

A Sign of the Pandemic Times? Completing a Virtual Group Thesis During COVID-19

A warm welcome and happy reading of the second issue of the McMaster Undergraduate Journal of Social Psychology! Since last year, the editorial team of the McMaster Undergraduate Journal of Social Psychology has grown and changed. Namya Tandon remains at the helm as editor-in-chief, as does Jordan Graber as graphic designer. After a fantastic year as assistant editor, Ranuli DeSilva has transitioned out of her position, with Raisa Jadavji and Angelo Marmolejo serving as co-assistant editors. Last, Christina Doan has joined the team as the layout editor. The entire team sends best wishes and thanks to Ranuli and extends a warm welcome to all new editorial members of the McMaster Undergraduate Journal of Social Psychology.

I have been teaching the capstone course since the 2014-2015 academic year and the hard work, dedication, and engagement of the students remains a constant feature each year. The enrollment of the capstone course continues to grow each year, with the 2020-2021 academic year consisting of 88 students with 17 unique research projects. As a result, there were six thesis papers this year that met the minimum standard of excellence of a grade of 85% or higher on the final thesis paper submitted for the capstone course, as per the publication criteria. As you will discover when reading these six articles, our undergraduate students are emerging young scholars interested in exploring timely, socially relevant, and important topics impacting their fellow peers. The six studies included for publication in this issue include the following (ordered alphabetically by study title): **Communication and the Maintenance of Relationships During The COVID-19 Pandemic** by Alyssa Nerland, Baila Lovejoy, Christina Doan, Jordan Graber, and Kirsten Hutt; **Exploring Perceptions of Positive and Negative Impacts of Students' Well-Being on Their Physical Health** by Mikayla Voets, Emily Bergsma, Kayla Zanon, Jacob Thomas, and Keeley McGrath; **Quantitative Study of Upper Year Undergraduate Students at McMaster University: Assessing the Intersection of Remote Learning, Social Experiences and Living Environments** by Isabella Batista, Victoria De Freitas, Jet'aime Fray-Samuel, Ashmeen Hayer, Theia Jamal-Sunderji, and Ashley O'Brien; **The Effects of Online Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic on Undergraduate Students' Well-Being at McMaster University** by Kenya Cassidy, Cassandra De Lorenzis, Janelle Enns, Kenda Offinga, Haley Owens, and Emily Sorasit; **The Influence of Social Media on Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of Reality: Through the Theoretical Perspective of Groupthink** by Titi Huynh, Kristen Kostuch, Mya Martorano, Olivia McMurray, and Victoria Scimeca; and, **Undergraduate Students Experiences and Perceptions of Subjective Well-Being during a Global Pandemic in an Online World** by Catherine French, Kobika Kirubakaran, Mehr Mahmood, Kelsey Reinink, and Bailey Stegenga.

It is hard to believe a year has passed since the very first publication of the McMaster Undergraduate Journal of Social Psychology! Words like lockdown, quarantine, social distancing, masking, and online, remote, or virtual learning have been a constant and all-

too-familiar part of our discourse and lived experiences, exemplifying the changing global world living with and through this global health crisis since early 2020. The pandemic changed the format of the capstone course, with the 2020-2021 academic year being the first in history to have the group thesis projects completely entirely online. While this certainly brought on unique challenges and hurdles, the students' adaptation to change was admirable and impressive. This was a new experience for everyone as we held class lectures, group meetings, and office hours virtually on Zoom, with groups connecting in similar ways to develop, design, collect data, analyze the findings, and prepare both a poster and final thesis paper showcasing their research. While only a portion of the thesis papers completed during the 2020-2021 academic year are included in this issue of the McMaster Undergraduate Journal of Social Psychology, the work completed by the entire class under unprecedented and unusual circumstances was commendable and should be recognized. If you would like to know more about the other projects completed during the 2020-2021 academic year, please see this link for more information on the virtual poster showcase: https://socialpsychology.mcmaster.ca/news/social_psych_capstone

The research studies in this second issue of the McMaster Undergraduate Journal of Social Psychology reflect the current lived reality of university students as they negotiate their way through a new world with pandemic restrictions leading to impacts on health and well-being, changing learning environments, engagement with and use of social media, and adapted modes of communication for living, learning, relationships, and connectedness with others. As with many studies conducted in the course and in the social sciences more generally, the sample sizes in these published studies are not generalizable. However, the findings in each study emphasize the importance of incorporating students' perceptions and experiences to developmental changes with online learning, classroom experiences, and impacts that pandemic living and learning has on the role and usage of social media in everyday lives, relationships, and the health, well-being, and wellness of the McMaster University student population.

Batista et al., (2021) and Cassidy et al., (2021) conducted research on the different experiences of remote learning during the pandemic among undergraduate students. Batista et al., (2021) found that remote learning negatively impacted many participants which was mediated, both positively and negatively, by one's living environment. The transition to moving back home, managing multiple home and school-related responsibilities, and learning online impacted not only one's academic experience(s), but also challenged their ability to sustain connections and relationships with others. In their study, Cassidy et al., (2021) determined the online learning environment negatively impacted students' well-being in numerous ways, including cognitively (increased stress, online learning fatigue, decreased motivation levels); physically (greater aches, pains, and strains due to increased computer and device usage); interpersonally (via decreased connectedness and contact with peers), and finally, academically (perceived decrease in quality of learning, lack of motivation, and decreased educational satisfaction). While some experiences were positive, both Batista et al., (2021) and Cassidy et al., (2021)

concluded the pandemic and online learning environment ultimately changed the learning landscape, with potential yet unstudied long-term impacts on students. These two studies emphasize the need for McMaster University to further develop and enhance online learning, teaching technologies and delivery methods, offer alternatives to cheating and plagiarism software, and increase opportunities for engagement among classmates and peers.

Nerland et al.,'s (2021) study identified that while undergraduate students were adaptive in their modes of communication to sustain and maintain relationships during the pandemic, many still experienced online fatigue and social disconnectedness. Their study highlights the need for further outreach programs, both on and off campus, as well as social support programs and services in both online and offline (in safe, public-health guided ways) capacities, to increase connectedness with others. In a world that has become so reliant on online modes of communication to safely connect during times of lockdown and isolation, Huynh et al., (2021) examined the negative impacts of social media usage and the link to behaviours, leading to a group-think mentality. This study highlights the need for greater awareness about online presence, engagement with social media, a critical understanding of the impact of others on decision-making and behaviours/actions, and the need for balance between on and off-line communication with others. While Huynh et al.,'s (2021) study did not specifically look at the role of communication during the pandemic, their study findings allude to the potential implications of greater reliance on informational and communication technologies as a form of connectedness, and the potential consequences of such usage on actions, behaviours, and relationships.

Last, both French et al., (2021) and Voets et al., (2021) explored impacts on students' well-being. Voets et al., (2021) found that as mental wellness decreased, students experienced greater incidences of physical health related symptoms, such as pains, headaches, tension, and muscle strains. Further, stress had the greatest impact on the relationship between physical and mental well-being among the university students, according to Voets et al., (2021). While coping mechanisms helped mitigate some physical and mental wellness related experiences, the authors found more can be done at the institutional level to support undergraduate students. French et al., (2021), on the other hand, examined the subjective well-being of undergraduate students, studying the definitional reality of 'living a good life' during a pandemic. While some participants noted benefits of participating in online activities and communities, offline and/or in-person forms of communication were strongly preferred, leading to greater subjective well-being and wellness. Moreover, strong bonds and social supports with family, friends, and the community were also found by French et al., (2021) to be advantageous to students' overall subjective well-being and perception of 'living a good life.' Both studies, therefore, underscore the need for accessible, inclusive, and readily available supports, activities (including leisure activities) and coping mechanisms offered on campus to reduce student stress, thereby improving students' health, well-being, life satisfaction, and outlook.

I hope you enjoy reading the important, interesting, and socially relevant social psychological research studies of the six respective groups featured in the second issue of the McMaster Undergraduate Journal of Social Psychology. The entire editorial board should be commended for their hard work and dedication on the publication of the second issue of the McMaster Undergraduate Journal of Social Psychology. I continue to be honoured to work, as Faculty Advisor, alongside intelligent, motivated, dedicated, and inspiring students: Namyra, Angelo, Christina, Jordan, and Raisa, who serve as editorial board members, along with the six groups who were eligible for publication this year. Congratulations to all involved in the publication of the second issue of the McMaster Undergraduate Journal of Social Psychology - your hard work, dedication, and inspiring work is recognized, respected, and appreciated! Until next year's issue, stay safe, take care, and be well!

Sincerely,
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