THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

THE FRIENDSHIP UTOPIA: HOW COVID-19 EXPOSED THE NEOLIBERAL PARADOX OF FEMALE FRIENDSHIP IN THE 21ST CENTURY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

BY

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

AUGUST 2021

Abstract

As hook-up culture overtakes dating, the average age at marriage increases, and romantic relationships expand beyond historical expectations of heterosexuality, friendship has become an increasingly emphasized relationship for many college students (Demir, 2010; Holland, 1990). Previous scholarship has shown that friendship is important for ensuring everything from social support and connection to mental health and even academic success (Garcia, 2012; Bogle, 2007; McCabe, 2016; Narr, 2017; US Census, 2020; Demir et al, 2007). Barbara Caine (2009), in her book *Friendship: A History,* describes how friendship is differentiated from obligatory ties of family or coworkers because friendship is freely chosen, and the expectations of the tie are therefore defined by the friends. This lends the relationship a uniquely amorphous nature that is well suited to promoting the neoliberal ideals of flexibility, self-determination, and resiliency within the friends themselves. Through an ethnographic examination of undergraduate and graduate student friendship networks, I examine how Covid-19 highlighted how forms of image management and constant emotional work within female friendship take on neoliberal forms as they pervaded the deep interiority of student’s understandings and aspirations for themselves as self-determined and continually improving individuals (Goffman, 1959; Gill, 2018).

**Introduction**

Friendship has become an increasingly emphasized relationship for many college students as hook-up culture overtakes dating and romantic relationships expand beyond historical expectations of heterosexuality (Demir, 2010; Holland, 1990). While previous scholarship has shown that friendship is important for ensuring everything from social support and connection to mental health and even academic success, I observed that the relationship can also induce feelings of anxiety, social isolation, and inadequacy among students when they do not feel they are living up to internalized expectations of a fulfilling social life (Garcia, 2012; Bogle, 2007; McCabe, 2016; Narr, 2017; Mayo Clinic, 2019). The uniquely ambiguous nature of freely-chosen friendship as compared to the obligatory ties of family or coworkers allows for expectations within a friendship to be defined independently by the friends. In so doing, the relationship requires the development of neoliberal ideals of flexibility and resiliency within the friends themselves in order to negotiate these amorphous and evolving expectations (Caine, 2009). Through an ethnographic examination of undergraduate and graduate student friendship networks, I examine how Covid-19 highlighted how forms of image management within female friendship take on neoliberal forms as they pervade the deep interiority of student’s self-understandings and aspirations for themselves as self-determined and continually improving individuals (Goffman, 1956; Martinussen, 2020). Neoliberal ideals have been understood as a cornerstone of late 20th century and contemporary socio-economic life. Within a neoliberal framework, the emphasis on a free market and the entrepreneurial spirit of self-invention and self-mastery pervades into psychological and social life as the onus is placed on the individual to constantly remake herself as a nimble economic and social agent in times of flux (Harvey, 2005; Gill, 2017). Although one may wish to imagine that such intimate relations as romantic couples and friendships lie beyond the reaches of the neoliberal ethos, the ways in which this value complex permeates how young people approach these important relationships is striking. Specifically, female interlocutors described consciously working to overcome their own anxieties about both the illness and social isolation of the pandemic in order to provide the emotionally attuned and uplifting company that was expected in their female friendships. These forms of conscious self-disciplining entailed considerable degrees of affective labor as female students fought to resist feelings of frustration, anger, and self-critique in favor of becoming fun loving and reliably upbeat friends. In this way, I argue that Covid brought into sharper relief the affective labor and neoliberal ideologies that permeate so many facets of 21st century life, including the gendered enactment of female friendships (Hochschild, 1983).

**Methods**

To examine the impact of the pandemic upon practices and conceptions of friendship, I undertook 17 interviews with students at an elite, medium sized, private, liberal arts university in the Southeastern U.S. and 3 interviews with master’s students at a medium private elite research-oriented university in the Midwest. Of those interviewed, 13 identified as women as 7 as men. According to their own self reporting, four of these students identified as Asian, one as Hispanic, one as Black, and fourteen identified as White. My sample was gathered with the help of professors in the Economics and Women’s Studies departments at the Southeastern university, who circulated an email requesting participants. My sample was also collected through snow-ball sampling of members of several Greek organizations on campus. I recruited students from the Midwestern university via university Facebook and WhatsApp groups for a social science master’s program. Overall, the undergraduate student participants ranged from freshman to seniors, and both the undergraduate and graduate students included international as well as domestic students. The sample included individuals involved in a diverse array of activities, including scholar programs, Greek life, the symphony orchestra, political organizations, international student groups, sports teams, business clubs, mental health awareness clubs, and outdoors clubs.

As a former student at the southeastern university and a current student at the midwestern university, I was familiar with many of the aspects of social life that the students mentioned at both campuses. I chose to study these two populations both because of my existing knowledge of the southeastern university’s campus culture through my three year-long ethnographic study for my undergraduate thesis and my own experience and unusual positionality as a (remotely situated) graduate student at the midwestern university. However, given their diversity of backgrounds, identities, and personalities, and the immense challenges that have impacted people differently during the pandemic, their interviews exposed unexpected dynamics of friendship. As such, the most compelling research findings I explore in this paper were guided less by my initial research questions than by the themes that appeared to most preoccupy my interlocutors.

**Historical and Contemporary Theories of Friendship**

In the Classical period in Ancient Greece, Aristotle described virtuous and genuine friendship as that which is constructed between two individuals of high moral standing who engage in the relationship for the sake of the wellbeing of the other rather than for personal pleasure or gain (Caine, 23; Aristotle, 3; Helm, 1). In this way, “good friendship” implies wanting to benefit a friend for the friend’s sake rather than for one’s own self-interest. Each friend thus wants what is best for the other, and good friendships enrich both individuals. Friendship involves caring about someone else but does not require the loss of care for oneself. Aristotelian elements of sharing moral values and of caring for others *for the sake of others* emerged as a salient theme for the college students with whom I discussed friendship during the pandemic. To elaborate, many students described being shocked to learn their friends did not share their moral qualms about such risky behavior as going to bars and nightclubs during Covid. Specifically, students were surprised that their friends prioritized their own self-satisfaction of having a fun weekend by going out to clubs over maintaining safe practices to see their (more Covid cautious) close friends in-person. For example, one undergraduate interlocutor, Lily, described feeling very let down by her best friend in the early months of the pandemic when her friend continued going out to bars every weekend even though she knew that would mean she wouldn’t be able to see Lily because Lily and her room mates were maintaining much stricter Covid-safety practices. While Lily was willing to overlook this and continue to take the risk of seeing her friend initially, Lily described soon realizing that she was making significant sacrifices by risking her own safety to see her friend while her friend continued to do whatever she pleased, unwilling to sacrifice her social life in order to continue seeing Lily. As I will elaborate on in the subsequent sections, this took a significant toll on their formerly close friendship. In these ways, confronting ethical dilemmas and navigating divergent levels of risk-taking in relation to their own health and that of their friends took on a newly central role in student friendships.

While this ethical dynamic of friendship has seemed to maintain its relevance from the classical age to the contemporary, one crucial difference must be noted in the modern friendships I observed. For Aristotle in the classical era, the “virtuous” friendship was conceived of as an exclusively male relationship because women were not capable, as men were, of possessing the necessary traits of justice, courage, rational decision making, and self-control (Caine 24, 319). By contrast, in both current popular media and social science research, women are more often the protagonists of explorations of friendship and references to men, particularly heterosexual men, are relatively scarce (Way 37, 262). This transition likely occurred gradually, with friendship among upper middle-class women becoming an increasingly socially normative form of emotional intimacy. This arose, in part, due to the vast gender separation in socializing that became increasingly prevalent at the turn of the 20th century (Caine, 243). Women’s greater capacity for emotional expression was also seen as providing a form of support through friendship distinct from the support of the socially normative heterosexual marriage (Caine, 280). In this study, I focus on friendship among female university students as a site from which to examine how the neoliberal mandate for the making and re-making of self unfolds in uniquely gendered ways.

**Undergraduate Friendship During a Pandemic**

 In many scholarly studies, meaningful friendships have been found to correspond with enhanced student mental health, academic performance, social support and connectedness (Garcia, 2012; Bogle, 2007; McCabe, 2016; Narr, 2017; Mayo Clinic, 2019). Almost without exception, my interviews revealed that friendships are of utmost importance to students, occupying a great deal of their energy, focus, and time. However, the presence of friendships did not neatly correlate with thriving mental health, social life, or academic performance. I found that, particularly among female interlocutors, Covid-19 simultaneously heightened the dependence, need, and desire for friendships while also adding greater complexity, anxiety, and tension to these relationships. Students had reevaluated their friendships in the past year, distancing themselves from friends who did not share the same social distancing practices and forged new and sometimes unexpected friendships with those who shared their Covid safety protocols of choice.

Guiding these preferences of new friends was a novel moral judgement within social connections and interactions. Specifically, students claimed to immediately lose respect for friends when they saw online posts that indicated they were, for example, out, mask-less, at crowded clubs. However, even as students strongly critiqued friends whose behavior they deemed reckless during Covid, they did so at great emotional cost. Echoing Aristotle’s ideals of virtuosity and care for the friend’s sake, students described their attempts at inculcating magnanimity in order to prevent themselves from judging their friends. They claimed that they did this both in order to preserve the friendship and also to maintain their own mental health. One interlocutor, Lily, illustrated this clearly in our conversation. Lily is a White junior at the southeastern university. She is from the West Coast and is majoring in Psychology. Her introverted but warm demeanor became serious as she said:

“I spent a good amount of the fall and the beginning of this semester with too much resentment, too much anger, and like- for my own health, I needed to let that go…because I just couldn’t be so mad and like so disappointed and so ashamed … like I just need to focus on the fact that my parents are proud of me … and I don’t want to carry resentment towards these [other] people. I also don’t want to see them and carry resentment towards them. We made different choices. I was very disappointed. Probably deep down, I’m still just like ‘you’re not the person I thought you were. You care so little about Covid.’ But, it’s okay.” [30:05]

Here, Lily struggles between wanting to be easy-going and let go of her resentment towards friends who did not maintain her level of Covid safety practices and simultaneously acknowledging that, deep down, she still feels frustration towards these friends. She illustrates a tension that arose with other female students between trying to embody neoliberal imperatives for flexibility and resiliency in friendships regardless of divergent safety practices as they compared their own sacrificing of personal social needs in favor of keeping others safe with their friends’ seemingly reckless behavior. While in tension with one another, both the selfish and individualistic behavior of her friends and her own inclination toward forgiveness, flexibility, and resiliency in her friendships, evoke neoliberal values. In this way, the moral quandaries that Covid created brought to light the way in which individualism and flexibility are intertwined within female friendships. Flexibility and resilience on the part of one friend are only necessary when selfishness and the prioritizing of individual self-interest is present in the other. As will be evidenced in the following interviews, without flexibility and resilience, friendships disintegrated during Covid. At a time of anxiety and stress, when the need for emotional support and companionship was particularly stark and the opportunity to forge new relationships curtailed, this loss (or the fear of such loss) was especially painful. As such, students recurrently described consciously cultivating easy-going demeanors and forcing themselves to bounce back after disappointments in order to maintain their friendships.

If the college years are already a time in which the transitions of young adulthood challenge mental health, Covid-19 introduced a heightened degree of anxiety and depression among students. They described leaning more heavily on close friends and creating a complex web of support, needing to strategize about which of their friends was strong enough emotionally in that moment to support them when they needed a shoulder to cry on. Students also described increased fear of missing out as a result of Covid and reduced social opportunities. Now, some felt that they compared the extent and quality of their social encounters to those of their friends even more than they had pre-pandemic. Questions of whether they were being “social enough” and “fun to be around enough” became heightened when their social networks shrank. As students described going from dozens of friends to only five friends they could see on a regular basis, losing any of single friendship became a far more significant loss. In seeking to mitigate these increasingly complex dynamics within their friendships, female interlocutors discussed the ways in which they honed forms of image management, summoning Goffman’s ideas of on-stage and off-stage domains of relationality (1959). Further, their forms of image management drew on neoliberal ideals as they strove to make themselves increasingly more flexible, easygoing, resilient, and fun to be around to their friends. For example, one student, Natalia, described her efforts to work hard to maintain friendships while simultaneously not letting herself have expectations in the friendship so that she would not be let down. In this way, conceptions of friendships that emerge through my research richly express the “imperative for personal growth and fulfillment, and an emphasis on affect management for self-regulation” that psychologist Glenn Adams has described as endemic to neoliberal culture (2019). However, the co-presence of neoliberal and subversive counternarratives that Martinussen et al (2019) observed among the female friendships they studied in New Zealand is also relevant to my work. One of the key elements of neoliberal subjectivities entangled in the female friendships they studied was the intimate self-disclosure that elicited emotional support from a friend to improve one’s own life. However, they found that some friendships pushed against neoliberal expectations for continual self-improvement. For instance, some friends sought refuge in activities deemed lazy and counterproductive to the neoliberal goals of working on the self, such as eating pie all day and watching TV (2019). In this study, I explore the ways in which on-stage, consciously controlled neoliberal affective techniques of self-management and self-improvement intertwine with off-stage, relaxed moments of non-productive intimacy with friends and the wider implications of these convergent practices (Hochschild; Goffman).

**Neoliberalism as a Lens to Understand Friendship**

Neoliberalism has recently been taken up by feminist scholars as a lens through which to understand female techniques of self-development, ranging from examinations of self-help guides to hone more fulfilling romantic or familial relationships to working to develop desirable personality traits such as confidence that will make women more successful in life (Gill; Martinusssen & Wetherell; Kanai; Winch). I build on these scholars by understanding neoliberalism as the broad set of interventions in which the market shapes the practices and ideologies of individual actors by idealizing the continually optimized agile agent in an ever-changing and insecure cultural economy (Harvey). Specifically, I examine how neoliberal ideals pervade into the development of female friendship and the wider implications of this tendency. In my interviews with female students about their friendship networks, I observed that women actively worked on improving themselves in order to attract and craft the most fulfilling friendship networks they could. Further, the uniquely amorphous and ambiguous nature of friendship provided fertile ground for these neoliberal ideals to take root. To elaborate, senses of duty or obligation within friendship varied widely among my interview subjects, and it was often its amorphous nature that made friendship both so appealing to students as a less burdensome relationship than, say, a romantic tie, but also what spurred disappointment and even resentment when needs and expectations were not met by one’s friends. Unlike in a romantic or kin tie, the expectations and obligations within friendship could thus vary widely. One White junior interview subject at the Southeastern university, Sabrina, described this relief from the pressures of specific expectations in her friendships as compared to her romantic relationships in the following way,

“It’s the expectation of partnership, because I know that I am not my friend’s only friend. But in my partnerships, often you know I am my partner’s only partner … our culture has positioned partners as needing to be everything for their other partner or have like complete and utter responsibility for them.”

As such, she described the non-exclusive and less burdensome nature of her friendships as making it easier to appreciate and take pleasure in her friendships than her romantic relationships. I was particularly struck by how the more ambiguous nature of friendship often required forms of flexibility and resilience emblematic of a neoliberal sensibility (Burchell, 1993; Springer et al, 2016; Tansel 2017; Gill, 2018). Women interview subjects often described affectively laboring to be easy-going, carefree, and non-judgmental in their friendships so as to maintain the relationships even when they felt hurt, let down, or even angry with their friends (Hochschild, 1983). This effort operates on two tracks—on one hand, requiring the development of a seemingly light-hearted demeanor and casual, flexible spirit, and on the other hand tamping down the hurt feelings and expectations. For example, after describing how she enjoyed talking to friends on frequent intervals, one interlocutor who I will call Natalia, an international master’s student at the midwestern university, described the following: “Some of my best friends … are really really shit at keeping in touch over a distance. So for example one of my best friends … she’s always saying that we’re gonna schedule a call and then it never happens. But I just know that she’s bad at it I just know that it won’t happen so I’m not *too* mad at her” [10:55]. In this way, Natalia works to adjust her expectations for communication in her friendships, even when they don’t meet her own preferences, in order to prevent any tension or resentment on her part in the friendship. In another moment, Natalia described how one of her closest friends completely changed her personality when they were around other people. Rather than letting herself become frustrated, Natalia said she simply accepted that was a tendency her friend had. In descriptions such as these, women construct friendship as yet another mode of image management as they work to develop adaptive personality traits that will serve them well in maintaining their appeal as a friend and thus increase the breadth of their network and the longevity of their friendships.

The development of these flexible and resilient personality traits is illustrative of Rosalind Gill’s description in her essay, “Mediating Neoliberal Capitalism,” of how, “Across varied contexts, neoliberalism holds together the promotion of economic de-regulation, and the extension of market principles into all areas of life with the appropriation of increasing powers of the state to discipline, punish and coerce individuals into “productive” social and economic activity … When rights to secure employment and social safety nets are under continual attack, media are increasingly implicated in calling forth subjects who are “resilient,” “creative,” “flexible” and “positive.” Building on the arguments of Springer et al (2016), I argue that as market principles encroach into the intimate sphere of personal relationships, requiring the honing of personality traits such as resilience, flexibility, and relentless positivity, friendship becomes both a tool and a barometer of self-development and in turn, self-value among young adult women. Evidence of these dual and sometimes paradoxical dimensions appeared in interviews when students described the simultaneous social affirmation, self-fulfillment and self-growth they expected to experience through their friendships as well as the judgement and self-comparisons they made between their own friendships and their perceptions of the friendships between other individuals in their network. As a result, female students often described *working* to develop more meaningful or fulfilling friendships in relation to those they perceived around them, in the online (i.e. social media) and offline spheres. In this sense, friendships and friendship networks deemed “successful” became a form of social capital that students aspired to possess and contributed to the criteria from which they understood and evaluated themselves (Bourdieu, 1979).

Further, students with outgoing personalities were more likely to feel prioritized and affirmed during Covid, and to maintain their extensive friendship networks. More soft-spoken and introverted students, by contrast, were more likely to feel either unfulfilled or neglected by their shrinking networks. While the tendency for extroverts to have larger groups of friends has been found in previous studies, correlations between extroversion and quality or satisfaction with friendships have not been conclusive (Nelson et al, 2011; Doroszuk et al, 2019). What is salient, however, is that regardless of students’ personality dispositions, they all expressed an internalized imperative to develop themselves and their personalities so as to attract better friendships. Alison Winch, in her article “Brand Intimacy, Female Friendship and Digital Surveillance Networks,” explains the production of desirable female friendship on social media pages in the following way,

“Rather than being a top-down form of governance and discipline such as in the panopticon, control is devolved, shared and internalised among modalities of the policing gaze. Moreover, this policing is permeated by market values and the privileging of self-management in service to competitive subjectivities. Bodies are surveyed and controlled by groups of women, or what I call a *gynaeopticon* – a gendered, neoliberal variation on Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon – where the many women watch the many women … In these media women’s bodies traffic among women … In other words, these media texts both promote the intimacy of female networks and the pleasures of belonging to a ‘we’. Simultaneously, however, they regulate their consumers around the body and sexuality by inducing feelings of shame and humiliation if they do not conform to the implicit templates of normativity” (Winch 2015, 1).

Winch thus illustrates how within a neoliberal landscape, female friendships become a good desired and sought after but also capable of igniting shame and self-critique if women are not able to achieve this goal through complying with expectations for gendered normative behavior. While themes of conforming to social pressures for the body and sexuality did not appear in my interviews, the idea of women surveilling one another’s social practices (i.e. who they saw, where they went, and how frequently) both in the online and offline spheres within friendship networks was profoundly recurrent. Importantly, this tension within friendship between the promise of social affirmation, fulfillment, and even self-improvement and the simultaneous igniting of self-critique and fears of social isolation derives from the neoliberal understanding that friendships are indicative of an individual’s work to maximize their own self-value. It is from this perspective that friendships deemed worthy and successful reflect well on an individual’s value, appeal, and drive for self-improvement. Alternatively, friendships deemed disappointing reflect poorly on an individual, proving that she needs to work on herself more to attract and develop a truly fulfilling and robust friendship network. Dangerously, the emotionally nourishing friendships that each of these students both needed and desired became enmeshed within a system in which individuals were singularly responsible for earning fulfilling friendships through honing their own affective techniques and modes of self-improvement. If they were unsuccessful, therefore, they believed they had only themselves to blame (Hochschild; Gill; Peck; Freeman). This shifting of responsibility from broader structural and socio-cultural factors to the individual created the sense among women that, if they could only develop themselves to be flexible, upbeat, easygoing, and resilient *enough*, then they could have the friendships they desired. Importantly, this was almost always described as a state of being yet to be attained (Berlant).

**Social Media, the “Gynopticon,” and Female Friendship**

Surveillance of female friends on various social media channels was often described by interview subjects as a helpful way of monitoring the Covid safety behaviors of their friends in order to prevent their own exposure to the virus. However, this monitoring could quickly devolve into sharp moral critiques of friends. Students who were being very Covid safe (e.g. forming small friendship pods and being tested regularly, maintaining social distance and mask protocols, socializing only outdoors, etc.) described immediately losing respect for friends when they saw Instagram pictures of them out clubbing with hundreds of mask-less strangers. Lily’s interview with me illustrated this precise tendency. She spoke with a warm and good-natured seriousness as she said the following, “There’s something about going to Cancún- a lot of people are doing that … but to have the audacity to post a snapchat picture of yourself in an indoor club with no masks on with thousands of people in the background, like you have to be the lowest of the low.” [32:40] In this way, instant judgements of others based on social media posts portraying behavior deemed unsafe was described as a newly common-place activity among many interlocutors. This practice served as a constant cloud over even close and long-term friendships.

Alison Winch describes the gynopticon as the “girlfriend” surveillance of women by one another, where what is rewarded is the continual *striving* for self-improvement with regards to conforming to socially sanctioned ideals of femininity and sexuality. I argue that what my interlocutors expressed was a gynoptic surveillance of work on the self not towards feminine norms of appearance, dress, and the like, but, rather, to achieve the friendship networks deemed “successful.” Friendship this way provided perhaps the most important form of social capital among these women.

My interlocutors morally justified the monitoring of friends’ behavior on social media as a way of keeping themselves and others safe. For example, a student would choose not to see a friend in person if they saw the friend had recently been to bars. However, they simultaneously used this surveillance to construct a web of judgement, resentment, and jealousy within friendships. These forms of surveillance also brought students with similar Covid safety practices even closer. Frequently, students described a combination of judgement of friends’ behavior they deemed dangerous and selfish and jealousy that these friends were able to continue going out and seeing a wide network of friends while they themselves sacrificed the social interaction they craved. For this reason, fears of missing out (fomo) intensified for some students over the past year as their own networks shrank, their social calendars became more sparse, and they watched the social practices of their friends remain at pre-Covid levels.

Fear of missing out and experiences of depression and anxiety have previously been shown to be highly correlated with social media usage (Franchina; Keles et al.). It is not surprising, then, that monitoring of friends’ behavior on social media was often described by students who were less content with the quality of their friendships or who had vastly shrunk their social activities in order to be as Covid safe as possible. By contrast, students who described deep satisfaction with their friend groups or who were still engaging in in-person gatherings frequently with wide friend groups brought up social media less often and seemed less preoccupied by the social activities of other friends in their network. It was not as common for students satisfied with their friendship networks to directly compare their friendships to those of others and in this way, they portrayed fewer symptoms of fomo. For example, Bobbi, a White Jewish sophomore at the southeastern university who is from a northeastern city described seeing several different friend groups and going to larger group events than many other interview subjects. For her, these social events were what buoyed her and they were necessary for her mental health. Bobbi has a spunky personality and in a frank manner she described how she weighed the costs and benefits of going to larger social events in the following way, “I’d hang out with 15 people. I’d do that. And I’d go to these like smaller house parties and there’d be like 30 people, and I’d be like ‘ahh its fine.’ And I’d get tested every week my own will to make sure I wasn’t just going around giving people Covid … and I’m just desperate for people to host house parties. And I know they’re going to be bigger than last semester, but I’m just going to test that out … I feel like I’m being put in a corner because I do also need to be social but I also really don’t want to get Covid and I don’t want to be irresponsible to the greater good of things, so I’ll do things where it stays in the [university] bubble” [62:01]. In contrast to Chloe, Bobbi did not bring up social media. Further, in discussing her friendship networks, she appeared much more satisfied than Chloe was with the breadth of people she had to interact with and the depth of these relationships. Social media thus appeared to further existing insecurities about one’s friendship network.

Hand in hand within women’s descriptions of the images of friendship they viewed on social media was an idealized notion of friendship towards which they strived. One woman described seeing friends socializing with one another on Instagram much more than she was. She subsequently castigated herself for not socializing to the same extent as these friends were, and she simultaneously wondered, if she had friends that she had more in common with, if she too would be able to mirror these constantly interacting and happy looking faces on the screen in front of her. As I demonstrate below, in interviews such as these, the neoliberal aspirational ideology of continual work on the self to reach a socially sanctioned ideal, in this case one of deeply satisfying and affirming friendships and wide friendship networks, manifests within women’s understandings of and contentment with themselves.

**Implied Self-Comparison in Girl-friendship**

Maree Martinussen draws on Lauren Berlant’s work to describe how the female friendships she observed in Aukland, occurring in sick days taken to eat pie with friends or watching television with friends all night, indicate moments of relief in which “women, temporarily, do “not have to push so hard in order to have ‘a life’.” (Berlant, 2013, p. 285; Martinussen, 2020, p.18). While one might have suspected that Covid would provide individuals with an opportunity of relief from expectations of high levels of sociality and image management, what I observed in my interviews was that for some female students, it did just the opposite. Specifically, in vastly reducing their in-person networks and highlighting either divergent social distancing practices or differing communication styles, Covid exposed areas in which values and practices dramatically varied within friendships that had previously been less obvious. Furthermore, as some women compared their disappointing friendships to the social media pictures of endless social gatherings that their less Covid-cautious friends were engaging in, some women were left feeling even more left out and isolated.

My Zoom conversation with Chloe, an undergraduate interview participant, about her social experience during Covid crystalizes this theme of increased self-comparison during Covid and its subsequent implications. She wore a light blue t-shirt, no make-up, and was relatively soft-spoken and reserved. She often glanced around her room as she took time between her thoughts, choosing carefully how to express what she was thinking in response to my questions. Chloe was a sophomore. She was White and had grown up in various East Asian countries due to her parents’ work. Several aspects of our conversation touched on this theme of comparing one’s own social practices to those of other friends, including the following line:

“I’ve felt a lot of social pressure, oddly, during Covid, because everyone down here in [university town] is on different playing fields. Like some people are going to bars, some people are going to frat parties, some people are just seeing their friends, and I think that has been a huge source of stress for me especially because I felt so unsettled last semester … And I have done a lot of comparison of like what I’m doing compared to other people. And not even, like, a safety, not even from like from a safety perspective, more just ‘oh these people are like interacting with people more than I am and like what does that say about me?’ And I think that mindset has been pretty toxic and has definitely gotten worse sinceCovid started … so I guess fomo, like fear of missing out, has just gotten exponentially worse since Covid happened” [31:28].

Chloe here reflects a feeling of inadequacy in her social practices as compared to the extent of socializing she hears about and sees on social media. This insecurity about her social practices pervades her perception of herself. She wonders why she is not socializing to the extent and in the ways that she sees others in her network are. Latent within this self-reflection is the sense that there is a level of socializing that is more than she currently engages in and to which she should aspire. Further, Chloe cannot help but see her lower level of socializing as indicative of a lacking in her own personality and character. As noted, Winch (2013) described a gynopticon of peer surveillance in which, “under the girlfriend gaze, what is rewarded and acclaimed is striving for perfection […] evidenc[ing] the success and necessity of the neoliberal work ethic.” Chloe’s experiences mirror Winch’s description. For Chloe, female friendship and, more specifically, female friendship as negotiated on social media, is both a reward for and a promoter of an ideal self that women are always in the process of striving towards.

Based on interviews such as Chloe’s, the aspirational mindset fostered within a community of girl-friendship as mediated by social media fuels insecurity with the current self and her social relationships. Chloe described how she was somewhat unsatisfied with an existing, small but close friend group that she interacted with in person on a regular basis. She described wondering, had Covid not happened, if she would have been able to find friends she had more in common with. She recalled being involved in a choir in high school and how she wished she had friends now who were interested in similar activities. The friendship self-comparisons Chloe engaged in on social media were therefore heightened by her existing insecurities and dissatisfactions with her friend group. When I asked whether she would consider deleting the social media apps to reduce her feelings of being left out, she said that deleting them would make her feel even more “out of the loop.” Social media in and of itself thus created a paradoxical loop of seeking inclusion and experiencing exclusion.

Chloe’s sparser social calendar made her feel that she had not worked hard enough to find the right friends. She saw her lack of having the r kinds of intimate, supporting, fulfilling, and wide-spanning friendship networks she desired as reflective of her own self-worth, illustrating the internalized gendered expectation for the crafting of social relationships as discussed by Rosalind Gill who draws on Arlie Hochschild’s book *The Managed Heart*. In her study of female online engagement, Gill describes how women in the West have been called on, “affectively and psychically to lean into a globalized, neoliberal capitalism in ever more intimate, personal ways … which may take the form of performance of confidence, of pleasing yet resilient femininity” in social media, blog forums, and the online sphere (2018; 1983). What Gill calls the modern feminine neoliberal ethic involves working to develop oneself in increasingly more intimate domains such as personal relationships and personal attributes. Chloe’s self-reflection exemplifies this ethic, as she sees the development of her friendships and her efforts to attract the “right” kinds of friendships as essential forms of work on the self that, in turn, illustrate her own value in the world.

In conversations with more soft-spoken, introverted, and socially anxious female students like Chloe, I observed an internalized sense of an imperative to engage in affective labor to improve herself by attracting a friend group that was the “right fit” for her. In Chloe’s case, this entailed considerations of working to find friends that she had more in common with and expanding beyond her existing friend group of convenience to find people who, sharing more in common with her, would likely also actively seek out her company more frequently. This heightened desire to have her as a friend would, in turn, remedy her existing feelings of “missing out.” Chloe described joining a club earlier this past year that seeks to provide psychological support to students in an attempt to broaden her network. While she enjoyed joining the club and getting to know its members, she said that she was still not included in the in-person gatherings that some of the club members organized. It should be noted that, while Chloe’s feelings of inadequacy in her social life clearly had a negative impact on her emotional state, they might in the long term have positive implications. In working to find friends that she has more in common with, she will likely feel more affirmed and happier in these relationships. Internalization of aspirational neoliberal values within these women’s friendships thus potentially had both negative and positive implications. As I demonstrate in the next section, conversations about social life during Covid highlighted the increased salience of practices of inclusion and exclusion as health safety concerns forced students to think more critically about who they should prioritize and why.

Returning to the role that awareness of other individuals’ social practices plays in individuals interpreting their own behavior and changing their perceptions of others, it is important to note that this reaction was not simply about different social distancing practices but also more broadly reflective of individuals’ own fear of missing out and jealousy that their friends were continuing to socialize on the broad scale they so missed. Lily described this dynamic with her roommate,

“Clarissa has gone totally off social media and she was like I just don’t want to see people doing the shit I want to do but can’t because I care about people, and it makes me mad and sad because the people who are posting on social media are the people who don’t give a crap. *I hate feeling sad about wanting to be a good person.*”

Clarissa’s frustration arises in part from her jealousy and likely her own fear of missing out when confronted with images of the fun looking, large social gatherings of her broader friend group. This touches on the findings of Kanai (2017) that girl-friendship becomes complicated when one of the friends is perceived as having it all. In this case, having it all implies casting aside social distancing protocols and continuing with social life as normal, engaging in large gatherings and, as a result, feeling socially connected, satisfied, and psychologically buoyed. When vast divergences emerged in friends’ locations along this ladder of self-fulfillment (i.e. one friend appeared socially very satisfied because they were not adhering to social distancing measures while the other friend was lonely and isolated because they are strictly following social distancing measures), friendships were often tested. In Lily’s case, for example, the expectations in some of her friendship changed considerably. In this way, the moral dividing lines drawn during Covid were imbued with both personal senses of self-sacrifice by complying with strict social distancing measures and resentment and jealously of other friends’ continued lax social behavior. This finding is reminiscent of Winch’s conclusions about the neoliberal expectations for engaging in a common and shared struggle for self-betterment within girl-friendship (2015). Winch argues that within girl-friendship culture, women must be striving to embody the neoliberal values of self-improvement together. As a result, women resent others who are seen as already “having it all.” A failure to share this struggle, because some friends were seen as unfairly happy and socially supported due to not sacrificing their social lives during Covid, took a toll on intimacy in female friendship.

**The Affective Labor of Maintaining Flexibility and Resilience in Friendship**

 Friendship in Covid times, like so many other aspects of the pandemic, has introduced new vocabularies as well as social and psychological challenges. Over the past year, students discussed how they determined which “pod” they wished to be a part of. Social gatherings now needed to be more limited in size than they ever were previously. As such, conversations about who should be prioritized on the invite list that in the past would never have been necessary were now commonplace. Exclusion is, of course, a common and painful element of human social life (Allman, 2013; Hoff, 2018). However, its prevalence of and the public health sanctioning of its necessity gives a whole new meaning to its prevalence in the lives of college students today. As such, the social stakes for being an enjoyable or valuable friend, worth the risk and effort of seeing, have climbed to unprecedented heights overnight. This became clear in conversations with Lily:

“Just spending so much time in my apartment, I was really afraid my room mates would get sick of me, and they would have every right to, they weren’t supposed to have to spend this much time with me. All of that has just been really, really, really difficult. And I lost it. And then I got a dog. This semester has been better. But you know, still, I experience that anxiety” [15:14].

Lily had gone home for a few weeks during the fall semester because the reduction in her social activities due to Covid had made her anxiety much worse. A part of this arose from her fear that she would lose friends due to her higher degree of Covid safety practices, which prevented her from seeing most of her friends in person. This fear was especially hard because, pre-Covid, she had been very focused on maintaining friendships, even when they were not fulfilling. Lily’s increased anxiety about whether she was enjoyable and entertaining enough to be around now that Covid had increased the amount of time she spent with her room mates, (a much-reduced friend group) was profound. Lily’s concern about her roommates getting sick of her implies a nervousness about whether she is performing the role, to draw on Goffman, of enjoyable friend and roommate, well enough now that the circumstances (or the stage settings, so to speak) have changed so much. Goffman describes human interaction as consisting of a main stage, a behind the stage, and an audience.

“There will be a back-stage with its fixed props. There will be a team of persons whose activity on stage in conjunction with available props, will constitute the scene from which the performed character’s self will emerge, and another team, the audience, whose interpretive activity will be necessary for this emergence. The self is a product of all of these arrangements, and in all of its parts bears the marks of this genesis” (1959:253*).*

What Lily describes is a concern about how spending so much time with her roommates might wear down her on-stage performance and force her to let them into the “backstage sphere,” where it would be okay for her to not be entertaining or enjoyable to be around all the time. Lily is afraid that showing this unregulated side of herself would make her room-mates like her less. When I asked if Lily had a support system beyond her roommates, (in other words, a “behind-stage” network) she replied that her family was judgmental of the few times she chose to have dinner out with friends and her former closest friend was behaving very unsafely during Covid. As such, they rarely interacted anymore. In this way, her roommates were the closest Lily came to having a support system, even though they were relegated to the onstage sphere. Echoing the findings of Gill and Kanai, Lily felt she needed to maintain a pleasant and enjoyable “on-stage” demeanor with everyone she interacted with. The psychological toll of putting in the affective labor to maintain an on-stage presence all the time had clearly been profound for Lily, expressed in her repeated descriptions of immense social anxiety (Hochschild, 1983).

In addition to employing considerable degrees of affective labor to continually maintain an on-stage presence with her friends, Lily also made concerted attempts to overcome her judgements of less Covid conscious friends to instead be accepting, easygoing, flexible, and understanding of different choices. Lily described her efforts to better herself by fostering positive feelings towards others:

“I spent a good amount of the fall and the beginning of this semester with too much resentment, and like for my own health, I needed to let that go, because I couldn’t be so mad and so disappointed and so ashamed … it was just too much negativity .. I don’t want to see these people and have resentment toward them. We made different choices, I was very disappointed, probably deep down I’m still like ‘you’re not the person I thought you were,’ but, it’s ok … like I don’t know their story… they might have already had Covid” [33:14].

In this way, Lily’s struggle to be flexible, understanding, easy-going, and resilient in her friendships by accepting her friends in spite of their different Covid choices. The inculcation of neoliberal values of self-mastery, self-improvement, flexibility and resilience is thus crucial for maintaining friends.

**On-stage Friends as Emblems of Neoliberal Image Management and Self-Work**

The importance of having both on-stage and off-stage friendships that was brought into sharp relief during Covid is also reflected in other interviews. In my first interview with Sabrina, she described an anxiety similar to Lily’s about letting friends into her backstage area. Sabrina is a White, highly articulate, vivacious junior from about an hour away from the southern university she attended. Involved in one of the comedy clubs on campus and a Women’s Studies major, she enjoyed interweaving comedic as well as theoretical references throughout our conversation. She described her anxieties about letting friends into her backstage, non-performative, and more vulnerable side in the following way,

“Um, I’ve been referring to this stage of my life as my fleabag moment, which is a show in which a woman is experiencing her rock bottom through a lot of grief. And, so, I tell my friends all the time like “I’m not always so sad; I’m not always such a complainer; I’m not always so insecure… blah blah blah blah.” Like really the people that I’m seeing now are seeing me at my rawest and - and at my worst moments, and that is frankly embarrassing and I don’t love it … it is kind of nice to be able to have interactions where, you know, people don’t know these deep contours of your interiority, and people don’t know- where people just have in their head in terms of the bullet points about me like, “oh you know that’s Sabrina you know she’s a junior, she’s WGS, very political, she’s in [sorority], like maybe she’s into girls I don’t really know.. she’s pretty funny can be kind of an asshole like good time, like can handle her weed” [16:54].

What Sabrina is describing here is a loss of the kind of image management Goffman describes individuals performing in larger groups of people with whom they are more distantly acquainted. Individuals ideally have more control over the kind of self they present to audiences. Sabrina describes losing of the stage-audience relationship and a reduction of all interaction to “behind the stage,” with her close small group of friends who have seen her loose her composure or the performative personality she shows to her wider network. She feels embarrassed and somewhat disempowered when these close friends see her emotionally fall apart, “crying in the bathtub,” as she euphemistically says, on a regular basis. She craves interaction with more peripheral friends who don’t know “the deepest contours” of her interiority. In this way, she reflects Goffman’s argument that the backstage, the main stage, and the audience level interactions are all necessary for human sociality.

However, in a follow-up interview, Sabrina conveyed an importantly distinct message. In the time between her first and second interviews, she and her entire friend group had been fully vaccinated, and Sabrina now felt comfortable interacting in-person with her wider group of friends. However, rather than feeling relief at being able to see this larger network, she felt strained in her performative interactions:

“Last time I think we discussed it being fun to put on, not a façade but to specifically be- to be a specific version of yourself kind of in the general public social sphere um and right now I feel like I don’t have any energy to like – either I feel like that particular version of myself had receded deep, deep, inside and it’s gonna take some energy to like mine her out. Or, I don’t have the energy to be covering up the like rawer or more depressed or more negative parts of myself. And, so, I find myself really appreciating and wanting to continue to spend time with the people in my pod. And rather than being sick of them, I’m like, “Oh my God, they have seen me at my most nihilistic, boring, devastated, whatever, and they still wanna spend time with me.” So, if I’m having a shitty day, I don’t have to put on a face and act like I’m not having a shitty day. I can just say ‘I’m having a shitty day, do you want to watch the next season of *Are you the one*?’ And it’s fine” [11:27].

Here, Sabrina described how Covid had made her even more appreciative of her close friends because she did not need to “put on a face” with them the way she felt she needed to with more peripheral friends. Drawing on Goffman’s ideas of on-stage image management with an audience, Sabrina felt relief that she could let her close friends “backstage” and show them her rawer or less entertaining side when she did not have the desire to perform. Importantly, Sabrina now expressed a deep satisfaction and appreciation for her close friendships. Unlike Chloe, Sabrina did not emphasize feeling inadequacy in her friendships and social practices compared to what she saw others were doing via social media. Rather, like some of the friendships that Martinusssen and Wetherell observed that push against neoliberal expectations, she felt relief that she could show a lazy, sad, and sometimes even unpleasant side of herself and still be accepted and appreciated by her friends (2020). Further, ability to embody this offstage side of herself and still be appreciated made Sabrina more confident and content with her friendships. This strikes a sharp contrast to the feelings described by Lily and Chloe, whose anxieties and dissatisfactions stemmed from the inadequacies that neoliberal sociality produces. They strived to live up to utopic expectations of limitless friendships and fun.

What led to these divergent friendship experiences, and what are their wider implications? Sabrina’s core in-person friend group during the past year were primarily from her high school years. As such, she had known them for a long time and had established a deep sense of trust and understanding with them. In addition to this group, Sabrina had many slightly more peripheral friend groups that she occasionally interacted with in-person, a common tendency for self-described and evidently extroverted interlocutors such as herself. By contrast, Chloe was both a year younger than Sabrina and had grown up in another country. As a result, her main in-person friend group from college was much more recently established and tenuous. There were moments in our interview when Chloe wondered if she would have made friends she had more in common with if Covid had not happened. All of her in-person friends were made in her freshman year of college, and, as with many students, she somewhat felt she had outgrown these initial college friends. However, due to the difficulty of making new friends organically during Covid, she felt she hadn’t had the opportunity to find a new network. She was reticent to try to make new friends online via Zoom classes or club meetings because she said it felt too formal. As a result, Chloe was relegated to friendships that felt less satisfying, which likely exacerbated her self-comparisons and feelings of social inadequacy in relation to friends who she saw socializing on social media. In reducing students’ in-person networks, the pandemic laid even more bare the true nature of these friendships, making Sabrina even more grateful for her “ride or die” friends, as she called them, and Chloe more aware of the ways in which her friendships were lacking compared to those she perceived around her.

Importantly, within Sabrina’s descriptions of her close friendships in her pod is an implication that these friendships resist the neoliberal ethic in that they do not require her to “put up a façade.” Instead, they affirm Sabrina even when she shows uglier and less entertaining sides of herself. These friends still want to spend time with her even if it is only to lazily watch season after season of reality TV. The friendships provide Sabrina with a break from her pre-Covid routine of 7am-11pm image management in front of her myriad peripheral friend groups. However, as Sabrina describes the development of these friendships, it becomes clear that it took intentional effort to be flexible and resilient enough in her friendships to gradually inculcate this behind-stage intimacy. In a sense, then, the reward for succumbing to the neoliberal ethic of working on the self and one’s friendships to develop close friends who will accept a student in her “behind-stage” sphere is an opportunity to finally escape this very neoliberal drive to work on the self and to instead let oneself show less appealing personality traits and engage in unproductive activities, all the while with the company and acceptance of one’s close friends.

**Neoliberal Flexibility: How to not Expect too much from your Friends**

On-stage performances require specific dimensions of the neoliberal imperative for flexibility within the realm of friendship. Interview subjects described the ways in which they expected their friends to be engaged and attentive, but not too attentive so as to overwhelm them. There were certain expectations of solidary, enjoyment and pleasure in one another’s company, as well as fun and emotional support within friendships. But in students’ descriptions of these expectations, they were careful to describe the fine line walked between desiring these things from their friends but also not expecting more than the friend was prepared to offer. One interview subject, Natalia, described how she tried to meet friends where they were in terms of communication styles, citing many friends she considered very close but whom she only spoke with every six months or so because they were so bad at keeping Facetime dates. Natalia is a White master’s student at the midwestern university, and she is a few years older than the undergraduate students I interviewed. She had grown up in several different European countries and described frequent moves as spurring her ability to easily make and maintain friendships, even when she no longer lived in the same places as her friends. Natalia described employing a combination of flexibility and persistence in order to maintain closeness with her friends from high school or her undergraduate years,

“It’s so much easier to love your friends and have happy relationships if you don’t expect certain things that you know won’t happen. That doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t work really hard to maintain relationships. The key thing is you need to know what you can expect from them and also need to work hard to maintain them. Maintenance is really important. If you don’t check in regularly- sometimes for me it’s every 6 months- it sounds weird to say you need to not have expectations but do the work but both are important. For me, that has been the most rewarding, easiest way to keep friends for a very long time even if you never see them in person.” [46:20]

Implicit in Natalia’s description of how she maintains contentedness in her friendships is the internalization of flexibility and resilience when plans fall through by employing modes of affective labor, controlling her emotions so as not to feel disappointed. She is nimble in working around and embracing the different communication styles of her friends, and she maintains a constructive attitude in framing these experiences of self-adjustment within friendships when talking to me. Her agentic framing of herself as someone who has learned how to extract the most positive aspects of these friendships while refusing to engage in feelings of frustration or disappointment exemplifies her engagement in the neoliberal “mood economy” that Jennifer Silva observes in her examinations of coming-of-age culture (2013). In Silva’s analysis, this “mood economy,” or mastery over one’s own psychology by minimizing negative feelings, is the key to success, implicitly casting individuals rather than structural inequities as the greatest obstacle to their own accomplishments. Similarly, Natalia constructs herself as singularly responsible for managing her own emotional responses to her friends’ behavior so as to focus on the positive and avoid any negative emotional reactions.

These embodied attributes of resilience, flexibility, the ability to control one’s emotions to make them conducive and productive for the social relationship, and the framing of these relationships as modes of self-growth (learning to adapt to another’s mode of friendship) and self-fulfillment (learning to appreciate what the friend can offer), all echo the internalization of neoliberal values through modes of affective laboring in girl-friendship described by Gill and Kanai (Gill &Kanai, 2018; Hochschild, 1979).

Importantly, themes of psychological self-management only appeared in my interviews with female students. This echoes the findings of previous scholars examining recent self-help and relationship advice books and media texts that meet a specific demand for *women* to erase any vulnerability or neediness (Favaro; Wood; Gill). As Gill writes, “If confidence is the new sexy, then insecurity is undoubtedly the new ugly – at least when it presents in women” (619). Natalia refuses to allow the flakiness of her friends regarding Facetime dates to make her feel insecure in her friendships, preferring instead to accept but not dwell on these differences in communication practices. In this sense, Natalia’s self-mastery over her responses to her friendships evidences a permeation of neoliberal values into the deep psychological compass of the feminine understanding of how the self *should* be.

My conversation with Gabe, a White freshman at the southeastern university, illustrates this gendered difference I observed throughout my interviews. Gabe is an introverted, sincere, and down to earth student from a working-class family in a small northeastern town. He described how, “I don’t think I need- everyone needs social interaction but I don’t think I need that much of it so for me I don’t think my life has changed that much since Covid, which may sound kinda depressing. But, even during lockdown, me and my four friends- we hung out as much as we could, and that was fine, because I don’t need to hang out with people I don’t have that much of a connection with.” Gabe also described how he did not have social media and, as a result, he was aware he sometimes missed out on social events. However, he did not appear to be very concerned about this potential for not finding out about or being invited to events. As with other male students I interviewed, Gabe described himself as content with the friendships he had and not feeling a particular imperative to do anything to increase the breadth or quality of his friendships.

 By contrast, freshman and sophomore female interview subjects spent a large portion of their interviews examining the intricacies of their friendships. Further, they were less capable of the self-management older students like Natalia to minimize disappointments in friendships. Different communication styles that sometimes resulted in a year passing without a real-time conversation created a strain on the friendship. This was especially the case for close friendships, in which the expectations were higher. In describing this experience with her best friend, Bobbi, bounced between acceptance of their differences and expressing hurt and frustration that her friend didn’t try to accommodate Bobbi’s desire for greater contact at all throughout the year. She had an outgoing and confident personality and she opened up very thoughtfully about the challenges of having different communication styles from her closest friend in university,

“So ah- basically I figured this out over winter break but my closest friend, from Jamaica, is really bad at keeping in touch over the phone. At first I took it personally like you need to take time to keep in touch with me and she was like no you need to trust our relationship can last time apart. And I was like oof- ok. […] With Zoey- that’s my Jamaican friend- that was really frustrating over the summer I felt really upset with her because we’d plan to FT then she’d be busy. I’d be like ok now it’s like we haven’t talked in a year because you won’t make a little time that’s too much.”

Here, Bobbi describes her close friend failing to meet her expectations of communication in her friendships when they are physically separated in different countries due to Covid-19. By contrast, Bobbi described becoming very close to a new friend in large part because she was so communicative virtually. Bobbi was not able to simply accept and adapt to the different communication practices of her friend, Zoey, in the way that Natalia could. Rather, Bobby felt hurt and it took a toll on the closeness of her friendship with Zoey. Rather than placing an ultimatum on Zoey to be more communicative, which would likely not have changed Zoey’s behavior and perhaps even strained the relationship more, Bobbi instead found a replacement for the closeness she had with Zoey with her new friend, Abby. Abby would Facetime Bobbi almost every day to update her on her life and ask Bobbi about what she was doing. In this way, Abby was willing to put in the effort that Zoey was not, and she thus usurped the closeness that had existed between Bobbi and Zoey. When friends did not put in the same degree of affective labor to meet one another in the middle in terms of communication practices, it could create fractures in the friendship. In this way, women students consciously inculcated personality traits of flexibility, acceptance, and resilience so as to avoid putting too much strain on their friendships, which in turn would risk the dissolution of the relationship itself.

**Transforming Suffering into Narratives of Resilience**

The forms of emotional labor female students engaged in, embodying particular neoliberal values, were also evident in their framing of the difficulties they experienced during Covid as productive experiences. Lily described how,

“I spend a lot of time worrying about losing friends and things. That’s why I try to hold onto things as long as I can. Freshman year first semester was hard because I was so terrified of having to eat breakfast, lunch, or dinner alone. Everything was scheduled – coffee with this person, breakfast alone […] I spend so much time worrying people are like you’ve abandoned me […] One thing I’ve worked on in therapy is learning how to be alone and be ok with that. Even though Covid is hard it might be a blessing in disguise because I have to spend a night alone. Everyone is partying because it’s a Friday night. Plans fall through at the last minute because the friend might have been exposed. That’s happened a lot. I have to *force* myself to be okay with that. I got an emotional support dog over winter break, which has helped.”

Here, Lily’s constructive framing of the disappointments and difficulties she had during Covid reflects a trend I noticed throughout my interviews. As many female interlocutors described intense emotional and social struggles, they often sought to frame them in a balanced and constructive light. A clear example of this is Lily’s description of the frequent occurrence of friends cancelling on her at the last minute after possibly being exposed to Covid as a useful experience because it forcedher to get comfortable with being alone, something she had struggled with for a long time before Covid. However, her subsequent phrasing of her coping or growth through these experiences of disappointment in the line “I have to *force myself* to be okay with that” expresses the immense emotional labor that goes into her attempts at resilience and self-growth through the painful experience of embracing moments of disappointment and social isolation. In hoping to appear strong, resilient, and confident, Lily is employing considerable work to embody what Gill, drawing on Foucault, terms “confidence as a technology of self.”

Gill describes how popular discourses about strategies to gain confidence invite women to work on their inner psychological states to transform themselves into the neoliberal ideal (2016). In so doing, these strategies blame individual women for their social or psychological struggles while shaming dependence, vulnerability, or failure among women (340). Importantly, this ideological perspective casts women’s suffering as something that can be surmounted with adequate internalization of neoliberal values of flexibility, self-regulation, and self-improvement. As such, a woman has only herself to blame if she cannot achieve these ideals. Lily’s attempts to cast herself as growing through painful experiences illustrates her effort to embody neoliberal ideals by refusing to cast herself as abjectly falling into a spiral of unproductive and undesirable disappointment and loneliness.

 This internalizations of resilience and self-improvement when discussing their psychological struggles during Covid also appeared in conversations with Sabrina. Sabrina frequently tried to make light of her psychological difficulties during Covid by referencing and even enacting lines from various comedic skits and media, such as *Fleabag*,as analogous to her own struggles. These tendencies of Lily and Sabrina to frame constructively or even comedically their attempts at growth through their struggles during Covid align with Arkane Kanai’s work on meme accounts featuring female friendship that describe the ways in which, “knowledge, labor and skill are required to craft […]; a self that is aware of awkwardness, faults and disappointments but parcels them into a consumable, funny, lighthearted package; a self that seeks to please others but does not draw on their resources” (13). My interlocutors’ dogged framing of their experiences as constructive and sometimes even humorous represent neoliberal desires for continually extracting appealing modes of self-improvement, even as they experience the profound and unprecedented trials of loneliness, anxiety, and heightened insecurity that Covid has wrought.

This neoliberal valuing of resilience, self-improvement, and maintaining an upbeat temperament set certain expectations of image management for interactions with friends. Sabrina described apologizing to her friends for having an emotional or depressed mood, claiming determinedly that she was not always or normally like that. Affective labor is actively at work as my interlocutors manage their anxiety, loneliness, and social fears so that they don’t become so unwieldy that they become off-putting to the few friends they are still able to see in their pod. This reality of scarcity added pressure to friendships, especially in-person friendships, to be fun, lighthearted, and enjoyable, and simultaneously emotionally supportive and not emotionally draining, further intensifying the affective laboring entailed in many of the girl-friendships observed by Gill and Kenai. In these ways, Covid has placed exponentially higher stakes on friendship as in-person networks shrink, shedding light on the hidden affective labor that goes into maintaining female friendship that encompass neoliberal ideals of flexibility, resilience, enjoyability, and continual self-development towards an ideal of girl-friend selfhood.

**Synergies Between the Amorphous Nature of Friendship and Neoliberal Ideologies**

Sabrina described that the reason she felt so confident and satisfied with her friendships was partially because of the less encumbering nature of friendship as compared to a romantic relationship. The fact that friends were able to have many other friends to lean on for emotional support and the subsequent amorphous understanding of what one friend was obliged to provide for another appeared to be what made it so crucial to college students like Sabrina as a liberating primary source of sociality, emotional support, and levity. However, as other interview subjects illustrated, this ambiguity was also what made it all the more complicated when the stakes of Covid made the relationship more morally imbued. Without explicit norms of expectations for behavior within friendship as with a romantic relationship, many students described trying to manage and minimize their own feeling of being let down by their friends’ behavior during Covid. The stakes of neoliberal negotiations of flexibility, resilience, and work on the self thus became all the more important.

In spite of striving for flexibility, however, sometimes friends were unable to bridge the gap in their divergent expectations of friendship. This can be seen in my conversation with one interview subject, Lily, who described her surprise that Covid exposed how her friendship with Liza, whom Lily had considered one of her best friends, was clearly less of a priority to Liza than it was to Lily, saying,

“I knew Liza wasn’t being safe. So, in beginning of year, I was like, ‘I want Liza to be in our bubble even if she’s unsafe.’ I was so worried about not being able to see her. Then choice after choice, it became clear she was my priority, but I wasn’t one of hers. She knew we couldn’t see each other and would still go to parties or indoor restaurants- it became really clear you don’t put our friendship in the forefront at all. I thought we were best friends and seeing me would be important to you.”

Lily had initially attempted to be flexible and meet Liza where she was by accepting Liza’s more lax social distancing practices. However, over time, Lily felt that while she was making sacrifices to be flexible for Liza, Liza was not doing the same for Lily. Liza’s continued choices to go out to bars even if that meant she could not see Lily became interpreted by Lily as a sign that Liza didn’t prioritize their friendship to the same extent that Lily did. As such, Lily adjusted and recalibrated her own expectations for the friendship so as to minimize her disappointment. As an example of this, Lily described how they avoided talking about things they didn’t agree on in order to avoid making things even more strained in the relationship, saying, “When she tells me she’s going to the club, we brush past it because there’s no point getting into it. It’s pretty clear things aren’t the same- we don’t talk about the things we don’t agree with.”

In this way, Lily adapts by lowering her own expectations for her friendship with Liza in order to maintain the friendship on some level. For both women, managing their interactions so as to hold onto the friendship was the most optimal strategy in the long run. In a follow-up interview, Lily described her happiness at reconnecting with Liza once they were both vaccinated. This further illustrated the necessity for being able to manage switching between behind-stage closeness and on-stage remoteness over the course of female friendship. In recalibrating their expectations for the friendship, Lily and Liza’s story demonstrates how Covid further exposed the neoliberal imperative for flexibility, resiliency, and image management for ensuring the longevity of female friendship.

**Conclusion:**

In the interviews I conducted with American university students, I observed the tension the pandemic has highlighted within female friendship between the immense desire for and benefit from these forms of connection intermingled with profound anxieties about whether their friendships lived up to the highly satisfying ones they perceived around them. Some students increased their self-comparisons with the friendships they observed on social media as their in-person interactions diminished. At the same time, students described a heightened self-consciousness about being a sufficiently enjoyable friend now that they forced to spend so much more time around a reduced number. This lead to increased anxiety and image management among students surrounding their friendships. In an attempt to mitigate this, students described affectively laboring to internalize the neoliberal values of flexibility in meeting friends where they were; work on their social network in striving for an ideal of friendship involving intimacy and shared interests; making themselves desirable as a friend by improving their own forms of image management; and by casting their social anxieties and struggles of this past year in a doggedly constructive light. This inculcation of neoliberal ideals within friendship builds on previous findings of Winch, Gill, Martinussen, and Kanai among others. I perceived friendship as playing a central role in these women’s lives and having the capacity to be both a powerful resource for support and levity and a source of immense self-comparison and anxiety. It is important to notice that the echoes of neoliberal values within discussions of friendship have both positive and negative connotations: they can help spur women to seek out more fulfilling friendships, but they can also provide the sense that there is always a better friendship and a better self as a friend out there, if only one can do the psycho-social gymnastics to get there.

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