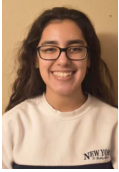


# *HOW COVID-19 HAS ALTERED THE AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENT'S EVERYDAY LIFE*

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## **Abstract**

The initial spread of COVID-19 in early 2020 led to the introduction of policies such as social distancing and quarantine. These policies affect the everyday lives of American college students, particularly their daily rhythms, interactions, and spaces. This article uses a survey conducted on American college students in March of 2020 to deconstruct the specific changes to their everyday lives. In quarantine, American college students saw a drastic shift from normal linear rhythms to cyclical rhythms. Due to the lack of social interaction, they also found new ways to communicate using technology, creating a temporary solution. Lastly, with no differentiation between the workspace and home space, American college students felt an increased need for productivity. The new policies of quarantining and social distancing altered the American college student's everyday life.

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The everyday life of an individual consists of a complex mix of rhythms, interactions, and spaces. What happens when the traditional sense of everyday life is rapidly and drastically changed? In the past months, COVID-19 has shifted the everyday experience. The situation worsens daily and the need to quarantine and socially distance seems to have become the new norm. These changes have had an unprecedented impact on people's daily lives. However, no matter the situation, everyday lives are still governed by complex rhythms, interactions, and spaces. The introduction of new policies to help contain and prevent the spread of COVID-19 has only altered the balance of the everyday and how these complex rhythms, interactions, and spaces occur. The everyday is ambivalent; it is when and where individuals develop their capabilities and become integrated into our societies (Gardiner, 2000). But the everyday also presents itself as a contradiction. The everyday can be both ordinary and extraordinary, normal and abnormal, known and unknown (Gardiner, 2000). In order to better understand the inner workings of the chaotic everyday experience, philosopher Henri Lefebvre introduced the concept of rhythmanalysis. Rhythms help categorize the various mundane repetitions and patterns that are experienced daily. Many American college students undertake multiple obligations within their everyday life, including but not limited to academic activities, extracurricular activities, sports and physical exercise, leisure activities, and work.

Interactions are also important in the everyday. Sociologist Erving Goffman (1978) emphasizes that social life is solely characterized by face-to-face interactions. Therefore, an individual's expressions, speech, body language, and identity are all continually impacted by interaction (Goffman, 1978). The COVID-19 pandemic has caused many states to order shelter-in-place policies, barring interaction with anyone outside of one's home and effectively ending most opportunities for face-to-face communication for many college students (Mervosh et al, 2020).

Finally, social spaces are another key component of everyday life, constructed through social interaction and understanding. Social spaces are hard to define because they are dynamic and vary greatly. However, each space is characterized by underlying rules and expectations, such as how a student is expected to focus and pay attention in a classroom.

By utilizing a qualitative survey to assess the rhythms, interactions, and spaces of American college students, this study aims to contextualize how COVID-19 and the introduction of the policies of quarantining and social distancing has altered the complex everyday lives of American college students.

## **Methods**

### *Participants*

The participants in the survey were 48 American college students aged 18 to 23. Participants were recruited from academic and extracurricular online discussion groups, where they were invited to complete a survey. A majority of participants attend Florida State University or another university in Florida. Four out of forty-eight participants were from outside the state of Florida.

### *Materials*

Participants were given a virtual survey conducted in March of 2020 via Google Forms. I set out to design an open-ended, qualitative survey that would holistically capture a glimpse of students' everyday lives. The daily lives of American college students usually feature activities such as going to class, meeting up with friends, studying, working out, eating, and more. To examine these behaviors, I asked participants three "yes" or "no" questions to assess changes in their social media and electronic device usage and changes in their productivity and motivation due to the quarantine. The remaining 9 questions were free-response and designed to qualitatively assess participants' daily schedules, in-person and virtual interactions, modes of interaction, negative feelings, separation of work and rest spaces, and belief in the effectiveness of the quarantine.

## **Results**

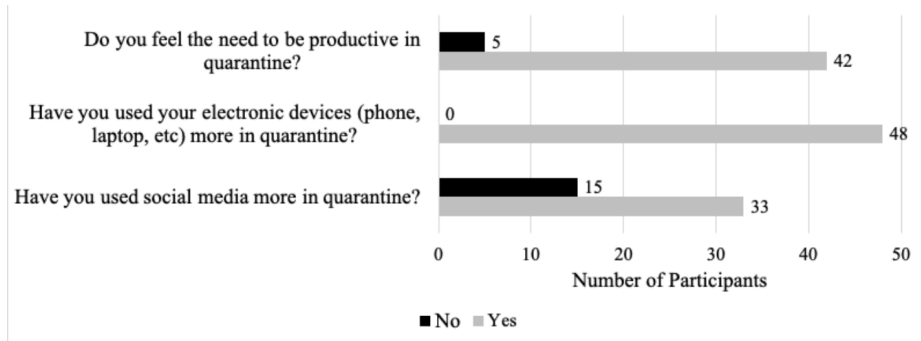
The results of the yes or no questions can be seen in Fig. 1. Most of the questions were free-response so I assessed how the majority of participants responded. For example, when participants were asked "Do you have any in person interactions in quarantine (with family, pets, etc)?" a majority of participants reported interactions mostly with immediate family and pets. The implications of these interactions are further discussed.

Participants reported increased social media and technology use following the outbreak, with about 88 percent of participants responding yes to the question "Have you used social media more in quarantine?" and all participants responding yes to the question "Have you used your electronic devices (phone, laptop, etc) more in quarantine?". Participants also reported maintaining their motivation, with 87.5 percent of participants feeling the need to be productive in quarantine. Most participants report having a daily schedule. This includes but is not limited to allotting portions of the day for schoolwork, exercising, and eating. One participant even explained how they "try to keep the same schedule [they] had on campus." Additionally, participants described their very limited in-person interactions, oftentimes with family members or pets and the occasional friend.

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**Figure 1**

*Number of Participants Responding "Yes" or "No" to Each Item*



Virtual interactions were very common, with only one participant reporting a lack of technology-based communication. Most participants described a reliance on technology by using text and video conferencing applications.

Most participants also expressed feeling uncomfortable or sad during quarantine, attributing their feelings to missing certain aspects of their pre-COVID everyday lives. When describing quarantine, one participant stated that it is “draining and monotonous to be stuck at home.” Indeed, when asked what they miss from and what they took for granted before quarantine, participants described many mundane activities like seeing friends and going to common spaces. Additionally, because of quarantine, work space and relaxation/rest spaces are separate only for a small number of participants, with most participants utilizing one space for both work and relaxation. One participant detailed “I have a harder time staying productive since I associate that space with both work and relaxation.” Finally, on their attitudes toward the quarantine, most believe it is an effective way of combating COVID-19, although some critiqued the lack of enforcement of the quarantine policy.

## Discussion

### Rhythms

Henri Lefebvre (2013) identified two types of rhythms: cyclical and linear. Cyclical rhythms pertain to natural or cosmic time while linear rhythms relate to social practices and human imposition. These two types of repetitions work in conjunction with one another as the intersection of nature (the cyclical) and modernity (the linear) to create the everyday (Lefebvre, 2013). Results show that COVID-19 and the policies of social distancing and quarantine have prompted college students to increasingly embrace cyclical rhythms while experiencing the frustration of failing to emulate typical linear rhythms.

*Embracing Circular Rhythms*

When surveyed about their daily rhythms, American college students noticed a shift in this aspect of their everyday. In terms of the cyclical, when asked about their daily schedules, some participants in the research study reported that they were sleeping later than usual. The “usual” sleep schedule is defined as each participant’s pre-pandemic sleep schedule. In quarantine, college students are beginning to embrace the cyclical rhythms of their bodies by sleeping later than usual. There is little obligation to wake up early because classes are online rather than in-person: a linear rhythm that was previously imposed. Although some classes are still synchronous, online classes are unique in that students are able to attend from the comfort of their beds or right after waking up. Thus, the pre-pandemic linear rhythms that are associated with attending class are absent, allowing students to embrace cyclical sleeping habits. Those who reported sleeping later also mentioned that their eating schedules were shifted. When awake, an individual’s body follows a cyclical rhythm that dictates hunger and eating habits, which means sleep and eating are connected cyclical rhythms. Therefore, college students are beginning to embrace cyclical rhythms, specifically seen in sleeping and eating habits, due to a recent lack of intense linear rhythms that usually exist on campus.

*Evaluating Linear Rhythms*

Even though cyclical rhythms are beginning to replace linear ones, many participants have attempted to emulate their usual, intense linear rhythms by setting a general framework for their day. This usually means completing a list of tasks before the day’s end. In quarantine, college students may be forming these makeshift schedules at home in an effort to return to the regular linear rhythms of campus life. Many participants mentioned that, in quarantine, they are usually bored or uncomfortable on a daily basis. There are multiple potential sources of this discomfort. For one, this discomfort may be a result of the failed replication of the pre-pandemic linear rhythms. College students could be attempting to mirror their pre-pandemic everyday rhythms, but lack the means to do so in quarantine, resulting in negative emotions.

Another potential source of this discomfort could be the institutionalized pressure on students to be productive. Two-thirds of participants in the study felt the need to be productive within their new schedule. French philosopher Michael Foucault established the concept of discourse, an institutionalized way of thinking (Foucault, 2000). The need to be productive in daily life is a form of discourse imposed upon college students by modernity and capitalism (Foucault, 2000). This suggests that many linear rhythms that define the typical work day are imposed rather than of free will (Lefebvre, 2013). Along this line,

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one participant stated that they did not “feel like [they were] being productive enough and could be doing more with [their] free time”. Productivity for a college student can look like many things, but is oftentimes defined by completing assignments or studying for a test. In fact, many participants reported being bored or uncomfortable because they had little to do and therefore could not be productive as modernity and capitalism expect them to be.

Altogether, the rhythms of college students in quarantine have shifted, but a new dynamic is beginning to form as they find a new balance between the cyclical and linear.

### **Interactions**

#### *Loss of In-Person Interactions Mitigated by Technology*

All participants in the survey study reported that most of their in-person interactions have been within their home with family members and pets. On exception is the occasional interaction with neighbors. The ill-effects of this lack of in-person interactions have been offset by the utilization of technology. All participants report using some form of technology to interact with family and friends outside of the home. For example, college students are texting and using conference calling software like Zoom, FaceTime, and Google Hangouts to maintain face-to-face interactions. A majority of participants are using social media more in quarantine and all have seen an increased reliance on technology in their daily lives. This innovation and access to technology has allowed college students to continue healthy social interaction amid the loss of true face-to-face interaction.

Despite these benefits, online alternatives do not completely negate the loss of face-to-face interaction for college students. Many in the study indicated that they missed much of the mundane interaction of everyday life, such as simply “seeing other people” and “talking to people face to face”. The lack of face-to-face interaction is another driving force in the perpetual boredom or discomfort previously discussed. Without true in-person interaction, college students are losing a vital part of their everyday life, one that often defines the everyday being of a student. The shift from face-to-face communication to solely technological communication is a temporary solution that is uncomfortable to some because it does not fully simulate the in-person experience.

### **Spaces**

#### *Blending of Work and Relaxation Spaces*

COVID-19 has trapped many American college students in their apartments, family homes, dorms, and other confined spaces. In this sense, there is no distinction between a workspace and a home space, causing for the social constructs of the two spaces to conflict. “Social” spaces are, in fact,

a direct consequence of the mode of production in creating “work” spaces (Elden, 2007). Therefore, modernity and capitalism have created a separation between the spaces of the workplace and the home. The difference between these two spaces allows an individual to internalize when and where they must be productive and when and where they are allowed to relax or pursue leisurely activities. The power of capitalism creates the discourse that, in the workplace, an individual must be productive (Elden, 2007). As mentioned before, two-thirds of participants reported that they felt the need to be productive even when they are stuck in their homes. Additionally, most participants stated that there is no distinction between the space in which they work at home and the space in which they relax at home. One participant even mentioned that they “have a harder time staying productive since [they] associate [their room] with both work and relaxation”. This is a clear indicator that the mindset of production in the workplace is seeping into the norms of the home space, creating a need to be productive at irregular times and places.

#### *Blending of Public and Private Spaces*

COVID-19 has also interfered with the personal distinction of self between the public and private spaces. Oftentimes, there is a public self and a private self that an individual assumes based on where they are physically located. The home is often the space for the private self while the workspace is for the public self. Now, due to the shift toward virtual communication and learning, there is a greater need to present the public self at home, resulting in a clash between the private and public self. This alters the person’s sense of self due to the lack of spatial variety. Thus, the clashing of spaces in quarantine creates an odd mixture of norms that existed separately before the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **Conclusion**

COVID-19 has put the lives of American college students on standstill, trapping most in their homes. Thus, all aspects of their everyday lives have drastically shifted. American college students are navigating this change in several ways, while also confirming the importance of rhythms, interactions, and spaces in the everyday. Their rhythms have shifted more towards the cyclical, even though many are trying to replicate the traditional linear rhythms of college life. Although face-to-face interaction is limited, American college students have found innovative ways to communicate to curb the lack of interaction, though it is a temporary fix. The variety of spaces in which college students exist have dwindled and most are confined to a dorm, family home, or apartment. This is leading to a redefinition of the differentiation of everyday spaces along with the expectations associated with those spaces. Overall, COVID-19 and the resulting safety policies such as quarantine and

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social distancing have impacted the daily lives of American college students in unprecedented ways. However, the everyday by no means has been halted; rather, it has only been redefined for the time being. This shift will continue to occur as the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine become the new norm.

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