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## ENDLESS SCROLLING: TECHNOLOGY, (DIS)CONNECTION, AND PLACE IN TIMES OF COVID-19

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**ENDLESS SCROLLING: TECHNOLOGY, (DIS)CONNECTION, AND PLACE  
IN TIMES OF COVID-19**

A Thesis

Presented to

The Academic Faculty

By

Felecia Glover

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in American Studies

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HOLD FOR CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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## I. ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic created sudden ruptures in the ways many people connected with one another in their day to day lives. Though experiences differed, many turned to communication technology as a means to continue to connect despite COVID restrictions. For some this meant learning to collaborate with coworkers through a screen, while for others it allowed for a sense of closeness with those at a great geographical distance. For many, the seemingly separate spheres of the work, home, and social life all began to take place in one physical, and many virtual, spaces. Though it allows for a smoother transition to life at a social distance, communication technology is not always viewed as a positive tool. Researchers have pointed out the damaging effects that social virtual platforms can have on wellbeing, and the capital-driven motives of these virtual spaces translates to design that vies for the continual attention of its users. The question I sought to answer in this research was fundamentally phenomenological in nature, and I measured the experience and relationships to technology and virtual place using a combination of autoethnography, feminist analysis, qualitative research, and thematic analysis. The research question was *how have our relationships to place, meaningful social connection, and communication technologies changed since COVID-19?* Through my research I argue that communication technologies, despite their faults, have become places where meaningful social connections can occur. I find evidence of the rise in communication technology usage and a correlation between those who embrace the changes of the pandemic and those who choose to use communication technology to connect with small groups and to seek out personal interests.

## II. AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

When COVID-19 became central to the conversations happening in the US, I found myself at home afraid to leave the house. I started searching for cures to the boredom and anxiety that filled me. I would wake up in the morning, make some coffee, and then pick up my phone. Hours later, I would set it down, but the truth is, some days I found myself continuously scrolling for up to six hours without a break. The problem is, though I felt connected through the social media websites I was staring at, it was often a connection to people I had never spoken to or had not connected with in months or even years. It really felt more like I was distracting myself from the pain of disconnection, rather than genuinely making connection with anyone. The burden of staying calm under the stress of the new uncertainty felt heavy, and staying productive felt like one way to make the best of the time at home. But, rather than acting in a way that I felt was productive – like looking for work or learning a new hobby, I felt stuck, and I judged myself for my inability to suck it up and create. Why was I unable to slow down without feeling guilty and frustrated with myself about not working or making use of my time? Why was my concept of productivity so anchored to a traditional capitalist ideal of hard work, during a time that was so unlike anything I had ever experienced? Picking up my phone was a quick fix for the inner dialogue that raced through my mind about what I should be doing and how I was going to make sure I was O.K. But when I set the phone down, it felt like the cure to the thoughts and emotions about what I was feeling and experiencing were to pick up the phone yet again, and continue the process. I even downloaded a new platform, TikTok.

TikTok felt like an exciting way to be connected at first glance, to see what youth culture looked like these days, and after a week of use or so, it became more and more personalized in what I was shown. I felt like I was becoming connected and learning about new cultures, about

productive ways to use my time, learning new facts about my mental health by mental health professionals that used the website to get their messages out. I was able to see real doctors and nurses giving information about the COVID virus and ways to stay safe, and I got the chance to see other families struggling through and surviving the pandemic with a sense of humor. Even writing about my experience with the Tiktok app made me want to download it again and see what was trending with the millions of users at that point in the unprecedented year of 2020. The feeling that came up when I consider re-downloading the app was an anxious excitement. My heart beat faster, and I could feel the excitement rising in anticipation of what could have been waiting on the screen. This exemplifies the problem. What I was anticipating was a momentary spike of dopamine that had no real bearings on my long-term mental state. What I was seeking was a connection or something else that would settle my nerves, but what I was settling for was a distraction from the experience of loneliness, or at the very least, feelings of severe anxiety that seemed to creep up more often than not during that time.

At some level, it was not all negative. I did learn new facts about mental health, stories about people that rose up against oppressive systems, and saw and heard from people I may have never had the opportunity to speak with about their situations otherwise. But when I put down the phone, it never felt refreshing. It felt like I was bingeing on the satisfaction I gained from coming across something enlightening or funny, and all I wanted to do was pick up my phone again. The questions of how I was going to fix the job loss and lack of income, of when this stage would end, or whether I was making the best of the mass opening up of my schedule all flooded my mind. I was keenly aware that I was wasting newfound time, but it felt good when I was actively distracted by the app. The thoughts of wasted time more deeply reveal just how connected to the ideal of productivity that I unknowingly was. I believed that, although others

had reason enough to slow down and just breathe through the uncertainty, I should be doing more. The consequences of this lack of productivity that I perceived could be displaced in my mind when I focused on what others were doing. Maybe this was a feeling of projected accomplish- a moment of feeding my own malaise with the accomplishments of another. Maybe it was pure distraction- moments of detachment from my physical self through a technological medium. The meaning-making that I found on the app took place in a space that didn't need me to decide what it was and how it operated. It was design that was tapered to my personal preferences to feel like a meaningful place, but while what was constructed there may have been personal expression, it was rarely authentic connection. Though I enjoyed watching what others were doing, I didn't know the people on the other side of the screen, and I could not express myself and feel seen by just watching others interact with a camera.

I felt overwhelmed by the inability to see how I would make ends meet after being laid off, to have an end date to the shutdowns and rising cases, and to check in with a close friend over coffee or tea in our favorite small, local shop. I felt overwhelmed by the eerie sight of busy roads emptied. I needed to figure out how to take the burden of constant productivity and the feelings of being physically disconnected from my friends and family off of my shoulders, but left to my own thoughts and avoidance, I felt stuck in the negativity that quietly loomed over my life. It wasn't long before we began to find more creative ways to meet over a cup of coffee and learned that connection can happen in more than just physical spaces. Regardless of the common usage of the virtual space Zoom as a business meeting website, I experienced the Zoom platform as meaningful based on what my group of friends and I began to use it for when the pandemic was preventing us from seeing one another. Three of my friends and I started to hold weekly meetings for the four of us, or whoever was able to show up that week, where we talked openly

about the thoughts, feelings, and fears that were coming up during that time. Because of the level of uncertainty that characterized my feelings, especially in the early stages of COVID-19, this was one of the few places where I felt like it was safe to spill whatever thoughts I was having.

We used this space, weekly, in a way that allowed us to vent, cry, laugh, and to work through anything that came out during the meetings. It was not the virtual space itself that made it meaningful to us, but the continued effort to really lay everything out on the table when we talked about what was going on with us. The amazing piece was that we seemed to take turns walking through the difficult periods and were able to show up for one another when the other was experiencing those things. Because there was continued honesty and genuine expression around each of our personal experiences, I felt that I could see myself in their struggles and was not alone in my own perspective. After these meetings, I almost always felt tremendous relief from the anxiety and fear that clouded my thoughts, and I always felt less alone than I had before the call. We often spoke about how much it helped us to have that space. Meaningful connection did not require a physical space, but the reciprocity of thoughts, feelings, and support and the trust for authentic and honest expression had to be central.

### III. INTRODUCTION

The work and methods used in this project were chosen in a manner mirroring the process of putting together a puzzle. While some literary connections may be seemingly obvious, others only become apparent in examining what has already been pieced together. I stumbled upon my research question through my own personal experiences and fears living and connecting during the pandemic, and because my question did not have a straightforward answer, it could not be solved using one straightforward method or field of work. My research attempts to answer the following question: “How have our relationships to place, meaningful social connection, and communication technologies changed since COVID-19?” My process began with the autoethnographic account above and a feminist theoretical lens and ended with attention to technological design and usage, an argument for a theory of virtual place, and a qualitative survey to measure the experiences of others. The conclusion of the study looks at how all of the pieces of research combine to offer a more complete picture of people’s experience of the physical isolation that COVID-19 caused, in light of the use of communication technology.

This research study connects as a whole through a lens of human experience and a look at the elements that make up human understanding. The opening autoethnographic account depicts my experiences with communication technologies early in the pandemic, just after a job loss, when government mandated shut downs began to occur across the world, and before there was much understanding of the severity of COVID-19 or how long the pandemic would continue for. The account gives readers a short look at a moment of profound uncertainty and how technology both prolonged and alleviated the intensity of the emotions I faced, first by utilizing communication technology to disguise my personal anxieties, then releasing them through personal weekly chats with a group of trusted friends. The autoethnography describes technology

usage patterns as well as emotional and experiential elements of the time period. It provides a frame through which to understand what the literary research and qualitative study is intended to examine by compiling a mixed method account of phenomenological data in the midst of a historical moment. With the autoethnographic foundation established, the study moves forward to a literature review that will provide insight on the different fields of study and topics that combine to provide a glance at what it means, structurally and personally, to live in this particular moment.

The literature review includes works that address how people think about meaningful places, as well as how they experience connection and disconnection, in an effort to contextualize common experiences of communication technology usage during the COVID-19 pandemic. It provides a look at motivation, of people and external forces, as well as experiences. I ask how meaningful places relate to the virtual through the field of American Studies, ultimately questioning why discussions about place lack attention to the virtual. I examine historical and present-day activism, social and feminist movements, as well as pivotal works in the field of American Studies. I question of how meaningful connection occurs continues through the examination of communication technologies and their design as well as their usage. I take into account the works of Leo Marx and Karl Marx to discuss effects that technology within the context of American Studies. By utilizing Karl Marx's work *Estranged Labour*, I demonstrate how a capital-driven society creates ideal conditions for technology that alienates both workers who create the products and users who interact with them. This theme of structurally driven disconnection continues through a discussion of Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic framework, which contextualizes the experience of disconnection with the consequences of modern-day society's failure to deliver on a promise of connection. I put the

aforementioned conversations into the context of connection; what it means and how the experience of connection remains a possibility despite alienating circumstances, such as COVID-19 shutdowns. By examining the concepts of connection and disconnection using Olivia Laing's descriptions of loneliness and taking into account Julia Kristeva's work on the speaking being, the work of meaningful place-building becomes relevant to the context of activist work. I end by bringing the study back to the current moment, asking if meaningful connections can take place through in-person and virtual interactions, and how people experience this. The literature review concludes in a brief discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic and the effects it has had on social isolation and perceptions of meaning by discussing research that has been compiled into a large shared document titled the *#coronavirussyllabus*.

After the literature review, the study continues in the form of a qualitative research survey, in which participants answer a combination of multiple choice and open-ended questions. Through this study I question what happens when people lose access to most physical spaces and how virtual communication affects the experience of such a drastic change. The survey questions are analyzed using a thematic approach and the data is compiled into results that can be viewed in detail in section III of this research study. Data is initially examined by common and repetitive usage of terminology and demographics initially then open-ended questions are coded into themes. After this process all the data is compared against the overarching themes of embracing change and resisting change. Results are compared and explained at length in the discussion section. Through my research I seek answers to how the COVID-19 pandemic has and continues to change conceptions of connection and disconnection and whether the virtual has become a site of meaningful place-building since the pandemic began.



## A. METHODS

This research project used a mixed-method approach in collecting data. Literature was selected from a variety of fields and disciplines, and research was compiled using a variety of methodologies. Literature for the review was collected by researching themes of COVID-19, connection, alienation/disconnection, feminist activism, communication technology, and place without limiting fields of study to create a truly interdisciplinary approach to the phenomena taking place at the current moment. Feminist theory and analysis became a clear choice for this project, as the critical nature of the work and the importance placed on societal structures and personal narratives fulfill the need for a look at environment and efforts towards change. A qualitative research survey was also created in order to compile new data based in descriptive experiences and was coded using thematic analysis. Autoethnography was also used to further contextualize the data through personal experience. Global analysis was used to bridge the divides between the various methods used in this project and create a concise look at the findings.

### *Autoethnography*

Autoethnography is a detailed account of experience from a first-person point of view. This standpoint allows for a full account of both how a situation took place and how the writer thought or felt about the experience, giving readers a fuller view of what it was like to exist in the moment or time period discussed. An autoethnographic approach is used to more clearly speak to the issues and potential solutions from a space of personal experience. I draw upon the experiences I have had personally with avoiding feelings of loneliness by, sometimes effectively and sometimes ineffectively, utilizing social media, oftentimes characterized by hours of passive

scrolling. I look at the cultural moment of the COVID-19 pandemic and the effect that it had on my personal wellbeing, as well as my common response to seek distractions from anxieties rather than seek out genuine connection. I also speak to the ability of social virtual spaces to open an opportunity for connection, as I experienced using the Zoom platform on a weekly basis with four other women. Then, I compare the difference in the affective experiences that I had in hours of scrolling in contrast with an hour long Zoom conversation among close friends.

Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner speak about how personal and creative the process of autoethnography is in their work *Evocative Autoethnography*, a book that grew from a transcript of a workshop they held. Bochner speaks about the goal of the book, stating “[w]e want to evoke feeling and induce readers to make a personal connection to the stories we are telling. Our writing is not simply academic; it’s personal and artistic too.”<sup>1</sup> By describing the work in this way Bochner reveals to readers, and those who attended the workshop, how the field is complex in theory, yet straightforward in its ability to allow the reader and writer to relate to one another. Bochner and Ellis also describe the emotional closeness autoethnographic work is vulnerable and honest.<sup>2</sup> In my work, I use autoethnography to address the global experience of COVID and the personal experiences that I had as a person dealing with the fallout and changes that resulted from the pandemic. I am not the only one who faced feelings of loneliness, separation, and excessive worry due to the uncertainty and forced isolation that the pandemic caused. Studies have shown that many who did not identify with mental illness prior to the pandemic have seen

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<sup>1</sup> Bochner, Arthur P., and Carolyn Ellis. *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories*. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 80.  
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip.shib&db=cat06545a&AN=ken.997867314002954&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>2</sup> Bochner, Arthur P., and Carolyn Ellis. *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories*. 82.

an increase in feeling mentally unwell.<sup>3</sup> The research made clear that to leave out my experience would be to rob my research of the catalyst for the work to exist. Bochner and Ellis : “We want our readers to see themselves in us. In this way, perhaps they can feel momentarily relieved of some of their loneliness.”<sup>4</sup> Autoethnography is a partial solution to the loneliness that people may feel. In this context, in speaking about loneliness during COVID and the possibility of connection through technology, autoethnography should operate just as it is intended to. Not only does autoethnography speak uniquely to loneliness, but it also represents experiences of identification. COVID caused a combination of uncertainty and physical isolation that left me feeling tense and disconnected, and I needed a solution<sup>5</sup>

My experience effortlessly contorts itself into the story arc that Bochner and Ellis define as important to storytelling in autoethnography: “Performing these lived-through dramas, we transform private troubles into public plight, making evocative autoethnography powerful, comforting, dangerous, and culturally essential.”<sup>7</sup> The process of autoethnography allows me to wrap words around the feelings, thoughts, barriers, and solutions that emerged under extreme stress, during a time that research on the pandemic was still scarce. Bochner and Ellis also explain the researcher’s specific challenges in framing an autoethnographic story, stating “[t]he act of telling is a performance, a process of interpretation and communication in which the teller and listener collaborate in sense-making.”<sup>8</sup> Being situated in the center of both the experiences that I had during the beginning of COVID, as well as in the research that I encountered when preparing to write this thesis I tried to be as transparent as possible, while still understanding and

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<sup>3</sup> Jetten, Jolanda, Stephen Reicher, S. Alexander Haslam, and Tegan Cruwys. *Together Apart: the Psychology of COVID-19*. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2020. 74.

<sup>4</sup> Bochner, Arthur P., and Carolyn Ellis. *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories*. 87.

<sup>5</sup> Bochner, Arthur P., and Carolyn Ellis. *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories*. 87.

<sup>7</sup> Bochner, Arthur P., and Carolyn Ellis. *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories*. 87-88.

<sup>8</sup> Bochner, Arthur P., and Carolyn Ellis. *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories*. 93.

laying out feelings and motives to the best of my ability. Despite the challenge, I attempted to reframe my experiences into a story format to allow readers to relate their own experience to this work.<sup>9</sup> According to Ellis, my work would fall closely under the category of what they call *complete member research* autoethnography because I am situated within the group that I am studying, in this case of people who turned to technology for connection during the 2020 pandemic.<sup>10</sup>

### *Deductive/Feminist Analysis*

Feminist analysis was utilized as a critical frame in this research project. of the study detailed in section III, as well as to both contextualize and speak about the findings of the dataset itself in relation to the literature review. This informs the slant toward a combination of personal narrative and a critical structural analysis of capital-driven societal goals to frame the experiential data later found among the survey research, as well as the argument for owning narrative as autonomous power.<sup>11</sup> This theoretical approach was used in a deductive manner, especially in the case of the research study completed in section III, allowing a comparative look at where results of the presumed findings held up well against the data collected, as well as where they differed from those prior expectations.<sup>12</sup>

### *Phenomenological Qualitative Research*

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<sup>9</sup> Bochner, Arthur P., and Carolyn Ellis. *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories*. 93.

<sup>10</sup> Ellis, Carolyn. *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel About Autoethnography*. (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2004) 49.

<sup>11</sup> Allen, Mike *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*. 4 vols. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2017. doi: 10.4135/9781483381411.

<sup>12</sup> Kennedy, Brianna L. "Deduction, Induction, and Abduction." In *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Collection*, 49-64. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2018. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781526416070>.

Phenomenological research focuses on how to better understand a phenomenon by way of experience, and qualitative work focuses on non-numerical data to make sense of what it studies. By using both in my study, I was able to make sense of a phenomenon that is still lacking in data. I chose to focus on the phenomena of connection and disconnection or alienation in times of COVID-19, specifically centering on the usage of communication technology and conceptions of place. I created an online survey, which can be found in Section III of this research project, in order to measure experience without compromise to anonymity, using the Qualtrics platform. The qualitative survey included both multiple choice questions and short answer questions to allow for demographic information, usage times and patterns, and for experiential information to be conveyed in the results. Phenomenological information was also collected through the process of autoethnographic work, recognizing that the researcher is, in this case, experiencing the phenomena being researched.<sup>13</sup> An emphasis was placed on the descriptions used by both participants and the researcher, within the autoethnography, in order to extrapolate themes from within the dataset that fall within a truly phenomenological approach to the research topic.<sup>14</sup>

### *Thematic Analysis*

Thematic analysis was used to code the data found in the Qualtrics survey. First, the surveys were analyzed for prevailing themes. Then, the answers were used to create short statements and phrases conveying the decontextualized data, or codes. These codes were then read over a few times to look for themes across the data and were highlighted and placed into categories. From there, categories were reviewed and grouped that had similar data to create a theme. The ending

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<sup>13</sup> Groenewald, Thomas. "A Phenomenological Research Design Illustrated." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 3, no. 1 (2004): 45.

<sup>14</sup> Groenewald, Thomas. "A Phenomenological Research Design Illustrated," 44.

themes were as follows: Embracing Change, Resisting Change, Disadvantages of Physical Place, and Shifts in Perspective.

#### IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

In today's society social media and other communication technologies are a central tool to the social experience. While websites may be viewed as modern examples of connection happening in a technologically advanced world, researchers are finding that social media spaces often leave people feeling disconnected from one another. In the book *Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*, Siva Vaidhyanathan explains that Facebook leaders even admitted that what people see while scrolling on their feed may increase anxiety and interfere with mental wellbeing.<sup>15</sup> People use their devices to find and perform career-related tasks, to order food and clothing, to educate themselves, and to meet and interact with others. Social media platforms, while connecting people with one another, also serve as tools for quick comparisons of the user's life to the lives of others. Though people often realize that the view online is skewed, the experience is still isolating. Technology today mirrors the heteronormative and patriarchal structures that the Western world is built on, and those structures can be challenged through intentional usage of such technology.<sup>16</sup>

If connection is what people deeply want, as Julia Kristeva claims, then a society focused on monetary gain will appear to deliver this promise by way of consumerism. However, the experience of living in such a society does not reflect a culture of connection and inherent human value.<sup>17</sup> To drive purchases, or advertising revenue, consumers need to continue to perceive a need for a good or service, and for the product to sell connection it needs to make people feel as if they are closer to this desire than they previously thought, without ever actually delivering this need. Social media platforms both fool the user into believing that it satisfies their need for

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<sup>15</sup> Vaidhyanathan, Siva. *Antisocial Media How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*. (New York, NY: United States of America Oxford University Press 2018), 34.

<sup>16</sup> Wajcman, Judy. *TechnoFeminism*. (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), 29.

<sup>17</sup> Kristeva, J. *New maladies of the soul*. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995).28.

connection, while simultaneously creating a larger desire to feel connected. Vaidhyanathan explains the phenomena of getting stuck in social media in his experience with his Facebook feed, stating “The News Feed also promises more—and perhaps more significant—emotional stimuli just a bit lower on the feed. Clicking, reading, and engaging with text outside of Facebook carry a cost. We suspend our pleasure flow by stopping to read something.”<sup>18</sup> If people were not willing to keep playing along, the interaction-based structure would collapse. That is not to say that moments of true connection cannot exist on such platforms, but that platforms geared towards scrolling are not built to favor conversation.

In large part, social media operates to show a partial and perfect image of each user while mimicking the connection that human beings crave. One never feels entirely alone, because they know that others are occupying the same space and interacting with the version of themselves that they choose to show to the world, but this leaves a lot of space for emptiness; and misses the mark for genuine identification and connection.<sup>19</sup> Vaidhyanathan explains how Facebook shares information and disguises it as connection, stating “If some connectivity is good, then more must be better... After all, privacy implies a denial of communication, a restriction on movement and gaze. Privacy seems to be the opposite of connectivity.”<sup>20</sup> While social media pages allow users to check in with their personal and professional networks with ease, regardless of distance and schedules, front pages and news feeds, or spaces built to encourage continuous scrolling, are home to advertisements and quick glances at carefully chosen images and memories.

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<sup>18</sup> Vaidhyanathan, Siva. *Antisocial Media How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*. 44.

<sup>19</sup> Vaidhyanathan, Siva. *Antisocial Media How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*. 17.

<sup>20</sup> Vaidhyanathan, Siva. *Antisocial Media How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*. 72.

### A. AMERICAN STUDIES AND PLACE

American Studies today invites multiple perspectives and disciplines to fall within its boundaries of work. Its interdisciplinary nature allows for new questions and theoretical frames to arise in the field over time. However, its beginnings were largely exclusionary. Borders as a concept appeared in early American Studies but were conceived as lines drawn between what belonged and what did not, such as what periods of history were valid and what periods were not, or whose experience was valuable and whose was not.<sup>21</sup> But as American Studies progressed as a field, the borders or frontiers changed shape and meaning.

Though the exceptionalist tendencies in the early myth and symbol school of American Studies is far from central to how the field discusses American history today, except as a means of contrasting theories, the roots of such a perspective can still be problematic. The field is still removing the ties to American exceptionalism, which is offered to readers as justification of the colonization and brutalization of those depicted as “others”.<sup>22</sup> Lots of analytical work has been done, but there is likely a vast amount of attachments to early literature that the field is yet to uncover or expose, and break away from. As stated by Shelley Fishkin, “We will increasingly interrogate the ‘naturalness’ of some of the borders, boundaries, and binaries that we may not have questioned very much in the past and will probe the ways in which they may have been contingent and constructed.”<sup>23</sup> American Studies scholars must continue the work of untangling and identifying continued evidence of cultural blindspots.

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<sup>21</sup> Noble, David W. *Death of a Nation : American Culture and the End of Exceptionalism*. Critical American Studies Series. University of Minnesota Press, 2002. 76.

<sup>22</sup> Noble, David W. *Death of a Nation : American Culture and the End of Exceptionalism*. 2002. 115.

<sup>23</sup> Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. "Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004." *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2005): Pg 22. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40068248>.

What began as a solid understanding of difference as negative, wherein borders were imagined as bold lines between one nation and another, self and other, civil and savage, exceptional and inferior, has been challenged over time and the field itself has opened and changed. Border thinking has become a theoretical means by which to understand and contextualize difference, rather than a tool for absolving guilt and justifying harm. Borders are no longer theoretical representations of a linear understanding of progress, from savagery to civility, but instead span a range of meanings from theoretical to physical to gendered. They are no longer equated with a notion of progress or forward motion but represent tension between cultures, nations, and identities.<sup>24</sup> Borders have become a tool to decenter historical and present day narratives. It has been critically important to make space for more than the white, heterosexual male perspective in the field of American Studies, in order to better understand history and its effects. The advancement, or history as progress, narrative easily makes sense for someone who has benefited from it, but for those who were directly impacted, the harm and destruction becomes more clear. Exclusionary practices offer close minded perspectives, but space for inclusion can be made. One area where more headway can be made is on the topic of place in American Studies.

The concept of place aids in understanding how meaning is made within a space. It is possible to take a space that was created from one viewpoint, and while it holds those perspectives in its design and how it is encountered, and create within it more personal meaning. As explained by Tim Cresswell, "Indeed the meaning of a place may arise out of the constant reiteration of practices that are simultaneously individual and social. places in this sense are

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<sup>24</sup> Guidotti-Hernández, Nicole M. "Borderlands Scholarship for the Twenty-First Century." *American Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (2016): 488. doi:10.1353/aq.2016.0030.

intensely embodied and dramatic.”<sup>25</sup> A space can feel safe and personal for its users and allow for genuine expression and connections to happen within it, and can even be recreated for specific communities, regardless of the way it is presented to the public eye. Place is a space in which its meaning is continually made.

Tim Creswell is a prominent scholar in the discourse of place and begins his work “Place: A Short Introduction” by speaking about the sense of place as well as the physicality of place, stating “In any given place we encounter a combination of materiality, meaning, and practice. Most obviously, perhaps, places have a material structure.”<sup>26</sup> This is in contrast with Leo Marx, who believed spaces to be devoid of meaning prior to being acted upon by technology. To Creswell’s point, place does have an emotionality and personal or shared meaning. However, I believe that the coordinates he speaks of in description of a place’s physical geography, can be echoed in the sense encountered in a virtual space. The coordinates, in case of the virtual, appear as a url and the cross streets or landmarks parallel the main pages, subpages, or applications that the place itself is located within. But, just as with physical spaces, a place like reddit or facebook can mean very different things to those who frequent them. Creswell goes on to describe that places are initially created by those who already had the resources to create them, and that they left a meaning according to their beliefs and what they hoped to get across to others about the place.<sup>27</sup>

To understand a place’s creation is to understand the reason for feeling as if one belongs or does not belong within a space, and Creswell defines these realities as being “in place” or “out of place”.<sup>28</sup> In their review of *Place and Placelessness*, David Seamon and Jacob Sowers speak

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<sup>25</sup> Creswell, Tim. *Place: A short introduction*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2011), 7.

<sup>26</sup> Creswell, Tim. *Place: A short introduction*. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Creswell, Tim. *Place: A short introduction*. 5.

<sup>28</sup> Creswell, Tim. *Place: A short introduction*. 8.

more to the concepts of existing inside or outside of place, as first introduced by Relph, by studying his primary work from the 1970s. They state, “If a person feels inside a place, he or she is here rather than there, safe rather than threatened, enclosed rather than exposed, at ease rather than stressed.”<sup>29</sup> The exclusivity of a private facebook group, a small Zoom meeting, or a subreddit can allow for the experience of a trusting and safe community, where people feel that they can post and express themselves without the understanding that ‘just anyone’ will see their content. Although Creswell would claim that this is not place due to the lack of a geographic address, the virtual space still fulfills his description of having a sense of place because of the meaning and emotional aspects that are experienced and created within it.<sup>30</sup>

The field of American Studies still finds itself deeply connected with the idea that place as a concept is possible only in the physical manifestation of that place. Often if the virtual is mentioned at all, it is alluded to as interesting but simply not place. Though physicality has been a staple in most of the conversation concerning place, the term has been challenged and has changed over time. For Leo Marx, the rise of technology was what gave nature and spaces the meaning that they now have. It was through the use of technology that he believed that nature gained meaning.<sup>31</sup> In some cases, the notion of place is complicated by the understanding that it has the ability to stretch across physical, as well as theoretical, borders. M.P. Guterl states “That is why borders still matter, even as we strain to blur them in our interdisciplining, both methodological and institutional. The study of borders between nations, Lane and Scott remind

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<sup>29</sup> Seamon, David & Sowers, Jacob. “Place and Placelessness, Edward Relph,” *Key Texts in Human Geography*, London: Sage, 2008: 43-51. 10.4135/9781446213742.n5.

<sup>30</sup> Creswell, Tim. *Place: A short introduction*. 1.

<sup>31</sup> Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964) 110.

us, is the study of place.”<sup>32</sup> Guterl goes on to explain that American Studies has encompassed many fields that span from identity and culture to theory and history, and the importance of the examination, stretching, and blurring of how the fields and concepts are understood.<sup>33</sup> If this is true, it should follow that though the border between the virtual and physical should not disappear without question, it should be examined and understood more thoroughly, rather than dismissed.

The defining characteristics of place repeat themselves in many works. Apart from physical features, place is characterized by personal meaning, as well as repetitive use of the space in the same way, in order to create that meaning. People who interact with a space that is meaningful to them encounter this as what is often called a sense of place. In *Place, Sense of Place, and Presence*, P. Turner and S. Turner state, “Place results from our experience of a space, our memories and emotional attachment to that space, and the meanings we attach to it.”<sup>34</sup> This statement is fundamentally true in cases of interactions that happen in the physical or the virtual. This is also true of Buell’s explanation, “it is most commonly thought of as a social construct; but it also implies a physiographic environment of some sort, as well as a phenomenological dimension of lived experience, bonding, imagination, adaptation at the individual level.”<sup>35</sup> Aside from physicality, the virtual offers the same connective experiences as descriptions of physical place. The conversation of place in American Studies commonly shuts down the possibility of bridging the virtual divide, because of its lack of physical evidence.

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<sup>32</sup> Guterl, M.P. “The Importance of Place in Post-Everything American Studies,” *American Quarterly* Volume 61, Number 4, 2009: 939. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/365920>.

<sup>33</sup> Guterl, M.P. “The Importance of Place in Post-Everything American Studies,” 940.

<sup>34</sup> Turner, P., and Turner, S., “Place, Sense of Place, and Presence,” *Presence*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2006: 207. doi: 10.1162/pres.2006.15.2.204.

<sup>35</sup> Buell, L. “The Timeliness of Place: Response to the Presidential Address,” *American Quarterly* Vol. 58 No. 1, 2006: 18. doi:10.1353/aq.2006.0020.

In descriptions of place that move beyond its physicality, the virtual seems to fit the mold with ease, especially in consideration of a time when physical place is barred due to COVID restrictions. K. Halttunen argues, “But neither all-knowing objectivity nor all-doubting irony can erase the truth that our knowledge is emplaced, inescapably situated... And it isn't just our knowledge: our lives are conducted in place.”<sup>36</sup> Halttunen’s argument, while persuasive, is wrapped in the idea that our society would not at once cease to operate as normal, as it did during the COVID-19 pandemic. Knowledge and lives are situated, but during the pandemic they became situated solely in homes and virtual spaces. Halttunen goes on to describe the impact of hurricane Katrina and how it made the relationship between people and their personal bonds to place central to understanding how they reacted to the tragedy. Though the feeling of being in a virtual space may be different, people still bond to the others that they encounter there, and the abstract space is what makes that possible. Physical space may feel different than virtual space, but connection between people can still be real in each setting, and still feels like connection, regardless of where it happens.

Place is discarded without much consideration in the American Studies field, however, it could be used to understand the virtual in the context of COVID-19. COVID disrupted my ability to interact with the everyday places that I typically made meaning within, and during the shift, my friends, family, and coworkers learned to remake the functionality and connections that we shared daily, but did so within virtual spaces. This initially led to a lot of skepticism and worry, but myself and many others were able to find a way to recreate the feeling of sharing physical space for one another within the virtual.

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<sup>36</sup> Halttunen, K. “Groundwork: American Studies in Place -- Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 4, 2005,” *American Quarterly* Vol. 58 No. 1, 2006: 7. doi:10.1353/aq.2006.0025.

Often the reasoning for place to be only physical seems to echo it's historical makeup. As stated by P.J. Deloria, "A place becomes a place only with the passage of time, and with human experience. Place may not always be a reliable marker of time (a house can turn into a vacant lot overnight!), but it operates at a particularly evocative scale of human experience"<sup>37</sup>. This means that the historical is a central piece in the ability to build place. Deloria largely disagrees with Halttunen's understanding of place as progressive and moving or changing, rather than sedentary. He believes that change often means destruction, and to claim that the change is positive is often to equate it with progress, or to say that the new is inherently better than the old.<sup>38</sup> Is the virtual shut off from the theory of place because it is relatively new, and lacks a prolonged history? And how is a virtual space that is yet to be created different from a forest that is yet to become a neighborhood? If connection and continued usage is really what place is about, then how is it that the lack of touch, taste, and smell are enough to bar such a space from having a sense of place? The denial of virtual place without digging into its implications leaves more questions than it should if it is to be easily dismissed.

Place is further complicated by those who believe that some places are inauthentic, being constructed and modeled after what is deemed desirable to a consumer. Halttunen explains, "The power of place has been undermined by a disparate array of factors, including intermodal highways and corporate mergers, big-box retailerships and urban sprawl, extended-stay hotels and Indian casinos, and, within the academy, postcolonialism, cosmopolitanism, and 'the cult of the border.'"<sup>39</sup> Halttunen is describing what he calls "disneyfication", which is the

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<sup>37</sup> Deloria, P.J. "Places Like Houses, Banks, and Continents: An Appreciative Reply to the Presidential Address," *American Quarterly* Vol. 58 No. 1, 2006: 26. doi:10.1353/aq.2006.0022.

<sup>38</sup> Deloria, P.J. "Places Like Houses, Banks, and Continents: An Appreciative Reply to the Presidential Address," 27.

<sup>39</sup> Halttunen, K. "Groundwork: American Studies in Place -- Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, 1.

commodification of place. This is experienced in the virtual through spaces that mimic social connection, like Facebook. Though chain restaurants and social media can be enjoyable, there is an understanding that they are not free of emotional manipulation. This happens through data collection, marketing, and design tactics, and is a direct reflection of the entrenchment of capitalism in western societies, but it does not limit usage of these spaces to ends of disconnection. I would argue that this commodification of meaningful experience is similar to what people rub up against when searching for connection on social media platforms.

But capital driven motives don't always stop users from building important moments in such spaces. Yeon explores how connection can happen through virtual spaces almost as if they occupied physical space, claiming "I see them as tangible and material rather than metaphorical...Rather, I mean that concrete human interaction and social relations formulated online can provide the sense of being there without physical encounters."<sup>40</sup> Just as with physical spaces, connections are made and nourished through virtual spaces as well. This ability to connect through nonphysical spaces became even more important during a time when stress and uncertainty felt high, with continued shut downs, shelter in place orders, and when meeting in person seemed unsafe to many due to rising COVID-19 rates.

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<sup>40</sup> Radhika Gajjala, Yeon Ju Oh, Radhika Gajjala, and Yeon Ju Oh. *Cyberfeminism 2.0*. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2012), 249.

## B. COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES - DESIGN AND USE

Technology in and of itself is not negative or positive, but the experience of it is informed by its design, which is set in a larger societal model, in time and place. Therefore, technology is biased by design. Technology allows for exploration and knowledge seeking, and it brings users together with those they may not meet in other circumstances. The capitalist structure that most technology rests upon, and the motive to gain profit impacts the design and usage of those technologies. As discussed by Karl Marx, production with a focus on high profit margin only creates loneliness and alienation.<sup>41</sup> Those who profit from the creation of goods or technological services do so by way of the sacrifice of those who need to earn a living, and those who consume the products find remnants of the worker's experience in their interaction with the product itself. In a sense, the workers and consumers become connected in their shared experiences of alienation, as a result of the individualistic goal that drives the society: capital. When workers find themselves disconnected from meaning for hours of their daily lives to produce for others, they become disconnected from themselves. For those who live in a capitalist society the perfect product is the ideal of connection that they are missing in their daily lives. This is what social media sells to its users, a salve for the problem that the technology itself profits from, a promise of connection that feels just real enough to keep the user engaged in the profit machine- the "social" space itself. The design of communication technologies is often created to mimic experiences the users feel that they are missing, but in a way that keeps them coming back to the same platforms again and again.

However, early theoretical claims in the field of American Studies, stated that technology had no social positionality. Leo Marx, in his work *Machine in the Garden* speaks of technology

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<sup>41</sup> Marx, Karl. "Estranged Labour." in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 32-38.

as if it intrinsically carries no meaning or standpoint. Marx confronts the conflict between the pastoral landscape of America and the problem he felt that technology posed stating, "But at the same time they acknowledge the power of a counter-force, a machine or some other symbol of the forces which have stripped the old ideal of most, if not all, of its meaning."<sup>42</sup> To Marx, technology is itself neutral until given purpose by its user. Although Marx has theorized that technology exists as a wide open space, by which anyone may enter in and use in any imaginable way, this is not the case. Technology can be utilized differently than originally intended, but by its very design users will initially experience the technology from a context of the designer's personal biases. To break it down, if those creating the technology are largely white, cisgender, heterosexual men, the design will, on some level, reflect this vantage point. The culture of communication technology is characterized by different elements of experience, largely social and relational, that are recreated virtually, such as time perception, gender, safety, structural influences and capitalism, and the drive for profit related goals. The following paragraphs will provide a glimpse into the implications of creating and using technology design in a western societal model.

To speak to the experience of time, one can look to Iván Charr-López's work. In *The Garden is the Machine: New Media and Technology in American Studies*, the foundational work of Marx is criticized by Charr-López. He explores the complexity of new media and the physical design, like hardware and software, and the end result of that design, or how it is experienced by the user as images and sounds. Charr-López<sup>43</sup> He understands not only the experience as related to the design itself, which is situated within a culture of pre-established societal standards

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<sup>42</sup> Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964) 363.

<sup>43</sup> Charr-López, Iván. "The Garden Is the Machine: New Media and Technology in American Studies." *American Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (2014): 1144. doi:10.1353/aq.2014.0077.

and expectations, but also explains that the use of the technology actually shifts how time is experienced, into what he calls machinic time. This experience of time creates a cultural phenomenon around what happens in the vacuum of the virtual space, rather than being determined by what is occurring in the physical space. This is not the only experience that changes within the virtual, as online spaces also feel different according to the gender of the user.

Online spaces are perceived as gendered, and the prevailing power structures as largely heteronormative, just as in western society at large. In her book, *Technofeminism*, Judy Wajcman focuses on the complexity of such issues. Wajcman also sees the online space as *doing*, rather than simply *being*, conveying that meaning is created according to how the space is being used and is not only dictated by the initial design or structure.<sup>44</sup> The male-dominated culture of virtual spaces is due to the majority of women in tech being primarily behind the scenes and not at the forefront of programming and usage. This is challenged by techno feminism in action. Wajcman states, “To this extent, women are reinterpreting the technologies as tools for political organizing and the means for creation of new feminist communities,” meaning that when spaces are being used as feminist spaces, they become feminist spaces.<sup>45</sup> The gendered power dynamic that may be initially set into place by those creating technological spaces are not permanent, and the meaning of spaces shifts in the moment of usage. This is to say, using a space for connection and self-expression based in feminist forethought is in that moment a true feminist space, regardless of the intended design. Though a hopeful message, the concerns of the male-dominated spaces are still a factor in the ability to use communication technologies in a feminist manner.

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<sup>44</sup> Wajcman, Judy. *TechnoFeminism*. (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), 7.

<sup>45</sup> Wajcman, Judy. *TechnoFeminism*. (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), 120.

Safety is a concern, from virtual harassment to address sharing and threats. In *Cyberfeminism 2.0*, Ju Oh takes the time to speak on the importance of creating spaces that are safe for users to participate and find expression within. This is critically important when creating feminist spaces, just as with physical spaces. The technical design background of many social virtual spaces is overwhelmingly male and rests on or invites a misogynistic cultural tone.<sup>46</sup> Ju Oh describes the need for a special attention to be paid to, not only how the online space operates, but also how the woman is protected.<sup>47</sup> How the space is made to be a safe space is as, if not more, important as the guidelines of operation. How can a virtual space be protected from attacks? How does one create a space that is at the same time easy to find, easy to enter, and that feels safe for true expression from its users? Can this only happen in closed or private groups and spaces?

In the US, it has taken a high level of disruption, protests, and forceful change to see incremental shifts over hundreds of years as an attempt to create a bit more space for those who do not fit into the westernized societal ideal. Those who most closely resemble the physical appearances, abilities, norms, and values of the colonizers fit more easily into the places that they designed. Because society itself was created, intentionally or unintentionally, to hold and police the values of the people who shaped the space and gave it meaning, others must struggle to create a more personal meaning within the ill-fitting space. Yeon Ju Oh speaks to this effect in the virtual plane, stating “Technological revolution at the macro-level, in complicity with corporate power, tends to reproduce the influence that Western invaders exercised on the new continent.”<sup>48</sup> This is part of the reason that, although the internet is not a physical space, it

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<sup>46</sup> Radhika Gajjala, Yeon Ju Oh, Radhika Gajjala, and Yeon Ju Oh. *Cyberfeminism 2.0*. 166.

<sup>47</sup> Radhika Gajjala, Yeon Ju Oh, Radhika Gajjala, and Yeon Ju Oh. *Cyberfeminism 2.0*. 247.

<sup>48</sup> Radhika Gajjala, Yeon Ju Oh, Radhika Gajjala, and Yeon Ju Oh. *Cyberfeminism 2.0*. 249.

operates similarly. It is especially true when considering social platforms that sell user engagement to advertisers. Because technology operates in a similar cultural space to that of society, with the exception of spaces intentionally created as queer or otherwise on the margins, when one chooses to interact with a virtual space in new ways, they must learn how to decenter those spaces in a way that is safe and surmountable for those involved in the process of recreating place, especially those that seek to construct a directly opposite culture of that which the main page of the website is centered on. Despite challenges, communication technologies can be used to bridge connections rather than accepting the alienating nature of profit-driven design. Despite this possibility, the effects of profit driven virtual spaces on it's users is clear.

There is an increase in cases related to mental illness and feelings of isolation, and this rise comes at a time when social media is quickly gaining more and more information about it's users through surveillance capitalism. As explained in the documentary film *The Social Dilemma*, information is gathered and used to keep each person more glued to their technology than ever before in order to sell advertising. This is accomplished by altering the virtual experience according to personal algorithms, and changing the pages that users see and interact with gradually in order to find the best method of sustaining their attention.<sup>49</sup>In *The Social Dilemma*, the lack of safety in certain virtual spaces is apparent. Social media websites are created as money making tools that subtly shift what the user experiences and study their responses. The more companies see engagement within the platform climb, measuring the longer users are tuned in, the more money that they can make off of each user from advertisers. When someone logs in, or otherwise interacts with, a space that feels as if it is created for them, it is often emotionally slanted to keep users engaged and scrolling. To say this in another way,

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<sup>49</sup> *The Social Dilemma* (Documentary). Orłowski, Jeff. , Tristan Harris, Jeff Seibert, Bailey Richardson, Joe Toscano, Exposure Labs, Argent Pictures, The Space Program, 2020.

companies that benefit from the continued scrolling and engagement in social media platforms are feeding users whatever it is that will keep them logged on or engaged. This happens completely regardless of what it is the users are actually needing, wanting, or searching for when they open up the homepage of a communication platform. The documentary style film, released in 2020 by Netflix, speaks to the design aspects that feed tech users an experience personal enough to encourage continued usage.<sup>50</sup> How does something that feels slightly personal alienate people? Many scholars point to capitalism.

In *Estranged Labour*, Karl Marx speaks about the role capitalism has in technology, pulling focus on the relationship of the worker to his product, the worker to himself, the worker to the consumer, and the product to the experience of the consumer. What Marx is positing through those relationships is the blatant disconnection and invisible, yet tangible, space between the “worker”, what they do, and the subject, or the person that is gaining the majority of capital. Marx speaks about the idea that the more the worker produces, the less value he has from a capitalist standpoint. This means that the product itself is less monetarily valuable and, by default, the worker is less valuable in his relation to it.<sup>51</sup> Loneliness emerges from this moment of disconnection that the worker is forced to continually reproduce in attempts to earn a living wage. But the worker becomes disconnected from others as well as themselves in the process. Simply put, valuing monetary gain over human experience is alienating, but it is often not a choice for the worker.

It is important to consider that capitalism is central in Marx’s description of estrangement/alienation from oneself, one’s work, and others. The alienation, or what I would

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<sup>50</sup> *The Social Dilemma* (Documentary). Orłowski, Jeff. 2020.

<sup>51</sup> Marx, Karl. "Estranged Labour." in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 32-38.

assert as loneliness and disconnection, appear through people's relationships to the production of goods *as well as the products they interact with*.<sup>52</sup> Just as Marx describes the relationship of the worker to the object, and the object as later bringing the remnants of that relationship to the user, this same relationship carries from technical designers to users of those designs. Marx states, "First it has to be noted that everything which appears in the worker as an *activity of alienation, of estrangement*, appears in the non-worker as a *state of alienation, of estrangement*."<sup>53</sup> This is to say that the intentions of technical designers to design virtual spaces that profit a few by garnering the attention of many, matters in the experience of the user. Though I would venture to say that the designers are mimicking connection in their designs, their own vantage points and drive for capital gain in creating the product, promotes disconnection, regardless of other creative aspects of design.

But, as mentioned, usage plays a role in virtual experience too. What happens when people create private spaces within those social pages, such as closed groups and sub-spaces? Wajcman leads readers to believe that this fundamentally changes the function of that space, as it is being used to create connection in a corner of the space that is not entirely fueled by likes and hearts. The way that a space is used is controlled by the creator up to a certain extent, then the effect of the space, or it's own 'doing' becomes a function of those who use it. Many of those who had a hand in initially creating the social platforms well known in society today reveal that the overall effect was often not what they intended it to be.<sup>54</sup> Both design and usage of technology create the experience of a virtual space.

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<sup>52</sup> Marx, Karl. "Estranged Labour." in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 32-38.

<sup>53</sup> Marx, Karl. "Estranged Labour." in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 32-38.

<sup>54</sup> *The Social Dilemma* (Documentary). Orłowski, Jeff. 2020.



### C. LONELINESS/CONNECTION - QUESTION OF MEANINGFUL LIVES

Julia Kristeva's work around love helps to open up a dialogue about the psychosomatic issues that arise when people lack connection, and to more clearly define the meaning of connection and why it is important. Kristeva becomes a jumping off point by which to understand the importance of identification with others as central to feeling connected, as well as marking the physiological symptoms of living in a society devoid of the meaning it promises. She gives an example of an analysand's personal experience with disassociating from the narrative they believed that they were meant to fulfill in their life, and the importance of speaking out or externalizing the emotions that exist in one's psyche.<sup>55</sup> But there are additional fields and methods of research that lead to a similar conclusion about the symptoms of disconnection. For Kristeva, meaning making happens in one's personal life when they feel connected with others. But, when people enter into the public spaces through social media, sometimes conversations are deepened with others who are experiencing and feeling what they do, and sometimes they only receive likes or hearts on a post. How can real connection be sought out and constructed within the virtual?

In *Tales of Love*, Kristeva explains that in moments of connection people see themselves in others, or identify with the experiences of others. She states, "In being able to receive the other's words, to assimilate, repeat, and reproduce them, I become like him: One. A subject of enunciation. Through psychic osmosis/identification. Through love."<sup>56</sup> She refers to this moment of identification as narcissistic because of the identification with self. This is not to be confused with more recent prescriptive and mental illness-related renderings of the narcissistic. The need for identification comes as a result, to Kristeva, of the need to distract or place a barrier between oneself and the emptiness within them. Something she claims that narcissistic identification

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<sup>55</sup> Kristeva, J. *New maladies of the soul*. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995). 15.

<sup>56</sup> Kristeva, Julia. *Tales of love*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 26.

shields them from. In the moment of identification, this need is satiated through the ability to see oneself in the other.<sup>57</sup> The Ego and Object relationship are central to Kristeva, and she points to the relationship of Ego vs. Object to present the possibility of Ego with Object, where identification is found and love is in practice. To put it differently, a subject is created in the moment of connection, or love, when the Ego, or self, is set aside to allow for identification with the object, or other, to happen.<sup>58</sup> Kristeva explains that lack of such connection causes psychosomatic illness, and this is easy to see in the increasing numbers of anxiety and depressive disorders in recent years.

Brené Brown is a grounded theory researcher who creates definitions around emotional language according to a large number of interviews that she conducts on topics of belonging and shame, primarily. In *The Gifts of Imperfection*, she defines connection as “The energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship.”<sup>59</sup> In *Braving the Wilderness*, Brown also speaks to the concept of loneliness, and explains that at the core of struggling rather than speaking out, are feelings of shame that keep people stuck in emotional isolation. Westernized beliefs or views of loneliness often push towards hiding rather than exposing the feelings and doubts that people experience. For example, the loner is a common trope often associated with criminal activity due to stigmatization around disconnection. Statistically speaking, overwhelming feelings of disconnection and loneliness increase chances of early death by 45%, a rate higher than that of excessive drinking.<sup>60</sup> Working from Brown’s

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<sup>57</sup> Kristeva, Julia. *Tales of love*. 33.

<sup>58</sup> Kristeva, Julia. *Tales of love*. 36.

<sup>59</sup> Brown, Brené. *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*. (Center City, MN.: Hazelden, 2010), 36.

<sup>60</sup> Brown, Brené. *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*. (New York: Random House, 2017), 47.

definition of connection, the use of social media or other communication technologies without intention does not meet the mark as connection. In fact, the moments when I took a short break from scrolling left me feeling much closer to what she associates with loneliness and disconnection. My endless scrolling almost always left me craving further distraction, or in disdain, because my questions and anxieties were still looming in the background of the brief diversion of social media platforms.

In her book, *The Lonely City*, Laing echoes Brown's point that shameful feelings and a negative stigma often cause the unwillingness to speak about the experience of loneliness. Loneliness is a central theme that Laing steps into as she exposes its varying characteristics throughout the book. She differentiates the physical or social reality of being close to others with feelings of authentic connection, and she sets a special attention on the silence that surrounds the disconnection inherent in loneliness.<sup>61</sup> She explains that loneliness is both reflective of our values and our inability to express them, and states "Loneliness feels like such a shameful experience, so counter to the lives we are supposed to lead, that it becomes increasingly inadmissible, a taboo state whose confession seems destined to cause others to turn and flee."<sup>62</sup> Similarly to Laing, Kristeva is quick to point out the ailments that accompany such a feeling.

In *Maladies of the Soul*, Julia Kristeva demonstrates what it looks like for meaning promised by societal models to fall short of expectations. One way that this happens is a byproduct of the idealized life represented as the proper path, or the strive to live according to social expectations, and the absence of expression around the internal struggles that one experiences on that path.<sup>63</sup> Kristeva points to the symptoms that occur when people stay stuck in

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<sup>61</sup> Laing, Olivia. *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone*. (New York: Picador, 2016), 50.

<sup>62</sup> Laing, Olivia. *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone*. 25.

<sup>63</sup> Kristeva, J. *New maladies of the soul*. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995). 29.

such psychic spaces, or otherwise suppress what they are experiencing. She offers an example in which a patient describes their encounters using social norms and common language, but continues to be ill due to a lack of more personal expression around their experiences. She gives this real life example to drive home the notion that authentic expression in one's life is at the center of their ability to make life feel meaningful. The lack of self expression creates a break in the meaning that one finds in their life. She explains, "It seems to me, then, that Didier's perversion separated drives and their psychic representatives from language and symbolic functioning. This separation brought the body out into the open and exposed it to somatic symptoms."<sup>64</sup> This unwillingness to express genuine personal concerns, feelings, and thoughts causes physical and mental illness, and Kristeva does not see it as an accident that this "malady of the soul" takes place within a western context. In fact, profit seeking behaviors within the normative space created for western life is the perfect storm for the connection between the semiotic and the symbolic, or language and signifiers, to become broken and meaning lost. Kristeva goes on to detail the psychic realm and the importance of speaking on the innerworkings of one's psyche, stating "...as long as we avoid becoming trapped inside it, the psychic realm protects us. Yet we must transform it through *linguistic activity* into a form of sublimation or into an intellectual, interpretive, or transformational activity."<sup>65</sup>

In her book, *Kristeva* (2011), S.K. Keltner also speaks of the importance of externalizing, or speaking out about, the internal state of mind as integral to a person's identity as she states, "The subject, she insists, is a *speaking being*; a being who means; a being who always intends something and speaks to another in a social and historical context. As speaking beings, subjects

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<sup>64</sup> Kristeva, J. *New maladies of the soul*. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995). 15.

<sup>65</sup> Kristeva, J. *New maladies of the soul*. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995). 29.

are constituted through language.”<sup>66</sup> Keltner understood Kristeva’s work as a detailed account of the process of identifying spaces in which meaning fails, as well as confronting the task of meaning making, and spoke of the importance of the semiotic and symbolic in the construction of meaning. Connection, or love, is a central component of what makes experiences meaningful.<sup>67</sup>

The theme of a promise of meaning that misses the mark is also found at the intersection of science and technological research and the social science and psychoanalytical research by researchers like Sherry Turkle. Turkle describes the missed mark of connection in communication technology and the draw that it has plainly, stating “Technology is seductive when what it offers meets our human vulnerabilities. And as it turns out, we are very vulnerable indeed. We are lonely but fearful of intimacy.”<sup>68</sup> Technology does offer a quick distraction, as I experienced with Tiktok, but this leaves people craving the promise that their technology failed to deliver. This drive is likely what kept me scrolling for hours, despite the resurgence of my worries the moment I set my phone down. Turkle continues, “Digital connections and the sociable robot may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other. We’d rather text than talk.”<sup>69</sup> The more personal and vulnerable the virtual connection is, in the context of a trusting community, the more seen people feel. This is why the act of scrolling and watching videos does not actually alleviate any of the stressors or anxieties one might pick up their phone to distract from, but still seems to offer a brief reprieve. The act of picking up the phone for a

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<sup>66</sup> Keltner, S.K. *Kristeva: Thresholds*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 22.

<sup>67</sup> Keltner, S.K. *Kristeva: Thresholds*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 48.

<sup>68</sup> Turkle, Sherry. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other*. (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 1.

<sup>69</sup> Turkle, Sherry. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other*. (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 1.

video chat may take more effort and courage on the part of both parties, but, without the ability to express oneself the authentic connection people look for is not happening.

Another view on using communication technologies for what Turkle calls the “illusion of companionship”, boils down to the desire for approval or affirmation that comes from hearts and likes on carefully crafted snapshots of one’s complex life. Tim Wu brings approval seeking into the conversation by focusing in on the blurred lines between the sales person and the user of a social platform, namely instagram. He points out that users of instagram specifically have a tool for self-esteem, stating “And the real-time fix of ‘likes’ and comments would become for untold numbers an addictive form of self-affirmation.”<sup>70</sup> Wu talks about the importance of engagement with other users in order to boost numbers of followers and build a fan-base for those hoping to become *microfamous* or *instafamous*. This fame is effectively the commodification of connection as a tool for increased popularity. He goes on to say that “By encouraging anyone to capture the attention of others with the spectacle of one’s self- in some cases, even to the point of earning a living by it- it warps our understanding of our own existence and its relation to others.”<sup>71</sup> This is another huge piece of the puzzle in understanding why people are searching for connection through social media platforms without wanting to connect on a more personal level. It may feel more comfortable to post a cropped, filtered, perfect picture and receive hearts rather than striving for the deeper layers of the websites that offer a more human opportunity for connection, but the satisfaction of being only partially, momentarily seen is fleeting. It also fails to satisfy the connection that comes from outward expression of the psyche achieved by spoken language, that Kristeva speaks of. Far from the momentary interactions with others through clicks and emojis, being or becoming a part of a community creates a mindset and space for connection.

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<sup>70</sup> Wu, Tim. *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads*. (New York: Knopf, 2016), 308.

<sup>71</sup> Wu, Tim. *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads*. 311.

In *Joining the Resistance*, Carol Gilligan expresses the implications of feeling alienated, stating “The initiation into patriarchy is driven by gender and enforced by shaming and exclusion. Its telltale signs are a loss of voice and memory, an inability to tell one’s story accurately.”<sup>72</sup> Interestingly, this chapter detailed a focus around the stories of young boys and their understanding of what masculinity should look like, but the position remains true of all of those who interact with the patriarchal model in their everyday lives. The power of the structure as it pertains to identity building and self-expression is in its ability to place shame on some stories, identities, and gender expressions, applying enormous pressure to contort oneself into the normative model. When people find strength in their story and choice, it encourages connection building and disrupts that model.

In order to better understand the history of activist conceptions of community and what I personally experienced within my Zoom group, both togetherness and personal autonomy co-existing within a single space, I primarily searched for answers in accounts of activist, and largely womanist or otherwise inclusive groups. In *Activism that Works*, Whitmore, Wilson, and Calhoun describe their experiences with activist groups and how they came to understand them as meaningful communities. One description of the group experience stated, “as shame and isolation are replaced by pride and a sense of community, these can morph into a shift in focus from the personal to the political and a politicized involvement in the fight for social justice.”<sup>73</sup> The authors describe an experience similar to my own when I began interacting in the Zoom group. Although it may feel that personal expression of the psyche is not political, in this day and age in which our identities are sold to advertisers through social media websites, personal stories

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<sup>72</sup> Gilligan, Carol. *Joining the Resistance*. (Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity, 2011), 26.

<sup>73</sup> Elizabeth Whitmore, Maureen G. Wilson and Avery Calhoun (eds). *Activism that Works*. (Winnipeg: Fernwood, 2011), 154.

permeate political boundaries. One reason that silence around personal stories and open expression is so prevalent is due to the culture of scarcity. The culture of scarcity is the, often invisible, belief that there is not enough and it leaves people continuously wanting more.<sup>74</sup> It keeps users scrolling on social media and feeds on the need to keep authentic connection, personal expression, and stories silenced. As I interacted with my friends via Zoom and offered support in their situations and choices, I became more willing and able to share my own, knowing that I would be supported as well. Whitmore and the others continue, “Stories touch us at both cognitive and emotional levels, surfacing both content and feelings in relation to an experience. Because of their evocativeness, stories helped us to ‘enter’ the experience with our partners, allowing us to build empathy as we could feel the excitement together.”<sup>75</sup> Connection, existing as the ability to speak openly and identify with each other, is an important part of the process of building community, and this often happens under the guise of personal storytelling or honest discussion.

The importance of empathy in the act of community building and self-expression shows in Sylvia Burrow’s work. She walks through the thought that, while criticism is a good catalyst for self-narrative restructuring, support is the cornerstone of community.<sup>76</sup> In our Zoom group, after we established an understanding of what the group meant to each of us, the idea of support appeared to be built into the meaning of our small community of women as a given, never necessary to say but often spoken as a reminder that we were not alone in our process. Support, or respect, was always inherent in our language if feedback was given at all, and it was

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<sup>74</sup> Brown, Brené. *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*. 91.

<sup>75</sup> Elizabeth Whitmore, Maureen G. Wilson and Avery Calhoun (eds). *Activism that Works*. 159.

<sup>76</sup> Burrow, S. “The Political Structure of Emotion: From Dismissal to Dialogue,” *Hypatia*, 20(4), (2005): 33. doi:10.1111/j.1527-2001.2005.tb00534.x

understood that sometimes the thoughts and feelings I expressed were those that I already knew to be untrue, but needed to voice aloud to be released from my psyche. When it felt important for us to breach a difficult topic, there was a sense of, “I support your struggle, but have you considered...” Burrow continues to state,

The release of typical oppressive barriers of self-expression and interpretation disrupts response patterns, freeing persons to acknowledge their own emotions and those of others that subvert dominant ideologies. Thus, dialogue within a separatist community may significantly change how one experiences or interprets one's emotion, even to oneself. Developing a new trusting attitude is central to this enterprise.<sup>77</sup>

Having a group that I trusted to ultimately support me allowed me to express myself and gain perspective without the self-imposed barrier of worrying how I appeared during that process. To look at the oppressive barriers that Burrow calls into question is to consider what is at the root of oppression: power. Power over is an important factor in the ability of one to oppress another and within language this looks like the ability to keep someone silent or afraid of the self expression that creates the internal power for change. I believe this is why Burrow's trusting attitude is important to her point. If one feels that they are unable to express their experience without facing judgment, they may not speak up at all. The place that we created on Zoom was somewhere that I felt that I could relay my thoughts and experiences without altering them to appear more socially acceptable. I learned to trust that the group, regardless of personal opinions about my choices, were still going to support my autonomy, and that I was free to change my opinions over time without fear of judgment. The group became a place of expression, support, and growth despite the changing particularities of each of our situations.

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<sup>77</sup> Burrow, S. “The Political Structure of Emotion: From Dismissal to Dialogue,” 37.

#### D. COVID-19 AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

The pandemic made apparent the lack in research surrounding what happens when whole societies are forced into “shelter in place” orders, and how people react to such a situation. In order to more efficiently compile the research that was available surrounding such a state of society, the *#coronavirussyllabus* was created.<sup>78</sup> The syllabus is broken down into a number of sections covering the 1918 flu, the concept of a pandemic, as well as the research that has been compiled since the start of the COVID-19 virus. I used this index to compile sources that were relevant to the topics of place, dis/connection, and technology in light of the scarcity of resources available.

In the midst of all that has changed as a result of the pandemic, I assert that understandings of connection and disconnection have changed, as well as relationships to technology, especially as viable means by which to build and maintain connection. Though communication technologies were already used as a means to connect, many people only used them minimally, still relying on face to face connection as their primary method of contact with others. The pandemic simultaneously shut down places that people met and connected, like coffee shops and bars, and created a culture of fear because of the unanswered questions about what should be done, and how long it would last, among other things. This fear created a need to connect, yet shut downs limited options for those who were willing to continue to meet in person. This hypothesis was based largely on autoethnographic experience, which further research will confirm or deny.

It’s no revelation to say that the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted life as we know it. But, what does this really mean? COVID has been the catalyst for shifts in perspectives, rising racial

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<sup>78</sup> “#Coronavirussyllabus.” Google Docs. Google. Accessed January 2, 2021.  
[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1dTkJmhWQ8NcxhmjeLp6ybT1\\_YOPhFLx9hZ43j1S7DjE/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1dTkJmhWQ8NcxhmjeLp6ybT1_YOPhFLx9hZ43j1S7DjE/edit).

tensions, changing work conditions, different expectations for social behavior, exacerbation or calming of mental illnesses, different yardsticks by which to understand health, and has changed how national borders are viewed. One article that I found to be especially relevant to understandings of the American Studies field and to changing perspectives due to the pandemic was “The COVID exception”.<sup>79</sup> This article turns the idea of American exceptionalism on its head, pointing to something referred to as the “politics of survival”. In the article, Appadurai succinctly states that when the pandemic hit the western nations, it did not identify, and was not hindered by, social and national borders that feel very real in the social models that those in the west encounter on a daily basis. Rather, the need for information and help during the crises created a need to look to nonwestern nations for help. The state of fear shattered the imagined borders that have been implemented between nations, causing a new moment to arise in which the validity of the borders can be more clearly seen and questioned.

But perspectives around borders were not the only longstanding relationships to be viewed and questioned by the rapid shifts caused by COVID-19. In another brief article, the rapid consequences of work from home implementations were brought to bear upon the concept of family time.<sup>80</sup> Tuva briefly explains in the article how the concept of home shifts over time, and even over the course of just a few minutes, when everything from work to family time to school co-exist within the same space. She speaks about the seemingly paradoxical feelings of longing to be outside of the home, while appreciating the family time that has come from being in a state of lockdowns and shelter in place orders. Perspective shifts are certainly a central

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<sup>79</sup> Appadurai A; “The COVID Exception,” *Social anthropology : the journal of the European Association of Social Anthropologists = Anthropologie sociale* (U.S. National Library of Medicine), accessed January 8, 2021, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32836975/>.

<sup>80</sup> Broch, Tuva Beyer. “Home Sweet Home'” Wiley Online Library. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, June 8, 2020. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1469-8676.12904>.

theme in the past year, but how people view their home and work life is only one aspect of the psychological field.

One continuous theme across resources was a focus on the mental effects that the changes implemented in understanding and navigating the pandemic caused. In *Together Apart: The Psychology of COVID-19*, researchers pulled focus on the mental and behavioral changes that are happening as a result of the pandemic by calling attention both to new studies as well as contextualizing past data that is relevant to current experiences of COVID-19. This work focused a lot of attention on the importance of a social mentality, or identity of oneself as being a part of a group and supported by that group.<sup>81</sup> The pandemic did more than point out the importance of connection, but collected data also represented the cost of disconnection caused by new shelter in place orders and shutdowns. The researchers explain, “In the face of COVID-19, many people who had never experienced significant mental health difficulties before found themselves struggling with insomnia, anxiety, and emotion dysregulation for the first time.”<sup>82</sup> They continued by showing that rates of mental health issues directly correlate with levels of social interaction, and directly state that the social can take place within a virtual platform and still provide the same health benefits.<sup>83</sup> There was also an emphasis on the term *meaningful groups* when speaking of how people connect with social groups that seemed to continue to appear throughout the book. The term *meaningful* is one that has become increasingly important throughout my autobiographical experience of connection, as well as a relevant measurement for how connection takes place throughout this literature study.

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<sup>81</sup> Jetten, Jolanda, Stephen Reicher, S. Alexander Haslam, and Tegan Cruwys. *Together Apart: the Psychology of COVID-19*. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2020. 77.

<sup>82</sup> Jetten, Jolanda, Stephen Reicher, S. Alexander Haslam, and Tegan Cruwys. *Together Apart: the Psychology of COVID-19*. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2020. 74.

<sup>83</sup> Jetten, Jolanda, Stephen Reicher, S. Alexander Haslam, and Tegan Cruwys. *Together Apart: the Psychology of COVID-19*. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2020. 77.

Because of COVID-19, the virtual has become an integral part of the socializing process, and this is echoed in my personal experience as well. The pandemic is changing the way that people think about connection and disconnection, as I will attempt to represent through my research.

## E. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic greatly altered my experience and usage of social platforms, as a result of the isolation that the shutdowns caused. My current solution for the issue of loneliness and feelings of isolation center around virtual shared spaces. I think the moments of identification are central to creating connections, and that this can happen within physical or virtual places. Identifying myself in what another person is going through allows me to feel more validated in my personal experiences, and when I am heard and seen, even when the others do not reflect my struggles, I feel more confident in my own life. I think there is an importance in saying things aloud and being afforded the autonomy to figure out a solution in one's own time while being supported by others.

## V. COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

IRB Approved Title: Phenomenological study of communication technology usage changes before and during COVID-19 pandemic

### A. BACKGROUND

This qualitative study, approved by the Kennesaw State University Institutional Review Board, was created in the context of the literature review section of this research project as well as the historical moment in which it was written. The researcher, myself, combines a background in American Studies, utilizing the interdisciplinary methods associated with the field, with a qualitative survey in order to make light of the phenomenological experiences currently being experienced, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The limited scope of research centered on the pandemic, due to the unexpected nature of the virus, created both a challenge for further research as well as a need for it to be accomplished. The study question is “How have our relationships to place, meaningful social connection, and communication technologies changed since COVID-19?”

### B. PURPOSE

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to learn more about how participants over the age of 25 who utilize communication technologies over three hours per week detail their experience with communication technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study specifically looked at how patterns of usage and experiences of connection, loneliness, and disconnections were described by the participants.

C. METHODS

The dataset collected was done so by qualitative digital survey using the online survey tool, Qualtrics. In total there were six surveys filled out that became part of the data set. The survey data included nine multiple choice questions and three short answer sections, and was coded using thematic analysis. The results were contextualized using the information found in the literature review section of this research project.

*Appendix*

III. Communication Technology and the COVID-19 Pandemic

- A. Background
- B. Purpose
- C. Methods

*Appendix*

Table 1.0 *Survey Questions & Responses*

Phenomenological Qualitative Thematic Analysis

- D. Sampling and Participants
- E. Data Collection

Table 1.1 *Qualitative Survey Questions*

- F. Data Analysis
- G. Results

Table 1.2 *Socioeconomic Status*

Table 1.3 *Programs with User Accounts*

Table 1.4 *Usage Type of Communication Technologies*

- H. Discussion

Table 1.5 *Word Cloud for Usage Changes Since COVID-19*

Table 1.6 *Word Cloud for Connection Using Communication Technology*

Table 1.7 *Word Cloud for Disconnection Using Communication Technology*

- I. Limitations

Table 1.0 *Survey Questions & Responses*

<i>Question</i>	<i>Responses</i>
What is your gender?	Male - 2 Female - 3 Non-binary / third gender - 1
What is your age?	25-34 - 5 35-44 - 1
Which of the following best represents your race or ethnicity?	White or Caucasian - 6

What is your socioeconomic status?	Working - 3 Middle - 1 Upper Middle - 2
Which of the following social and communication technologies do you have an account with? (Choose all that apply)	Zoom - 5 Facebook - 6 Facebook Messenger - 6 Instagram - 5 Reddit - 4 Discord - 5 Snapchat - 2 Twitter - 5 Tiktok - 2 Skype - 3 Tumblr - 3 WhatsApp - 3 Youtube - 5
How do you utilize social and communication technologies on a regular basis? (Choose all that apply)	Read, scroll, and view posts and comments (not posting) - 4 Create public posts and/or videos - 1 Create semi-private posts and videos (in closed groups, subgroups, or private groups) - 3 Participate in small group video meetings - 6 Participate in small group text-based chats - 5 Interaction with close friends and family - 5 Interaction with others around a specific interest (game, hobby, identity, career, topic) - 4 Text-based messaging - 4 Video chats - 4 Voice chat - 4
How do you think that your usage of social or communication technology has changed from since before the COVID-19 pandemic?	I use communication technology much more often - 1 I use communication technology slightly more often - 4 I use communication technology about the same amount as before - 1
How many hours a week do you spend on social or communication technology?	5-6 - 1 6+ - 5
How has the way that you use social and communication technology changed since before the COVID-19 pandemic?	I participate in a lot more group chats and video chats.  Now that I work from home I mostly communicate with my co-workers via Teams. My social communication (Discord mostly) hasn't really changed.  It's gone from my main way of communication to almost exclusively how I communicate.  It hasn't changed dramatically, in use video chat slightly more often to keep up with family now.  I don't really think it has.  I spend significantly more time in virtual meetings (platforms like Zoom and Teams) for a variety of purposes - business, socialization, service work and special projects. I rarely used these platforms before the pandemic, and now they are part of daily life. I was already a pretty frequent user of social media,

	<p>texting, calling and video texting prior to the pandemic, so that has only increased a little bit.</p>
<p>How has your opinion of connecting with others through social or communication technology changed since before the COVID-19 pandemic? Please describe.</p>	<p>Since the COVID-19 pandemic, I have started communicating with my long-distance friends a lot more. I view social communication in a much more positive light.</p> <p>I'm glad that more people are embracing online meetings instead of in-person meetings. Less travel.</p> <p>I don't think my opinion has changed much, but I have noticed that the rest of the world seems to have realized that the internet is much more of a utility than a luxury.</p> <p>Not greatly, although it's found a place in my work life now.</p> <p>I don't really think it has.</p> <p>I realized that these virtual meeting platforms allow us to connect in meaningful ways while accommodating certain challenges to connecting in person, like physical distance and time constraints. I see the opportunities that these platforms create and that society as a whole benefits by having this additional method for connection. However, I also sensed that as people spent more and more time online during the pandemic, through social media or other forms of entertainment, there has been a form of disconnection that also happened, as people's opportunity to be physically close to each other was inhibited. Being together in person is different, and it feels like this time has changed us, detached us from each other and made it harder to meaningfully connect - in part because we rely so heavily on our devices to connect us.</p>
<p>How has your understanding of loneliness or disconnection changed since before the COVID-19 pandemic? Please describe.</p>	<p>I leave my house less, but I feel more connected to friends and family. I thought I was more connected before the pandemic because I interacted with more people socially, but this was more because of geographical convenience. During the pandemic, I connected much more with friends and family, regardless of where they live, and I feel much closer to them and more connected than I did previously.</p> <p>I feel less connected from my co-workers, but socially I'm about the same. If anything, I'm closer to friends/family that don't live nearby than before COVID-19.</p> <p>I used to think that I was fine by myself, but the pandemic has shown me the limits of that.</p> <p>It hasn't changed drastically. Social media and video conferencing were a large part of the way I interacted</p>

	<p>with friends before the pandemic, although I do miss in person interaction.</p> <p>I don't really think it has. I am pretty introverted, so I have never been big on socializing.</p> <p>I had no idea how important it was to my sense of normalcy to be able to get up every morning, get dressed, and go to my office job. To joke with coworkers in the break room or walk down the hall to ask a question to a colleague. To sit in a restaurant or go to the movies. To hug a friend when we meet for coffee or share an appetizer with acquaintances. These chances to connect, even in small ways, and just be around other people were something I took for granted. When the connection-moments were taken away, I experienced disconnection and loneliness. I continue to feel empathy for people that live alone and have limited opportunities for human connection. So how has my understanding changed? I think in the past I thought I needed intimacy to feel connected and not-alone, but now I know that even without intimate connection, simply being able to be around people, in the world, and feel "normal" goes a long way to making me feel not-alone.</p>
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*Phenomenological Qualitative Thematic Analysis*

A phenomenological approach was used in the research in order to measure individual experience of how relationships to place and concepts of connection and alienation had shifted or remained the same in light of availability of communication technology to stay in contact despite COVID-19 shutdowns. Following the survey, thematic analysis was used to make clear emerging themes, especially in short answer sections of the survey in which participants were asked to share their personal opinions and perceptions. Answers were coded for information about personal experiences, and were later clustered into overarching themes by which to better understand the data set. This was the best method of analysis due to the qualitative nature of the data and the lack of research and information surrounding experiences of the pandemic.

D. SAMPLING AND PARTICIPANTS

This research project was approved by the Internal Review Board at Kennesaw State University. Participants were chosen using the snowball method of sampling, and initial participants for the study were identified by the primary researcher.<sup>84</sup> Participants in the sample group were required to be at least 25 years of age and to spend a minimum of three hours per week on communication technology. After the initial participants were sent a flyer through email with details and a link for the online survey, they were asked to send the flyer to one other potential participant. After accessing the survey through the link provided, participants were first required to view the consent form and agree or disagree to the terms before moving forward. Those who chose to disagree were forwarded to the end of the survey and did not complete any further questions.

#### E. DATA COLLECTION

The primary researcher, upon finishing literary research, created a set of 12 questions that they felt best embodied the question at hand; How have our relationships to place, meaningful social connection, and communication technologies changed since COVID-19? The questions were split up into nine multiple choice questions and three short answer questions for the participants to have a chance to describe their specific experiences. The online survey was created using Qualtrics.

Table 1.1 *Qualitative Survey Questions*

Questions
<p>To better understand demographic data of the group represented:</p> <p>What is your gender?</p> <p>What is your age?</p> <p>Which of the following best represents your race or ethnicity?</p> <p>What is your socioeconomic status?</p>

<sup>84</sup> Noy, C. (2008). Sampling knowledge: the hermeneutics of snowball sampling in qualitative research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 11(4), 330.

To understand usage of technology and patterns of engagement:

Which of the following social and communication technologies do you have an account with?

How do you utilize social and communication technologies on a regular basis?

How do you think that your usage of social or communication technology has changed from since before the COVID-19 pandemic?

How many hours a week do you spend on social or communication technology?

To learn more about individual experience:

How has the way that you use social and communication technology changed since before the COVID-19 pandemic?

How has your opinion of connecting with others through social or communication technology changed since before the COVID-19 pandemic? Please describe.

How has your understanding of loneliness or disconnection changed since before the COVID-19 pandemic? Please describe.

Data collection occurred over the period of almost two weeks, from April 12, 2021 until the survey was closed on April 24, 2021.

## F. DATA ANALYSIS

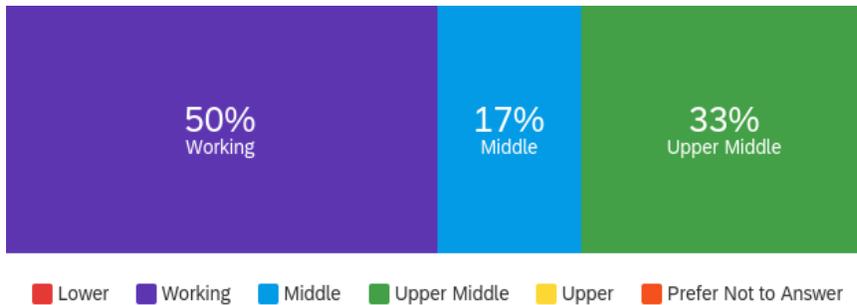
The survey information was analyzed partially through use of the statistics and word clouds given by Qualtrics, as well as through the process of coding. Short answer format questions underwent a thematic analysis in order to make sense of the data. During the thematic coding process, participant answers were read and broken down into straightforward codes, or statements, made up of the information provided. This was necessary to decontextualize the data, and was done in a line by line format. After breaking down the answers to create initial codes, the codes or statements were re-read and initial themes were formed from the data. The themes were color coded to allow for a faster comprehension of the data. Themes were then clustered to create new, more encompassing themes according to similarity and given new titles. The themes were titled according to what each category stated about the data. The final themes that emerged were: Embracing Change, Resisting Change, Disadvantages of Physical Place, and Shifts in

Perspective. From here, themes were compared to demographic data, to multiple choice answer data, as well as to one another, and an analysis was done to explicate the findings.

### G. RESULTS

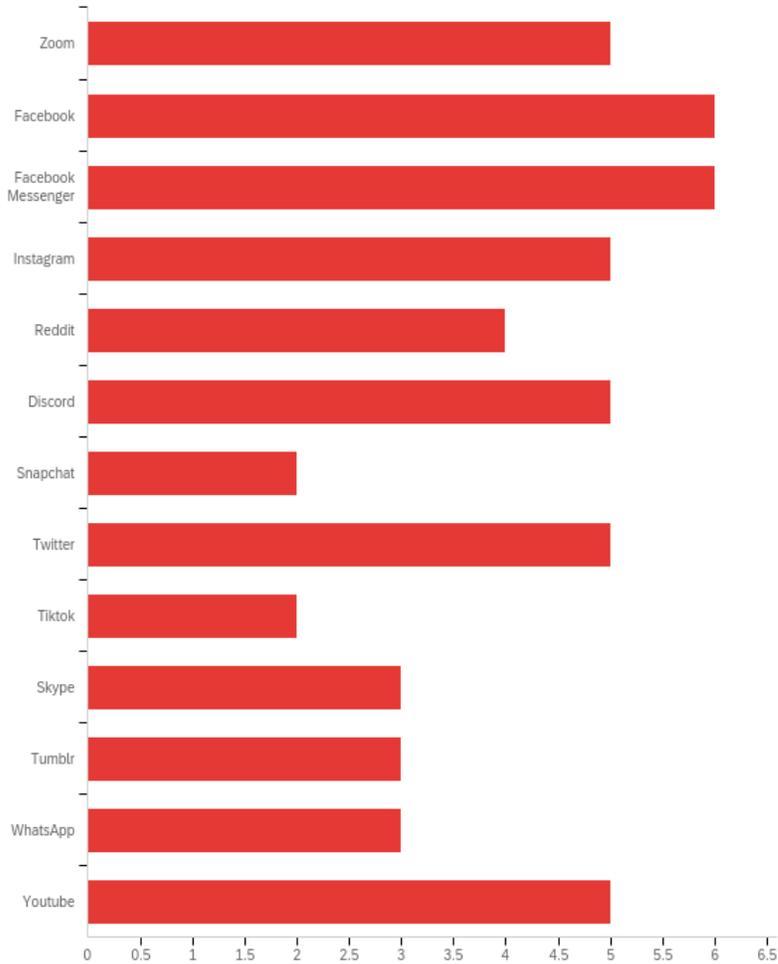
A sample of six participants completed the survey and all were included in the data set. Names and IP addresses were not recorded. Participants were primarily between 25-34 years of age (83%). All participants identified themselves as white or caucasian (100%). Participants mostly claimed the socioeconomic status of “working” (50%), although a large portion of the sample considered themselves to be “upper middle” (33%) as shown in the table below.

Table 1.2 *Socioeconomic Status*



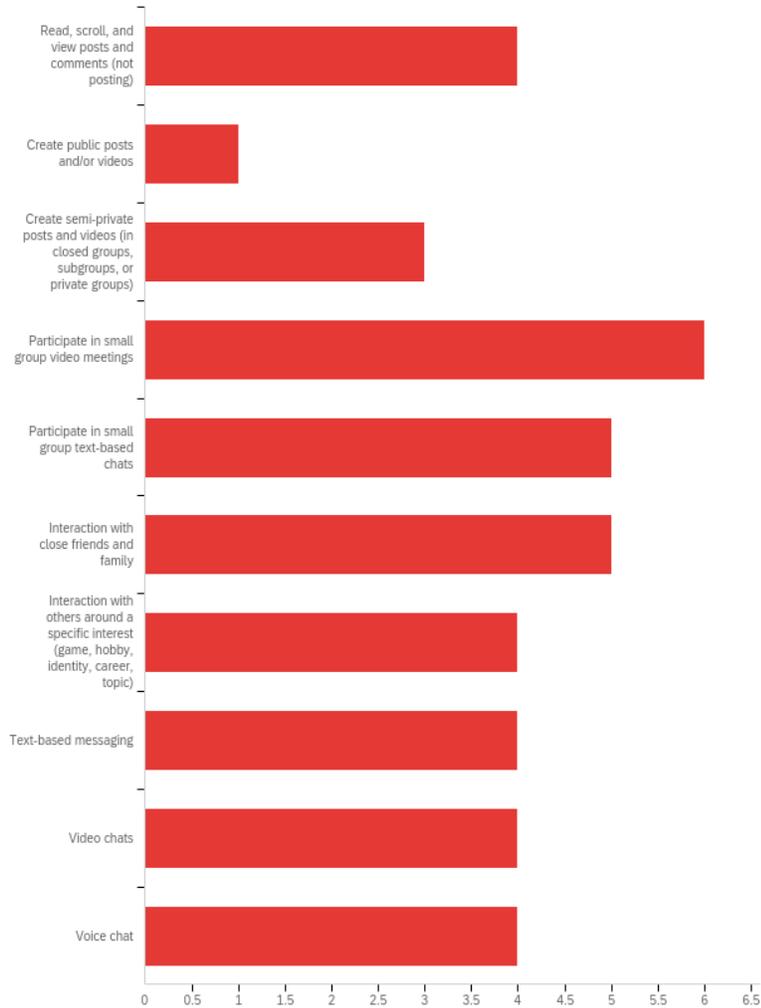
All of the participants spent at least five hours a week on social or communication technologies, and the majority of the participants used those technologies for over six hours per week (83%). Most of the participants claimed that they used communication technology “slightly more often” than before the COVID-19 pandemic (~67%), while the rest were split evenly between using communication technology “much more often” and “about the same amount as before” (~17%). All Participants had accounts with both Facebook and Facebook Messenger, and most had accounts with Zoom, Instagram, Discord, Twitter, and Youtube. The programs most rarely used by the participants were Snapchat and Tiktok. The table below illustrates this finding.

Table 1.3 *Programs with User Accounts*



Usage was also considered in this study. Participants were asked about their usage both through an opened ended question, in reference to changes since COVID, and more generally through a “select all that apply” question. The most selected answer for usage was “Participate in small group video meetings”, which was selected by all participants. The other most common usages were “Participate in small group text-based chats” and “Interaction with close friends and family”. The least commonly selected answer among the participants was “Create public posts and/or videos” which was selected by only one participant. See the table below for further details.

Table 1.4 *Usage Type of Communication Technologies*



This information was used, alongside open ended question responses, in thematic analysis. The themes that emerged from the data were: embracing change, resisting change, disadvantages of physical place, and shifts in perspective. Of those, those deemed most important to the purpose of this study were embracing change and resisting change. Correlations were found between those who embraced change and those who experienced shifts in perspective; and between interest group and small group participation and embracing change. Those who had a shift in perspective all had some characteristics of embracing change, and none of the participants identified as spending less time on communication technology than prior to the pandemic. The

study also found equal splits between embracing change, resisting change, and a balanced presentation of both.

## H. DISCUSSION

Though the study completed spans disciplines, my background work is in the field of American Studies, with an undefined focus on identity, and an undergraduate foundation in the fields of gender studies and philosophy. This background translates into my work through a critical lens. This creates a process of writing that leans more towards recognizing the information given, asking what it seeks to do, and where it may be questioned or connected to larger themes. For the literature section, I sought to create a truly interdisciplinary look at how people may be experiencing the shutdown of physical spaces and the stress of living through a pandemic, in the context of how they experience their connections with others utilizing communication technology. This became central after reviewing my personal behavior and experiences of usage of communication technology at the start of the pandemic through an autoethnographic approach. The interdisciplinary and mixed-method works of various scholars in the American Studies field contributed to the nature of this study, taking into question the historical moment and the fields necessary to construct a relevant contribution. Through my background and a critical look at the present moment I created a new question that was true to my interdisciplinary background, but different from much of my previous research on identity. This resulted in the research question: “How have our relationships to place, meaningful social connection, and communication technologies changed since COVID-19?”

In making sense of the research I compiled, I first created an outline for a code book. Then I rewrote the data from the short answer questions of the survey into straightforward

statements. Then, I created a word cloud to better understand most commonly used words for open ended questions, as well as performing a thematic analysis to recognize overarching themes. The word clouds, created in Qualtrics, are embedded below. The first word cloud refers to terms found most often in the short answer question, “How has the way that you use social and communication technology changed since before the COVID-19 pandemic?”

Table 1.5 *Word Cloud for Usage Changes Since COVID-19*



The above illustration pointed out a few details to consider when searching the data for themes in my next step. First, the word *video* was most prominent, and this gave me an understanding that many of the participants were using video features more often. The terms *work*, *team*, and *communication* confirmed my understanding that many jobs had shifted virtual work, rather than in office work, and prepared me to read more about work experiences. The terms *social* and *chat* were indicators that the technology was likely being used to contact friends and family. The second word cloud (pictured below) refers to the terms found most often in the short answer question, “How has your opinion of connecting with others through social or communication technology changed since before the COVID-19 pandemic? Please describe.”

Table 1.6 *Word Cloud for Connection Using Communication Technology*

The above illustration pointed out some other key details to look for, and initial questions to consider. The terms *social*, *people*, and *change* appeared indicative of the shift away from in-person get togethers by many, while public entertainment spaces remained largely limited by ordinances, reduced in capacity, or closed creating a shift for many in terms of socializing. The terms *realize* and *change* also seemed to have the possibility of speaking about new understandings due to the situation. *Distance* could refer to the social distancing procedures that many had begun to follow or to refer to possibilities of communication technology. The final word cloud included below was created to call attention to most commonly used terms that arose in participants' answers to the question, “How has your understanding of loneliness or disconnection changed since before the COVID-19 pandemic? Please describe.”

Table 1.7 *Word Cloud for Disconnection Using Communication Technology*



The word cloud above pointed to important terms to consider when continuing to analyze the participant's answers. The most commonly used terms *friends*, *live*, *feel*, *social*, *pandemic*, and *connected* indicated a few main ideas. *Feel* pointed to the likelihood that the answers to this question would become more emotional in nature. *Pandemic* and *live* suggested that this answer would refer to the changes that occurred in everyday life for the participants. *Friends*, *social*, and *connected* suggested that I would come to better understand the participants perceived relationship to those they called friends and whether they still felt they achieved this despite limiting circumstances.

With ideas about what I may find in the content, I began the process of re-reading the decontextualized answers and looking for any themes that may emerge from the data. The first set of themes that I was able to organize the data by were the following: distance no longer a factor in connection, connecting virtually with friends and family, positive view - virtual, appreciative/gratitude, nostalgia/discontent with present, negative view - virtual, claims little/no

change in usage or understanding, reduction in commute/travel, negative view - physical space/in-person, new standard of connection, realization/new understand, virtual work/work from home, video chat, and positive view - physical space/in-person. Some of the themes were extremely prevalent in the data and relevant to the research question and some were not. From the process of organizing the data through the new themes, color coding the results, I maintained a clearer view of the findings. After reading through the themes and surveys again, I began to compile the themes into larger categories. After grouping the new categories and determining what data was not relevant to the research question, I began to give each theme a new name that represented the concepts that it conveyed. The final themes that emerged were embracing change, resisting change, disadvantages of physical place, and shifts in perspective. Embracing Change was named to refer to moments when participants pointed out positive concepts having to do with virtual upswing as a result of COVID-19. Resisting Change was named in relation to the current period of COVID-19, as there has been a recognized shift to online programs (even though 100% of businesses did not make the switch). Disadvantages of physical place was named after themes that appeared that were critical of different dimensions of physical space. Shifts in perspectives was named according to changes in thought as a result of new patterns of usage of communication technology.

I consider embracing change and resisting change to be the two primary categories because they most straightforwardly relate to the question of how the participants are perceiving the experience. The other categories speak more to the content of their thoughts and how they relate to the present moment. For this reason, much of the interpretation of the data is linked back to whether the participant is embracing or resisting the change that the COVID-19 pandemic caused, and a “split” category has been named for the purpose of representing an

almost equal amount of embracing change and resisting change categories. Most of the participants claimed that they used communication technology “slightly more often” than before the COVID-19 pandemic (~67%), while the rest were split evenly between using communication technology “much more often” and “about the same amount as before” (~17%). From personal experience early in the pandemic, I had expected that there would be more participants who used communication technology “much more” than prior to the pandemic, but this could also be a result of the lack placing a clear limit on what time period during the pandemic I hoped to look at.

Correlations were found between those who embraced change and those who experienced shifts in perspective; and between interest group and small group participation and embracing change. The former was a consideration as it seemed a natural progression to find a relationship between the two. The research shows that half of those who had noted shifts in perspective had also embraced change, and the other half that had noted shifts in perspective still carried some characteristics of embracing change. An example of someone shifting perspective and embracing change in the research can be found in the following statement,

I thought I was more connected before the pandemic because I interacted with more people socially, but this was more because of geographic convenience. During the pandemic, I connected much more with friends and family, regardless of where they live, and I feel much closer to them and more connected than I did previously.

The other noted correlation in the data is between interest group and small group participation and embracing change. Those who mostly resisted change did participate in small groups, but did not participate in special interest groups. The research shows that 100% of those who participated in both interest and small groups had elements of embracing change. From the responses, the following exemplifies mixed characteristics with a lean towards resisting change, only small group with no interest groups,

I see the opportunities that these platforms create and that society as a whole benefits by having this additional method for communication. However, I also sensed that as people spent more and more time online during the pandemic, through social media or other forms of entertainment, there has been a form of disconnection that also happened, as people's opportunity to be physically close to each other was inhibited.

The first sentence of the statement falls under the theme of shifts in perspective, while the second fell under the resisting change category and was originally categorized as negative view - virtual.

Those who had a shift in perspective all had some characteristics of embracing change, and none of the participants identified as spending less time on communication technology than prior to the pandemic. One participant in the study shared, "During the pandemic, I connected much more with friends and family, regardless of where they live, and I feel much closer to them and more connected than I did previously." Another points out a different shift in perspective, stating, "I used to think that I was fine by myself, but the pandemic has shown me the limits of that." Both participants showed levels of embracing change in their responses, but the first had no responses that were characterized as resisting change, while the second had characteristics of both resisting and embracing change (split). The study also found equal splits between embracing change (33%), resisting change (33%), and a balanced presentation of both (33%). Although I had expectations that class difference would factor into views of communication technology and how participants reacted to change, a significant correlation did not appear. Rather, categories were very equal in nature, or class did not seem to have any effect on response to change. Those who identified as working class fell into categories of resisting change (33%), embracing change (33%), and split (33%). Those who identified as upper middle class fell into resisting change (50%) and embracing change (50%) categories, and the single participant who identified themselves as middle class fell into the split category.

The final category that I expected to find in the data was a correlation between the marked usage of scrolling and observing, social media accounts, and resisting change. There only turned out to be a partial correlation. Scrolling and observing did correlate to resisting change, as expected, but social media was used by everyone involved in the study so it could not be claimed to contribute to either experience. Half of all participants marked the answer “Read, scroll, and view posts and comments (not posting)” and of those participants 67% fell into the resisting change category.

This study is useful as a model for what can be done during this historical moment, however changes would be implemented if it were to be continued at a later date. If this study was continued, I would be sure to specify a more precise time period of the pandemic that I intend to collect information on, making it clear whether or not “stay at home” orders were in place during that time. Now being in a state of continuance of the pandemic more than a year from the initial information released about COVID-19 in the US, much of the routine of daily life has become at least partially settled. At the start of the pandemic, the level of uncertainty was even higher. Looking specifically at time frame during the stay at home orders and after they were lifted could afford a more accurate view of how people were responding during the most stressful time period of the pandemic, as well as how they experienced the period of the pandemic after things had become less restricted, yet longer term.

When asking for participants to include the amount of hours for weekly usage, a much larger time frame for usage would be included. The highest number of hours available for this question (6+ hours) was the answer chosen by all but one of the participants (who chose 5-6 hours per week) and did not allow for an accurate representation of how often communication technologies were actually used by participants. Multiple participants cited Teams as a program

they now used regularly, but it was not included in the list on the question about accounts held. Facetime could also be added to this list. It could be beneficial to focus on usage rather than simply having an account with various programs. Possibly even looking at usage by program and hours per week to better understand how the participants interact with the programs.

A similar topic for study could focus on experiences of connection in how communication devices are used for text-based communication, voice communication, and video communication, looking at real time as well as prior posts in light of affective responses. Speaking from an autoethnographic and experiential standpoint, there seemed to be a difference in the quality of connection from text-based feeling least connected to personal video chat feeling most connected. It would also help this matter to know about the number of participants who use facetime and other single person chats to connect as well as voice calls rather than text-based messaging. A specification for “one and one video chat” could be added in addition to “small group video chat” and “video chat” to ensure that an understanding is met for the kind of usage.

## I. LIMITATIONS

This study represents what questions that researchers may be asking in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic, and the appropriate actions were taken in researching the relevant topics as well as their fields. The theoretical research that was found in the literature research section of this project influenced the phrasing of the questions for the research, as well as the background of the primary researcher in the fields of American Studies and feminist theory. Both of which rely heavily on experiential narrative and data. However, this research project creates an initial look at what questions are possible to research at this historical moment. This research project

was limited in time, funding, and experience. The geographic location in which all initial participants were chosen are within the state of Georgia. The limitations are due to the method of sampling used (snowball), the participation of those the researcher knew personally, the amount of participants that took the survey (six), and the timing allotted for the research survey window (two weeks), severely limit the ability to claim the research as sound.

Constraints on time and resources limited the possibilities available for this research project, however, this research project could include a much larger, more randomized, and more diverse sampling of participants and in turn become more representative of the group and community experiences COVID-19 caused and how those experiences translated to interaction with communication devices. This could be done through expansion of the number of participants through continued sampling and flyer distribution efforts, a larger initial participant group, as well as a more in-depth coding process than was possible in the time allotted. The small window of time for surveys to be collected and coded only allowed for a limited number of participants and level of data extraction. The snowball sampling, at a larger scale, could lead to a better understanding of the group within context to one another, as this particular method of sampling has the ability to uniquely represent groups of people that are connected. However, such a small number of participants does not have the ability to accurately represent a larger group.

## VI. CONCLUSION: COMMUNICATING, CONNECTION, AND CHANGE

This research project was built on the idea that connection is possible, despite interruptions of physical place, through the medium of communication technology, despite its faults.

Communication technologies, though built on structures of capital gain, can be utilized to create moments of true connection, and I sought to take into account the historical moment of COVID-19 to better understand how connection and disconnection became understood in the context of this time, especially considering the shut down of common meeting places, such as bars, coffee shops, and restaurants. The literature review takes into account research done in the social sciences concerning concepts like connection and alienation or disconnection, as well as studies of place, within the context of American Studies, and the absence or immediate rejection of discussions about the virtual realm being a possible space for place-building, research considering the effects of social media and technology, and feminist discourses that center on community building and activism. Using the topics of American Studies and Place, I brought attention to the meaningful attributes of virtual spaces and questioned why the concept of virtual place has been excluded from the field. By looking at communication technology design and usage I considered how technology creation in itself can be alienating, when it takes place in the context of a capitalist society, and asked how usage can allow for meaning to be created despite those alienating properties. All of these disciplines gave light to the historic moment of COVID-19 and the barring of physical place, and gave way to the research question to be addressed through a qualitative study: How have our relationships to place, meaningful social connection, and communication technologies changed since COVID-19? From this question, I began to build my model and plan for the research.

The qualitative study was completed using the online survey website, Qualtrics. The research was meant to be centered on the individual descriptions and lived experience of those who participated, which is why open ended questions were included when speaking of how perspectives of connection and disconnection had changed or remained the same. The survey also utilized multiple choice questions to measure things like hours spent on communication technology and how each participant interacted with the apps, programs, and websites they used, to better frame an understanding of experiences of connection vs. how technology was used. The survey data was then analyzed using a thematic approach. The following overarching themes were extracted from the data: embracing change, resisting change, disadvantages of physical place, and shifts in perspective. The two deemed the most important were the themes of resisting change and embracing change.

These themes contextualize the study within the understanding of experiences of connection and disconnection through use of communication technology in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, as was discussed in the literature review. The correlation that was found in the study between interest group and small group participation and the participants tendency to embrace change makes sense in the context of Julia Kristeva's work on the importance of expression or being a "speaking being" and speaks to the research question through terms of meaningful social connection.<sup>85</sup> For those who are embracing the changes associated with pandemic living, small groups and interest groups are one of the few ways to do the work of relating with one another and socializing in a more private situation, where people are more likely to have the opportunity to speak and be heard. This usage is also representative of a choice to connect over commonalities and on a more personal level in comparison to other forms of

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<sup>85</sup> Keltner, S.K. *Kristeva: Thresholds*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 22.

communication technology, in which a user simply scrolls main pages, or posts publicly on social media.

The other most notable result of the research study speaks to the research project question in relevance to relationships to place, and surprisingly came to light in the correlation between those who embraced change and those who experienced shifts in perspective. This parallel is characterized in the participants' likelihood to speak of closeness or connection despite distance when speaking of these shifts in perspective, as exemplified in one participant's point that prior to the pandemic they chose people to interact with largely “due to geographic convenience”. Many also cited a positive change in light of no longer having to drive the physical distance to arrive in the workplace or to meet others. Connecting back to the earlier discussion on place, it is clear that the *workplace* has changed from an experience rooted in the physical routine of driving to work, arriving at the building, and speaking to coworkers to the current workplace, characterized not by different spaces but by the programs, like Teams and Zoom, used to communicate and complete the work actions.

The final answer to the research question, addressing how our relationships to communication technologies has changed since COVID, can be found quickly at a glance. All but one participant in the survey claimed that their usage of communication technologies had gone up since before the pandemic, this is a clear correlation to increased usage. Another easily identified change is the relationship to work life and relationships to friends and family. In viewing the survey answers there were continued references to working from home as well as to virtual connections with friends and family that had begun to occur or increased since the start of the pandemic. Reflecting back to discussions on technological design and usage, there is a clear indication that much of the technology used is made to encourage more use rather than less. The

encouraged usage is mostly scrolling with only brief diversions, as most advertisements live on these pages.<sup>86</sup> However, the participants in this survey represented usage of technology for participation as well as scrolling, as was seen in the earlier results. From both autoethnographic experience as well as Vaidhyathan's point on technology design, I presumed that with the job loss and stay at home orders of the pandemic, some would have begun to use communication technology much more often, as I did early in the pandemic. This was only the case for one participant, however. Exact usage increases were not measured in the survey, but could indicate correlative elements between how increases appeared and whether the participant embraced change. This point of research could be useful in a continued study of experiences.

The interdisciplinary and mixed method approach used for this study, though uncommon, is an American Studies approach at its core. American Studies has progressed as a field and expanded its range of topics through scholars willing to cross imaginary divides. This act of breaking from common application of works informed the departure from foundational texts that glorified a "virgin land" and toward a transnational turn, a central moment for the field and a reminder of the history of change the field has embraced. Scholar Sherry Turkle created a fundamentally American Studies research project in a mixed methodological study based similarly in technology and usage, combining years of qualitative work with psychoanalysis and literary criticism. These sentiments are echoed in this research project. The historical moment combines a lack of research with a strong need for research. In light of this, an interdisciplinary, mixed-method approach is the most applicable as the experience does not fit neatly into any one category. Though there may not currently be any straightforward answers documented for my research question there were conversations around whether digital spaces are place, what it

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<sup>86</sup> Vaidhyathan, Siva. *Antisocial Media How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*. 44.

means to be connected, how alienation is experienced, and how communication technology affects its users. This is why an interdisciplinary and mixed method approach was so important to this study.

Because of the broad scope of methods and disciplines involved in this study, there are a number of areas that could be improved upon and topics of study that could be included in later research. I was disappointed by the lack of diversity in my participant group, and recognize the importance of considering alternate means of sampling to gather participants in the future to improve this area. Perhaps a more diverse group would have viewed connection and disconnection differently. This could prove especially relevant in light of the disproportionate effects that COVID-19 has had on communities of color, as well as high-risk groups, such as the elderly.<sup>87</sup> It is likely that those whose friends and family were seriously affected by COVID-19 have stronger views on whether technology was delivering the connection needed to maintain relationships close during this time, but this information was not collected in the survey. For those who received hospitalization and were not allowed any guests, did communication technology alleviate loneliness or did it fail to live up to the possibilities for connection suggested? There are many questions left unanswered by the limited research in this study that could be addressed in the future.

Within this research study, there were no participants who identified themselves as within the “lower” socioeconomic group. I question how this would have changed the dynamics seen in the results of this study. Consider the fact that many of the workers deemed “essential” throughout the pandemic were those who saw many people in-person on a daily basis. Of

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<sup>87</sup> Summary of Guidance for Public Health Strategies to Address High Levels of Community Transmission of SARS-CoV-2 and Related Deaths, December 2020,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, December 10, 2020).

essential workers, ‘25% had a low household income, 18% of households had at least one uninsured person, and 18% of households live with someone at least 65 years of age’.<sup>88</sup> How did these factors and risks impact experiences of connection and disconnection? Are communication technologies a luxury for those with the money, time, and access to utilize them or are they standard now? For those working multiple jobs to maintain substantial income, how did daily life and routines look the same? How did circumstances differ? This would likely look very different from those who saw a shift to a virtual workplace, as many in the qualitative study had. The ability to make decisions about social distancing was likely also largely impacted by monetary needs. There were also a number of questions and considerations that arose in consideration of what it means to use technology.

Within communication technologies, there are new forms of usage that drive the question; what is labor? Karl Marx seems to draw a line between those who work to create products and those who benefit and use those products, but what happens when the line between worker and user is blurred? Can workers still be separated from the users of communication technology? Rather than design the intricacies of user experience within a platform, users are creating their own experience by way of algorithms that alter what they see in order to mimic their engagement. Rather than paying advertisers, users are encouraged to share content publicly. Influencers are *sometimes* paid to start trends that encourage more free labor, selling their perceived connection with users. Passive scrolling is monetized. This is only the tip of the iceberg, but it points to much larger questions about exploitation. How does emotional manipulation speak to the kind of exploitation tech users are experiencing now? Does it matter that they have a choice whether to interact on the platforms? How does choosing not to use

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<sup>88</sup> Grace McCormack et al., “Economic Vulnerability of Households With Essential Workers,” JAMA (American Medical Association, July 28, 2020), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7303901/>.

communication technology impact users during a time when many local spaces are closed?

Experiences of connection and disconnection are only a small piece of the puzzle when considering how embedded communication technology has become over the past several years, and COVID is only one catalyst for the changes society has seen. There is great potential for further research to address these questions and to consider how else the use of communication technology has shifted dynamics of social interaction and free time.

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