Together, apart:

Exploring American Families' Use of Video Calling Platforms

to Adapt to the New Normal of Social Distancing

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Abstract

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Framed by the Communication Theory of Resilience, this thesis examines how American families are using video calling tools for maintaining relationships with their loved ones while they make sense of the new uncertainties brought and heightened by a pandemic-ridden world. The study uses semi-structured interviews of 15 participants from various locations in the United States. It aims to shift the focus from the quantitative data-heavy perception of COVID-19 in the United States to a more humanistic approach in which qualitative accounts of the experiences of American families are highlighted. Findings reveal that video calling has become a valuable alternative to face-to-face interactions during COVID-19 to the participants because of its ability to partially replicate of face-to-to face interactions and its high convenience. Moreover, the participants have developed resilience and maintained practices on video call during COVID-19 that foster shared experiences of high personal emotional value and exhibiting thoughtful behaviors and actions.

Keywords: Communication Theory of Resilience, video calling, family, COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing.

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Dedication

This Honors thesis is dedicated to my beloved parents, Ramandeep Kaur & Rashpal Singh Dhaliwal. Thank you for being my source of inspiration, giving me strength, and continuously providing me with your wholehearted support.

Additionally, I would like to dedicate this Honors thesis to my sisters, grandparents, and all of my loved ones. Thank you for your words of advice, affirmation, and encouragement that have helped me complete this study.

Introduction

Relationship maintenance is a fundamental need for all people. Maintaining a relationship with someone that one considers family provides a particular avenue for sharing the exciting news that comes in life as well as sharing comfort in situations of high uncertainty. Interpersonal communication creates the primary condition for most of this relationship maintenance in families (Kneidinger-Müller, 2018). The global public health crisis since the 2020 March has, however, caused a significant stress on maintaining family relations between the members of any family who live far apart, especially with the loss of freedom of movement in response to quarantine and lock down measures (The COVID-19 Pandemic: A Family Affair, 2020; The Chicago School, 2020). This has also resulted in a shift to video calls and other computer-mediated communication in a way that has not been observed before.

With the sudden spread of the COVID-19 virus and subsequent appearances of its variants, people worldwide have been facing more uncertainty while they are isolating and quarantining in their homes and places of care such as nursing homes, hospitals, and so on. While COVID-19, is dangerous to all, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, older adults and people who have suffered severe underlying medical conditions and are at higher risk for developing more severe complications from the COVID-19 illness (CDC, 2020). Additionally, what is even more alarming is that people who become infected can often be carrying the virus and spreading it to others for up to 2 weeks before they start to show symptoms. Therefore, as CDC suggests, the best way to prevent infection is by participating in social distancing. However, this solution brings its own stress on interpersonal communication between family members, leading them to find alternative ways to communicate. This study aims to delve deeper into this aspect from the onset of the pandemic till the present.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Family-Center Communication

This study uses family as the primary context and situation for linkages of relationships that transcend the digital world. Family relationships are usually formed offline before gaining an online presence. As Silva (2018) suggests families usually have something to do with marriage, partnership, parenthood or kinship, be these formally or informally recognized (Silva, 2018, p. 273). This may include families of origin and families of orientation (Segrin, 2005, p. 6). In other words, families are not necessarily bound by biological or genetic relationship but can also include kinships that are formed out of social choices yet are considered to be extremely important to an individual's life.

Familial relationships are the building block of most people's communication with others. For those who are born and raised in a conventional family, we communicate first with parents or parental figures. As we grow, this communication extends typically to our siblings, grandparents, and other relatives. These familial relationships are often the primary source of intergenerational communication. Moreover, "families engage in a variety of rituals that demonstrate symbolic importance and shared beliefs, attitudes, and values. Three main types of relationship rituals are patterned family interactions, family traditions, and family celebrations" (Wolin, 1984, p. 401). These three rituals are the basis of the interpersonal communication that occurs between family members as they are passed on from member to member. Occasions such as birthdays, weddings, and funerals, are examples of rituals where one would show support to their family members. However, it is important to note that these are also examples of events that have had to be postponed or altered due to the pandemic. Noteworthy that families where the members are separated, estranged, or in orphan conditions may have different dynamics of

interaction, which is beyond the scope of this study but an important discussion (see, Scharp & Thomas, 2018; Scharp, & McLaren, 2018).

The theory of Resilience

Despite familial rituals facing uncertainties now more than ever, it is important to remember how humans have continuously persevered throughout difficult times in history. Intimate relationships such as familial ties and kinship have long been identified as a crucial part of developing resilience and a turning place when one is in need of support (Zimmerman et al., 2013). Maintenance of relationships on a daily basis protects one from jeopardizing his or her personal and relational health in moments of stress (Afifi et al., 2016). Relationship maintenance is based in demonstrating support by creating shared emotional experiences and exhibiting thoughtful behaviors and actions (Afifi et al., 2016).

For instance, going on a trip with a loved one, purchasing them a gift, displaying physical affection, engaging in fun activities, having intimate conversations, making coffee for that person, giving compliments, expressing gratitude, and doing things that show effort and make the other person feel appreciated are all examples of putting in the labor of maintain a relationship. Additionally, while relationship maintenance behavior needs both receiving others' investments and investing in one's relationships, receiving is what often produces stronger effects in one's perception toward a relationship.

In her Communication Theory of Resilience, Buzzanell (2020) stated that, "it is not time but human resilience that enables us to adjust and change—not by forgetting, denying, or coping, but by legitimizing our feelings and learning to live with our losses" (p. 98). Because the pandemic has restricted physical gatherings, most of this emotional processing has occurred over video calls and yet the resilience-building has not stopped.

This paper uses the Communication Theory of Resilience as a framework. Buzzanell (2018) describes the theory as situated in human interaction and constituted through communication which enhances one's ability to create new normalities. She notes:

> resilience continues to grow over the course of our lives as we encounter and make sense of new circumstances and relationships. Moreover, its processes draw upon interpersonal, family, and interorganizational connections, posing a multilayered communication system of adaption and transformation using face-to-face and mediated communication. (p. 98)

In order for resilience to develop, people have to face triggers, such as uncertainty, first. Scharp and colleagues (2020), for example, examine how individuals who face uncertainties develop resilience. Specifically, the study found that migrants who dealt with physical distance as a main cause of stress used communicative resilience processes such creating a new normal and maintaining communication networks to help their resilience process. Scharp and colleagues shift the focus from quantitative perception of migrants to a more humanistic approach in which qualitative accounts of migration experience are shared while using the Communication Theory of Resilience as a frame.

In another project, Sharp, Cooper *et al.* (2020) examine how uncertainties are inherent when moving to a new role or stage of life and therefore largely manifest in undergraduate student parents' ability to successfully fulfill the roles of student and parent. They find that having both a student and parent identity not only intensified some uncertainties but also created completely new ones. While the situation of COVID-19 is distinct from the situation of dual identities, this study provides valuable insight that emphasizes the importance of examining the use of communication theory of resilience in terms of family.

Computer-mediated Communication

Computer-mediated communication has become increasingly omnipresent since the start of the 1990s. With the growth of technologies, communication from a distance has become instant as well as diverse. Maintaining interpersonal relational maintenance in computer-mediated communication (CMC) involves understanding and exploring "underlying processes of human interaction in newer channels" (Mason & Carr, 2021). Video calling apps and other newer forms of interactive computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools connect people across distance, often when they would otherwise be unable to meet face to face (FtF) (Zolyomi et al., 2019). Social media, email, video calling, or simply even voice calls, enable various types of communications to happen simultaneously. Each platform has its own affordances, in which it enables distinct uses and experiences by its unique function and design, and therefore each platform carries with its own set of unique social implications (McEwan & Fox, 2017).

For people living nearby, text messages are used more frequently for the organization of face-to-face meetings. On the other hand, for people living farther apart, the use of CMC is common for exchanging meaningful conversation and to develop normalcy. Therefore, researchers have argued that apart or together, perpetual mobile connection transcends the differences of physical presence and absence (Kneidinger-Müller, 2018). Currently, very little research has been completed on video calling on mobile phones (and tablets, laptops and PCs) specifically. This may be a result of video calling being quite similar to the more typical way of communicating face-to-face, except over distance (Licoppe et al., 2019). Brown and Greenfield (2021) found that since the stay-at-home order video calling has increased among family and friends, and it led to their higher levels of well-being. In this line, in this study I further explore the differences and impacts of video calling particularly among the family members.

Family, Resilience, Video Calling, and the COVID-19

Due to the various uncertainties surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic and in adherence to social distancing guidelines put in place by the government, many people made a shift to computer-mediated communication via their smartphones or laptops. Though this phenomenon occurred across relationship types, it was especially true for communication with those who they consider family in order to develop and maintain resilience (Chatterjee & Yatnatti, 2020). Mobile applications such as Apple's FaceTime or Zoom replaced physical areas where family members could meet and discuss their losses and uncertainties while adhering to social distancing guidelines. Whereas separate studies have examined the concepts of family communication, computer-mediated communication, or the uncertainties revolving around COVID-19, there is yet to be an in-depth review of the intersection of these various disciplines. Therefore, bringing me to my first research question:

RQ1: How are Americans using video calling platforms as an extension of their ability to connect with family as an alternative to face-to-face conversations during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Most sources available regarding online family communication are in regard to those of internationally fragmented families. These families send each other digital messages to exchange information about everyday experiences and to create the feeling of sharing one's life with another (Kneidinger-Müller, 2018). Specifically, these types of families have been long relying on video calling to solidify themselves not through articulating what they think when they are separated, but by letting each other recognize each other's shape, their form, their body (Licoppe et al., 2019). The well-being of a loved one can be better recognized by the subtext in their body movement and facial expression, which can be conveyed over a video-call (Licoppe et al., 2019).

Though transnational families have continued to use mobile devices to sustain relationships (Cabalquinto, 2018), this is a fairly new concept for those who live closer to their families. Instead of using mobile communication to set up a face-to-face meeting when there is uncertainty or stress in their lives, these families are just now learning about sustaining emotional proximity while being apart for an extended amount of time. Therefore, leading me to my second research question:

RQ2: What practices have American families adopted over video calling to develop and maintain group resilience during the uncertain times of a global pandemic?

Methodology

To investigate the research questions posed, I conducted a qualitative study by first distributing a preliminary survey and then conducting interviews. The study design was reviewed and approved by The University of Washington's Internal Review Board (IRB) with Exempt Status (IRB ID: STUDY00012697). I received funding from the University of Washington Department of Communication in order to compensate each participant with $20 for their time. To recruit participants for this study, first, I made research announcements via social media, email chains and then relied on snowball sampling from personal contacts. Recruitment messages included criteria information such as (a) participant's minimum age limit of 18 years old, (b) proficiency with conversational English, (c) current residency in the United States and physically located in the United States at the time of the interview, (d) physically distanced from someone they consider "family", and (e) familiarity with video calling. Participants were required to have a status of "permanent resident" of the United States. All participants were to

have had at least one video call, on any platform of their choice, with someone they consider "family" during quarantine.

This information as well as other demographics details were requested through Google Forms, an online survey platform (see, Appendix 1). Respondents are asked to specify their as biological sex, gender or sexual orientation, ethnicity, education level, or socioeconomic status. Merrigan and Huston (2020) emphasize the importance of researchers being "sensitive about the ways in which individuals identify themselves along lines of race, class, religious affiliation, veteran status, and abilities" (p. 126). Therefore, a mindful approach was taken during the crafting of this preliminary survey.

The preliminary survey also included an informed consent form (see, Appendix 2). At the beginning of the form, I protected the free choice of the potential research participants by communicating to them about any potential risks and benefits that this research can have on them. The consent form detailed (a) the title of the research, (b) purpose and background, (c) procedures, (d) risk, (e) confidentiality, (f) direct benefits, (g) alternatives, (h) costs, (i) compensation, (j) questions, (k) signatures (Merrigan & Huston, 2020).

After 19 potential participants were screened for eligibility, 15 that qualified met with me via Zoom video chat for an in-depth narrative and semi-structured interview. The study aimed to have at least 20 interviews from participants in order to better represent a larger population. However, lack of responsiveness after completing the Informed Consent form and scheduling conflicts resulted in a final number of 15 interviews. Each participant was asked to "share a story of what it is like connecting with family via video calling during a global pandemic." A narrative interview allows academic researchers to understand and theorize communication from participants' points of view (Merrigan & Huston, 2020). Next, participants were asked open-

ended, in-depth interview questions based on their narrative account. For this study, both the narrative and the semi-structured portions informed my data analysis. Interviews aimed to last roughly 20 minutes, but length turned out to be shorter or longer based on participant flexibility. I replaced names with participant IDs, based on the order of the participants were interviewed. Moreover, identifying information was removed and replaced with placeholders.

Stage and Mattson (2003) explain that ethnographic interviews, such as the ones that this research conducted, are marked by three "elemental phases" (p. 98). First, ethnographic interviews begin with the "explicit purpose" of the interview being explained by the interviewer to the interviewee (Stage & Mattson, 2003, p. 98). I explained that this interview is taking place in order to shift the quantitative data about the COVID-19 virus in the United States to the qualitative accounts of American Families during this height of this pandemic.

I also described the semi-structured nature of the interview to the participants at this point in order to encourage participants to include any details they feel are relevant. Next, I provided participants with an ethnographic explanation of the paper through a conversational strategy. Stage and Mattson (2003) suggest that when conversation is added the interviews produce a more participant-respectful project and they find it more natural (pp. 98-99). Here, I led a conversation with individuals to reflect on their experience video calling those who they consider family while staying apart from their families. Additionally, I indicated that their responses will be recorded in order to maintain accuracy in data collection. After reviewing the outline of the prepared questions, I reminded the participants that they are encouraged to explain their experiences in their own terms. Finally, the last phase of the interviews is where I employed a variety of "ethnographic questions" (Stage & Mattson, 2003, p. 98). Interview questions included:

- What does family mean to you and who does it include?

- Think through this year, out of the people you have just included in your definition of family, who have you been video calling instead of meeting in person?

- If the pandemic did not require social distancing, would some of these video calls be in person conversations instead?

- Have you shared moments of celebration or distress quarantine with your loved one over video calling?

Rahman (2020) highlights that interview questions need to be invitations that provide a narrative of the who, what, how, when, where, and why. Therefore, I used this argument for the development of my guiding questions. Additionally, it proved to be imperative for me to ask follow up questions during interviews in order to gain a holistic story from each participant. I extend answers that participants provided me through a curious, persistent, and critical attitude. For instance, I added in questions such as these whenever it was necessary:

- Could you expand on that idea?

- How did that family member respond, when you said that?

- Do you have any examples of when you did that?

Participant Demographics

Of the 15 participants, 15 (100%) are living in the United States. When reporting about the residency of family members, 15 (100%) indicated that the majority of those who they consider family lives in the United States. 15 (100%) out of the 15 participants engaged in one video calling with a family member on a platform such as Zoom, FaceTime, Skype, etc. since

entering quarantine. The majority of the participants identified as female (86.7%), and the rest identified as male (13.3%). 8 (53.3%) identified their socio-economic status as "middle", 3 (20%) responded "lower-middle", 3 (20%) and 1 participant (6.7%) preferred not to respond. 7 (46.7%) participants indicated a bachelor's degree as their highest completed schooling, 4 (26.7%) have completed high school, 3 (20%) have completed a graduate or professional degree, and 1 (6.7%) participant has completed their associates.

Analysis and Findings

I employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of thematic analysis to analyze interviewees' answers regarding RQ1 and RQ2. This method calls for first understanding the data through interviewing, transcribing, and revisiting the transcript. Next, Braun and Clarke call coding the data in terms of keywords and ideas that respond to the research questions. These codes can then be combined to create thematic patterns across interviews and data sets. Once the patterns are refined to mirror the data in a representative manner, clear examples and quotes from the data prove the prevalence of each theme.

Several significant themes emerged from the interview data. In response to the first question (RQ1) I found that the participants used video calling as an important and viable alternative to face-to-face interaction because the tools enabled safe and convenient virtual interactions, helped the participants to establish familiarity, and assisted them to take control of their exhibition of emotion. In response to the second question (Q2) several key patterns emerged around how the video calling tools played a vital role in developing resilience and maintaining ritual and cultural practices while being at safe distance during the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes being present and contributing virtually during the times of celebrations

and grief, creating shared experiences through gaming while video calling, or even increasingly participating in conversations and activities related to physical and mental health with family while on video call. This also includes increasing finding oneself participating in shared video calls with family, by both quantity and length.

Video Calling as a Valuable Alternative to Face-to-Face during COVID-19 (RQ1)

Thematic analysis of the data yielded four themes organized by two overarching supra-themes: (1) replication of face-to-to face interactions and (2) convenience in a time of disruption.

<u>Replacement of Face-to-Face Interactions</u>

Video Calling as a Safety Precaution Tool

Participants are using *video calling as a safety precaution tool* to continue having conversations and proximity to their families. For instance, Participant_1 uses FaceTime to connect with a sister that attends medical school. She shared that they both relied on video calling to practice co-presence while socially distancing from one another as her sister "was scared to visit [Participant_1] because of [her] health condition".

Multiple participants discussed how fears of spreading the disease resulted in the reliance on the presence of their loved ones through video and their mobile devices. Participant_7 recalled that for her graduation last year, "celebrating on zoom was the only option [she and her family] really had. At that point, it was better safe than sorry". This sentiment of "better safe than sorry" seemed to be shared across participants, indicating that the sacrifice of in-person conversations and meetings was a fair price to pay for the general health safety of their loved ones and themselves.

Video Calling as a Tool that Establishes Familiarity

In addition to video calling being a tool for safety during the pandemic, it was also utilized for the less tangible purpose of extending one's ability to *establish familiarity* with family members that live outside of the household. Participant_11 expressed her astonishment at how her son was able to recognize his grandmother despite never seeing her in person:

> My son was born in the middle of the pandemic, and so our family was not able to visit him. Therefore, we set up video calls with his paternal grandparents once a week. It is a family ritual now, and he talks to the screen like his grandparents are there in front of them. When his grandmother finally was able to visit, my son knew it was his grandma and it didn't matter that we haven't been able to physically see her in eight months.

Testimonies of several participants indicate the importance of sight in order to feel a sense of co-presence with loved ones. While Participant_11 provided insight into the importance of a grandchild being able to recognize their grandparent because of video calling, Participant_15 provided a flipped narrative. He explained that his "grandkids are growing up fast, by using video calling [he gets to] watch them grow and change while living away from them". Senior citizens are one of the most at-risk populations to Covid-19 complications in the United States. Participant_15's interview sheds light on how the older generation of Americans is adapting to using new technology with a view to develop relationships with their young grandchildren despite the new barrier of social distancing.

Overall, Participant_4 summed it up best by stating "it's a lot more human and personal when you actually see the face, instead of just the voice". Video calling has worked as an extension of the participants' abilities to not only connect with one another but has also been used to foster very human connections between loved ones.

Convenience in a Time of Disturbance

Ease of Connecting with a Loved One

One of the most unexpected, yet prevalent terms that emerged as a pattern was "convenient". This word in one way or form was mentioned by each of the participants in their interviews. A key theme that caused the popularity of this term was the newfound *ease of connecting with a loved one*. Participant_9 explained how last year she made her mother get an iPhone so that Participant_9 could "video call her when [she] went off to college because [she] knew that [her mother] missed [her] a lot and FaceTime is so convenient".

The main concern that rose with making the effort to have a face-to-face in-person conversation seemed to be around making a commute. Participant_8 summed this up by stating "FaceTime is easier in some ways as I don't have to worry about driving to them and facilitating a good time". Participant_6 added to this by explaining that "though some of my family members are in Washington, even a couple of hours drive away, it's hard to meet them in person. Video calling helped close that gap". Therefore, while many have turned to video calling as an alternative to face-to-face interactions during COVID-19, it would not be fair to claim that social distancing is the only factor contributing to the higher and higher prevalence of video calling platforms in everyday life.

Ease of Hiding Emotions

Another form the word convenience has taken on in the accounts of the participants is in regard to the *ease of hiding emotions* over a video call. Participant_12 is a practicing social work clinician, therefore she was thinking critically when examining her own time using video calling when chatting with her loved ones: "You can have a smile on your face, and you can be saying

the perfect words but, if your legs are crossed and your foot is shaking. The other person on the screen wouldn't be able to know if you are nervous or anxious about something".

Participant_13 also reflected on this phenomenon. She recalled that when she video calls her close friend, they are "both able to hide our frustrations with each other but in person that would not be the case. In-person interactions are just more genuine, because if you're frustrated the other person can become aware of it through your body language". Video calls are convenient in the sense that they limit what the person on the screen sees, whether this is an advantage or disadvantage to participants remains unclear.

However, it is important to highlight that while the majority of the participants described video calling as an easier alternative to hide emotions, some participants thought of it as the exact opposite. Participant_7 explained how she uses "video calling for the sense of togetherness" as she thinks that her "parents as they are not very vocal people. [Therefore, she] can tell more from a conversation, based on their facial expressions than necessarily hearing them say certain things". Participant_7 further explained that a "key part of human interaction is being able to pick up social cues which are very important when having a deep conversation".

Resilience Development & Maintenance Practices on Video Call during COVID-19 (RQ2)

Thematic analysis of the data yielded five themes organized by two overarching supra-themes: (1) sharing experiences of high personal emotional value in real-time, (2) exhibiting thoughtful behaviors and actions.

Sharing Experiences of High Personal Emotional Value in Real-Time

You may recall that maintenance of relationships on a daily basis protects one from jeopardizing his or her personal and relational health in moments of stress (Afifi, 2016).

Therefore, performing relational labor in terms of being present and contributing during the

times of *celebrations* and *grief* creates a support system among families that is then used to adapt

in future situations of high emotional distress.

Celebrations

Participant_1 shared that her sister participated in their family Thanksgiving dinner

through FaceTime: "we showed her around the room and the food we laid out on the table. Then

we had normal conversations with her talking about how next thanksgiving we can change this

or try this new recipe".

Other than traditional holidays, a trend of online birthday celebrations was constant

throughout all interviews. Participants had either hosted, attended, or were surprised with at least

one online video call celebration. Participant_4 from Seattle recalls how for her father's birthday

in December her family had a joint video call, with her sister living in California, my parents

were in their house in California, then some family from Dubai and India. Participant_4 explains

that she was "able to make sure that everything worked in one with one timing and that [they] all

celebrated and cut the cake together".

In these types of online birthday celebrations, Zoom seemed to be the most widely

preferred platform. Participant_9 described her excitement with such celebrations:

> During big family Zoom calls, I get to see all of the similarities within my family
>
> members. Of how they all act the same, how they all like look the same and their
>
> mannerisms all very the same which is not something that I would have seen
>
> otherwise except when I can see literally all of them in front of me at one time.

Other celebrations that were generally held online through Zoom were ones that were

related to individuals that were at higher risk of contracting Covid. Participant_3 shared that her

cousin was pregnant meaning that she would be at a higher risk for complications if she was exposed to Covid. Therefore, Participant_3 settled on having a baby shower for her cousin over Zoom. She further explained that they planned a date, played party games and revealed the baby's gender online as they would have done in person as well.

Grief

While video calling is being used to participate in moments of joys of loved ones, interviewees also shared stories of co-presence and support during moments of grief and adversity. Participant_5 shared how over the past two years, she was fighting for justice for herself by going through a rape trial in court, but her family was there every step of the way despite the interference of the pandemic:

> It was difficult for me and my family. The pandemic has affected people in many different ways but having this trial in person is one thing that I wanted to be able to have as it was a big part of my recovery process. However, it was online because of Covid, and on top of that, I had to wait an hour and a half in a virtual courtroom on Zoom before my case was opened.

Participant_5 shared that with video calling her grandmother in particular regularly, she has been able to find some closure and resilience. Similarly, Participant_3 shared how her family practiced co-presence during the passing of a loved one because of Covid-19:

> We lost a family member to Covid, it was my husband's grandfather. We were struggling emotionally because we were not able to see him in person before his passing. However, we used Zoom so we could attend the ceremony of his passing and be present in any way we could.

Participant_11 builds on this idea of connecting with your loved ones in moments of grief as she explained to her how this has led to co-presence through technology with her father who is terminally ill.

> Sukeeret: One way to develop resilience is by relying on those you love and getting support from them as well, whether it be moments of celebration or moments of grief. I was wondering if you can tell me a story about a moment you came together with your family over video calling during this pandemic, whether that be to celebrate or to grieve together?

> Participant 11: We've had our fair share of both during this pandemic but particularly right now my father is really sick. We're scared and we don't know what's going to happen. So, we have relied on Amazon's Echo Show with Alexa, so that my brother and I can virtually drop in on him and make sure that he's safe. He probably doesn't have much longer left so we use the video chat and the photo function to make sure that he gets constant updates of his grandkids. It's the thing that brings him the most joy.

> Sukeeret: Of course, and I'm just curious to know if that same joy transfers over when he's talk to his children, like you, as well?

> Participant 11: For me, my dad wasn't a part of my daily life for 10 years. It's not that we had a bad relationship, he just was elsewhere. So now, one of the things I like is that through sending pictures and video calling he knows what's going on, he's feeling

involved despite being sick and physically distant. And I think he feels this, for the

first time in a long time.

Along with co-presence, coping also emerged for some when discussing grief.

Participant_1 explained that in the situation of online school stress, she relied on her sister and

vice versa to cope. She further described this as something that they "bonded" over while on

FaceTime. She recalled that:

It is very stressful to have classes online because you lose the resources that you would

otherwise be able to get quickly. My sister and I both need hands-on learning experience

to excel. So that was something we found we can bond over and talk about how we used

to be able to help each other in person, but now we now have to do it online.

Gaming

While all of these narratives describe sharing experiences of high personal emotional

value in real-time, they all are related to a major life event in one way or another, whether that be

celebration or grief. However, the last memorable shared experience that kept showing up among

interviews was the concept of *gaming* online. While gaming over video calling was not often tied

to any major life event, participants still acknowledged it as shared experiences that they held

high personal value to. Participant_10 explained how her cousins and her use online video

calling and gaming platform Backyard.co to host virtual family game nights: "with the pandemic

and with everything that's been happening so far, my family and I live very far apart, and it

means a lot to me to be able to connect to them and really just continue maintaining our

relationship by having these shared experiences virtually".

Exhibiting Thoughtful Behaviors and Actions

Participating in Conversations and Activities Related to Physical and Mental Health

Interestingly, interviewees found themselves increasingly *participating in conversations and activities related to physical and mental health*. Participant_1 explained how her constant need to be aware of her sister's health grew out her concern of her sister possibly coming in contact with COVID-19 while working as a medical student and dealing with sick patients:

When you hear that there's not enough PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) and hospitals are telling medical students that "we're going to take you guys out but now we are going to take you back in", I found myself constantly asking for updates about my sister's physical health.

Buzzanell (2020) encourages such behavior, as conversations surrounding trauma with loved ones create higher levels of resilience in individuals. As a coping mechanism, carrying out these conversations allows individuals to move on. Participant_13 provided insight into the benefits of having mental health discussions with loved ones, even if it's over a video call: "My family comforted me so many times this year when I was anxious about my future plans over video calls. Therefore, when I got the news that I got into the program that I really wanted, they almost started crying with me".

Similarly, Participant_2 commented on how it is "refreshing getting to talk to [her] cousin and see her sharing [Participant_2] happiness and celebrating with each other, especially during the pandemic, and it's kind of mood heightening".

Participant_5 highlighted practicing spirituality with family over FaceTime to establish normalcy and to combat the stress of the pandemic. She described how she, her mother, and grandmother are "reading scriptures every morning at 8 a.m. with each other over FaceTime

because [they identify as] Christian". She continued by describing how "religion has been a difficult part of [her] life, however, the pandemic has allowed [her] to spend time focusing on an area where normally [she] wouldn't have been able to spend as much time on otherwise".

Overall Increase in Quantity and Length of Shared Video Calls

While all narratives and details shared by interviewees were highly informative and reflective of the extraordinary circumstances Americans have found themselves in for the past two years, a pattern I noticed among the participants is their astonishment when realizing that there has been an *overall increase in quantity and length of shared video calls* in their personal life with their loved ones. Participant_14 reflects on his past year and a half in quarantine shares that he "think[s] the pandemic actually increased the number of my FaceTime and video calls with [his] cousin. The pandemic is very tiring, so [he likes] to share [his] feelings with her when possible".

Many participants did not realize that as a result of being nervous for one and another, of dealing with high amounts of uncertainty as a country, and a higher amount of idle time that was not wasted in commuting and unnecessary errands, they were turning to those who they love to make sense of their new world and to stay emotionally close yet physically distant. Participant_5 reflected on how video calling has impacted her relationship with her family and realized that to some degree, it has made it stronger. She explained how being "confined, and alone in our space, [makes us] want to reach out to people who offer some familiarity, and that's the case with [her]".

Similarly, Participant_10 concluded his interview by adding, "I would say that I'm actually closer to my loved ones than I was before, because of video calling".

Further Discussion and Conclusion

I began this study with two primary goals: (1) to identify how Americans are using video

calling platforms as an extension of their ability to connect with family as an alternative to face-

to-face conversations during the COVID-19 pandemic, (2) to explore common practices that

American families have adopted over video calling to develop and maintain group resilience

during the uncertain times of a global pandemic. The present study illuminates two supra-themes

that classified five ideas prevalent among the stories of participants. I will now address

theoretical implications, limitations, and possible further study of my findings.
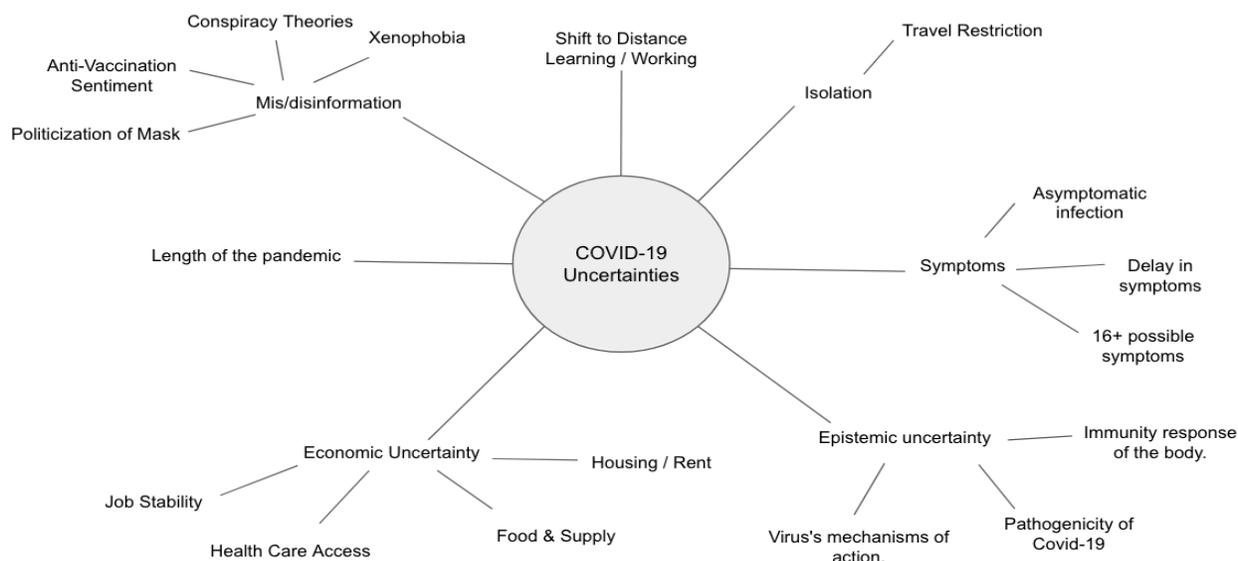
As this paper was an idea in May 2020, which was worked on until completion in June

2021, it truly proved to be a work in progress throughout the year. Specifically, new information

(and sometimes mis/disinformation) were popping up as alerts daily. Moreover, these news alerts

were littered with big data information and macro-level accounts of countries and communities.

This paper worked to bring down the discussion of not only the scientific crisis at hand, but also

the humanitarian adversity spread throughout the world. Specifically, real world accounts of

individuals living in the United States were highlighted in an effort to bring forth the micro-level

discussions of resilience building in a time of uncertainty out in the academic world.

While many past papers have highlighted the connection between resilience building and

family, this paper was committed in taking this one step further by focusing on the unique

phenomena that occurs when resilience building, family, video calling, and a global pandemic

intersect. For many, video calling was simply a tool that helped them move shared experiences

that would typically happen offline to online. For some, it became an opportunity to engage in

conversations and activities related to physical and mental health with loved ones that they

would not find themselves doing under "normal" circumstances. However, most surprising, the

intersection of resilience building, family, video calling, and a global pandemic brought for a chance for individuals to have more and longer video calls with their loved ones. Not one, or two, but three different participants came to the realization that they think of themselves as being closer to their loved ones than they ever were before because of the unique circumstances they found themselves in over the past year. With this in mind, I argue that video calling has not only become a viable alternative to face-to-face interactions with family during social distancing but also an accessible tool that can be used to deepen familial relationships in times of high uncertainty.

The biggest limitation that this paper encountered was in its ability to accurately represent larger populations. I was only able to completely interview 15 participants. Given my reach and time frame constraints I was not able to replace participants that dropped out and complete a heavy recruitment process. Future development of this project should absolutely include more participants, in order to gain a richer understanding of the general public. Another limitation was being able to find a balance of both female and male accounts. The majority of the participants identified as female (86.7%), and the rest identified as male (13.3%). Ideally, this figure would be closer to a 50:50 ratio. Reaching gender parity would also contribute to providing a more generable account to the broad population of the United States.

This study specifically focused on the stress brought forth by the "social distancing" factor of Covid-19, however the pandemic and the years 2020 and 2021 brought many other external sources of stress on families.

Figure 1. A breakdown analysis of various aspects of uncertainty caused by the spread of the COVID-19 virus. This chart compiles information from various sources including Altig et al., 2020; Cell, 2020; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020; Chiu, 2020; Crawford et al., 2020; and Roberts, 2020.

Mis/disinformation about Covid-19 was spreading just as fast as the virus early on due to social media and other news outlets. Many people took to social media to politicize the CDC's recommendation of wearing face masks while in the presence of anyone outside your household. Others re-posted conspiracy theories about the possible weaponization of the COVID-19 vaccines (Roberts, 2020). Additionally, some followed prominent politicians in spreading xenophobia by blaming the virus on China (Chiu, 2020). As a direct result, violent attacks and harassment toward Asian Americans have spiked.

Economic uncertainty a direct result of the sudden shock of COVID-19. In the Current Population Survey, unemployment in the United States rose from 3.5% in February 2020 – its lowest rate in over 60 years – to 14.7% in April 2020, the highest rate in 80 years. (Altig et al., 2020) US Gross Domestic Product fell 11.2% from 2019Q4 to 2020Q2, the largest drop since the

Great Depression (Altig et al., 2020). Job stability, home mortgages and rent, food and supply, health care insurance are all on the line for many families in the United States right now because of COVID-19.

While the virus acts as a cause for many uncertainties (refer to Figure 1), it also reveals several pre-existing vulnerabilities that families may have. For instance, a family with no savings prior to COVID-19 was already vulnerable to financial instability. The economic uncertainty caused by COVID-19, however, reveals and further inflicts stress on this vulnerability. For others, a pre-existing vulnerability might be a crowded housing situation (Dasgupta et al., 2020). While COVID-19 may have caused these living conditions, it will further inflict stress because of the virus's high infection rate. Therefore, a family living in a crowded housing situation will be more likely to become infected and face hardships.

Besides direct consequences of the pandemic, Americans were also calling for justice for George Floyd and fighting against police brutality toward the Black community. Americans were also going out in record numbers to vote in the 2020 election. Americans also witnessed a riot and violent attack against the U.S. Congress, in the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C. on January 6, 2021, through their tv screens.

All of these various stressors, injustices, and difficulties were present while social distancing and Covid-19 were looming over the country. Each of these agonizing circumstances, are unique in nature, therefore deserve an in-depth review by scholars in the future. Particularly, similar research papers can be conducted on exploring American families' use of video calling platforms to adapt to the economic uncertainty caused by Covid-19 or focusing on American families' use of video calling platforms to adapt to the political unrest caused by Covid-19, and discover further insight.

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Appendix 1. Preliminary/Selection Questionnaire used in this study.

Eligibility to Participate in Research Study and Information & Demographics
University of Washington - Department of Communication - Seattle, Washington

Together, apart: Exploring American Families' Use of Video Calling Platforms to Adapt to the New Normal of Social Distancing
Primary Researcher: Sukeeret K. Dhaliwal
Phone number
Email

Eligibility Criteria
This research is limited to those who live in the United States.

Are you currently living in the United States?
- o Yes
- o No

Are those who you consider family currently living in the United States?

For this research paper, the family can be defined as "something to do with marriage, partnership, parenthood or kinship, be these formally or informally recognized"

(E. Silva in *Connecting Families?: Information & Communication Technologies, Generations, and the Life Course*, 2018).

- o Yes
- o No

Have you had at least one video calling with a family member on a platform such as Zoom, FaceTime, Skype, etc. since entering quarantine?
- o Yes
- o No

Information and Demographics

First Name

Age

Which best describes you? (You may choose multiple)
- White or Caucasian
- Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
- Black or African American
- Asian
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Middle Eastern or North African

- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- Mixed
- Some other race, ethnicity, or origin.

What would you describe your socio-economic status as?
- Low Income
- Lower-Middle Income
- Middle Income
- Upper-Middle Income
- High Income
- Prefer not to say

What is the highest level of education that you have completed?
- High School
- Bachelor's Degree
- Graduate or Professional Degree
- Prefer not to say
- Other

Proficiency with English
- Beginner
- Intermediate
- Fluent

Appendix 2. Informed Consent form used in this study.

Informed Consent to Participate in Research Study
University of Washington - Department of Communication - Seattle, Washington

Together, apart: Exploring American Families' Use of Video Calling Platforms to Adapt to the New Normal of Social Distancing
Primary Researcher: Sukeeret K. Dhaliwal
Phone number
Email

A. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND
Sukeeret Dhaliwal, an Honors student in the Department of Communication, is conducting research on American families' usage of video calling during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research is conducted with the support of Dr. Anis Rahman, of the University of Washington. The purpose of this interview is to shift the focus from the quantitative data-heavy perception of COVID-19 in the United States to a more humanistic approach in which qualitative accounts of the experiences of American families are explored.

B. PROCEDURES
If I agree to participate in this research study, the following will occur:
      1. I will be asked to participate in an individual interview held over Zoom that will last roughly 30 minutes.
      2. I will be asked to discuss the following topics:
            - Experience of video calling platforms.
            - Relationships with those I consider family.
            - My residency in the United States.
            - Experience of quarantining.
            - Uncertainties caused by or worsened during the pandemic.
      3. I will be asked about the following demographic details:
            - Proficiency with English
            - Educational Background
            - Age
            - Gender
            - Race / Ethnicity
            - Socio-Economic Status
      4. If I agree to participate in this research study, a recording of this interview will be made for research purposes.

C. RISKS
1. Risks
      - There are no known foreseeable risks or discomforts involved in participating in this study.

2. Confidentiality

- The records from this study will be kept as confidential as possible. No individual identities will be used in any reports or publications resulting from the study. All recordings, transcripts, and summaries will be given codes and stored separately from any names or other direct identification of participants. Research information will be kept in password-protected digital space at all times. Only research personnel will have access to the files and the recordings, and only those with an essential need to see names will have access to that particular file. After the study is completed and all data have been transcribed from the recordings, the recordings will be held for 3 months and then destroyed.

D. DIRECT BENEFITS

There will be no direct benefit to me from participating in this research study. The anticipated benefit of these procedures is a better understanding on how American families are using video calling platforms to adapt to the new normal of social distancing.

E. ALTERNATIVES

I am free to choose not to participate in this research study.

F. COSTS

There will be no costs to me as a result of taking part in this research study.

G. COMPENSATION

I will be compensated $20.00 Amazon Gift Card within 1 week of completion of a Zoom interview with the primary investigator.

H. QUESTIONS

I have spoken with Sukeeret Dhaliwal about this study and have had my questions answered. If I have any further questions about the study, I can contact Sukeeret Dhaliwal at (sukeeret@uw.edu) or Dr. Anis Rahman at (aniscom@uw.edu). Or I can contact the Department of Communication at University of Washington at (206) 543-2660 or write them at the 102 Communications Building, University of Washington Box: 353740.

I. CONSENT

I will receive a copy of this consent form via email, once submitted.

PARTICIPATION IN THIS INFORMED CONSENT / PRELIMINARY SURVEY AND RESEARCH STUDY IS VOLUNTARY. I am free to decline to participate in this research study, or I may withdraw my participation at any point without penalty. My decision whether to participate in this research study will have no influence on my present or future status at The University of Washington.

Signature by Research Participant
Please write your full name to serve as your e-signature.

Signature Date by Research Participant

Signature and Date by Primary Investigator