The dialectical experience of the fear of missing out for U.S. American iGen emerging adult college students

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The Dialectical Experience of the Fear of Missing Out:
Perceptions of Relational, Emotional, and Physical Well-Being and Academic Success

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author if IRB permission is granted [MMH]. The data are not publicly available due to the fact they contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.
Abstract

This paper involves a qualitative investigation of the fear of missing out, colloquially known as FoMO. Data consisted of 35 semi-structured interviews with emerging adults at a residential college. Framed by relational dialectics theory (Baxter, 2011), findings indicate two proximal-level contradictions between the discourses of connection and disconnection and inclusion and exclusion, which can be understood by examining a distal-level contradiction between the discourses of carpe diem and investment in the future. The discourse of carpe diem, which centers on living in the moment and prioritizing personal relationships, counters the culturally centripetal discourse of college as a time to invest in one’s professional future. Implications of these findings related to perceptions of relational, physical, and emotional well-being and academic success are discussed and practical applications for institutions of higher education are presented.

Key terms: FoMO, relational dialectics theory, personal relationships, well-being
The Dialectical Experience of the Fear of Missing Out: 
Perceptions of Relational, Emotional, and Physical Well-Being and Academic Success

Personal relationships matter. In fact, the World Health Organization (2019) has included them on their list of considerable factors that are related to personal and community health and well-being. As they note, “where we live, the state of our environment, genetics, our income and education level, and our relationships with friends and family all have considerable impacts on health” (World Health Organization, 2019, para. 1). Personal relationships help us to meet our belonging and inclusion needs, which scholars have long argued to be fundamental to the human experience (Maslow, 1943; Shutz, 1957).

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. 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, Buff, & Burr, 2016). This is due, in part, to the ability to see what relational members are doing at any given point.

FoMO is argued to be a salient and significant problem with personal and relational consequences (e.g., Elhai et al., 2018; Milyavskaya, Saffran, Hope, & Koestner, 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, scholars who specialize in communication technology have highlighted its connection to problematic smartphone use and problematic internet use (Elhai et al., 2018). Modern technologies, especially social networking sites, appear to exacerbate the presence of FoMO among users. For example, Conlin, Billings, and Averset
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(2015) 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).

There is some evidence that 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 emerging adult college students’ experiences with FoMO, the implications FoMO has for them, especially for their personal relationships, well-being, and academic success, and steps that can be taken to prevent or address negative implications.

**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, this time in life is characterized by change and personal exploration. One important factor that is influential to 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 professional responsibilities. Taking the factor of residential status into consideration, the present study centers specifically on emerging adults who attend a residential college.

Recent research on college students suggests that they are in a time of crisis. For example, according to the JED Foundation (2015), over half of first-year 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, Reeze, Krylowicz, & Barr, 2012, p. 174).

Physical health factors are also important to consider. Due to competing demands, students are struggling 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 (2018), 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.

One area of concern that is particularly relevant to the current study is the increasingly common experience of loneliness. Loneliness can be defined as “a situation in which a person experiences a subjective deficiency of social relationships in a quantitative or qualitative way” (Diehl, Jansen, Ishchanova, & Hilger-Kolb, 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 NCGA survey, 63.2% of students reported feeling lonely within the last 12 months. Loneliness can be viewed as either social, which involves the absence of a social network, or emotional, which involves the absence of intimate relationships (Diehl et al., 2018). Aware of the widespread experience of loneliness
and the consequences it can have for students, educational institutions are now taking myriad steps to help students build relationships and foster belonging (Supiano, 2018).

Emerging adults are reporting high frequencies of loneliness even though they are more digitally connected than ever before (e.g., Primack et al., 2017). 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 were found to 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 using it. Snapchat allows users to send and receive time-sensitive images and videos (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). In the present study, we are interested in understanding what role, if any, social media plays in emerging adult college students’ experiences with FoMO.

In summary, emerging adults are digitally connected, yet many struggle with feelings of loneliness, sadness, and anxiety. Many also struggle to get the recommended amount of sleep, which can negatively impact their academic performance. The present study seeks to understand how emerging adult college students make sense of FoMO and what impact personal relationships and cultural discourses have on their experiences. As Baxter (2011) asserted, “there is no such thing as culture-free interpersonal communication” (p. 53). We also seek to understand the perceived impact FoMO has on their personal and relational well-being and academic success and how we might mitigate negative impact. Given the role social discourse plays in relational communication (Baxter, 2011), we drew on relational dialectics theory as a guiding lens.
Relational Dialectics Theory

Relational dialectics theory (RDT; Baxter, 2011) provides a valuable lens for the present study because it centers researchers on the relationships between social and personal communication by illuminating “how communication defines, or constructs, the social worlds, including ourselves and our personal relationships” (Baxter, 2004, p. 3). Integral to an RDT-framed analysis is an investigation of discourses, which Baxter (2011) describes as systems of meaning (p. 2). Discourses can be 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 makes intelligible the interpersonal talk occurring at the relational level. Using RDT as a lens, scholars can begin to understand how social-level discourses are reflected or rejected through relational talk.

Given its dialectical or dialogic focus, RDT guides researchers to explore how people reflect and reproduce multiple meaning systems. Thus, equally important to an RDT-framed analysis is the notion of interplay, or the relationship between discourses. An examination of interplay often begins with a focus on 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, which occurs when one discourse works to uproot an existing discourse by rejecting it. A second mechanism through which we can see the relationship between relational-level and social-level discourses is countering, which occurs when relational-level talk works to replace an expected discourse. A third marker of interplay is called entertaining, which occurs when talk positions a discourse as only one possibility among many. In these moments, the relationship between discourses is more complementary than it is competitive because they work together to shape meaning (Baxter, 2011).

An examination of interplay also requires an examination 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 discourse about FoMO and understand the potential implications of these discourses for residential college students, we posed the following research questions:

RQ1: What discourses do emerging adult college students voice as they talk about their experiences with FoMO?
RQ2: What forms of interplay of competing discourses are present in emerging adult residential college students’ talk about their experiences with FoMO?
RQ3: How might our finding inform practical applications to improve well-being and student success on residential college campuses?

Method
Relational dialectics theory is a critical theory that allows researchers to both provide a deep understanding of the phenomenon of interest and illuminate the role power may play 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). In order to participate, individuals had to meet the following criteria: (a) be 18 years or older and (b) have experiences with FoMO within a personal relationship. All participants were current college students. Data were collected on a residential college campus by a team of students (n=35), 34 of whom identified as emerging adults. This is important to note because the interview can be understood as a communicative context that 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 from freshman (n=3), sophomore (n=7), junior (n=12) to senior (n=13) and ranged in age from 18-23, with a mean age of 20.1 years.

After completing a background questionnaire, participants were asked to answer 20 open-ended questions about their experiences with FoMO. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. Questions focused on what FoMO means and feels like for them, the contexts in which it occurs, the role social media plays in their experiences, how they make sense of the
experiences, and how they respond and/or communicate when they or others experience FoMO. We transcribed each interview verbatim, which resulted in a data set consisting of 254 single-spaced pages of data.

**Data Analysis**

We followed the steps for a contrapuntal analysis, which is a method Baxter (2011) presented for RDT-framed research. Contrapuntal analysis typically begins with a qualitative thematic analysis in order to determine the discourses present in the body of data (Baxter, 2011). As it did for us, this process begins with the researchers familiarizing themselves with the data set. Once we were familiar with the data set, each member of the research team individually engaged in a deep reading of the first 10 transcripts in order to identify initial themes. Following this process of analysis, the first author organized the individual analyses and then met with the other team members to discuss their findings and areas of difference within their individual analyses. Few discrepancies were present. The differences we identified were tied to labeling and organization rather than to meanings. We also noticed initial differences in how we grouped data. Some members of the research team identified a large number of specific themes, whereas other members of the team grouped similar ideas into a broad theme. The team discussed the relationship among themes and the terms we felt best captured the meanings of each theme. Resulting from this process was a coding tool we used to analyze transcripts 11-20 and reanalyze 1-10. The tool was effective. In that process, we began to see the proximal- and distal-level contradictions emerge. We used these contradictions to reanalyze the complete data set and confirmed their validity.

Following the identification of contradictions, we examined the interplay of discourses and the potential implications of the interplay for student 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 confirmed 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 that we heard in emerging adult college students’ talk about their experiences with FoMO. We also sought to understand what, if any, impact this interplay has on students’ personal and relational well-being and academic success. Inherent in participants’ talk were two proximal-level (i.e., relational-level) contradictions: (a) *connection and disconnection* and (b) *inclusion and exclusion*. Making these proximal-level discourses intelligible was a distal-level (i.e., cultural-level) contradiction between the discourses of *investing in the future* and *carpe diem*. These proximal- and distal-level discourses, in turn, influence participants’ decision-making regarding whether or not to “miss out” on a social event and the various implications of that decision. We will discuss each finding in the following paragraphs.

**Proximal-level Discourses**

Findings showcase that for emerging adult college students, FoMO is triggered by a multitude of social experiences, including but not limited to parties, after parties, athletic events, dinners, trips, or just about anything that involves not being able to be in the same space as those with whom one shares a close personal relationship. Participants’ desire for relational connection and inclusion influences their decision of whether or not to attend a social event. Thus, what
participants fear missing is not the event itself, but rather the opportunity for relational development and belonging.

**Connection and disconnection.** Participants’ desire for relational maintenance was evident in their talk about connection and disconnection. The discourse of connection involves talk about participants’ desire to strengthen or, at least, maintain their interpersonal relationships, especially their friendships. In contrast, the discourse of disconnection involves talk about feeling emotionally and relationally distant 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 allow them to create collective meanings and shared memories. Participants spoke about how inside jokes, stories, and images function to symbolically “link” them and allow them to maintain and strengthen their relational connection (18: 176). In contrast, missing a social event prevents them from acquiring these symbolic connections, which, in turn, leads them to fear losing or reducing the quality of their friendships. As Participant 6 explained, “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). Voicing the opposite discourse of disconnection, but expressing the same meaning, participant 8 stated, “if I’m not there, I can’t build a relationship” (74). Thus, participants acknowledge the importance of participating in social events, for it is in these contexts that they acquire symbolic devices that allow them to communicatively maintain or strengthen their relational connections.

In addition, participants fear losing their already established relational closeness by choosing not to participate. This fear is intensified by the perception that those who are present will increase their relational closeness, which would result in an even larger gap. As Participant

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1The numbers represent the line number range from the interview transcripts.
21 shared, “I feel like the whole time I’m not there they are becoming closer without me” (110-111). Participant 16 shared a similar sentiment,

I think it [FoMO] impacts our relationship because often times other relationships strengthen through certain experiences and because I’m not there to experience those things with those people my relationships weaken and then [it] also strengthens with someone else so I feel like I am losing my strong relationship with them in those times when I am missing out. (122-126)

For many participants, this perceived connection and disconnection dialectic results in a feeling of relational jealousy. As Participant 6 noted,

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)

This perception of relational connection or disconnection relates to their perception of social belonging. This becomes evident through the discourses of inclusion and exclusion.

**Inclusion and exclusion.** Participants who feel disconnected from their relational partners also expressed feeling excluded. In contrast, participants who felt interpersonally connected also spoke to feeling included. The discourse of inclusion involves talk about being part of a social circle, whereas the discourse of exclusion involves talk about feeling removed. The ability to engage communicatively in the relationships played an influential role in their assessment of inclusion or exclusion. Again, participants framed jokes and stories as communicative tools through which they can engage with the others and participate in that social group. In contrast, not knowing the story or inside jokes prohibits them from participating in the
storytelling process, and, as a result, leaves them feeling outside the group. As Participant 32 explained,

[You] definitely feel like an outsider when you’re with everyone else. 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)

Participants acknowledged the central role communication plays in enacting their relationships and meeting their belonging needs. As Participant 5 shared,

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)

As we have tried to convey, in their talk about FoMO, emerging adult college students describe the important role social participation plays in their perceptions of relational connection and inclusion. In contrast, participants associated the absence of social participation with relational disconnection and exclusion. Participating in these social events provides participants with communicative tools to strengthen their relational connections and sense of social inclusion. For participants who choose to “miss out” on a social event and forgo the relational resources, the feeling of disconnection and exclusion is amplified by attendees’ enhanced connections, resulting for many in feelings of relational jealousy. These proximal-level contradictions can be more deeply understood by examining the interplay of two distal-level discourses: investing in the future and carpe diem. It is to this topic we now turn.

**Distal-level Discourses**
At play at the cultural level are two interpenetrating and opposing discourses, which we refer to as investing in the future and carpe diem. These discourses help illuminate why participants privilege connection and inclusion, while they problematize disconnection and exclusion within the context of a residential college. The interpenetration of these discourses also highlights myriad implications that participation in and absence from social events have for students.

Investing in the future. The choice to attend college is considered by many to be an investment in one’s future. This expectation 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 the requirements for their degree, they earn qualifications for a potential lifetime career. In the present study, participants gave voice to the latent discourse of investing in the future when they chose to miss a social opportunity in favor of meeting their academic responsibilities. They made this decision despite the relational consequences of disconnection and exclusion.

The discourse of investing in the future helps us understand how the decision to forgo a social event is associated with academic benefits and relational drawbacks. Participants frame their decision to forgo the event as a burden on their relational well-being because it prevents them from being able to maintain or strengthen their personal relationships. Yet, they justify their decision because they perceive it as beneficial to their academic success and will bring future benefits. However, the anticipated academic benefits that participants expect from forgoing a social event often never come to fruition due to FoMO. In this context, participants frame FoMO as a barrier to academic success because it causes them to feel negative emotions, which interfere with their ability to focus. Social media triggers this process. Participant 10 explained,
Even though I decided that I’m gonna stay in and study and I’m not going to ‘afters’ for date party, I’m like thinking about it, while I’m studying, well like I could have stayed for an extra hour and I could have just gone down and spent time with my friends and 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)

In this example, we can see that social media not only interferes with participants’ ability to meet their academic goals, it also exasperates the experience of missing out and their feelings of disconnection, exclusion, and relational jealousy. Participant 5 spoke to the emotional component,

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)

Thus, even when students choose to invest in their professional future, they find themselves unable to do so because of their desire for relational connection and inclusion. For them, choosing to miss a social event is a waste of time because they achieve neither their academic nor relational goals. As Participant 6 explained, “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 if I want to be somewhere else [studying]” (57-59).

As we have illustrated, participants perceive missing a social event as problematic for emerging adult college students for multiple reasons. First, it has negative relational implications because it triggers feelings of relational disconnection and exclusion. Second, it fails to enhance academic success when distracted, which results in the perception of wasting time. Third,
missing out triggers various negative emotions such as sadness, anxiety, and regret. Participant 13 drew the link between relationships and FoMO and highlighted the emotional toll it plays on them. They shared, “it [FoMO] 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. They stated, “I would beat myself up about it if I wasn’t there and the decision was up to me” (60). The pull for relational development and inclusion is made intelligible by the centrality of the discourse of carpe diem in participants’ talk about FoMO.

**Carpe Diem**

Centripetal in participants’ talk about FoMO was the manifest discourse of carpe diem, which speaks to the importance of living in the moment and seizing each day. The discourse of carpe diem functions to uproot the centripetal cultural discourse about higher education – that it is a time to invest in the future. Participants counter this cultural meaning by replacing it with the discourse of carpe diem and by stressing the importance of embracing each relationship-building opportunity. In doing so, they position personal relationships as the most valuable investment. One justification they provide for this is the uncertainty of the future and the fleeting nature of time. As Participant 7 commented,

> 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 frequently about the fleeting nature of the college experience. 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)

Participants’ discourse situated relational connection and inclusion as more important than academic success despite their identity as college students. Participant 11 spoke to this hierarchy when they shared, “If its school, I mean those straight A’s are great. But if those straight A’s is 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, FoMO is constructed as helpful because it reminds them to emphasize what they believe really matters, which are personal relationships. Participant 31 explained,

I think FOMO helps with decision making in a healthy way. I think sometimes you have to forget about something a little important to really prioritize you and your friends and work on yourself personally and your relationships. Especially just because I’ve only been in college for two years, you know, you’re only here for four years. You have to develop intimate relationships now and you have to make good friends now. (31:222-226)

In order to reach their relational goals, participants are willing to not only sacrifice their academic success; 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 importance of sleep, yet makes the same decision. They stated, “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 went as far as to frame their decision to forgo sleep as a sacrifice. 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 live in the moment, was centripetal in participants’ talk about FoMO. The discourse functions to counter the culturally centripetal discourse of college being a time to invest in one’s professional future. Emerging adult college students live in the moment by prioritizing their personal relationships via participating in social events, including the everyday activates of grabbing lunch together and sitting and chatting. Participants described their willingness to sacrifice academic success and/or sleep in favor of relational and emotional well-being, especially because they perceive there is not enough time to do everything. In voicing the discourse of carpe diem, participants ultimately counter what it means to invest in their future. We will discuss this topic and 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 personal relationships play in their experiences. We also sought to understand the implications of FoMO for students’ personal and relational well-being and academic success and how we might mitigate negative impact. In the previous section, we
detailed two proximal-level contradictions at play in participants’ talk that involve the
interpenetration of the discourses of connection, disconnection, inclusion, and exclusion. To help
illuminate the role these contradictions play in participants’ meaning making about FoMO, we
described the interplay of two cultural-level discourses: investing in the future and carpe diem.
The centrality of carpe diem in participants’ talk functions to uproot and counter the culturally
centripetal discourse of college being the time to invest in your professional future. As we will
argue in this section, carpe diem functions to redefine what it means (and takes) to invest in
one’s future. Specifically, we will highlight theoretical implications related to FoMO and discuss
practical applications that institutions of higher education might take to support students’
relational, emotional, physical, and academic needs. We suggest fostering integration of
connection and inclusion with physical health-related and academic initiatives.

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)

The opening vignettes point to the paradoxical nature of FoMO for emerging adult
college students. Relational dialectics theory (Baxter, 2011) positions us to illuminate the
paradoxes given its focus on the complexity and often-contradictory nature of meaning making.
First, current findings suggest a multifaceted relationship between FoMO and personal
relationships. As captured in the first vignette, relational closeness appears to be a requisite for
FoMO. In this way, FoMO is an indication of relational strength. The closer the relationship is,
the stronger the likelihood one will experience FoMO. Participants are fearful of losing the
established connection or the strength of that connection. Moreover, they fear that in addition to losing their own relational connections, others who chose to participate in the social event will take their place. This leads participants to feel a form of relational jealousy. Thus, although FoMO is an indication of relational strength, it also is associated with relational fragility. Relational maintenance requires times and energy from partners and failure to invest those resources can challenge the stability and strength of the connection (Denes, Dhillon, & Speer, 2017). Emerging adults position FoMO as a driving force in their engagement in relationship maintenance. Thus, although participants frame the experience of FoMO as a negative experience, they frame its existence and effect as positive and important. Also paradoxical is the relationship between FoMO and connectivity.

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 (ACHA, 2018). As indicated by the second vignette, our findings support the relationship between social media and perceived disconnection, exclusion, and negative emotions and offer an alternative explanation. In interpreting their finding between that linked frequency of social media usage and perceived social isolation, 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)

FoMO provides another explanation for this. Specifically, our findings indicate that social media frequently triggers FoMO, which results in 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 align with the centripetal cultural discourse that encourages them to prioritize investing in their professional futures. Here too, the more robust their social media network is, the more opportunities there are to feel relationally disconnected and excluded. Also paradoxical is the relationship between FoMO and time.

A third paradox that became evident to us is relevant to time orientation and is situated in the interplay between the discourses of investing in the future and carpe diem. Although the centripetal discourse carpe diem centers on seizing the present moment, participants justified their desire to want to live in the present moment as a way of safeguarding their emotional future through minimizing regret. Thus, seizing the present moment functions to help them prepare for a future that is emotionally positive because they anticipate it will be free of regret and full of satisfaction. Specifically, as noted in the third vignette, participants spoke about their fear of regretting their decision to prioritize work over relationships. When they are older, they do not want to look back and regret how they spent their time while in college. Thus, living in the moment and seizing all relational opportunities serves as a way to invest in their future, specifically in their future emotional well-being as opposed to their academic or professional futures. This interpenetration of the present and future creates what Baxter (2011) calls a “discursive disjuncture” (p. 79), which occurs when a discourse’s counterpoint is integrated in
the original discourses and, as a result, blurs the lines 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 cultural meaning and expectation of college students. With this newfound knowledge, we believe the important question to ask is, how institutions of higher education can help emerging adults invest in both their emotional and professional futures without having them compete with one another? It is to this topic we now turn.

**Practical Applications: Integrating Social, Health, and Academic Initiatives**

Findings indicate that FoMO is a complex and paradoxical experiences that is perceived to be affecting the relational, emotional, and physical well-being and academic success of college students. On one hand, participants associate positive implications with FoMO because it indicates the presence of relational connections and encourages participants to take steps to foster their relationships, which they see as an investment in their future well-being. However, in order to reap the personal and relational rewards, participants are willing to sacrifice studying and sleep, which negatively affecting their present sense of well-being. These sacrifices are necessary, in part, due to the inability to do everything in the time they have available.

In light of these findings, our goal is not to suggest strategies for reducing FoMO, but rather to encourage educational institutions to acknowledge the importance of social and relational needs for current students. Moreover, we encourage them to introduce methods for fostering social and relational needs in a manner that also supports physical well-being and/or academic success. The process of integration will allow students to meet multiple needs simultaneously, which is important due to the time constraints that many face. Since enhancing
students’ social needs has long been a goal of institutions of higher education (Bamford & Pollard, 2018), this process will require a conceptual shift rather than a new focus. From a dialectical perspective, this shift involves synthesis. This approach would counter the “solitary intellectual” approach that is embraced on many campuses (Chambliss, 2014, para. 11). In his argument for the value of a personal approach to higher education, Chambliss (2014) noted, “Academics seem to segregate learning away from life…. [but] 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).

One method is to establish a formal program involving “social learning groups.” Social learning groups would allow peers to integrate academic coursework with sociability. This could allow them to meet their belonging needs while concomitantly pursuing academic initiatives. Moreover, it could provide students an opportunity to practice their communication, time management, and for some, collaboration skills and support each other’s learning. Students can enroll in a social learning group at the start of the semester and use campus space for their meetings. Social learning groups could allow students to move into and out of focused coursework (e.g., 30-minute increments) and face-to-face social interaction (e.g. 15-minute breaks). Whether collaborating on a shared project or working independently in the same space, coursework becomes a social activity. To support this process, instructors might require or recommend their students to join a social learning group or, in a similar vein, require students to work in self-formed dyads or teams in order to allow them to integrate their belonging and academic needs.
A second and similar method for integrating relational and social needs with professional development is through “leadership socials.” Higher education institutions could create social events designed to strengthen students’ leadership abilities. Guests would be encouraged to bring friends. Activities could involve working together to create or update a LinkedIn profile, while having the opportunity to network with leaders in their field and community. Here too, the learning outcome is grounded in a social context and the context becomes a space to practice the skill.

A third method, “exercise socials,” could provide an opportunity to exercise the mind and body by integrating physical health practices, academic content, and relational and social activities. For example, campus leaders might establish a weekly program that combines an exercise routine/class (e.g., weight lifting, yoga, stationary cycling, or walking), healthy lunch or snack, and an academic or professional development centered topic. One example is “Yoga and Mindful Listening.” While participants are engaging in yoga, they can be introduced to academic material on mindful listening, and then have the opportunity to practice their listening skills during the lunch or snack. A second example is to establish academic-centered walking groups such as one called “Walking and Talking about Relational Dialectics Theory.” Thus, partners would engage in conversation about and support each other’s learning of a theory through the process of shared physical activity.

As we have discussed, the present study raises important questions for educators about how to best help today’s college students succeed. Because our findings indicate that emerging adult college students prioritize relational, social, and emotional needs over academic engagement and sleep, we proposed strategies that integrate social dimensions into academic activities or integrate academic foci into physical health-related activities. We believe the
integration will help students meet multiple needs simultaneously rather than having them compete with one another. This, in turn, might provide more time for rest and rejuvenation.

**Limitations**

The present study provides important new insight about the dialectical nature of FoMO and the importance of personal relationships and inclusion for college students. Yet, it is not without limitations.

First, the present study focused on FoMO within the context of close personal relationships without centering on a single type of relationship. We suggest future research center their work on a particular relational context in order to explore potential areas of difference between romantic partnerships, family relationships, and friendships. Second, the present study looked at how only one cohort (i.e., emerging adults) experiences FoMO. Also important to understand is if and how younger and older generations experience FoMO and what impact it has on their personal, relational, and professional well-being. We believe one topic that would be especially interesting to explore is the role of FoMO in the work-life interface, such as how FoMO in one context (e.g., family) influences the other context (e.g., work). These contexts overlap for many emerging adult college students, but do not for those outside this context. Finally, given its interpretive lens, the present study highlights perceived (vs. actual) 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**

Relational dialectics theory allowed us to illuminate the complex and paradoxical nature of FoMO for emerging adult college students. In their talk about FoMO, they give voice to the importance of relational connection and inclusion. Maintaining strong interpersonal relationships
requires symbolic resources such as jokes and stories, which they acquire through shared activities. Failure to attend results in their inability to participate in the relationship and leads them to feel disconnected and excluded, which negatively impacts their emotional well-being. Their awareness that time in college is fleeting combined with their desire to avoid future regret about how they spent their time leads them to sacrifice sleep and/or academic responsibilities in order to maintain their relationships and happiness. Through their talk, they counter the dominant cultural discourse that centers college on career preparation by establishing relational and emotional well-being as the most valuable investment for their future. Ironically, living in the moment is the means through which students make this investment. In order to maximize students’ success, the findings suggest that institutions of higher education integrate social opportunities, academic initiatives, and physical health-promoting activities. Keeping students isolated and in competition with each other has detrimental implications for physical, emotional, relational well-being and academic success.
References


Association for University and College Counseling Centers Directors (2012)


   Available at https://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Maslow/motivation.htm


