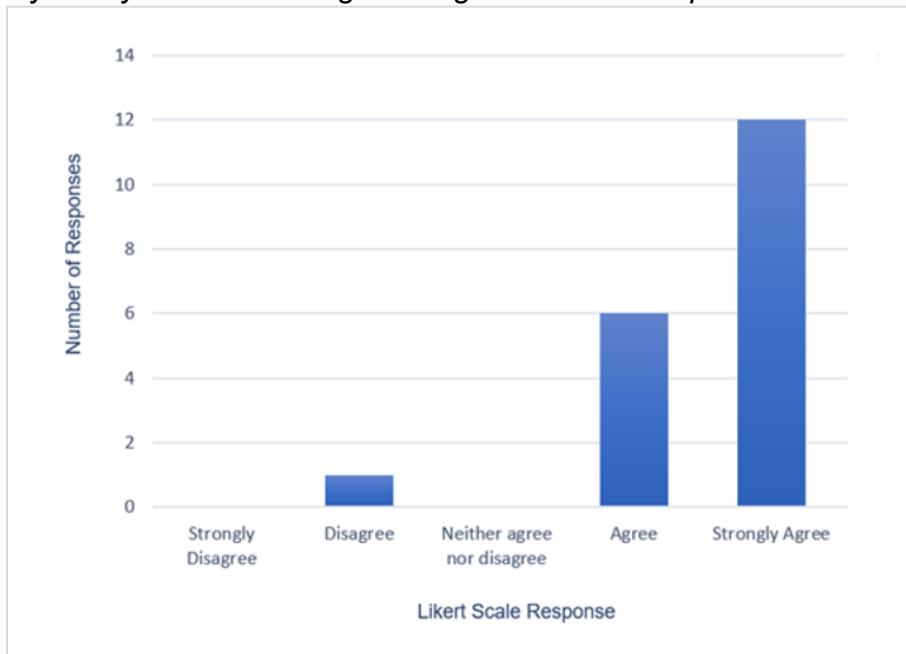
In addition to these demographic questions in this section of our survey, we also asked our participants who they were living with during the period of isolation which was more related to our study. A significant portion, 84.21% (n=16), of our participants said they were living with their family.

### Lifestyle Changes During the Pandemic

In Figure 1, participants were presented with the statement "my lifestyle had to change during the COVID-19 Pandemic," 63.15% (n=12) of our participants strongly agreed with this statement while 31.57% (n=6) agreed, and 5.26% (n=1) disagreed. These findings suggest that overall, the majority of our participants were taken out of their regular day-to-day lifestyle routine and had to adapt to new changes during the pandemic.

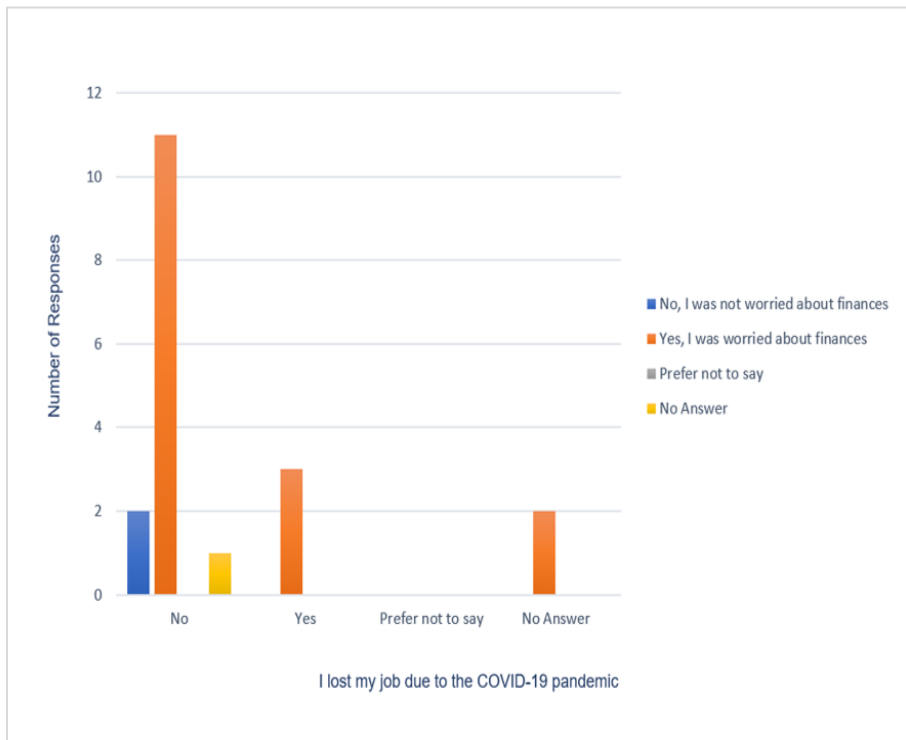
As shown in Figure 2, participants were presented with the statement "I lost my job due to the COVID-19 pandemic." 73.68% (n=14) said that they did not lose their job, and 15.78% (n=3) did. They were also given the statement "I worried about finances at least at one point during the COVID-19 pandemic." 84.21% (n=16) said that they were worried about finances at least at one point during the pandemic. Our results found that although

**Figure 1**  
*My lifestyle had to change during the COVID-19 pandemic*



most of our participants did not lose their job due to COVID-19, the majority of them were still worried about finances at least at one point during the pandemic (57.89%).

**Figure 2**  
*Job and Finances*



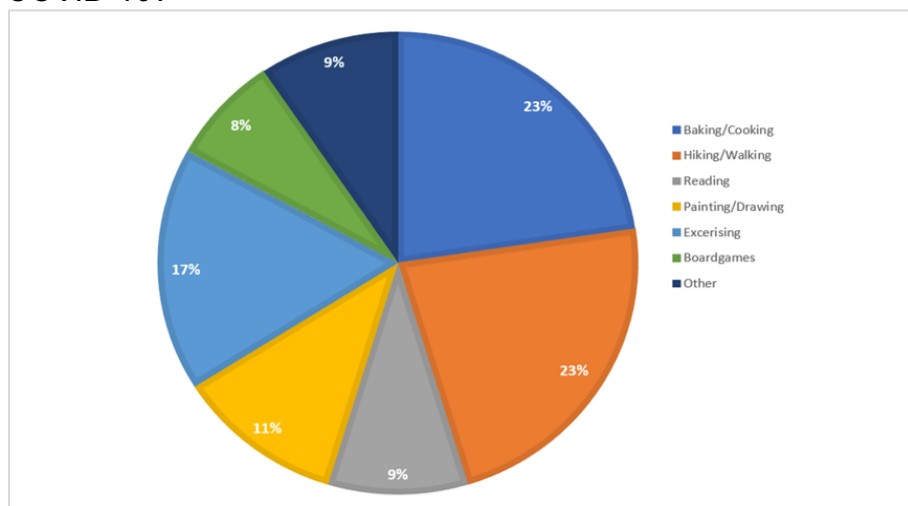
## Leisure Activities

### Offline Leisure

Figures 3 and 4 both show how we defined offline leisure activities as activities that do not require the use of the internet. We asked participants to list a few offline activities they engaged in during the lock-down months of the pandemic. The two most common answers cited by our participants were hiking/walking (23%) and cooking/baking (23%). Some other activities included exercising (17%), painting/drawing (11%), reading (9%), board games (8%), and other (9%). Participants were then asked to rate how they felt after engaging in the offline activities that they listed. 68.42% (n=13) of them said that they felt good, 26.31% (n=5) said that they felt excellent, while 5.26% (n=1) said they felt fair. Results show that participants had overwhelmingly positive feelings following participation in offline leisure activities.

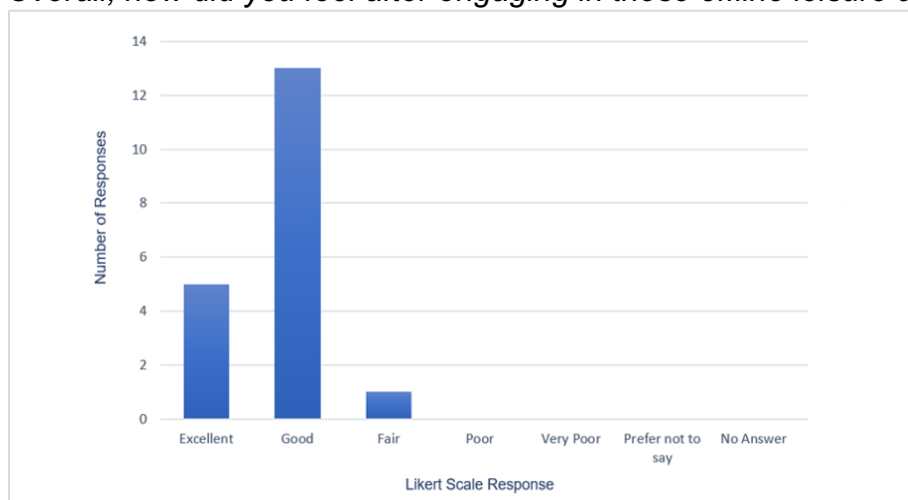
**Figure 3**

*What sorts of offline leisure activities did you enjoy doing during the lock-down months of COVID-19?*



**Figure 4**

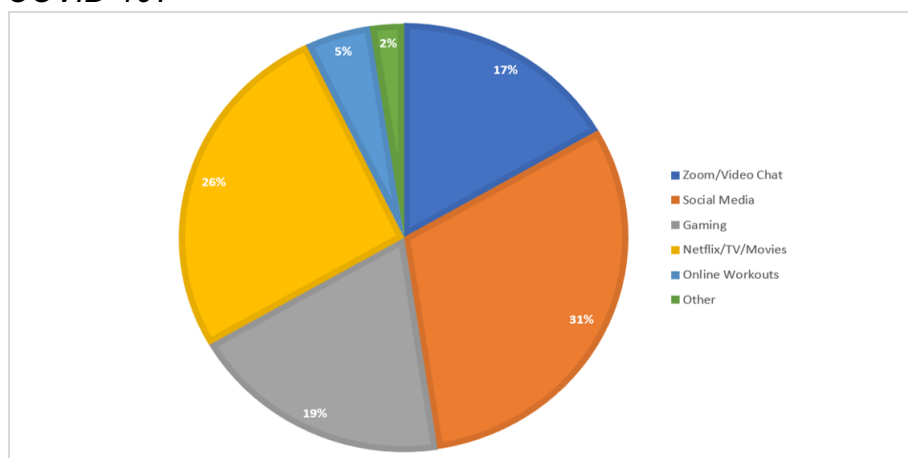
*Overall, how did you feel after engaging in these offline leisure activities?*



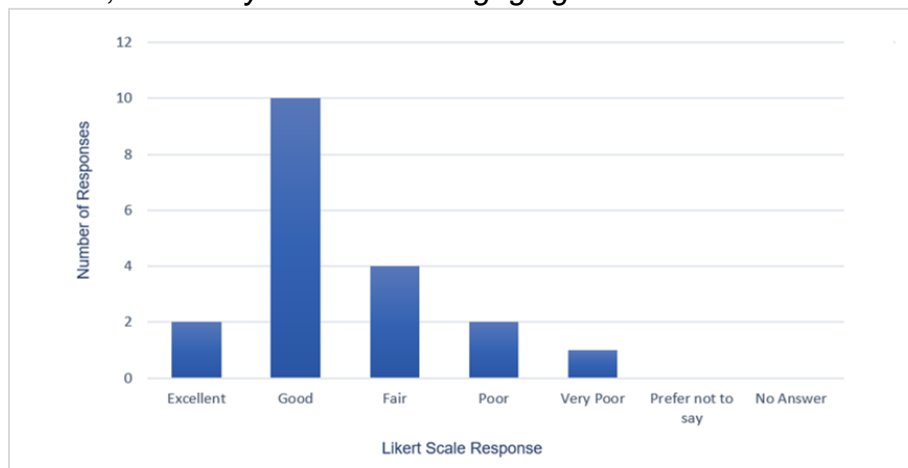
### Online Leisure

In figures 5 and 6, we defined online leisure activities as activities that require the use of the internet. We asked participants to list a few online activities they engaged in during the lock-down months of the pandemic. The most common answer cited by 13 of our participants was using some form of social media (26%). Some other activities included watching Netflix/movies/TV-shows (26%), online gaming (19%), Zoom/video chats (17%), online workouts (5%), and other (2%). Participants were then asked to rate how they felt after engaging in the online activities that they listed. 52.63% (n=10) of them said that they felt good, 21.05% (n=4) said that they felt fair, 10.52% (n=2) said they felt excellent, 10.52% (n=2) said they felt poor and 5.26% (n=1) said they felt very poor. Our results show that while the majority experienced positive feelings following participation in online leisure activities, there is an increase in those who indicate experiencing negative feelings. By comparing Figure 4 and Figure 6, we can say that online leisure activities can improve one’s mood, but not to the same extent that offline leisure activities do.

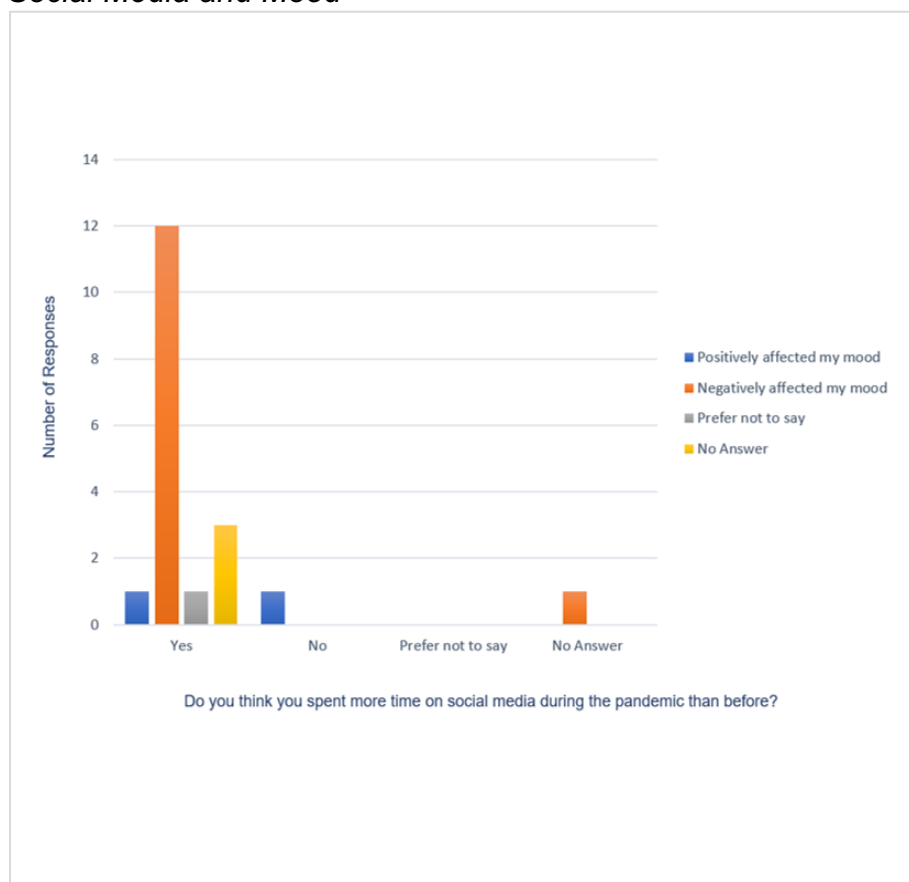
**Figure 5**  
*What sorts of online leisure activities did you enjoy doing during the lock-down months of COVID-19?*



**Figure 6**  
*Overall, how did you feel after engaging in these online leisure activities?*



**Figure 7**  
*Social Media and Mood*



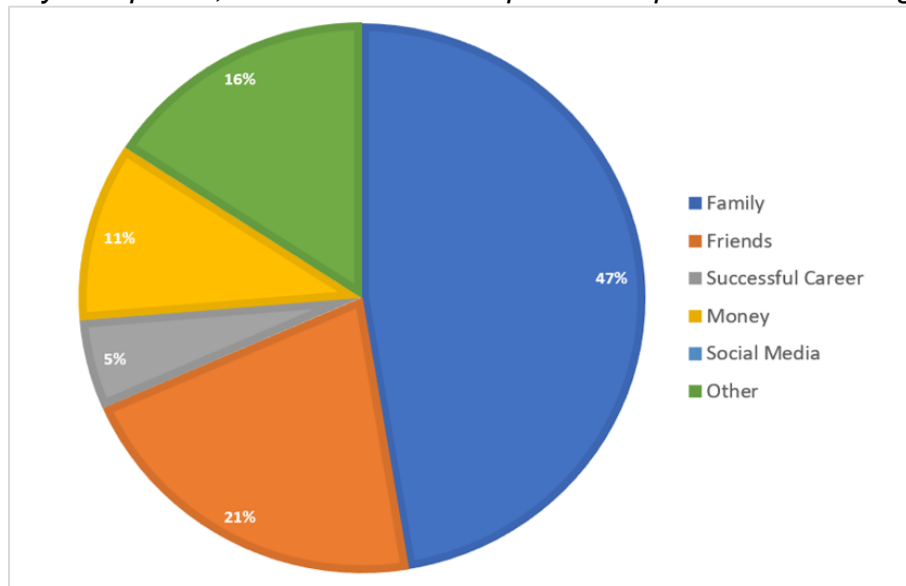
In Figure 7, participants were asked “Do you think you spent more time on social media during the pandemic than before,” followed by the question “Do you think increased time on social media positively or negatively affects your mood?” This graph compares the answers to these questions. Results show that 89.47% ( $n=17$ ), which is almost all our participants, spent more time on social media during the pandemic. These results also show that the majority of the participants who said yes, also reported that increased time on social media negatively affected their mood (63.15%).

### ***The ‘Good Life’***

Recall that 84.21% ( $n=16$ ) of our participants said they were living with their family during the period of isolation. Prior to this, participants were asked “In your opinion, what is the most important requirement for living a ‘good life’?” as seen in Figure 8. Participants were only allowed to choose one option. A significant portion said that the most important requirement was family (47%). Other options included friends (21%), others (16%), money (11%), and a successful career (5%). Some responses under the “other” option included “healthy mental well-being and state” and “overall happiness.” None of our participants choose the social media option. This is significant to our findings from Figure 7.

**Figure 8**

*In your opinion, what is the most important requirement for living a 'good life'?*



Participants were presented with the statement “What it means to live a 'good life' is entirely subjective.” 68.42% (n=13) of our participants agreed with this statement and 26.31% (n=5) strongly agreed. This explains the result that we found in the opened ended question “Has your perception of what it means to live a 'good life' been altered since the COVID-19 pandemic began?” Some of our participants indicated that their perceptions did change. One of our participants said “COVID-19 definitely changed my perspective on school and focused more of my happiness and fulfillment on my relationships with family members and friends.” Another one responded with:

I believe it definitely has. I have realized that going out, spending money, drinking/partying is not what a 'good life' must entail. I think who you surround yourself with is the most important thing. While the pandemic has definitely taken its toll on my mental health, being around people who keep you grounded, make you smile, etc. is the most important thing.

Some of our participants said that their perceptions about the 'good life' did not change. For example, one answer stated “No. I have always understood that having my friends in my life was part of living a good life. Seeing them less due to the pandemic just reinforces what I already believed.” Another participant said “Not really. I've always believed that so long as you have good people around you who love and care for you that good things will come. This just changed the way we did things together.” These results show that everyone has their own definition of what it means to live a 'good life'. Our participants' perceptions of living the 'good life' were based on their individual preferences on what was important to them.

## Discussion

### Lifestyle Changes

The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected many people over the past year, the impact, for the most part, appearing to transcend demographic and environmental



differences. Many have faced challenges, including rigid social restrictions, financial struggles, the loss of a job, among many others which all contribute to the unique experiences of each individual. A symbolic interactionist would recognize the importance of these environmental, life-altering changes, as they have the power to impact an individual's meaning-making process, in turn affecting their overall SWB (Charmaz et al., 2019). As shown in Figure 1, when presented with the statement, "my lifestyle had to change during the COVID-19 Pandemic," 94% indicated it did, with 63% strongly agreeing. Thus, there is no question that almost all of our participants were impacted by the pandemic in significant ways, and this may have been found in various aspects of their lives. This most likely included their time spent in leisure activities. In Figure 2, we discovered that when presented with the statement "I lost my job due to the COVID-19 pandemic," approximately 74% did not lose their jobs. However, although our participants may not have lost their jobs, there was still a worry of managing their finances or making ends meet. Slightly over 84% of our participants reported that they were worried about their finances at least once during the pandemic. Further questioning may have been beneficial to determine whether these responses were due to only being temporarily laid off due to lockdown restrictions and closures of non-essential businesses, rather than being fired. It also must be noted that it could be that our target population is more likely than the general population to worry about their finances, as they are younger and are likely concerned about payment of school-related expenses.

Nevertheless, there are various other explanations for why there is a worry about finances with the current context of the ongoing pandemic, as well as implications for how leisure activities are experienced. For one, there is the possibility that as a result of lockdown restrictions that many had to endure, there may have been an increase in online spending due to more time spent at home and possibly added stress. This may have contributed to financial worries. Additionally, according to Macchia & Whillans (2019), the prioritization of leisure is positively associated with life satisfaction, though this is often only possible for the financially secure. Therefore, based on the consideration that the majority of our participants either have worried or continue to worry about financial matters, this may impact their ability to take the time or pay the expenses necessary to participate in leisure activities. This is an important background to further assumptions about how they might reap any potential benefits from both online and offline activities.

### **Online Leisure Activities**

The experiences of online leisure activities and the positive or negative impact they may have are more pertinent than ever during the COVID-19 pandemic. For this research, we have defined online leisure activities as activities that require the use of the internet. When asked to list types of leisure activities that our participants enjoyed doing during the lock-down months of COVID-19, responses indicated that most were participating in social media (26%) as well as Netflix/TV/movies (26%). Other responses included Zoom/video chats (17%), online workouts (5%), and other (2%). These results revealed participation in a wide variety of online leisure activities. There are several important factors to take into account that impact the way these activities are experienced. Firstly, the way one views a particular online activity affects their desire to participate, as well as their enjoyment of that activity. According to Blumer (1969) and the symbolic interaction theory, individuals respond to things based on the meaning those objects carry, implying

that it will vary from person to person. While there is evidence of much online use during the pandemic, the large range of activities presented in these responses indicates diversity in preference for ways to enjoy one's time online. Most respondents regard the use of social media and viewing of movies and television as leisure and gain some measure of enjoyment from it. When asked to indicate how they felt before engagement in these online activities, more than 50% of participants responded with feeling either 'excellent' or 'good'. These responses are to be expected, as there is a general assumption that leisure activities of any kind, whether online or offline, are performed to increase positive feelings (Newman et al., 2014). However, almost 40% of respondents indicated feeling either 'fair', 'poor' or 'very poor'. These results provide evidence of both neutral and negative feelings following participation in online leisure activities. Building upon this, when asked whether they spent more time on social media during the pandemic, a significant majority (89.3%) said they did. Furthermore, 63.14% of those who responded 'yes' additionally reported that this increased time spent using social media had a negative impact on their mood. This is consistent with the research conducted by Lades et al. (2020), which provided evidence that social media use was correlated with increased negative affect. It is also important to note that according to these results, engagement in leisure activities does not always have a positive impact on one's mood.

Perhaps the nature of these online activities is another important factor that impacts whether or not one gains positive affect from these pursuits. According to Lades et al. (2020), spending time outdoors as well as engaging in physical activities is most significantly associated with an increase in positive feelings. However, only a small portion of participants (5%) indicated engaging in physical activities associated with online use, particularly online workouts. This is likely due to the lack of perception of this type of activity as leisure. Additionally, the level of social interaction involved in the activity may have impacted how positively the individual felt after. According to Newman et al. (2014), social activities work to improve one's mood as well as protect from negative feelings. Some examples of activities respondents gave that either are, or have the potential to be socially interactive, are social media, video games, and especially video chatting. The social aspect of these online activities likely contributed to the reports of positive feelings following these activities. It would be consistent with research done by Pang (2018), which revealed that social networks can influence a person's SWB by increasing their perception of social support. The reports of negative moods however may be evidence of the fact that a person's SWB does not entirely depend on their levels of social engagement (Diener, 1984). This evidence of the adverse effects social media can have is consistent with a substantial amount of research suggesting that it may decrease levels of social trust, and overall lower levels of SWB (Sabatini & Sarracino, 2017; Agbaria & Bdier, 2020).

What is clear in our findings is that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the way people spend their time, causing people to resort to doing many things online that were previously done in person. What we found is that, especially in the online world, people engage in leisure activities that may not be beneficial for their long-term physical and mental health. It appears that the isolation associated with the pandemic has only exacerbated these issues. Since there is evidence that supports many positive aspects of online activities, we cannot dismiss them altogether. Nevertheless, a decrease of reliance on them and incorporation with more offline leisure activities participation may

work to improve individuals' SWB, particularly within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Offline Leisure Activities**

The effects of offline leisure activities during the COVID-19 pandemic was another one of the major interests of our research. For our research, offline leisure activities were defined as activities that were completed without the use of the Internet, for example, exercise, baking, painting, and more. Participants were asked to list the types of offline activities they more enjoyed participating in, and responses indicated that baking and cooking were the most common answers, as well as hiking and walking. Both of these responses represented 23%, followed by exercising (17%) and painting and drawing (11%). Responses also included activities like reading (9%), other (9%), and board games (8%). Participants were also asked about how they felt after engaging in offline leisure activities, and the most common answer was 'good' (68.42%), and the second most common answer was excellent (26.31%).

When comparing participants' feelings after engaging in online activities and offline activities, no participants said they felt 'poor' or 'very poor', whereas after online leisure activities 40% of participants indicated feeling either 'fair', 'poor' or 'very poor'. These results show that the majority of participants felt positive after partaking in offline leisure activities.

Our research findings are consistent with previous research, showing that participants' moods and feelings were positively affected by offline activities more so than online activities. This is likely due to the fact that internet use is correlated with increased negative affect (Lades et al., 2020). Consistent with a study conducted by Newman et al. (2016), there is a correlation between SWB and leisure activities. More specifically, during the COVID-19 pandemic, research shows that spending time in nature and outdoor activities like walking are also associated with an enhanced sense of well-being (Lades et al., 2020). Furthermore, positive affect was found to be greatest when participants spent time outdoors or performed physical activities to exercise (Lades et al., 2020). Another study conducted by Brand et al. (2020) reinforces these findings saying that SWB is increased when physical activity and exercise are frequently performed. These results imply that greater emphasis should be placed on participation in offline activities, as opposed to online activities, to increase positive mood during a pandemic.

In addition to this, the types of offline activities may determine how participants feel after performing the activity. For example, hiking may cause participants to feel better than playing a board game. The higher number of participation in activities that required more physical exertion, namely hiking, walking, and exercising, may have contributed to the increase in positive mood responses. Therefore, it may be useful to examine mood responses to specific types of leisure activities. Another factor that could be further investigated is whether these activities were performed with other individuals, friends, or family. Activities performed with family or friends could affect mood or feelings differently than activities performed alone.

### **The 'Good Life'**

Another important focus of our study was individual perceptions of what it meant to live the 'good life', and how they have changed over time within the context of the COVID-19

pandemic. One way that our research helps to build on existing literature is through a focus on the perceptions of well-being through the personal reflections of our respondents. 94.73% of participants were in agreement that what it means to live the 'good life' is entirely subjective. These perceptions, as defined through symbolic interactionism, are products of the meaning-making processes that we encounter through our daily interactions (Meltzer et al., 2015). Each person creates their own interpretation of what makes a positive impact within their social reality. Within our study, participants were given the opportunity to give their explanations as to what they considered to be the single most important factor to a well-lived life. The majority of respondents noted that either family (47%) or friends (21%) were the most important, with money (11%) and career (5%) coming in behind them. This result is consistent with the current literature, such as the findings by Newman et al. (2014), who discussed how social interaction with others helps to positively affect SWB and improve overall mood. This aspect of our research shows the importance that individuals place on their social systems and how this affects their perceptions of whether or not they are living the 'good life'.

An analysis of the quantitative data collected within our study aided in answering our research question: "How did students' perceptions about living the 'good life' change following the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic?" The data suggests that the recent changes in social structure following the lockdown orders produced substantial effects on individuals' attitudes towards what constitutes a well-lived life. A significant portion of participants reported a new or increased emphasis on the importance of family or friends in defining what they would consider the 'good life'. This observation by our participants is supported by external research, which shows that the influence of a support system can help to promote SWB (Pang, 2018, p. 2150). For those participants that reported a perception change, the COVID-19 pandemic helped them to learn to prioritize family and friendships over other aspects of their lives. For those who reported a belief in the importance of social relationships but whose perceptions did not change, the COVID-19 pandemic acted as a way to solidify their views. These responses are consistent with previous research that suggests people are happier and have higher SWB when surrounded by others (King et al., 2020). The lockdown protocols and subsequent isolation that stemmed from the pandemic have created added stress in many people's lives over the last year. Our data suggests that people were more inclined to attribute social relationships as being an aspect of the 'good life' during this time, even when the ability to interact within these relationships has been made difficult.

While interpersonal connection was seen as a primary factor in building the 'good life', participants did not directly attribute social media use as a facilitator for it. This finding is in contrast to research conducted by Pang (2018), who found that social media use was a positive indicator of SWB. Our research found that the majority of respondents (89.47%) were going online and using social media more during lockdown months, and part of this was to communicate with family and friends online. However, the same percentage (89.47%) reported missing getting together with friends and family in person during the pandemic. When compared to the importance that participants placed on the need for social relationships, this shows a prioritization of in-person interaction in students' perceptions of the 'good life'. This is consistent with previous literature that found social media use was linked to poor self-esteem and lowered well-being (Sabatini & Sarracino, 2017; Lades et al., 2020). These findings show that communication in an online world is

not equivalent to in-person interactions, and in turn is not perceived by students to be a significant factor in SWB. Our data shows that during the stress of the pandemic people are using social media more, but it is not working as a strong enough tool to mitigate the need for regular interpersonal communication. It is important to note that this finding is preliminary and correlative, as the scope of our study does not allow for a more in-depth discussion of this topic. These findings could be due to a lack of access to technology to communicate or other spurious factors. Future research is recommended to better understand the impact of permanent distance and social media on individuals during the pandemic.

## Conclusion

### Summary of Results and Findings

In conclusion, the pandemic has been shown to have greatly affected people's lifestyles. There has been an increase in financial strain and career insecurity, as well as a shift in the ways people can communicate with their loved ones. Undergraduate students are found to have spent more time online during the pandemic than they had previously, participating in a variety of activities that differed between individuals. When asked to self-report their feelings surrounding their perceived well-being following leisure participation, students indicated that their mood was negatively impacted following social media use or online leisure activities. In contrast, students reported more positive moods following offline leisure activities. These positive perceptions of well-being also extended to social relationships, as family and friends were found to be the most important aspect of what it means to live a 'good life'. Time spent with others and participation in offline activities is both introduced or reinforced as effective ways to enhance well-being among undergraduate students as a result of the pandemic. Similarly, our data suggests that time spent with family plays an important role in participants' mood and perceptions of the 'good life' during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the existing academic research does not address perceptions of well-being and the 'good life' as it relates to a global pandemic, and our research works to fill this gap.

### Limitations

With any research study, there will be limitations and weaknesses that prevent any analysis to be explored to its full extent. With the restrictions of conducting in-person data from COVID-19, we were limited to solely focus on online resources and media to collect our research records. We were not able to conduct in-person interviews to gather information. This may have accounted for the reduction in our sample size, as there was a possibility of not having enough participants to gather a respective proportion in statistics and to understand the research focus. As mentioned already, our participants consisted of all female respondents. We were unable to gather a male perspective, and we are unsure if this plays an effect in our findings. We are also presented with focusing on the events from the recent pandemic to guide our study, which limited us from finding any previous peer-reviewed or published scholarly articles to use in guidance of the subject. Also, people may not remember their perceptions from a couple of months ago; a recall of memory may be one other limitation.

Additionally, there are limitations in regards to issues resulting from gathering information due to distress in an individual's personal experiences. Although it is

anonymous, they may have a hard time reporting their input. There is room to ensure that we have achieved all aspects of our research study. However, we are aware that some limitations will slow or prevent this progression.

### **Significant Insights or Contributions**

A significant insight our research project has provided is how undergraduate spent their time effectively to enhance well-being. Our research findings suggest that participants were in a better mood after engaging in offline activities rather than online activities and provides us with an understanding of how undergraduate students spend their time. Some of the activities that effectively promote SWB and activities that negatively contribute to their SWB. Being an undergraduate student is stressful, and there is the added stress that comes with living through a global pandemic. Recognizing the correlations between offline leisure activities and positive feelings may provide insight into both individual and university changes that can be made to improve students' experiences during the pandemic. Our research could be useful for the university's social support services in providing students with information about leisure activities to enhance SWB.

### **Concluding Thoughts/Statements**

Based on the results of our research, we can conclude that within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, offline leisure activities are better able to enhance mood than are online leisure activities among undergraduate students. Additionally, leisure activities that were performed in the company of family or friends were more likely to increase the individual's SWB. While everyone has a different perception of the 'good life', the majority indicated that family and friends were a significant factor in this concept. We understand that our sample size was small and not generalizable, yet it was important because it provided us with valuable insight into how students spent their leisure time during the pandemic. We hope that future research can expand on what we have learned from our study, and in turn, help to provide valuable insights for the application of future university policy that may aid in alleviating student stress.

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