

The Dialectical Experience of the Fear of Missing Out for U.S. American iGen Emerging Adult

College Students

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## Abstract

FoMO, the fear of missing out, is a salient and significant experience with personal and relational consequences. This study qualitatively analyzed 35 interviews with iGen emerging adult college students about their experiences with FoMO. Framed by relational dialectics theory 2.0 (Baxter, 2011), we found two relational-level contradictions, connection and disconnection and inclusion and exclusion, which are illuminated by the cultural-level interplay of the discourses of ‘carpe diem’ and ‘investment in the future’. Findings indicate that through the discourse of carpe diem, participants attempt to increase the power awarded to relational and personal resources and expand what it means to invest in the future. Implications of these findings related to well-being and academic success are discussed and practical applications for institutions of higher education such as team-based learning and more holistic professional development programs are presented.

*Key terms:* FoMO, relational dialectics theory 2.0, personal relationships, well-being, social media

## **The Dialectical Experience of the Fear of Missing Out for U.S. American iGen Emerging Adult College Students**

Personal relationships matter. In fact, the World Health Organization (2019) includes them on their list of significant factors that affect personal and community health and well-being.

Personal relationships help us meet our belonging and inclusion needs, which scholars have long argued to be fundamental to the human experience (Maslow, 1943). Given the importance of personal relationships to our well-being, it is not surprising that the fear of missing out, colloquially known as FoMO, has become a common experience. Illustrating the connection, Wang et al. (2018) found that Chinese adolescents with higher belonging needs paid more attention to social bonds and connection. Although the experience of FoMO is longstanding, the active use of social media in today's culture has heightened awareness of it as a social phenomenon (Abel et al., 2016).

Scholars have described FoMO as a salient and significant problem with personal and relational consequences (e.g., Alt, 2017; Elhai et al., 2018; Metin-Orta, 2020; Milyavskaya et al., 2018). Psychologists have linked the experience itself to negative affect (Elhai et al., 2018) and the frequency of the experience to fatigue, stress, physical symptoms, and decreased sleep (Milyavskaya et al., 2018). In addition, communication technology scholars have highlighted FoMO's connection to social media engagement (Alt, 2017) and to problematic smartphone and internet use (Elhai et al., 2018). For example, Conlin et al. (2016) argued that the 'experience of FOMO is worsened by the explosion of real-time sharing that social media tools, smartphones and tablets provide' (p. 152) and Park (2018) argued that FoMO is a 'driver of online participation' (p. 453). Cultural factors could also play a role in the relationship between FoMO

and social media use since research suggests that students who struggle with a language barrier may turn to social media for help and, in turn, experience FoMO (Alt, (2017).

Communication can play an important role in mediating some of the consequences. For example, Alt and Boniel-Nissim (2018) found that parents' positive communication activities such as listening, trying to understand, and creating a positive and supportive atmosphere for discussions can reduce FoMO and potentially the problematic internet use that may come with it. What is less clear is the role that interpersonal relationships and social discourse play in iGen emerging adult college students' experiences with FoMO and the implications FoMO has for them, especially for their well-being and academic success. As we explore these topics in the current paper, we use relational dialectics theory (RDT) 2.0 (Baxter, 2011) as a sensitizing device. RDT 2.0 helps researchers illuminate systems of meanings that circulate at both the relational level and cultural level along with the role they play in meaning making.

### **iGen Emerging Adult College Students**

Arnett (2000) used the term emerging adults to describe a cohort of individuals, aged 18-25, who fall between adolescence and adulthood. As Arnett (2000) stated, 'emerging adults do not see themselves as adolescents, but many of them also do not see themselves entirely as adults' (p. 471). For many, emerging adulthood is characterized by change and personal exploration. One influential factor for the emerging adult experience is residential status. For many, this time in life marks a transition from living at home with parents or guardians to living alone or with peers. This can bring new challenges, including forming and sustaining personal relationships and balancing them with professional responsibilities.

Recent research on today's college students suggests that they are in a time of crisis. For example, according to the JED Foundation (2015), over half of first-year U.S. college students

feel underprepared emotionally and nearly one in three find it difficult to make new friends. The American College Health Association's (NCHA) National College Health Assessment (2018) found that 67.9% of student participants felt very sad and 62.2% felt overwhelming anxiety within the last 12 months. In addition, according to the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors 2012 survey, 95% of counseling center directors reported that 'the number of students with significant psychological problems is a growing concern' (Mistler et al., 2012, p. 174).

Physical health factors are also important to consider. Due to competing demands, students struggle to get the sleep they need. Getting 9-10 hours of sleep is integral to wellness, specifically to 'promoting a healthy outlook on life and overall health, avoiding stress, elevating moods and helping concentration, energy levels and productivity' (JED Foundation, 2019). According to NCHA, 63.8% of participants reported feeling tired or sleepy three or more days in the last week and one in five students reported that sleep-related difficulties negatively impacted their academic performance (American College Health Association, 2018).

One area of concern that is especially relevant to the current study is the increasingly common experience of loneliness. Loneliness can be social and involve the absence of a social network or it can be emotional and involve the absence of intimate relationships. Loneliness occurs when 'a person experiences a subjective deficiency of social relationships in a quantitative or qualitative way' (Diehl et al., 2018, p. 1). In their research, Diehl et al. found that about 1/3 of their participants felt moderately or severely lonely and in the NCHA survey, 63.2% of students reported feeling lonely within the last 12 months. Emerging adults are reporting high frequencies of loneliness even though they are more digitally connected than ever before (e.g., Primack et al., 2017). iGen emerging adults are some of the most active users of social media.

According to the Pew Research Center (2018), 88% of 18-29-year-olds indicate using some form of social media. Of the active users, 18-24 year-olds use a variety of platforms and use them frequently, with the most widely used platforms being Instagram and Snapchat. More than half of young adults, ages 18-29, reported using Instagram, which is a free photo and video sharing application (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). Also popular among this age group is Snapchat, with approximately 25% of them using it. Snapchat allows users to send and receive time-sensitive images and videos (Alhabash & Ma, 2017).

In summary, iGen emerging adults are digitally connected, yet many struggle with loneliness, sadness, anxiety, and getting the recommended amount of sleep. With the present study, we seek to understand the role FoMO plays in their well-being and academic success as well as how we might mitigate negative impact. Given the role social discourse plays in relational communication (Baxter, 2011), RDT 2.0 provided a valuable lens.

### **Relational Dialectics Theory 2.0**

RDT 2.0 (Baxter, 2011) provides a valuable lens for the present study because it centers researchers on the relationship between social and personal communication by reminding us ‘there is no such thing as culture-free interpersonal communication’ (Baxter, 2011, p. 53). Integral to an RDT 2.0-framed analysis is an investigation of discourses, which Baxter (2011) describes as systems of meaning (p. 2). Discourses are heard in talk at both the social and relational level. Baxter introduced the notion of the utterance chain to describe the relationship between social-level discourse and relational discourses, noting that every individual utterance is part of a larger dialogue (Baxter, 2011). As such, communication is complex and has multiple sites that link specific relational experiences (which she calls the proximal sites) with larger cultural experiences (which she calls the distal sites). Baxter explains, ‘discourses that can be

heard at the distal already-spoken site of the utterance chain are those meaning systems that are active in the larger culture yet influential to our personal and relational meaning making processes' (p. 53). Understanding the cultural discourses allows researchers to make the interpersonal talk occurring at the relational level intelligible. By using RDT 2.0 as a lens, scholars can begin to understand how people reflect, reproduce, or reject social-level discourses in relational talk.

Equally important to an RDT 2.0-framed analysis is the notion of *interplay*, or the relationship between discourses. An examination of interplay often begins with an interrogation of power by asking which discourse is centripetal—or centered in a person's talk—and, in contrast, which discourses are centrifugal or marginalized (Baxter, 2011). Baxter asserted, 'the center is easily legitimated as normative, typical, and natural, and thus it functions as a baseline against which all else is somehow positioned as a deviation' (p. 123). Relational-level talk can *negate* social-level discourses when one discourse works to uproot an existing discourse by rejecting it. Relational-level talk can also *counter* social-level discourses when it works to replace an expected discourse. A third marker of interplay is *entertaining*, which occurs when talk positions a discourse as only one possibility among many, making them complementary rather than competitive as they work together to shape meaning (Baxter, 2011).

An examination of interplay also requires an investigation of the multiple variants of meaning that a discourse may hold and the discursive disjunctures (or apparent paradoxes) which occur when a discourse legitimizes multiple experiences or courses of action. Thus, researchers become interested in the strands of meaning a discourse holds and the relationship between and among those strands. With a desire to unpack the complex relationship between social and

relational discourses and understand the potential implications of these discourses for iGen emerging adult college students, we posed the following research questions:

RQ1: What discourses do iGen emerging adult college students voice as they talk about their experiences with FoMO?

RQ2: What forms of interplay of competing discourses are present in iGen emerging adult college students' talk about their experiences with FoMO?

RQ3: How might our finding inform practical applications to promote well-being and student success for iGen emerging adult college students?

### **Method**

RDT 2.0 is a critical theory that allows researchers to provide a deep understanding of the phenomenon of interest and to illuminate the role power plays in the experience, in this case the influence of cultural discourse. In line with these goals, we used qualitative methods of data collection and analysis.

### **Data Collection**

In total, 35 individuals participated in the present study. We sought participants through purposive sampling, which is a method for choosing people who have experiences relevant to the phenomenon of interest (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). Participants had to be 18 years or older and have experience with FoMO within a personal relationship. All participants were current college students. Data were collected on a U.S. residential college campus by a team of students (n=35), 34 of whom identified as emerging adults. The emerging adult status of the interviewees is important to note because the interview reflects proximal-level interactions between individuals who share a common experience related to the topic. As Baxter (2011) noted, 'an interview is itself a speech event with at least two participants engaged in the joint enterprise of meaning

making – the interviewer and the interviewee’ (p. 155). The majority (n=23) of participants identified as women and fewer (n=11) identified as men. One individual chose not to identify their gender. The participants ranged in academic year and included freshmen (n=3), sophomores (n=7), juniors (n=12) and seniors (n=13). Participants ranged in age from 18-23, with a mean age of 20.1 years, making them iGen emerging adult students.

The team of interviewers engaged in multiple steps to ensure effective interviewing and a credible data set. First, team members completed a course in Protecting Human Subjects and explored various topics related to research ethics. Second, team members were trained to follow a multi-step protocol for conducting semi-structured interviews that included building rapport, gaining consent, seeking background information, following a pre-determined list of open-ended questions, identifying areas in need of more information, asking follow-up questions when necessary, audio-recording the interview, and transcribing each interview. The quality of each interview, which was evident by the transcript, was both peer reviewed and reviewed by the primary researcher.

Participants answered 20 open-ended questions about their experiences with FoMO. Questions focused on meanings and interpretations of FoMO, the contexts in which it occurs, the role social media plays in their experiences, how they make sense of the experiences, how they respond and/or communicate when they or others experience FoMO, and, central to the present paper, the struggles FoMO creates for them. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. We transcribed each interview verbatim, which resulted in a data set consisting of 254 single-spaced pages of data. Although the length of each transcript varied, the average transcript was 7.2 single-spaced pages and 3287.6 words. The substance of all interviews was consistent, even

though the length of the interviews varied. We attribute variance to the verbosity of each participant and the resulting need to request additional information through probing.

### **Data Analysis**

Drawing from Baxter's (2011) methods for RDT 2.0-framed research, we engaged in contrapuntal analysis. Such analysis typically begins with a qualitative thematic analysis in order to determine the discourses present in the data (Baxter, 2011). For our project, researchers began by familiarizing themselves with the data set. Then, each research team member individually engaged in a deep reading of the first 10 transcripts in order to identify initial themes. The first author then organized these individual analyses and met with the other team members to discuss their findings and areas of difference within their individual analyses. Few discrepancies were present. Differences were tied to labeling and organization rather than to meanings. The team discussed the relationship among themes and the terms we felt best captured each theme's meanings. This resulted in a coding tool that was used to analyze transcripts 11-20 and reanalyze 1-10. In that process, we began to see the relational and cultural level discourses emerge. Using these discourses, we reanalyzed the complete data set and confirmed their validity.

Following the identification of competing discourses, we examined the interplay of discourses and the potential implications of the interplay for student well-being success. Through inductive analysis of the initial sample, we developed a coding tool to categorize impacted areas. This tool included emotional impact, physical impact, relational impact, and academic impact. We then used this tool to analyze the full data set and confirm its validity.

### **Findings**

I kind of view life as like *carpe diem* or seize the day, live the moment.  
Ultimately, at the end of the day we're going to leave here soon, we're here for a moment.  
So the one way to really avoid it is to be out there, sacrifice some things,  
go out there and experience if you feel like you'll miss out on it. (32: 168-171)

In the present study, we sought to illuminate the interplay of discourses heard in iGen emerging adult college students' talk about FoMO and to understand what, if any, impact the discursive interplay had on their perceived well-being and academic success. In participants' talk were two manifest relational-level discourses: (a) *connection* and (b) *inclusion* and their latent opposing discourses *disconnection* and *exclusion*. Making these relational-level discourses intelligible were the cultural-level competing discourses of *investing in the future* and *carpe diem*. These relational and cultural level discourses influenced participants' decision-making regarding whether or not to miss a social event and the various implications of that decision. We discuss each finding in the following paragraphs.

### **Relational-level Discourses**

For our emerging adult college students, FoMO was triggered by myriad social experiences, including parties, athletic events, dinners, and trips because they involved not being in the same space as those with whom they shared a close personal relationship. Centered in participants' talk was the importance of connection and inclusion. Participants' desire for relational connection and social inclusion influenced their decision about whether or not to attend a social event. Therefore, rather than missing the event itself, participants feared missing the opportunity for relational maintenance and belonging.

**The discourses of connection and disconnection.** The discourse of connection involved talk about participants' desire to maintain or strengthen their interpersonal relationships, especially their friendships. In contrast, the discourse of disconnection, involved talk about feeling emotionally and relationally separated from those with whom they have personal relationships. Integral to the feeling of connection is the process of engaging in shared activities in order to create collective meanings and shared memories. Participants spoke about how jokes,

stories, and images function symbolically to ‘link’ them and allow them to maintain and strengthen their relational connections (18: 176<sup>1</sup>). Participants’ discourse of connection highlighted three meanings they ascribe to personal relationships. First is the importance of physical presence. Participants framed physical presence as central to relationship maintenance. When asked what they were missing when they experienced FoMO, Participant 8 said, ‘If I’m not there, I can’t build a relationship’ (74). When addressing the same question, Participant 5 shared, ‘I feel like I am missing out on making memories...like when your friends are all recapping on the night and remembering things that happened...and they are all laughing but you weren’t there for those memories’ (95-97). Likewise, when asked about the struggles FoMO created for them, Participant 3 reported, ‘I feel like I don’t have any friends because I can’t commit to hanging out with people’ (218). Missing a social event prevents participants from acquiring these symbolic resources for connection, which, in turn, leads them to fear losing friends or reducing the quality of their friendships. This relates to the second quality, which is fragility. Participants described relationships as fragile. As Participant 6 explained when asked why they thought FoMO exists, ‘I have that fear that I am going to lose my friends if I don’t experience these things with them. I want to keep building bonds’ (255-257). Participants acknowledged the importance of participating in social events, for it is in these contexts that they acquire symbolic resources that allow them to feel connected and communicatively maintain or strengthen their relationships. This fear is intensified by the perception that those who participate will increase their relational closeness, which will result in an even larger relational gap. This factor highlights the third quality, which is scarcity. Participants framed relational closeness as an unevenly distributed resource that people earn and maintain through participation. As

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<sup>1</sup>The citation includes the interview number and/or line number range from the transcript.

Participant 21 noted when they discussed the consequences of FoMO for them, 'I feel like the whole time I'm not there they are becoming closer without me' (110-111). Participant 16 shared a similar sentiment, 'often times other relationships strengthen through certain experiences and because I'm not there to experience those things with those people, my relationships weaken' (122-124). For many participants, the perceived difference resulted in a feeling of relational jealousy. As Participant 6 expressed when they discussed others' role in their FoMO,

I won't have as strong of a relationship with them as they might have with each other if I miss out on these situations. They will get closer and I want to be able to have the same relationship that they have with one another. (70-72)

Participant 8 shared a similar feeling of jealousy stemming from FoMO: 'I would miss out on the overall relationship....I wasn't there, that's bringing them tighter and me not tighter' (70-73).

This perception of relational connection or disconnection relates to participants' perceptions of social belonging, which became evident through the discourses of inclusion and exclusion.

**The discourses of inclusion and exclusion.** Participants who reported feeling interpersonally connected also spoke about feeling included. In contrast, participants who reported feeling disconnected from their relational partners also expressed feeling excluded. The discourse of inclusion involved talk about being part of a social circle, whereas the discourse of exclusion involved talk about feeling socially removed. The ability to engage communicatively in relationships played an influential role in participants' assessment of inclusion or exclusion.

As Participant 5 shared when asked about FoMO's relational impact,

When my friends experience something I haven't, the next time we hang out there may be a divide between friends who have experienced something and those who haven't.

When they are talking about all the fun they had or about things I don't know about I sometimes feel secluded or even left out. (123-126)

Participant 32 elaborated on the social consequences, 'if someone brings up an inside joke about something that happens that you weren't there for, you kind of just feel like an outsider sitting there with nothing to contribute. (75-77)

As we have tried to convey, in their talk about FoMO, emerging adult college students described the important role social participation plays in their perceptions of relational connection and inclusion. Participating in social events provides participants with communicative tools to maintain or strengthen their relationships and sense of belonging. Participants who prioritized other activities and, in turn, 'missed out' on a social event, were left without the relational resources they felt necessary for connection and inclusion. Attendees' enhanced connections amplified their feelings of disconnection and exclusion often resulting in relational jealousy. Although the presence of these discourses was not surprising to us, when examined in conjunction with the interpenetrating cultural-level discourses of *investing in the future* and *carpe diem*, they present new insight about FoMO.

### **Cultural-level Discourses**

We found two competing discourses at play at the cultural level: the latent or unspoken dominant discourse of *investing in the future* and the manifest or spoken countering discourse of *carpe diem*. The interplay of these discourses help illuminate why iGen emerging adult college students privilege connection and inclusion and problematize disconnection and exclusion. The interpenetration of these discourses also highlights myriad implications that participation in and absence from social events has for students.

**Investing in the future.** Many people describe the choice to attend college as an investment in one's future. This description exemplifies a latent discourse that circulates at the cultural level. Individuals attend college to develop a breadth of literacies and to hone an area of specialization. In exchange for the time and effort students invest in meeting degree requirements, they earn qualifications for a potential lifetime career. Its widespread and unspoken qualities position investing in the future as a dominant cultural discourse. In this study, the discourse of investing in the future allows us to understand why participants may prioritize academic responsibilities over social engagements. However, even when they made this choice, participants often failed to meet their academic pursuits because of FoMO. Participants framed FoMO as a barrier to their academic goals because it resulted in negative emotions, which interfered with their ability to focus. When asked about the struggles FoMO created, Participant 10 explained, 'even though I decided that I'm gonna stay in and study...I'm like thinking about it, while I'm studying...then I'm like you're not studying you just spent 30 minutes thinking about something that didn't benefit your studying at all' (188-193). As this example shows, FoMO can interfere with emerging adult college students' ability to meet their academic goals.

Social media often triggers this problem. When asked about social media's role in their experiences with FoMO, Participant 5 framed the emotional component as a 'tease' (82) noting,

I will get the notification that they checked in and who they are with and what they are there for and it is all just rubbing it in your face that you are at that fun place with those fun people for that fun event while you sit at the unfun library and do unfun work with probably unfun people. (84-87)

Even when the dominant discourse of investing in the future guides students to prioritize their academics, FoMO prevents them from accomplishing their goals and results in a perceived waste

of time because they achieve neither their academic nor their relational goals. As Participant 6 explained when they discussed the triggers of FoMO, ‘Even if I want to be there [studying] I am still going to be experiencing the FoMO. I will be thinking about not being there [social event] regardless of if I want to be somewhere else [studying]’ (57-59). Furthermore, missing out results in negative emotions such as sadness, anxiety, and regret. As they shared their perspective about why FoMO exists, Participant 13 noted, ‘it exists because you want to be around the most important people and when you can’t be there with them you become frustrated or sad’ (264-266). For others, such as Participant 15, the negative emotion extends to regret: ‘I would beat myself up about it if I wasn’t there and the decision was up to me’ (60). Participant 9 made a similar point about FoMO’s role in their personal life, sharing that, ‘I’m just constantly fighting with myself. Should I do it? Should I not? I’m not sure. Maybe I shouldn’t have done it or I should have....it’s a lot, um, it’s a mental battle for sure for me’ (169-172). Participant 6 framed the impact of FoMO on decision making as ‘thinking more with my heart rather than my head’ (293). Participants revealed that situations when the dominant cultural discourse guided them to think with their heads often resulted in dissatisfaction.

As we have illustrated, the discourses of connection and inclusion challenge the latent and centripetal discourse of investing in the future that circulates at the cultural level. Investing in the future through prioritizing academic responsibilities requires missing social events, which is problematic for participants for multiple reasons. First, it has negative relational implications because it triggers feelings of disconnection and exclusion. Second, distractions interfere with academic goal attainment, which results in the perception of wasting time. Third, participants associate distance, exclusion, and unsuccessful goal attainment with negative emotions. The pull for relational maintenance and inclusion, despite the value placed on academic success, is made

intelligible by the manifest discourse of *carpe diem*, which was dominant in participants' talk about FoMO.

**Carpe diem.** The discourse of *carpe diem* stresses the importance of living in the moment and seizing each day. In our participants' talk, it functioned to challenge and expand the centripetal cultural discourse about what it means to invest in the future. Through their talk about FoMO, participants positioned personal relationships as a valuable investment for the future. They justified the value of relational work by noting the uncertainty of the future and the fleeting nature of time. Participant 1 illustrated this point when asked why they believe FoMO exists. They reflected, 'if we're looking at the grand scheme of things and if we want to get deep, we only have so much time and you want to use that time in the best possible way' (281-282). Similarly, when we asked Participant 7 to share meaningful personal insight about FoMO that we had not asked about, they noted,

Sometimes people go quickly and you might not always be given the next day. I just try to make the best of each day and [do] what's going to make me happy. So, yeah, sometimes I don't get my homework done or I don't get the sleep I wanted but I just put what's going to make me happy first. I feel like if I miss out on something, I'm missing out on something I won't have another chance to do. (192-196)

Not only did participants emphasize the short duration of life in general, they also spoke about the fleeting nature of the college experience. When asked to discuss the impact of FoMO on their friendships, Participant 18 commented,

You want to spend every minute because, unfortunately, just like with high school, as soon as college is done, there's no guarantee that you're going to be in constant contact with one another and so you want to build as many memories as you can now to keep

that relationship going in the future when maybe you don't have those opportunities to hang out as often as you did. (265-270)

Although they did not deny the importance of academic achievement, participants' discourse situated relational connection and inclusion as more important. Participant 11 spoke to this hierarchy in their commentary about sacrifices they make. They shared, 'Those straight A's are great. But if those straight A's are going to be a consequence of like not having a stronger relationship with your friends and family, then those straight A's are bullshit' (358-360). From this perspective, participants constructed FoMO as helpful because it reminded them to emphasize what they believe matters more, which are personal relationships. When discussing the impact of FoMO on decision-making, Participant 31 explained, 'I think FoMO helps with decision-making in a healthy way. I think sometimes you have to forget about something (that is) a little important to really prioritize you and your friends and work on yourself personally and your relationships' (222-224). In order to reach their relational goals, participants were willing to sacrifice their academic preparation; they also reported sacrificing sleep, despite its importance to physical health. Participant 29 commented, 'Because of FoMO, we'd all just like lose sleep because we're afraid that if we went to bed we'd miss out on fun times' (193-194). Participant 7 acknowledged the necessity of sleep, yet FoMO led to other priorities: 'even if I'm tired or have a lot of work to do, I just have the fear of missing out on things. So, I'll choose whatever event it is over something that's a necessity like sleeping or school work' (79-81). Some participants framed foregoing sleep as a sacrifice they are willing to make in favor of relational rewards. For instance, Participant 8 commented, 'sometimes when I want to rest, that's the sacrifice that I have to make that maybe I can't rest right now because I want to go out and strengthen relationships' (206-208).

As we have illustrated, the discourse of *carpe diem*, which centers on the desire to seize relational opportunities that are presented in the moment, was dominant in participants' talk about FoMO. It expands the culturally centripetal discourse of investing in one's professional future by redefining what it means and takes to invest in their future. We discuss this topic further alongside other theoretical and practical implications of our findings in the next section.

### **Discussion**

The present study sought to understand how emerging adult college students make sense of FoMO and the role that personal relationships play in their experiences with FoMO. We also sought to understand perceived implications of FoMO for students' personal and relational well-being and for their academic success. In the previous section, we detailed two relational-level sets of discourses underpinning participants' talk, connection and disconnection, and inclusion and exclusion. To help illuminate the role of these discourses in participants' meaning making about FoMO, we described the interplay of two cultural-level discourses: investing in the future and *carpe diem*. The manifest quality of *carpe diem* in participants' talk challenged the culturally centripetal location of the discourse of investing in the future in its current form and, as we will argue in this section, expands the meaning of professional development. Specifically, we will highlight theoretical implications related to FoMO and introduce theory-informed practical applications iGen emerging adults might take to empower themselves. We will also discuss strategies that institutions of higher education could implement to support this generation of students' relational, emotional, physical, and academic well-being.

#### **Theoretical Implications: The Paradoxical Nature of FoMO**

So for me it's kind of a catch 22 because I only have FoMO since I made such good friends and built relationships. Like if I didn't have friends I wouldn't have FoMO. (2: 211-213)

Social media makes FoMO five time worse. (5: 81)

I'm going to question and think 'oh I've never done this with my life' and 'I wish I did this' and I don't want to have regrets because of it. (7: 115-116)

These vignettes point to the paradoxical nature of FoMO for emerging adult college students. Pragmatic paradoxes, the type exemplified in this work, are socially constructed, centered in relationships, and involve situations in which the pursuit of one goal seems to challenge or interfere with the pursuit of another goal (McGuire et al., 2006). Relational dialectics theory (Baxter, 2011) positions scholars well to illuminate paradoxes because it focuses on the complex and often-contradictory nature of meaning making.

First, current findings suggest a multifaceted relationship exists between FoMO and personal relationships. Illustrated by the first vignette, relational closeness appears to be a requisite for FoMO, and FoMO acts as an indicator of relational strength. Participants fear losing established connections. In addition, they fear that others who prioritize a social event will take their place as relational partners. This fear showcases the perceived fragility of relationships, which is connected to relational jealousy. Relational maintenance requires time and energy from partners and failure to invest those resources can challenge the stability and strength of the connection (Denes et al., 2017). Emerging adults position FoMO as a driving force in their engagement in relationship maintenance. Thus, although participants framed FoMO as a negative experience, they described the reason for its existence and its effect on relationships as positive and important.

A second paradox centers on the intersection of digital connection and relational disconnection and exclusion. As we reported, recent findings indicate that although emerging adults are more digitally connected than other cohorts (Pew Research Center, 2018), many report feeling lonely (American College Health Association, 2018). In fact, Twenge et al. (2019) found that iGen adolescents who were high in social media and low in in-person interaction reported

the most loneliness. As indicated by the second vignette, our findings support the relationship between social media usage and perceived disconnection, exclusion, and negative emotions. We offer a possible new explanation for why the relationship might exist. Primack et al. (2017) explained,

Those who use increased amounts of social media subsequently develop increased social isolation. Though in some ways this may seem counterintuitive, there are possible mechanisms. First, increased time spent on social media may displace more-authentic social experiences that might truly decrease social isolation. Second, certain characteristics of the online milieu may facilitate feelings of being excluded.

For example, an individual may discover pictures or other evidence of events to which they were not invited. Finally, instead of accurately representing reality, social media feeds are in fact highly curated by their owners. (p. 6)

Our work provides another possible explanation, which is that social media may trigger FoMO, causing feelings of disconnection, exclusion, sadness, jealousy, and regret. These feelings emerge not from the failure to be invited, but rather from their (regretted) choice to reify the dominant cultural discourse that encourages them to prioritize their professional futures over their relationships and emotional well-being. Here too, the more robust their social media network is, the more opportunities there are for iGen students to feel regret, disconnection, exclusion, and torn by the competing discourses of what it means to invest in one's future.

A third paradox that became evident centers on time orientation and is situated in the interplay of the discourses of investing in the future and *carpe diem*. Although the manifest discourse *carpe diem* centers on seizing the present moment, participants framed their desire to live in the present moment as a way of safeguarding their emotional future by minimizing regret.

Participants spoke about their fear of regretting their decision to prioritize academic work over relationships. When they are older (future), they do not want to look back (past) and regret how they spent their time while in college (present). Living in the moment by seizing relational opportunities served as an important way to invest in their future emotional well-being. This interpenetration of the present and future creates a unique paradox called a ‘discursive disjuncture’ (Baxter, 2011, p. 79) which occurs when a counterpoint is integrated in the original discourse and blurs the line between them. According to Baxter (2011), discursive disjunctures remind us ‘a discourse may not function as a unitary system of meaning characterized by seamless cohesion’ (p. 80). For participants, living in the moment *is* an investment in their future, but one that differs from the dominant cultural meaning and expectation of college students.

To manage the negative effects of FoMO, while preserving its positive meanings, emerging adults might consider creating new relational rituals. These rituals could potentially function to empower themselves and support their friends as they seek to build social and professional resources. Relational rituals might include (a) engaging in social media communication that celebrates the important academic work in which they or their friends engage; (b) implementing friendship study hours into daily schedules; (c) practicing and photo documenting ‘day after’ get-togethers to allow friends to catch each other up on missed events; and (d) creating ‘post-pacts’ to regulate and/or reduce digital online presence during certain hours. These rituals acknowledge the centrality of both face-to-face and digital interaction to FoMO and the connection between images and memories for iGen students. Those who work closely with students such as members of residence life staff and orientation programs might help students see FoMO an indication of relational strength and encourage such rituals to

maximize the strengths. Equally important is asking how institutions of higher education might help emerging adults invest in both their relational and professional futures. It is to this topic we now turn.

### **Practical Applications: Fostering Synthesis**

Findings indicate that FoMO is a complex and paradoxical experience perceived to be affecting the relational, emotional, and physical well-being and academic goals of college students. The manifest discourse of *carpe diem* allows us to understand that participants may prioritize their relationships because they perceive sociability, relationship maintenance, and memory making as methods for investing in their future well-being. In order to acquire these important resources, participants are willing to sacrifice studying and sleep. These sacrifices are necessary, in part, because of the inability to do everything in the time they have available.

As a critical theory, RDT 2.0 allows researchers to illuminate discourses with greater or lesser power. The presence of both the discourse of investing in the future and the discourse of *carpe diem* exemplifies what Baxter (2011) refers to as ‘double-voiced discourse’ (p. 126). As Baxter (2011) explained, ‘in its idealized form, double-voiced discourse is dialogic in the interplay of equally valued discourses. However, often the discursive playing field is unequal...with one discourse centered while alternatives are heard yet still given secondary emphasis’ (p. 126). Within the context of higher education, traditional professional resources such as academic knowledge and skill hold the privileged position. By giving voice to the discourse of *carpe diem*, participants try to make space for and increase the power awarded to relational and personal resources, including physical and emotional well-being.

In light of these findings, we do not suggest strategies for reducing FoMO for that would further the power differential. Rather, we would like to encourage educational institutions to

continue to acknowledge the importance of social and relational needs for current students and to test new strategies for helping students secure these resources. We believe making this shift requires *synthesis* on two levels. On a basic level, synthesis would involve structuring academic initiatives in a manner that simultaneously supports traditional academic learning outcomes as well as physical well-being and/or relational maintenance. This can be viewed as a form of integrative learning or boundary crossing learning that is, as the American Association of Colleges and Universities (n.d.) asserts, ‘a signature characteristic of a 21st century liberal education’ (para. 1). On a more advanced level, synthesis might involve folding self-care in its various forms (physical, emotional, and relational well-being) into traditional perspectives of professional development. We believe that synthesis could integrate the paradoxical aspects of FoMO that appear to be mutually negating (McGuire et al., 2006) and, in turn, potentially reduce either-or decision-making. This could have positive implications for both students and academic institutions that may potentially extend to the professional workforce.

At the basic level, synthesis would involve the integration of personal and/or relational goals with academic goals. Fortunately, meeting students’ social needs has long been a goal of institutions of higher education (Bamford & Pollard, 2018). In his argument for the value of a personal approach to higher education, Chambliss (2014) noted, ‘critical thinking is not an isolated technical skill; it’s a socially embedded way of living, a habitual way of being with other people. It has to be practiced with others; the courage required to participate needs to be modeled’ (para.10-11). However, although higher education institutions may acknowledge social needs, they often foster them within different contexts, framing them as co-curricular which may create a work-life conflict for students. The inability to meet competing needs is often characterized as an individual’s inability to manage their time, which is similar to how the work-

life conflict is framed (Sweet, 2014). Thus, when faced with more opportunities than available time, the need to sacrifice surfaces as a method for re-establishing balance. The present study finds that students often opt to sacrifice sleep and study time. Through synthesis, institutions can exercise agency by taking steps to help students develop their personal, relational, and professional resources simultaneously.

Fortunately, some institutions have begun to practice this form of synthesis. Examples of initiatives that academic institutions have taken include living-learning communities and wellness challenges. Applying the qualities of intentionality and innovation that guide high impact practices (McNair & Albertine, 2012), other methods institutions might test include team-based learning and faculty-staff partnerships. Team-based learning activities that incorporate visual elements, social media presence, and reflection about task and relational benefits of collaboration might provide a valuable structure for this form of synthesis, especially for iGen students. Providing opportunities for digital connections appears to be as or even more important than in-person interaction because members of iGen spend significant time engaged in digital social interaction (Twenge et al., 2019). Institutions might also experiment with unconventional team teaching partnerships between faculty and staff, such as those between instructor and counselor or instructor and nutritionist, depending on course goals. For example, integrating a unit on mindfulness into a teamwork course has the potential to inspire more thoughtful and productive collaboration and foster self-care through stress reduction.

A more substantial form of synthesis and method for power realignment calls for a conceptual shift from viewing relational resources and well-being as distinct from professional development to being central to it. Scholars have begun to argue for the importance of self-care to professional success for both individuals and organizations. For example, Sweet (2014)

reported that within the context of the professional work force, personal and professional role harmonization corresponded with affective commitment to work. This finding may extend to college students. Thus, institutions can position self-care as a method *of* professional development. In addition to meeting myriad student needs, this approach could have organizational benefits such as fostering more healthy and fulfilled graduates and reducing the resources needed to address implications of the lack of self-care. Moreover, such an approach might provide a valuable model of what Sweet (2014) referred to as the dual agenda for students who will become organizational leaders. The dual agenda involves exploring ways individuals and organizations ‘can benefit by reformulating the ways work is performed’ (Sweet, 2014, p. 85) and rejects viewing personal and organizational goals as adversarial.

What we find especially important about synthesis in both forms is its potential to shift agency in the direction of institutions. Integrating relational and health objectives into traditional academic objectives and integrating self-care into the lens of professional development may reduce the need for students to decide which domain to prioritize and, in turn, feel less constrained by the paradox. Synthesis shifts the meaning making process from either/or to both/and, which is central to a dialectical perspective.

As we have discussed, the present study raises important questions about how to help today’s college students succeed. Because our findings indicate that emerging adult college students often prioritize relational, social, and emotional work over academic work when faced with competing responsibilities, we proposed strategies that bring the competing goals together. In doing so, each learning opportunity may forward a more holistic process of professional development that honors the multiple facets of today’s learners and prepares them to manage the work-life interface effectively throughout their career.

### **Limitations**

The present study provides important new insight about the dialectical quality of FoMO, but it is not without limitations. First, the present study focused on FoMO within the context of close personal relationships as a whole. We suggest future research centered on a particular relational context in order to explore potential areas of difference between romantic partnerships, family relationships, and friendships. Second, the present study examined only one age cohort. It is also important to understand if and how younger and older cohorts experience FoMO and what impact it has on their well-being. We believe one topic that would be especially interesting to explore is the role FoMO plays in the work-life interface, such as how FoMO in one context (e.g., family) influences the other context (e.g., work). Finally, given its interpretive lens, the present study highlights perceived impacts on well-being. We believe it is important for future researchers to test the actual impact FoMO has on relationship connections as well as on affect, academics, and sleep patterns.

### **Conclusion**

RDT 2.0 allowed us to illuminate the complex and paradoxical quality of FoMO for iGen emerging adult college students. Participants voiced the importance of relational connection and inclusion for them, which require symbolic resources gained through shared activities. Missing social events prevents them from acquiring those resources and leads them to feel disconnected and excluded, and triggers a range of negative emotions. Their awareness that time in college is limited combined with their desire to avoid future regret about how they spent their time leads many to sacrifice sleep and/or academic responsibilities in order to maintain their relationships and happiness. Through the discourse of *carpe diem*, participants expand the meaning of investing in the future by making space for relational and emotional well-being. Paradoxically,

living in the moment is the means through which students make this investment. To maximize students' success, the findings suggest that institutions of higher education test strategies that integrate academic, relational, and health related goals to prepare today's students for a future where work and life will continue to intersect.

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