

# Student life on hold

*How COVID-19 affected the social lives of students in Utrecht*



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# Universiteit Utrecht

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## **Acknowledgements**

The COVID-19 pandemic has now changed our everyday lives for more than a year. In this thesis we will describe how the (social) lives of students in Utrecht have changed due to the impact of the pandemic and its social distancing rules. We conducted this research since we are students ourselves, and we were sensing that the COVID-19 pandemic had quite an impact on our own social lives and that of our friends and fellow students.

This thesis would not have been possible without the support, input and help of many people. First of all, we would like to thank all the students that have been kind enough to open up and share their stories with us. You have allowed us to write an accurate representation of student life in Utrecht during this pandemic and how this has changed and affected all of you. Next to that, we want to thank the tutor and student advisor that have opened our eyes to the struggles of students but also to the positive effects of the pandemic. Thank you for taking the time in your busy schedule to talk with us.

Moreover, we would like to thank Marie-Louise Glebbeek. You have helped us even before the start of our fieldwork by giving us the opportunity to join an interdisciplinary research. Being involved in that research helped us in our decision for the topic of this thesis. During our fieldwork and writing of this thesis you have helped us immensely with your feedback, guidance and support. This was helpful especially during our fieldwork when the topic and the interviews put a weight on our shoulders.

We hope you enjoy reading this thesis and that it sheds some new light on what students go through in these times of COVID-19 and social distancing.

- Timo Keijzer & Jamie Keurntjes



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## 1. Introduction

Two weeks ago, there was a Valentine's blind date organized by the study association, I was then paired with one person to walk for an hour and a half. I just hadn't met anyone new for a whole year and all of a sudden it gave me so much energy. You used to take that for granted, but now you find out how much energy you get from it if you haven't had it for so long. It was a shocking realization.<sup>1</sup>

Over the last year the changes that followed the spread of the COVID-19 virus have become part of the lives of everyone, including students in Utrecht, the Netherlands. This is a completely new situation for all students, a group that finds itself in a life phase that is known for transitions.

In the Netherlands, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed on February 27th, 2020. From that moment on the virus started to spread throughout the country and it was on March 23rd, 2020 when the Dutch government announced a lockdown in order to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus<sup>2</sup>. Since the implementation of the first lockdown, people in the Netherlands had to stay home as much as possible, keep a physical distance of 1,5 meters from individuals not belonging to their household, wear facemasks in public places, on transport and all events were cancelled. Besides the events, also the universities closed their doors. From June 2020 on this lockdown started to diminish as infection rates dropped.<sup>3</sup> However, infection rates started to rise again and during the press conference of October 13th, 2020 the Dutch government announced a new, 'partial lockdown'<sup>4</sup>. On December 14<sup>th</sup>, Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte gave a speech on national television in which a 'hard lockdown' was announced<sup>5</sup>.

As may be known by now, the spread of the COVID-19 virus has caused governments from all over the world to put rules and policies into action that are aimed at stopping the spread of the virus. Besides the lockdowns, social distancing policies and the closing of certain public places have been part of everyday life in the Netherlands ever since the virus started to spread. Social

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from interview with Gijs, 25-02-2021.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/coronavirus-tijdlijn> Accessed January 21, 2021

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/coronavirus-tijdlijn> Accessed January 21, 2021

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/coronavirus-covid-19/documenten/mediateksten/2020/10/13/letterlijke-tekst-persconferentie-minister-president-rutte-en-minister-de-jonge-13-10-2020> Accessed January 21, 2021

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/toespraken/2020/12/14/tv-toespraak-van-minister-president-mark-rutte> Accessed January 21, 2021



distancing policies generally ask individuals to minimize physical contact with others outside of one's household (Elmer, Mepham & Stadtfeld 2020, 1-2). As a result, many universities have now turned to online teaching. This has drastically changed the social lives of students. The lessened social contact which results in students like Gijs, from the first quote, who talks about the few opportunities to meet new people. This creates a new situation, which has a lot of impact on the everyday lives of students. Therefore, this research is important since it provides a better understanding of what students are going through during the COVID-19 pandemic. The outcome of this research could prove fruitful in future situations in which students or young people are subject to sudden changes in their social lives.

The central question in this research is: *How do first-year students and senior-year students in Utrecht experience and deal with the changes in their social lives as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?*

This research is conducted in order to find out if and how the social lives of students in Utrecht have changed since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. It aims to explore the effects of COVID-19, more specifically on the social lives of students in Utrecht, the Netherlands. This study aims to discover the ways in which students in Utrecht deal with the stressful situation of COVID-19 and social distancing policies in times when, according to the literature, it is hard to maintain social ties and social capital that normally is so important to students.

The general effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing policies have already been studied (Elmer et al. 2020; Labrague, De los Santos & Falguera 2020; Shanahan, Steinhoff, Bechtiger, Murray, Nivette, Hepp, Ribeaud & Eisner 2020). The studies state that students regard the social distancing policies as disruptive to their social activities, resulting in experiences such as a lack of interaction, physical isolation and lack of emotional and social support (Elmer et al. 2020; Labrague et al. 2020; Shanahan et al. 2020). Moreover, the literature often highlights the importance of social capital to students (Raffo & Reeves 2000), something that we expect to be hard to obtain and maintain in times of social distancing.

As will become clear in our theoretical framework, social support, personal resilience and adequate coping skills are vital resources to be able to bounce back in situations such as disease outbreaks (Labrague et al. 2020). Social capital is gained in situations of social support and is of

great importance to students. Students who can rely on strong and effective systems of social capital have the greatest chance of long-term survival and ability to ride the current of social change. To be able to use their social capital, students must maintain social ties. (Raffo & Reeves 2000) However, social relationships are hard to obtain and sustain in situations where physical proximity and opportunities for interaction are limited (Elmer et al. 2020).

We think it is important to explore students' experiences in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic as they are generally underrepresented in studies and framed negatively in the media that consider the pandemic. We want to delve deeper and show how the pandemic affects students.

To support the main question, we have developed four sub-questions which focus first on the changes that have occurred, second, on the ways students experience these changes, third, their coping strategies and fourth, on their expectations for the future.

In the central question we focus on two different groups. We have chosen for a clear distinction between first-year students and senior-year students because we expect these groups to have different experiences regarding the COVID-19 pandemic policies. Next to that, senior-year students have been students before COVID-19 started to spread while first year students started their studies amid the pandemic. This research is both comparative and complementary. It is comparative in the sense that the effects on social lives, the experiences of change, and the ways of dealing with these changes have been examined in two separate groups: first year students and senior-year students. Jamie focusses on first-year students and Timo focusses on senior-year students. The data derived from these two groups will be compared to see if there are any differences in the ways the global COVID-19 pandemic affects the social lives of these groups, how they experience this and deal with it. Since we had to define which students would be part of our research population, we have decided to limit our research population to first-year bachelor students at Utrecht University and students who are currently enrolled in the third of higher year of their bachelor at Utrecht University.

In order to collect our data, we have conducted fieldwork from the 8<sup>th</sup> of February 2021 till the 16<sup>th</sup> of April 2021. But before our fieldwork period had officially begun<sup>6</sup>, we had already conducted most of the structured interviews. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its restrictions most of the fieldwork has been conducted from our own student homes, online at our laptop

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<sup>6</sup> We conducted research together with the psychology department at Utrecht University from October 2020 until February 2021 regarding the social distancing policies at university buildings. For this research and our thesis we conducted 12 structured interviews.

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screens. To collect our data, we have made use of participant observation, interviews and conversations. The interviews have been of structured, semi-structured and open nature. The structured interviews were conducted in order to give us some more insights in what student lives look like during the COVID-19 pandemic and what topics would need some further elaboration later on during the fieldwork period. Aside from these structured interviews, we have conducted 27 semi-structured and open interviews with students, board members of study associations, a study advisor and a tutor at the Utrecht University. We have chosen for an open nature during the interviews with students since this allowed them to tell us about what is important to them at the moment instead of us fully determining the specifics of the interview. These methods really helped to give us a clear image how the social lives have changed. The open interviews provided a more natural environment to talk about the experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The online interviews proved a challenge at the beginning since we were both new to interviewing in an online setting and we and our participants were both subject to technical problems. For example, bad internet connection, random laptop reboots or not working programs like Zoom or Google Meet. However, we managed, and we found our own way of doing interviews in times of social distancing rules.

Right at the start of our fieldwork period we tried to find opportunities during which we could perform participant observation. We reached out to all 29 study associations at Utrecht University in order to seek permission to join the online activities they would be hosting during our fieldwork period. Eventually, we have been able to join a couple of online activities that were organized by study associations. Next to that, we were able to perform some participant observation during a demonstration at the Jaarbeursplein in Utrecht where students were demonstrating in order to raise awareness for the isolation that many students go through during the COVID-19 pandemic.

An ethical dilemma we faced in the field was the degree of involvement we had towards our participants and our own student background. We chose this topic because we felt like it was something that needed to be researched more thoroughly. Especially since we are students in Utrecht ourselves. We noticed a lot of struggles among our fellow students ever since the COVID-19 started. Since we are both students and thus involved in the student life in Utrecht, we had to be constantly aware of the effect we could have on our participants and vice versa. This effect, that we could mix our own experiences with those of our participants, did prove difficult for us. Moreover, we needed to watch out for the effect the students' stories could have on us as not all

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stories are happy stories, and it affected us personally. In our fieldwork we both had some days or weeks where this proved hard for us. We were really down in those weeks, and it weighed on our shoulders. The fact that we were constantly reminded of how the situation is dreadful for a group that you are part of yourself, affected our own mental well-being at times as well. We did not expect it to be this heavy. Therefore, it was important that we did not mix our participants' stories with our own stories. In order to keep a clear distinction between our personal lives and this research, we decided to not have any direct friends or roommates as participants in this research. Data was only collected during the moments that we marked as "research time". This way we made sure the answers to our research questions will consist of our participants' stories which were collected with consent and not our personal stories.

This thesis begins with the theoretical framework. In this theoretical framework we cover relevant theories and concepts which serve as the foundation that we can base our empirical chapters on. After which the context chapter will describe the student city of Utrecht in the Netherlands including its student facilities and the impact that COVID-19 pandemic has on these facilities. Furthermore, it will give a brief overview of the COVID-19 measures that the Dutch government has taken since the virus started to spread in the Netherlands. In the following chapters we will present our empirical data, in which Jamie will firstly reveal how the first-year students' social lives have changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the second empirical chapter Timo will discuss the same for senior-year students. As will become clear, the COVID-19 pandemic and its social distancing rules do indeed have an impact on the social lives of students. Where first-year students have a hard time embodying the student life, senior-year students mostly experience a disruption in their already established student lives. What first-year and senior-year students have in common is the disruption of the social lives and that they long for offline social contact.

The concluding chapter will highlight the similarities and differences that we have found between the two groups and will elaborate on this further. This chapter will summarize the former chapters to give an answer to the main question and will also state whether new questions were raised during this research.

## Introduction

## **2. Theoretical framework**

In our introduction the importance to discuss the social lives of students in times of the COVID-19 pandemic has been mentioned. Several studies have shown that youth tend to rely on their social capital in stressful situations (Raffo & Reeves 2000; Buote et al. 2007). This study aims to see if this is true in times of the COVID-19 pandemic as well. According to the literature students are no exception to this rule. This theoretical framework will show the importance of social lives of young people. Youth need to rely on social capital and the formation of social identity is a big part for them. To further emphasize the complexity of this situation, this theoretical framework will show the relation of social capital to social change and disorientation in times of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, the role of resilience and coping among students will be linked to this new situation they currently find themselves in.

### **§1 Youth and social capital (Timo)**

This paragraph will discuss social capital and its importance for everyday life, specifically that of students. It will firstly conceptualize youth and why students count as youth. Second, it will explain the term social capital and its importance towards students.

Within anthropology youth is a difficult concept to define since youth is experienced and articulated differently in different societies (Durham 2010, 723). While many societies give different definitions to youth, this theoretical framework will be using a general definition of age as defined by the World Bank which is 15-24 years (Durham 2010, 723). Most students belong to this categorization of youth since usually students are between seventeen and twenty-four years old.

Students and youth are the subject of several studies regarding social capital (Holland et al. 2007; Raffo & Reeves 2000). In a cohesive society people help each other based on the relations people have with each other (Kawachi 2000, 175). This is explained with the concept of social capital which is generally defined as the features of social structures, such as levels of interpersonal trust and norms of reciprocity and mutual aid, which act as resources for individuals and makes collective action possible (Kawachi 2000, 175). Social cohesion refers to a society in which there is a presence of strong social bonds and social capital (Kawachi 2000). Social capital further

exemplifies this whereby the general consensus sees social capital as the ability of actors to secure benefits because of membership in social networks or other social structures (Portes 1998, 6). Furthermore, a person must be related to others to possess social capital, as it is those others, not the individual, who are the actual source of his or her advantage (Portes 1998, 7).

Benjamin et al. (2001) argue that developing clear occupational aspirations is an important step in the formation of adult identities. Benjamin et al. (2001, 49) further argue by saying that young people are actively trying to shape their present and future lives within the economic, social and cultural conditions they find themselves in. Young people can be conceptualized as emerging into adulthood, characterized by the exploration of potential adult roles such as work, love and worldviews (Benjamin et al. 2001, 50). This is especially important to take into account for our research since it provides a frame in which we can look at students and this links to the next passage which shows the importance of a healthy transition into adulthood.

There is a notion of a *rite de passage* where these young people emerge into adulthood. According to van Gennep (2019) there is a sequence of three stages to a rite de passage: separation, transition (liminality) and incorporation. The first stage, separation, refers to a change from the normal routine of daily life. Blumenkranz & Goldstein (2014, 86) argue that the transition to university, and then especially when youth are leaving home, is a stage of separation which spawns anxiety over the uncertainty of the new experience; it is a place in between which forces changes to occur. This phase shifts into the next phase, moving away from separation, which is the transitory or the liminal phase where there is considerable uncertainty and mystery. In this liminal phase, social status is lost or unclear while youth undergo instruction in the skills, values and ethics needed for the individual. This finally shifts into incorporation which ends the rite of passage and leaves the person with their new identity. This is characterized by certain rituals and ceremonies.

Raffo & Reeves (2000) further exemplify why in this liminal phase social capital is necessary by presenting a normative model of youth transition. They propose “an individualized system of social capital” which is a social and dynamic embedded group/network of social relation which has the youth at the core, which provides authentic opportunities for everyday learning (Raffo & Reeves 2000, 148). This individualized system is in contrast with social capital as described by Kawachi (2000), who argues that social capital is part of social cohesion and therefore part of a community or group of people. Whereby Raffo & Reeves (2000) argue that social capital is more linked to the individual since each person has the capability to have his or her own social capital

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and that each person can have different strength of social capital. Raffo & Reeves (2000) further exemplify this by arguing that social capital is heavily dependent on the way individualized systems of people evolve for each individual young person, which is in turn conditioned by the material and symbolic resources available to these networks (Raffo & Reeves 2000, 148). Thus, the notion of social capital by Kawachi is incorporated in the individualized system of social capital by Raffo & Reeves. Furlong & Cartmel (1997, 114) elaborate by saying that individuals are tied together by chains of mutual dependence to form changeable social configurations; this makes individuals inseparable from their social contexts. This creates a sense of community.

Victor Turner (1969) introduces the idea of *communitas*, the sense of community between individuals who have gone through a rite of passage together. The common experience of the liminal phase, which is characterized by uncertainty and mystery, creates a bond between these individuals. Young people are going through a rite of passage, or are transitioning, from childhood to adulthood. The sense of community and belonging to a group, which Turner would call *communitas*, results from the fact that these young people have gone through the same rite of passage, and thus were in a liminal phase, together.

Due to the anxiety over the uncertainty of the new experience in the liminal phase you could argue that need to rely on their social contacts and the social capital. It is important to view the conceptualization of social capital as an individualized chain of social bonds. This creates individual practical knowledge and understanding that is created through interaction, dialogue, action and reflection within individualized and situated social contexts (Raffo & Reeves 2000, 151). This active, subjective practical knowledge enables individuals to attempt to solve some of their everyday tasks and to facilitate their development of competence, self-confidence, self-esteem and identity (Raffo & Reeves 2000, 151). Consequently, newly formed social relationships and social networks must be individually chosen, which makes social ties reflexive, so that they must be maintained, established and constantly renewed by those individuals. (Beck et al. 1992, 97) Students and youth alike must maintain those social ties to still be able to use their social capital. Without strong individualized systems of social capital, young people have few opportunities of learning from others and have great difficulties in coping with many everyday tasks such as finding employment and studying, with few ideas of how to navigate from adolescence to adulthood (Raffo & Reeves 2000, 153). As we will see in the next two paragraphs social capital is of great importance for youth, especially students. In times of social change like the COVID-19 pandemic it is



important to be able to fall back on friends, as will be shown in next paragraph, to be resilient and have a way of coping as will be discussed in the third paragraph.

## **§2 The importance of friendships (Timo)**

In this paragraph we will highlight the importance of friends for youth and more specifically students. This paragraph will link what has been discussed in the last paragraph, social capital to friends and why it is important to maintain and establish friendships. In the COVID-19 pandemic social distancing policies are put into place. This could lead to having less contact with others and therefore make it harder to make friends. Before it is possible to link this, this paragraph will firstly explain the concept of social identity.

To understand why friendships are important it is evident to first conceptualize social identity since without the feeling of social identity it is hard to associate with like-minded people and therefore make friends (Nitzberg 2005). Bliuc et al. (2011) refer to social identity as those aspects of an individual's self-image that derive from the social categories or groups that they perceive themselves as belonging to. This together with the value of, and emotional significance attached to, that category or group membership is social identity. Social identity is different from personal identity which refers to a person's unique sense of self (Postmes & Jetten 2006, 260). That is because our social identity is shaped by the groups to which we belong to at various times in our lives and, in particular, the groups that are meaningful to us (Bliuc et al. 2011, 419). With those groups there is a notion of community building where the participants of those groups strengthen the ties to each other by working together towards a common goal (Nitzberg 2005). Most of the time this means that in those groups they are strengthening their own social capital but as discussed earlier it is those others who are the actual source of his or her advantage. Therefore, the common goal is to maintain the relationships to each other to achieve strong social capital. Nitzberg (2005) mentions that the efforts of community building strengthen the social and psychological ties to individuals that participate in communal activities. Because of those ties the social capital and social identity both strengthen.

The concept of social identity is important in understanding different processes and behaviors like work motivation and psychological well-being. The way people act in situations is significantly dictated by the degree of the social categories and groups they belong to (Bliuc et al. 2011, 419).

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Social identity, therefore, plays a central role in understanding how people situate themselves in the broader social context. However, Bliuc et al. (2011) argue that social identity is also related to individual-level processes such as psychological self-esteem, stress and other clinical symptoms, psychological well-being and self-reported personal functioning. This makes social identity important for the general well-being of both students and youth. It is also linked to the importance of creating strong social capital. Friends and/or groups of friends provide concrete help and allow one the opportunity to help others (Buote et al. 2007, 666). Friends and these groups thus act like a group of social capital and need each other to combat the problems that could stem from the inadequate help from others regarding the individual-level processes as described above.

The establishment of friendships is an important factor in the first year for a lot of students (Buote et al. 2007). Since friends provide aid in hard times produced by stress and loneliness, friendships are important to establish and to maintain. Furthermore, friendships aid in adjustments by providing a sense of belonging and companionship; they help ward loneliness by keeping students from being alone (Buote et al. 2007, 683). Buote et al. (2007, 687) mention that emerging adulthood is a time when there are one or more transitions to new social environments experienced by many individuals. The development of friendships and social contacts in these new environments will be important to how these individuals will adjust to their new situation. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, in times of transition or liminality it is important to establish and have strong social capital to fall back on. To improve their social capital their new social contacts also play an important role in introducing individuals to other potential friends, thus, expanding social networks (Buote et al. 2007, 686).

Making friends is an important part for first-year university students especially since in the shift from high school to university high school friendships tend to decrease in satisfaction, commitment and supportiveness and could possibly vanish completely (Buote et al. 2007, 667). Kenny (1987) suggests that having a close friend during stressful experiences would certainly help individuals cope. This in combination with the multiple functions that friends fulfill, and their provisions of support and well-being, is important for students. This is especially important in the transition to university, where a loss of friends may occur as there is typically a disruption in social support networks (Buote et al. 2007, 667).

In conclusion, having friends and social contacts is important for youth and students. Raffo & Reeves (2000, 154) argue that young people who can develop strong, effective and fluid

individualized systems of social capital stand the greatest chance of long-term survival and ability to ride the currents of change. Thus, friends, and the social contacts associated with those friends, make a great example of social capital. Raffo & Reeves (2000) mention in their research that friends make the experience of school meaningful and worthwhile, where the lack of friends or social capital when the students move to a new school or university could impact their grades or even make them leave education. Therefore, friends and the social contacts students make have a big impact on students and are very important in the upholding and continuation of education and their mental well-being. To add to this, it is important to acknowledge the risks for students when they are not able to make friends in their first year. As will be discussed in the next paragraph, in periods of social change students need friends or social capital which marks the importance for our research. In times of social change, like the COVID-19 pandemic, it is crucial to figure out what the effect of social change is.

### **§3 Students and social change in times of a global pandemic (Jamie)**

This paragraph will deal with the social change and possible cultural disorientation that occurred as a result of the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus. As is previously mentioned, social contacts are of great importance to students and their psychological well-being. Here, the existing literature will be discussed in order to explain how the social distancing policies may lead to psychological problems and emotional stressors among students. In the end, resilience and adaptive ways of dealing with the current situation will be listed.

#### *Social change and cultural disorientation*

Social change is defined by Fisher (1982 in: Trimble 2003, 488) as the “modification or alteration in the social structure of a society”. Barth (1967) argues that to better understand social change, anthropologists should not look at the changes in thoughts, behaviors, norms and values, but should rather focus on the changing circumstances that lead to situations that are fruitful for social change. The rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus initiated a situation of social change in which people started to reconsider notions of physical proximity to others and may be unsure about how to interact with others in a society where 1,5 meters of distance is the new norm. Taking Barth’s (1967) argument, the current social change may not have happened without the global pandemic

and the social distancing policies and lockdowns that followed it and it is these circumstances that forced people to make changes in the social structure of their societies.

Within the study of social change, Sztompka (2000) emphasizes the importance of studying situations of rapid, sudden, and radical social change as the effects of these situations are likely to be the deepest and last the longest. More specifically, Sztompka (2000) argues that certain situations of social change may lead to cultural trauma. A clear definition of a cultural trauma is given by Alexander (2004, 1): a “cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness marking their members forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.” For this study, we are interested in how students individually and as a collectivity feel like their lives have been disrupted by the social distancing policies and the greater impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and how this has affected their social identity of being a student.

For a situation of social change to be perceived as a cultural trauma, Sztompka (2000, 453) claims that some kind of “disorganization, displacement, or incoherence in culture” must be present. This is when we may speak of situations of cultural disorientation and is seen as the first stage of cultural trauma. Cultural disorientation appears in four typical conditions of which three could be linked to the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic. First, cultural disorientation is likely to happen in situations of sudden, unexpected and significant social changes that are perceived to tackle some of the central assumptions of a culture. Secondly, cultural disorientation may appear when the ‘socialized and internalized culture or semi-automatic habits’ (Sztompka 2000, 454) of people conflict with the new social and cultural environment they find themselves in. And thirdly, cultural disorientation may be a product of social change that follows a radical change in technological, economic or political conditions which leads to the internalized culture to become problematic, hostile or obsolete (Sztompka 2000). These three situations relate in some way to the spread of COVID-19, social distancing policies and changes in the way students must adapt to a new way of living the ‘student life’, for example because meeting with a group of friends is now seen as something that is problematic. Another example could be greeting friends with a hug, something that some people have now stopped doing, but others still see as a habit that is part of their social environment.

As is written above, Barth (1967) has argued that to better understand social change, anthropologists must focus on the changing circumstances that lead to situations of social change. Even though this is of some importance in the process of understanding social change, Sztompka (2000) in contrast, pleads for a focus on the impact on everyday life. He argues that it is the way in which social change disorients the internalized social life of the members of the changing society that is the most impactful. Consequently, in the case of the global COVID-19 pandemic and student life, the focus should be put on how the social distancing policies affect the everyday lives, well-being and identities of students.

### *Resilience and coping*

The spread of the COVID-19 virus has led many governments around the world to implement rules and policies in order to stop the spread of the virus. As a result, social distancing policies, lockdowns and the closing of public places are now part of everyday life. Social distancing policies generally ask individuals to minimize physical contact with others outside of one's household (Elmer, Mepham & Stadtfeld 2020, 1-2). Following these policies many universities canceled classroom teachings and have turned to online teaching, changing the lives of students drastically. While the social distancing policies aim to reduce the spread and infection rates of the COVID-19 virus, these policies also do have a tremendous impact on the social lives of students (Elmer et al. 2020).

Pandemics are perceived to be life events that are connected to feelings of uncertainty, ambiguity and loss of control which could trigger stress, emotional distress, anxiety, depression and anger (Shanahan, Steinhoff, Bechtiger, Murray, Nivette, Hepp, Ribeaud & Eisner 2020, 1). Therefore, social capital could be of great important in times of the COVID-19 pandemic. The current COVID-19 pandemic and its associated social distancing policies are no exception when it comes to these kinds of feelings, combining them with concerns about virus-related health risks, economic and lifestyle disruptions, social isolation, and loneliness. Most young adults are at a low risk of COVID-19-related health problems, leading them to mostly feel distress by the pandemic's secondary consequences; the social distancing policies and its associated social disruption and economic downfall (Shanahan et al. 2020). A distinction can be made between physical and psychological problems, and in relation to COVID-19 the psychological problems are of greater concern to young adults, and students more specifically. As we have seen earlier, young adults are

## Theoretical framework

known to face many stressful normative transitions, such as educational and professional development, social and romantic relationships, and changes in their living situation (Buote et al. 2007). These key life transitions are now troubled by the COVID-19-related stressors and disruptions leading to young adults feeling frustrated in their effort to deal with the normative changes associated with being a student (Shanahan et al. 2020). Multiple studies have shown that students perceive the social distancing policies as disruptive to their social activities, resulting in experiences of lack of interaction, physical isolation and lack of emotional and social support (Elmer et al. 2020; Labrague, De los Santos & Falguera 2020; Shanahan et al. 2020). These experiences affect the psychological well-being and mental health of students, leading to a multitude of emotional distressors. Shanahan and colleagues (2020) write that one third of the students they studied reported feeling worse during the pandemic. Elmer et al (2020, 19) report that students who live on their own, have less direct contact with loved ones, receive less social support and have weaker integrations in social networks of students are at higher risk of developing COVID-19-related emotional stressors. Newly enrolled students who did not get the chance yet to form social ties are also at increased risk (Elmer et al, 2020).

How do students deal with this situation of cultural disorientation, social disruption and increased vulnerability to mental health issues? Labrague et al. (2020) argue that social support, personal resilience, and adequate coping skills are of importance when it comes to the management of and ability to bounce back in situations like the COVID-19 pandemic. Egeland, Carlson & Sroufe (1993, 517) define resilience as “the capacity for successful adaptation, positive functioning, or competence despite high-risk status, chronic stress, or following prolonged or severe trauma.” Hartley (2011) divides resilience into interpersonal and intrapersonal resilience. Whereas intrapersonal resilience could be described as a resilience from within an individual, interpersonal resilience is related mostly with social support, operationalized as actively seeking for social support and keeping in contact with family and friends as much as possible (Elmer et al. 2020; Hartley 2011; Labrague et al. 2020; Shanahan et al. 2020). Within the literature that examines the COVID-19 pandemic, and the way students react to the disruption of their social and educational lives, intrapersonal resilience was proven to be helpful in situations where individuals were able to keep a daily routine, engage in physical activities and other distractions, seek for professional help and information, and were able to apply positive reappraisal and accept the situation (Labrague et al. 2020; Shanahan et al. 2020).

## Theoretical framework

Social support is part of social capital and is thus an important personal resource that could help someone to manage during the COVID-19 pandemic. As is written in previous paragraphs, students who can rely on a strong and effective system of social capital have the greatest chance of long-term survival and ability to ride the current of change (Raffo & Reeves 2000). To be able to use their social capital, students must maintain social ties. However, social relationships are main components of social support and are hard to obtain and maintain in times where physical proximity and opportunities for interaction are limited (Elmer et al. 2020). As seeking social support is hard in times of social distancing, it is likely that students will rely on their personal resilience and coping mechanisms more.

Thus, next to the health-related issues that may follow from the COVID-19 pandemic, the virus and the social distancing rules may also have an influence on the social lives of the population. This research focuses on students, and students in Utrecht more specifically. The next chapter will discuss more about the city of Utrecht and its student facilities in order to get a better understanding of the student infrastructure of the city

### 3. Student life in Utrecht

Since this research deals with students in Utrecht and their experiences of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, this chapter will first deal with the city of Utrecht and in what way student life would normally be organized within this city. After that, we will have a look at the rules and policies the Dutch government implemented in order to tackle the spread of the COVID-19 virus and how it influences the student infrastructure of Utrecht.

*Utrecht, student city in the heart of the Netherlands*

(Jamie)

The website of the city council of Utrecht states that Utrecht is a student city in the middle of the Netherlands, hosting the largest university in the country. The city has a variety of educational institutions that together have more than 70.000 students enrolled, making up an impressive twenty percent of the population of Utrecht (Gemeente Utrecht n.d.). The municipality of Utrecht (Gemeente Utrecht n.d.) describes the city as “a beautiful and inspiring urban setting that nurtures talent and creativity. It is a dynamic, growing city that is characterized by a personal, human scale and offers myriad opportunities to those ready to grasp them.” Utrecht has a lively student community that is made up of many different student organizations and societies (Gemeente Utrecht n.d.).

The city of Utrecht hosts eight big educational institutions, the biggest of which is Utrecht University. Utrecht University is one of the world’s top universities. The Shanghai Ranking ranks the university as number one in the Netherlands, 15 in Europe and 52 globally<sup>7</sup>. Next to Utrecht University there is University College Utrecht, the University of Applied Sciences (*Hogeschool Utrecht*), HKU Utrecht School of the Arts, TiasNimbas Business School, The Marnix Academie, Utrecht Summer School, and Tio University of Applied Sciences (Gemeente Utrecht n.d.).

Not much literature is available on the organization of student life, but Paul Chatterton (1999) provides a fruitful theory of student infrastructures. The student infrastructure of a certain city consists of all the services and organizations that are focused on the needs and wishes of students, including the provision of student-specific information (Chatterton 1999). Brands (2009) divides

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.shanghairanking.com/ARWU2020.html#> Accessed January 21, 2021.



student out-of-home-activities into 'going out' and 'other activities'. Here, 'going out' entails all activities related to bars/cafes, restaurants, clubs/discos, cinemas, and fraternities/sororities (Brands 2009). These establishments are an important part of the student infrastructure and are places where the identification of 'being a student' takes shape (Chatterton 1999). The more one uses this infrastructure, the more his/her identity as student will be reinforced. Everything there is to learn about 'being' a student, is learned using a city's student infrastructure (Chatterton 1999).

Brands (2009) researched the student infrastructure of Utrecht and has noted that there are a lot of student-related facilities available in the nightlife of the city. Multiple cafes are focused on students, having 'students' in their name or logo and a lot of bars in Utrecht offer events that are aimed at students specifically (Brands 2009). Some venues offer nights during which drinks are offered at a reduced price or events where students can enter for free after they show their student card. Some venues may even deny entry when one cannot show a student card in order to have events that are available to students only (Brands 2009). Next to that, fraternities and sororities (*studentenverenigingen*) are mostly accessible for students only and form institutions that often provide students with their full social networks.

Finally, students may enjoy a meal or shows for a reduced price in several cafes, theaters and cinemas (Brands 2009). Utrecht University has a free magazine for students and provides two cultural centers at which students can take part in courses and workshops for a reduced price. Utrecht University and *Hogeschool Utrecht* also join forces to organize the *UIT (Utrechtse Introductie Tijd)*, an event at the beginning of the academic year during which newly enrolled students get to know the city and its student infrastructure (Brands 2009). Lastly, these two educational institutions also collaborate with sports complex Olympos in order to provide students with a cheap opportunity to do sports (Brands 2009).

### *COVID-19 and its restrictions*

(Timo)

COVID-19 has had a tremendous impact of the social lives of people in the Netherlands. Utrecht is no exception. The coronavirus is one of major pathogens that primarily targets the human respiratory system (Rothan & Byrareddy 2020). Since it is person-to-person transmission based, social distancing and isolation are methods to stop the spread (Rothan & Byrareddy 2020). The COVID-19 virus has spread from China to many counties all over the world including the Netherlands since the beginning of 2020. The Netherlands has been subject to policies to stop the

spread since March 2020. According to the Dutch government website <sup>8</sup>there have been numerous policies to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus. These policies include always keeping physical distance of one and a half meters apart from each other, excluding one's own household, avoiding busy places, face mask requirement in public indoor spaces, staying at home when you have symptoms, the closure of restaurants, cafes and other infrastructures where people come together, a curfew in the evening and limitation of visitations at home (Government of the Netherlands, n.d.). Appendix 1 shows a more detailed timeline of the COVID-19 measures in the Netherlands. Since June 2020 these policies were gradually relaxed until the spread of the virus hit a second wave and policies needed to be put back in place. The closing of public spaces and the social distancing measures have a strong impact (Elmer et al. 2020). As discussed in the theoretical framework social distancing policies generally ask individuals to minimize physical contact with others outside of one's household but also inside one's household restricting the amount of people allowed inside the home (Elmer, Mepham & Stadtfeld 2020, 1-2). The social distancing policies aim to reduce the spread and infection rates of the coronavirus, but these policies also seem to have a tremendous effect and impact on the social lives of students and people in general (Elmer et al. 2020).

### *Student infrastructure during the lockdown*

(Jamie)

As was mentioned before, the student infrastructure in a particular city normally has a large share in teaching students what it means to 'be a student' (Chatterton 1999). But with the closure of public leisure places, students are no longer able to use this infrastructure for their identification of, and ideas about what it means to be a student. Marques and Giolo (2020: 344) write about the importance of leisure as it provides moments during which one can escape daily routines of work and care, contributes to expanding knowledge, skills and sense of belonging and self-realization. But what role do leisure practices play when social distancing policies are part of everyday life? Students feel like there currently are not much leisure options available to enjoy their free time and find themselves spending much more time on their studies. The balance between studying, working and leisure has shifted much more towards the element of 'study' (Marques and Giolo 2020). The idea that students are spending more time on their studies is something that is established at Utrecht University as well; "I feel like because of corona, students have fewer distractions, so they're more

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.government.nl/topics/coronavirus-covid-19/tackling-newcoronavirus-in-the-netherlands>  
Accessed December 17, 2020.

## Context

focused on their studies,” says Buskens, director of the bachelor’s programme in Sociology, in an article written for the university magazine *DUB*<sup>9</sup>. Braat’s (2020) article also shows that not being able to use the student infrastructure leaves students, and first-year students in particular, lost in the construction of their ‘student life’. “I don’t really feel like I’m a student” is a quote by a first-year student that has been used as the title of the articles, representing the general feeling of students who must shape their student lives in times of the COVID-19 pandemic (Braat 2020). Student lives thus seem to have changed a lot since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, mostly resulting in students being unsure about their social identity, experiencing different kinds of distress and seeking for ways to cope with the current situation. This research will study the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has on the social lives of first-year students and senior-year students and how they experience and cope with the situation.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.dub.uu.nl/en/depth/experiences-corona-generation-%E2%80%98i-don%E2%80%99t-feel-i%E2%80%99m-student%E2%80%99> Accessed December 17, 2020.

## 4. The lockdown generation

(Jamie)

The COVID-19 pandemic and the social distancing rules have had quite an impact on the social lives of first-year students in Utrecht. During the fieldwork period of this research the Netherlands was in its second lockdown, resulting in a lot of public places, including universities, to be closed.<sup>10</sup>

This first empirical chapter will show what the (social) lives of first-year students in Utrecht look like in times of the COVID-19 pandemic. It will state that first-year students are left with little to no new social capital in the city of their studies and find themselves in a liminal phase in between their lives as high school students and students at university, leading them to not fully identify as belonging to the second category. Additionally, this chapter will show in what ways first-year students cope and show resilience in times of the COVID-19 pandemic and its social distancing rules that make it harder to rely on one's social network. Finally, this chapter will discuss what students expect their student lives to look like after the pandemic.

### §1 Being a first-year student during the COVID-19 pandemic

I still don't really have the feeling that I am studying (...) I don't know, now when I think of student life ... I think about parties and all the social stuff, all of that is one thing. But going to the university and being in the same building as your fellow students ... I think that is the base of which I think, I don't really have that and that just is really weird to me.<sup>11</sup>

Starting their life at Utrecht University in the midst of a global pandemic makes the social student lives of first-year students different from what they had always expected as Nadine, first-year Liberal Arts and Sciences student, is saying above. For most of this year's first-year students the COVID-19 pandemic started when they were in the middle of the last year of high school and were preparing themselves for their final exams and the switch to university. Being in the last year of high school during the pandemic meant that many students had to close of the life phase of being a high school student in a different manner than they had always expected to. Many students always expected to end their life phase as a high school student with final exams being held in the big gym room at their high school, having something like a gala to celebrate graduation and to go for an *examenreis* (a trip to a sunny location somewhere in the south of

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<sup>10</sup> For a more detailed timeline of the spread of the COVID-19 virus in the Netherlands and the measures taken by the Dutch government, see Appendix 1

<sup>11</sup> Quote from the interview with Nadine, 15-03-2021.

Europe) with their friends. However, none of this happened last year which means that these students were never able to perform the rituals that are normally associated with the closing of the life phase of being a high school student.

Without having really closed of their previous life phase, a lot of students started their studies at university. Some first-year students have been lucky enough to have had some classes on campus at the beginning of the academic year. There are some first-year students who never had any class on campus up until the time that they were interviewed. Since the beginning of the second lockdown until the point that this research was conducted almost all lectures and tutorials at Utrecht University were held in an online manner. All courses are now online and this appears to be a great deal for first-year students as this is almost exclusively the first thing they mention when being asked about their student life in times of the COVID-19 pandemic. Out of those who have had some classes on campus, many students express being happy to have been able to have had at least a few classes or introductory activities on campus as they believe it is easier to get to know their fellow students and teachers in an offline setting. Some students told me that they managed to make a few friends during the "offline" activities they were able to attend at the beginning of the academic year. However, after about one month and a few offline opportunities to meet people and create a social network, COVID-19 cases in the Netherlands rose again. For most students all classes were held online from then on and in December 2020 a second lockdown was announced by the Dutch government.

(...) I normally am quite fast when it comes to making friends, I find that connection with others quite fast. But now I find it hard to find that connection, or hardly find it. And yes, I blame that entirely on online classes. (...) I think it is hard to become friends at all when you see each other on a screen, because you only see this [points to her head and shoulders]. (...) And it is not like you really are somewhere with someone. The other is just in their own environment...<sup>12</sup>

Students like first-year Interdisciplinary Social Sciences student Carlijn are having a harder time bonding with fellow students when they meet them online. Buote et al. (2007) emphasize the importance of establishing friendships in the first year of the new academic life after finishing high school. Friendships need to be established and maintained as friends provide help in hard times. Besides that, friendships provide a sense of belonging and companionship that protect students from loneliness. Buote et al. (2007) also mention that students typically find themselves in a time when there are one or more transitions to new social environments, developing friendships and social contacts in these new environments is of influence

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<sup>12</sup> Quote from the interview with Carlijn, 18-03-2021.

on the way students will adjust to their new situation. However, only the first-year students who have been able to make a few friends at the beginning of the academic year do have some new friends. This is not to say that those who have not yet been able to create strong friendships with fellow students are not enjoying contact with the people they know from their studies. Carlijn explains her relationship with her fellow students as follows:

(...) with them I had two meetings in the week (...) and today I had two exams and so we texted each other like ‘‘how did it go?’’ and we wished each other good luck beforehand. But a real bonding with my entire workgroup, I wouldn’t say that. But I don’t really think of something to be scary that quickly, I do like the fun, so in principle I would dare to text anyone ... I am that much bonded to them. But, yeah, I feel like ... they are not my friends or something, we don’t have a relationship like that.<sup>13</sup>

The current situation does leave those first-year students, who did not have any offline classes yet, or did not have enough offline time or opportunities yet to create a new social network in Utrecht, with not much social capital to fall back on from fellow students. Social capital is mostly seen as the ability of actors to secure benefits because of membership in social networks or other social structures (Portes 1998, 6). Social capital helps an individual in solving everyday tasks and facilitates the development of competence, self-confidence, self-esteem and identity (Raffo & Reeves, 2000, 141). This is to say that when one has no to little social capital in their new environment, it is harder for this person to adjust to the new environment, find a sense of belonging to it or enjoy any other of the advantages social capital has. As most first-year students are having a hard time building strong friendships in their new educational environments, it could be expected that they are less adjusted to and feel little sense of belonging or do not identify with these new environments.

When it comes to social relations with teachers, first-year students are having a hard time reaching out to their teachers during the lockdown. Whereas they feel free to ask questions during the tutorials and lectures on campus, they feel way more reluctant to ask a question during an online tutorial because of the unnatural flow that conversations during these tutorials often have. When it comes to online lectures, especially lectures that are recorded upfront, they are even more hesitant to ask the teacher anything as that often means having to send an email. This also becomes evident when Lucy, first-year Cultural Anthropology student, talks about her experience with pre-recorded lectures:

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<sup>13</sup> Quote from the interview with Carlijn, 18-03-2021.

I think that in the beginning of the school year, I really had to get used to the fact that my classes were on a screen. I cannot physically raise my hand and quickly ask a question. And all our lectures are recorded upfront, so if you want to ask a question, you have to first look for the professors' contact details. And yeah, I find that very inconvenient.<sup>14</sup>

Even though many students always planned to move out of their parents' place, out of the first-year students that were interviewed for this research only four have moved to Utrecht. Multiple students expressed that the COVID-19 pandemic influenced their decision to stay with their parents. During the lockdown, a great deal of first-year students do not perceive the expenses of living in a student house to be worth the freedoms they get with it because these freedoms are limited by the social distancing rules. However, not living in Utrecht does make it harder for first-year students to create a new social network, and thus social capital, in the city as it provides them with less opportunities to meet new people.

First-year students that still live with their parents mostly rely on friends from their childhood and high school as their social network and only meet with their hometown friends in their offline lives. This, however, defies Buote et al. (2007) who argue that in the shift from high school to university high school friendships tend to decrease in satisfaction, commitment and supportiveness. There are a couple of first-year students that expressed a disruption in their social support networks like Buote et al. (2007) predict for those who transition to university. Nevertheless, most first-year students' main friendships are still with friends from their childhood and high school. This means that instead of creating new social capital and creating social bonds that fit their new educational environment, first-year students tend to stick to their childhood friends who often still live around the corner.

For those first-year students who decided to move to a student house in Utrecht, roommates turn out to be an important part of their social network in Utrecht as they have often not yet been able to create a sufficient social network out of people they met at the university or other offline activities. But no matter of whom first-year students' social capital consists of in times of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the Dutch government implemented a curfew and a maximum visit of one person per day, it was hard for students to meet with any friends on a regular basis. Myrthe, first-year Interdisciplinary Social Sciences students explains her experience with the curfew:

Yeah, I just don't have the time to cook, and I want to walk more often, but that is hard because of the curfew. So walking is not really an option either. And I want to visit my grandparents, but that too is impossible because of the curfew because they live relatively far away.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Quote from the interview with Lucy, 10-03-2021.

<sup>15</sup> Quote from the interview with Myrthe, 29-03-2021.

When talking about the relationship first-year students have with their family, COVID-19 seems to mostly have an impact on the relationship they have with their grandparents. Because elderly people are considered to be at higher risk when it comes to the COVID-19 virus, first-year students tend to keep a distance from them and often do not visit their grandparents any more in order to protect them from the virus like Merel, first-year Interdisciplinary Social Sciences student, is talking about:

(...) It got annoying with the lockdown because I eat at my grandparents' place quite often (...) I made sure that I would eat at their place at least once every two weeks and sometimes more often ... only because ... at one point the numbers were rising, and we went into lockdown. And at that point my grandparents got scared. So, I haven't seen them now for, let me think, almost four months and that is quite a long time for me.<sup>16</sup>

The literature tells us that students who can rely on a strong and effective system of social capital have the greatest chance to manage during the COVID-19 pandemic (Raffo & Reeves 2000). To be able to use their social capital, students must maintain social ties. However, social relationships are hard to obtain and maintain in times where physical proximity and opportunities for interaction are limited (Elmer et al. 2020). Online classes and the fact that most first-year students still live with their parents limit the opportunities first-year students have for interaction within their new social environments. First-year students are having a hard time building social relationships with their fellow students, resulting in them mostly relying on their hometown friends as their social capital. That may be the greatest impact COVID-19 has on the social lives of first-year students.

## §2 "The lockdown-student"

(...) at the moment I am not a student all the way. Right now, I am just, studying. I just follow a study. And I think that the whole student culture, to call it that way, like the parties and the committees and the activities. That is a little reduced right now, or gone, and I think that really is a part of student life. So no, I do not really think of myself as a student. I merely think of myself as a person who is studying.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Quote from the interview with Merel, 07-04-2021.

<sup>17</sup> Quote from the interview with Sterre, 09-03-2021.



This quote by Sterre, first-year Liberal Arts and Sciences students, represents how many first-year students experience their student life in times of the COVID-19 pandemic. The common idea is that being enrolled at a university is not the only thing it takes to be a student. First-year students express that they need to be part of a student culture in order to fully identify as students.

When it comes to transitions from one phase in life to another, van Gennep (2019) introduces the notion of a rite of passage. As is said in the previous paragraph, students find themselves in a time that is characterized by many social transitions, one of those being the transition from high school student to university student. Because of social distancing rules, this year's first-year students have missed rituals that would normally close off their life phase of being a high school student. Therefore, there never really was a clear moment at which their rite of passage began because the start of their separation stage was never clearly marked by the rituals they had expected to endure. Nevertheless, there is a cognitive notion amongst first-year students that being a high school student is something that belongs to the past. However, the feeling that first-year students have fully started their student life at university does not appear to be present and a lot of first-year students feel like they are in some kind of in-between phase.

It's like, I feel like I'm living in between two worlds or something. Because high school was ended really abruptly (...) our exams were two days before the lockdown and then we wanted to go to all kinds of parties, but then we couldn't. And now it feels like it never really ended. And now I'm still talking with less than ten people that I know from high school. But still, somehow, it feels like they are my friends more than the people I know from university because I hardly ever see them. So, it's like I'm living in between two worlds.<sup>18</sup>

Van Gennep (2019) would label the feeling that Nadine describes above as a feeling of liminality, characteristic for the transition stage of the rite of passage. This liminal phase brings a lot of uncertainty and mystery because social status is often unclear. Raffo & Reeves (2000) emphasize the importance of social capital in this phase as it presents a normative model for the transition. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic it is hard to establish bonds and ties with others and build social networks in new social environments, and thus normative models are lost. This explains why most first-year students do not feel like they have fully entered the life phase of being a university student yet and are stuck in the liminal phase between life as a high school student and student life at university.

This also has an influence on first-year students' social identity. Bliuc et al. (2011) refer to social identity as the aspects of an individual's self-image that derive from the social categories or groups that they

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<sup>18</sup> Quote from the interview with Nadine, 15-03-2021.

perceive themselves to belong to. Together with the value of, and emotional significance attached to a category or group membership, this is social identity. Turner (1969) introduces the idea of *communitas* as the sense of community between and a bond among individuals based on the common experience of going through a liminal phase and completing the rite of passage. However, the fact that a lot of first-year students feel like they are stuck in their transition implies that they still find themselves in a liminal phase and have not completed this rite of passage. This, together with the fact that most first-year students have very little to no social capital within their new social environments, makes it assumable that there is not much feeling of a community, or *communitas*, among first-year students.

As opposed to what they expected their student lives at university to be like, first-year students are now mostly sitting in their rooms, looking at their laptop during their online classes and the few online activities organized by study associations they join, an experience is related to lockdown rut. Lucy describes her experience as follows; "(...) right now I mostly miss the social contacts ... that's what I miss the most and I think it's hard that you wake up in the morning, open your laptop, and then, yeah, you go back to bed. There's not much else."<sup>19</sup>

Lockdown rut is meant to describe the feeling of predictability of everyday life that is caused by the lockdown and social distancing rules. First-year students also express that the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting social distancing policies make it harder for them to feel motivated for and concentrate on their studies, even if it sometimes is the only thing they have to do during a day. Next to that, there may also be a feeling of languishing, a sense of stagnation and emptiness during which students feel joyless and aimless. This feeling originates from the fact that many first-year students have not been able to build deep friendships with fellow students, to go out, have drinks with a group of friends and all sorts of other things they perceive to be part of student life at university.

Many students express being sad that they have not been able to live a student life as they had always expected. Some do, however, like the fact that they get the chance to slowly adjust to a new style of studying and that they get to spend more time with their families or roommates at home. Nevertheless, the most important thing to first-year students is that they feel like they are not really living a student life because of the COVID-19 pandemic and that they cannot wait for the pandemic to be over and start living the student life at university they have always wanted to live.

Furthermore, the theoretical framework also introduced the concept of cultural trauma, a collective notion of a horrendous event that leaves unforgettable marks upon a group's consciousness and changing their future identity in irrevocable ways (Sztompka 2000). Cultural disorientation is the first stage in the development of a cultural trauma. It could be argued that first-year students currently find themselves in a

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<sup>19</sup> Quote from the interview with Lucy, 10-03-2021.

situation of cultural disorientation. First-year students perceive the current situation to tackle some of the central aspects of what they understand student culture to be. Next to that, it has become clear that first-year students are missing the social part of their student lives, a part of student culture that has become problematic in a time when physical proximity and meetings with groups need to be reconsidered. First-year students seem to be very much aware of the fact that they are the generation that is experiencing the beginning of their student life at university in a different way than the generations before them. Hence the title of this chapter. However, it may be too soon to say whether the current situation could be labeled as a cultural trauma.

### **§3 I stand here for all first-year students who don't really know what it's like to be a student**

'I stand here for all first-year students who don't really know what it's like to be a student' is the text that could be read on the sign that is in my bag as I am on my way to the Jaarbeursplein, a square next to Utrecht's municipality building. It is a cold, rainy afternoon in March. I am wearing a big sweater that is covered by my raincoat, Timo is wearing his winter coat and a beanie to keep him warm. We join a crowd that consists of about thirty people and in which almost everyone has a sign like mine. 'Because the curfew hits hard when you live on nine square meters'. 'I stand here for my friend who doesn't leave the house anymore'. The red crosses on the floor that indicate where we are allowed to stand make that even a small group of thirty covers a big part of the square. One by one, multiple speakers make their way towards the stairs that elevate them from the crowd. They talk about their personal experiences and the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has on their lives as students. One girl in a yellow raincoat shares how she burst into tears one day when she was in her way to the campus. One of the speakers works for the municipality and tells us she is going to make sure that things will be dealt with better in the future, a great applause follows her promise.<sup>20</sup>

Next to the speaker who promises to deal with things better in the future, students themselves need to find ways of dealing with the current situation. As has been mentioned, first-year students may find themselves to be stuck in a liminal phase and are having a hard time building up on social capital in their new social environments. Young people with strong systems of social capital are better protected against change (Raffo & Reeves 2000). Without having much social capital in their new social environments to fall back on, it is difficult for first-year students to find a way in which they can deal with this situation.

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<sup>20</sup> As part of our fieldwork, we have been to the demonstration "Student uit Isolement" (Student out of Isolation) at the Jaarbeursplein in Utrecht, 10-03-2021.

Labrague et al. (2020) argue that alongside social capital, personal resilience and adequate coping skills are also of importance when it comes to the management of and ability to bounce back in situations like the COVID-19 pandemic. Interpersonal resilience is mostly related with social support and has proven to be hard to find for first-year students in their new social environments. Intrapersonal resilience could be defined as resilience from within an individual and thus may be more fruitful during the COVID-19 pandemic. Intrapersonal resilience has proven to be helpful in situations where individuals are able to keep a daily routine, engage in physical activities and other distractions, and where individuals have been able to apply positive reappraisal and accept the situation they find themselves in (Hartley 2011; Labrague et al. 2020; Shanahan et al. 2020). First-year students seem to have engaged in more physical activities and other distractions.

In general, first-year students report to have more free time as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and often have a feeling that they should keep themselves busy to not get bored and in order to have a purpose for their days. Therefore, engaging in physical activities and other distractions could be a great way of applying intrapersonal resilience in the current situation. Here Nienke, first-year Cultural Anthropology students, talks about how she reintroduced certain hobbies to her life.

Yes, it's a little like, because I realize I'm a student and I like to say that I'm studying anthropology and all of that. But just, it's not, it's not what I had imagined. Not like that at all. And for example, I started knitting again. And that is something that I like, but maybe not something I would have normally done right now.<sup>21</sup>

Many students have taken up old hobbies such as drawing, reading and making music. Next to that, students spend their free time on activities such as gaming, watching movies or series and browsing the internet or social media. Students also try to meet with their friends as much as possible in the ways that they are still allowed to. They for example go for walks with friends, have dinner together or look for online possibilities to connect with others. Board members of study associations share that it is mostly first-year students that join online activities because they, as compared to senior students, have not been able to create a stable social network yet and seek for ways to meet new friends and to be in contact with fellow students.

Adjacent to the fact that social capital and friends make it easier to deal with change, Raffo & Reeves (2000) argue that friends also make the experience of school meaningful and worthwhile and that the lack of friends or social capital when students move to a new school or university could impact their grades or even make them leave education. In order to be able to keep on going and not to stop with their studies,

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<sup>21</sup> Quote from the interview with Nienke, 09-04-2021.

first-year students use their intrapersonal resilience and apply positive reappraisal when they focus on the positive side of the situation because they know it will not be helpful to focus on the negative side, just like Nienke is trying to: "(...) I at least try to approach it in a positive way, because when I'm constantly complaining about how bad this all sucks ... that won't make it any better."<sup>22</sup>

First-year students express the need to be okay with having an "off-day" because everyone has a day like this during the COVID-19 pandemic, which shows that sometimes they are able to accept the situation that they find themselves in. "Basically, school is the only thing I've got right now, so I want to at least get the best results in that. That kind of has become my state of mind."<sup>23</sup>

Lucy's state of mind results from the fact that because of the social distancing rules many everyday activities are no longer possible, resulting in the need to build a new daily routine. Studying is one of the few things to do in a day during lockdown anyway and most first-year students have for now decided to focus on their studies and try to get the best results as possible.

To prevent themselves from stopping their studies and starting over in a few years, first-year students tell themselves that the next academic year will be the year that the social part of their student life will really start. They have already promised themselves that they will allow themselves to enjoy this even more than they would normally allow themselves to do, and some students are already planning on extending their studies by one year in order to make up for all the fun they are missing now. However, the longer the social distancing rules stay in place, the more students start to lose their hope on a student life that they perceive to be normal. Next to that, the willingness of first-year students to stick to the rules is declining as they feel like their social lives and mental health are starting to worsen as a result of these very rules, as Sterre explains in the following quote:

(...) because right now I feel like ... I feel like it's been too much, and, yeah, are the measures still worth their consequences? And not only for me, but also people who got depressed and for whom every day gets tougher, people who are really depressed because of corona, or for whom corona made things worse. That just makes me think ... I don't really know. Also, I think all people with increased risk are almost fully vaccinated. So, yeah, to me it seems like everything could open again.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Quote from the interview with Nienke, 09-04-2021.

<sup>23</sup> Quote from the interview with Lucy, 10-03-2021.

<sup>24</sup> Quote from the interview with Sterre, 09-03-2021.

#### §4 Post-pandemic expectations

Thinking about the future, first-year students almost exclusively talk about how they expect the social part of their student life at university to become much bigger after the COVID-19 pandemic. As has been discussed, first-year students struggle with creating a stable social network or make more friends than just a few during the pandemic. First-year students believe that when the pandemic is over this will become much easier for them. Many students plan on moving to Utrecht once the lockdown is over which they believe will be a good basis for creating a new social network in the city of their studies. Moving out of their parents' house may affect their relationships with their families, but this does not seem like something first-year students are worried about. They expect to be having coffee with classmates after tutorials, go for drinks with friends whenever they feel like, have dinner with friends or with roommates multiple nights in the week, go to cafes/bars/clubs, go to a of "offline" activities organized by their study associations or maybe join a sports association. First-year students expect to be spending much less time on their studies and a lot more on their social lives when the COVID-19 pandemic is over. At the same time, they express that they do not really know what the social part of a student life looks like because they have not been able to experience this yet and cannot wait to find out whether their expectations will become reality after the pandemic.

First-year students expect that when their studies will be organized offline as well their contact with fellow students and teachers will be much better. Their expectations are that they will enjoy their studies much more, learn more from tutorials and will be less reluctant to ask teachers questions. Many first-year students express an assumption that when they are having lectures and tutorials on campus, they will be able to create or expand their social network as meeting new friends is believed to be easier when you meet people in real life. Furthermore, meeting new friends is at the base of the social part of their student lives. Here Lucy tells what she expects a normal day after the COVID-19 pandemic to look like:

I expect that I will go to campus in the morning, or in the afternoon, I don't know what timetables at the university look like, and then I'll go to my classes. After that, maybe I'll go for lunch with someone, or I will study at the library, go home, maybe do some groceries, do some sports. Go to friends or have a party in the evening. A bit like how it was before corona maybe. (...) But I think at least I have more activities during a day, things like sports and social things.<sup>25</sup>

All in all, the COVID-19 pandemic has quite an impact on the (social) lives of first-year students in Utrecht. All first-year students that have been interviewed for this research express that their current student lives are different from what they had always expected. Not only have they not been able to live a student life as

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<sup>25</sup> Quote from the interview with Lucy, 10-03-2021.

## Empirical chapter

is perceived to be normal yet, but they were also never able to properly close of their life as high school students. This results in a feeling of liminality that combined with the little social capital that first-year students have in their new social environments leads to the fact to most first-year students do not really identify as university students. Many have taken up old hobbies, applied positive reappraisal and found new daily routines in order to deal with the current situation. Despite the current situation, most first-year students are hopeful for the future and cannot wait to start living their student lives at the university as they had always expected to.

## 5. Senior-year students and ‘Corona tiredness’

(Timo)

In this chapter I will show what the social lives entail for students during the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter shows that senior-year students have a hard time dealing with the effects of the regulations and when they do how some find it hard to maintain their social circles. It also reveals how the social lives have changed and its consequences. This leads to struggles for senior-year students. Furthermore, this chapter indicates the importance of social contacts and its link to social capital, as well as how students try to maintain their group of friends. It discusses how students experienced the COVID-19 pandemic and how they cope with the changes to their social lives caused by the pandemic. Finally, it will show how students see their future.

### §1 The changed social lives of senior-year students

*“Je bent jong en je wilt wat”*<sup>26</sup> A quote which translates to “you’re young and you want something”. Lisanne, who is 21 and a third year student Economy and Business Organization, says that as a student you want to be able to date who you want and that love and lust is inevitable for students who are constantly in each other’s space due to living with each other. Especially when you are unable to meet other people due to the regulations as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Two of her roommates got a relationship during COVID-19 whereas before COVID-19 it was custom to not try to start relationships with roommates due to struggles it can produce after a breakup for example.

Gijs, who is a student and board member of a study association captures the other side of this change in his social life. He really captures this sentiment of most students: “Quality of social lives is just really low; we have more than enough time to spend on our social lives but the quality is just bad.”<sup>27</sup>. Multiple studies (Elmer et al. 2020; Labrague, De los Santos & Falguera 2020; Shanahan et al. 2020) have shown that students perceive the social distancing policies as disruptive to their social activities, resulting in lack of interaction, physical isolation and lack of emotional and social

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<sup>26</sup> Quote from the interview with Lisanne, 25-02-2021.

<sup>27</sup> Quote from the interview with Gijs, 25-02-2021.



support. Due to the regulations and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic a lot of students are bound to their homes, unable to go to university or see their friends at home.

Even if they have roommates, senior-year students still miss their friends and sporadically speak to them or meet up with them. As Lisanne mentions: “And now we are really lucky that there are ten of us living in this house of course. That is very nice. But then, actually you only see the same ten faces. Now and then someone in between. But I rarely see other people. That is really long ago.”<sup>28</sup>

Due to the closure of universities and public places like bars and cafés there is nowhere to really meet fellow students as Krista, a master student mentions: “I don’t know my fellow students, because before corona we would’ve gone out with each other and got to know each other.”<sup>29</sup> This quote captures the sentiment for students who are in a class with new people.

The contact with teachers and professors has also deteriorated a lot. You cannot just walk into their office anymore and the contact has become quite distant. When asked how the contact with their teachers was, James said: “yes, quite difficult because they no longer work on location they only come to the university now and then for lectures, but you cannot really reach them anymore. If you have a question or something you can't just walk to the building. So I find that very difficult.”<sup>30</sup> Despite that, some teachers are trying to reach out to students in an effort to create a connection.

The social relations from students in Utrecht has changed at a personal level. The relations stem from their studies or from other social places like a study or student association, nightlife or through other friends. One thing that all students mentioned was that they saw their friends and fellow students less and less. This is especially evident in the way students talk about who their good friends are, the people who they have the most contact with and who check in on them. Several students talked about how the COVID-19 pandemic made them figure out who their friends were. Krista is especially vocal about this: “Friendships are deteriorating, I needed to find out who my true friends were”<sup>31</sup>. Because you cannot just meet anyone anymore due to the risk of COVID-19 and the restrictions you have to pick the people that you want to reside into your social ‘bubble’. This was the main reason for students to pick some friends.

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<sup>28</sup> Quote from the interview with Lisanne, 25-02-2021.

<sup>29</sup> Quote from the interview with Krista, 16-12-2020.

<sup>30</sup> Quote from the interview with James, 18-11-2020.

<sup>31</sup> Quote from the interview with Krista, 16-12-2020.

Family is a really important part of the social life of senior-year students. Unfortunately, they have been unable to visit their parents as much as before the pandemic due to the advice not to travel and thereby not wanting to take the risk of infecting their parents with the COVID-19 virus. This is primarily the case for students who live in a student house with several other students since these students have a wide social circle which could transmit the virus. Lisanne says:

And yes, we do pay very close attention to the regulations ourselves. That is also necessary, because we also have someone who, for example, works in disability care. And we have roommates who have quite frail elderly parents. So you handle it more careful. Then you also want it to stay safe or that you can just go to your parents without thinking oh, I don't know if I did something unsafe...<sup>32</sup>

Even though Lisanne still sees her parents sometimes she does this less regularly.

The living situation for senior-year students in Utrecht changed for some. A few of the students mentioned that they were abroad when COVID-19 hit and needed to fly back but their own room in the student house was sublet to someone else for a few months, which resulted in them living at their parents for some time. These students found this not ideal and wanted to go back but for some this was not possible. Other students noted that because of COVID-19 and the first lockdown they and their roommates got really close with each other. Mostly because they could not see anyone else outside of their roommates. Most senior-year students had fellow students living with them in one house which made the social isolation for most students more bearable since in your own house there is no need for social distancing, and you still have people of the same age close to you. They adhere to the social distancing rules outside of their own home. When someone tested positive they went into isolation and the whole house did not go outside till they or the others tested negative or were symptom free. The social circle expanded to include their roommates. They were not merely your roommates but also becoming more and more your friends. As one student noticed “it is really nice to live with people of your own age who share the same struggles”<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> Quote from the interview with Lisanne, 25-02-2021

<sup>33</sup> Quote from the interview with Tim, 04-03-2021

Now that membership in social networks and other social structures has changed and has become less frequent you could argue that social capital has decreased for students in Utrecht. As established in the theoretical framework, social capital is the ability of actors to secure benefits because of membership in social network and other social structures (Portes 1998, 6.). These social networks and social structures of social capital include features such as levels of interpersonal trust and norms of reciprocity and mutual aid, which act as resources for individuals and makes collective action possible (Kawachi 2000, 175). As described earlier, there is less of social connection to others which therefore diminishes these features of social structures. Benjamin et al. (2001, 49) argue that social capital is of great importance for youth since young people and in this case students, are actively trying to shape their present and future selves through interactions with each other. When the interaction is less frequent and less available it could prove hard for students to shape their present and their future selves which could have multiple effects. In the next paragraph it will be discussed what these effects are when the social capital and the social connections have changed and how the senior-year students experience these changes.

## **§2 Senior-year students and their changed social lives.**

The changes as described in last paragraph of the social lives of senior-year students are mostly perceived as negative. Pandemics are perceived to be life events that are connected to feelings of uncertainty, ambiguity and loss of control which could trigger stress, emotional distress, anxiety, depression and anger (Shanahan et al. 2020, 1) which a lot of senior-year students in Utrecht experience. This is primarily the result of the regulations implemented by the government of the Netherlands in response to the COVID-19 threat as confirmed by a student on the online forum of Reddit regarding a post about the mental health of students in the Netherlands<sup>34</sup>.

The threat of the COVID-19 virus also had an effect on students in Utrecht. They were afraid to visit their parents, meet up with friends and meet people in general, but the biggest effect was constantly being in the same room to study, sleep and work as described by Krista:

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<sup>34</sup> <sup>34</sup> [https://www.reddit.com/r/ik\\_ihe/comments/m2klxd/ik\\_ihe/?utm\\_medium=android\\_app&utm\\_source=share](https://www.reddit.com/r/ik_ihe/comments/m2klxd/ik_ihe/?utm_medium=android_app&utm_source=share) accessed 12<sup>th</sup> of march 2021

Because you are at home you can decide for yourself when you do something and you can also quickly switch to being distracted and want to do something different. Then I will also look up something else. And then I go back to Netflix. Oh yes, I was still listening to lectures, but then you do something different. Because it is all on one laptop, for example. Everything happens in one room. And I already find that difficult.<sup>35</sup>

This quote portrays the struggle of studying at home where you have everything from your bed to your studies. It is easier to get distracted which happens a lot and people are tired of the constant screens. They go from opening the laptop to talk to friends to closing it or stepping away from the laptop. To opening it again for a lecture, to eventually closing it and opening again to ‘relax’ and watch Netflix. Multiple students mentioned that this is very tiring. They are tired of the lack of things to do like Krista is saying here: “But it costs a lot more energy now I think because your barely leave the house.”<sup>36</sup>. James, a fourth-year anthropology student says: “I find it very difficult to concentrate myself, I have to put in a lot more effort to motivate myself and watching a lecture of an hour that has already been recorded in advance takes more energy than following a lecture in physical class.”<sup>37</sup> Not being able to go outside the house and do things outside of their own home is tiring and thus wears the students in Utrecht down. These students mentioned having less energy to do something as well as less motivation in general to change the situation. They find this a big problem. They want to be able to follow lectures on location to be able have a clear distinction between work/study and relaxing.

The decrease in social capital as described in last paragraph has certain negative aspects, the first being the inadequacy of senior-year students to deal with their struggles resulting from the change in social lives. Whereas before they could rely on their friends and social capital to help them through these struggles, now it is harder with the decrease of their social circles.

Even though most young adults are at a low risk of COVID-19-related health problems, it could still lead them to mostly feel distress by the pandemic’s secondary consequences; the social distancing policies and its associated disruption of social life and economic downfall (Shanahan et al. 2020). This is especially evident with the way some students talk about finding employment and having less hours to work which will be mentioned in next paragraph.

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<sup>35</sup> Quote from the interview with Krista, 16-12-2020.

<sup>36</sup> Quote from the interview with Krista, 16-12-2020.

<sup>37</sup> Quote from the interview with James, 18-11-2020.

As a few students mentioned, in the winter period, from December to February, was when they had a winter depression which combined with the effects of the COVID-19 regulations, was not good on their mental health. Jenna, a third year Media, Art and Performance student, had troubles with her mental health and says: “I had a hard time during the last lockdown since December since I was really down, it didn’t help that I also suffer from winter depression sometimes, so it amplified each other...”<sup>38</sup> Jenna says here that she suffered from the regulations since she could not go out as much with her friends as before and due to bad weather she had little ways of meeting up outside with friends.

Several students mentioned that due to the regulations they are more stuck in their room, experience more stress, less motivation, more mental health problems. As discussed earlier, James talked about less motivation whereas Jenna struggled with her mental health due to the regulations.

One student mentioned that he experienced an increased lack of empathy. This lack of empathy is mostly due to increased ‘corona tiredness’ among students as well as the feeling of being forgotten by the government. This ‘corona tiredness’ is what some students described as “the feeling that you are just done with everything that has to do with the COVID-19 virus, the regulations, the virus itself, the fear and just everything...”<sup>39</sup> Gijs mentions that it feels like a football game where you are 13-0 behind, following the regulations serves no purpose anymore because you’re already behind. He does not care anymore. “you’re getting really cynical just thinking about it all (...) I can almost start thinking, let the elderly die because it is not worth it anymore. The boiling point is almost reached for students”<sup>40</sup>.

This feeling from Gijs could show some form of trauma. As Jamie argued in the last chapter, first-year students are subject to a cultural disorientation which is the first stage of a possible cultural trauma. This is the case for senior year students as well. The social lives as they have known it, from before the pandemic, have abruptly changed and their student lives are therefore disrupted. Senior-year students do know what it is like to be a student in contrast to first-years, but the things that made them students have deteriorated. They are missing the social part of their student life which is a big part of what student culture entails. As discussed in this paragraph students are aware of what they are missing and are therefore subject to cultural disorientation. Nevertheless, just because they are missing something now, and have experienced something in

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<sup>38</sup> Quote from the interview with Jenna, 24-02-2021.

<sup>39</sup> Quote from the interview with Gijs, 25-02-2021.

<sup>40</sup> Quote from the interview with Gijs, 25-02-2021.

the past, does not mean that this will lead to a cultural trauma since they see themselves going back to 'normal' once COVID-19 passes.

To show the other side, there are some students with perceived positive changes. A study advisor argued that some students with ADHD or autism for example are having a better time studying due to the fact that there is no social pressure for them or distraction. She also mentioned that due to the lockdown and the lack of social interaction that students who were already struggling before the pandemic had time to recover without the fear of missing out on social interactions. Linda, a student English literature says: "it was hard, and sucked but when I look back I don't think I had an unpleasant time"<sup>41</sup>. Because she had time to recover from mental health problems, that started before the COVID-19 pandemic, the lockdowns and the regulations where you could not do much helped her find her rest and resulted in her mostly recovering.

The study advisor mentioned earlier that for students who have ADHD or other disorders where there can be a sensory overload, it was easier in times of COVID-19 to deal with that and to study. The negative changes in their social lives did not outweigh the positive changes for their well-being. This was mostly due to not having to go to the university as well as not having any social obligations which could impair some students. There were also some positive changes in which some students were reevaluating their social life and coming to the conclusion that they had a boring social life before and changed that so that they have more of a social life outside of the students they meet at the university.

To conclude, there are several negative aspects to the changing of the social lives. These negative aspects are primarily due to the regulations and the fear of transmitting the virus. As can be seen from this paragraph several students talked about how it affected their motivation, concentration, overall mood and made one student even quite cynical. How students handle and cope with these situations will be discussed in the next paragraph.

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<sup>41</sup> Quote from the interview with Linda, 02-03-2021.

### **§3 Coping and resilience of senior-year students in Utrecht in times of the COVID-19 pandemic**

As is written in the previous paragraphs, senior-year students experience a lack of social contact which has its effects as seen in the last paragraph. Even though these effects are significant senior-year students also show the tendency to cope with these struggles. These coping techniques include sports, (new) hobbies, cooking and still meeting up with friends when possible, be it online or still in person somewhere.

What is perceived as normal carries a lot of different connotations in times of COVID-19. When students are less able to form social bonds and acquire adequate social capital, it is possibly hard to deal with things such as studying and the effects of the COVID-19 virus and regulations. As will be clear in this chapter students tend to find ways and show resilience despite the struggle for strong social capital.

In the vignette below Jamie and I joined a study association in their online Thursday afternoon drinks. It shows how some students cope in these times.

A guy named David joins the zoom call. He has combed hair going to the back of his head and apparently already had some drinks before joining this Thursday afternoon drinks from the study association. Jamie and I joined the zoom call fifteen minutes before and were greeted by three different screens, one which was empty and where you could only see a guitar, a closet with a robe hanging off of it and the door. On the second screen you could see a blonde girl with short hair and she is wearing her study association T-shirt. It is dark blue with short sleeves. Her room has curtains with dark green flowers and it looks like quite a spacious room. We start talking about how her living situation is at the moment and she mentions that she lives with three others. The third person is a young guy with a blue wall as background and he greets the guy David into the space. You can see the names on the bottom of each screen. John, the guy in the third screen, greets David and asks if he is hungover from the day before. David says: “nah I’m not hungover, I even drank seven beers before joining here.” He does not seem that tipsy but that could maybe not be seen through the screen. It is just 4 o’clock in the

afternoon. David mentions that he drinks quite a lot these days, he even has an Instagram account in which he drinks a beer in one go every day. To just keep the spirits high of others.<sup>42</sup>

As seen from the vignette above, David is a student who drinks a lot and it is his way of coping with the COVID-19 pandemic. Several other students mentioned that sometimes things escalate in their house and when one drink evolves into a whole party. Lisanne says: “You grab a drink and suddenly it escalates.” Lisanne also spoke about an alternate coping technique to her diminishing interest in studying due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the lack of seeing her fellow classmates. She made the decision to take a break from her study for one period of 10 weeks since she just did not enjoy studying anymore. Lisanne lives with 9 others and several of them also took a break noticing the effect the break had on her. She started working and said:

I worked at PostNL in December to sort Christmas cards. It’s nothing fancy, but it was really great to have my goal to get out. Enjoy cycling and earn money.

I thought that was a very nice change compared to sitting behind your laptop and just following lectures.

For Lisanne the change of pace was really nice, and she hoped that from the break she would find new motivation and interest in her study again. Which luckily she did.

Labrague et al. (2020) argue that alongside social capital, personal resilience and adequate coping skills are also of importance when it comes to the management of and ability to bounce back in situations like the COVID-19 pandemic. Next to the normative transitions, students experience as described in the theoretical framework, students in times of COVID-19 experience new ‘abrupt’ transitions. These include, not seeing your friends, being confined to your own home for longer periods of time and several others. This affects the psychological well-being and mental health of students. Therefore, they needed to find coping mechanisms and habits to help them through this time.

Students in Utrecht found other ways to cope include gaming and new hobbies. Jenna, for example, bought a Nintendo Switch and played a lot on this to pass the time on the days where she

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<sup>42</sup> Vignette from Thursday afternoon drinks with a study association, 01-04-2021.



is not studying. She also started a new hobby of rollerblading. She is not the only one picking up new 'odd' hobbies. Several students joined or got more active at a student association. There they took part in activities like pottery from home or knitting. Some may call this 'old school' activities, but all students interviewed really liked these hobbies since they gave a purpose or a feeling of connectedness with each other, also when done online.

The coping mechanism that was exercised most was just simply walking in nature, several students said that this was really nice to do with others since it was 'safe' due to it being in the open air where the risk of contamination is said to be reduced. But as mentioned before in the winter it was quite cold and bad weather which unfortunately meant that a lot of students were still confined to their homes. As mentioned earlier Jenna said that this is primarily the reason for her winter depression since she is unable to meet up with others and that combined with the effect of the weather has an effect on her overall mood and happiness.

As can be seen here senior-year students tend to have adequate coping skills. These include walking in nature, finding hobbies to keep them busy and knowing when it is time to take a step back and relax or do other things than studying. It is important to research how these coping techniques help students in general and if they show resilience as mentioned by Labrague et al. (2020).

As Jamie mentioned in the previous chapter, resilience is the capacity for successful adaptation and positive functioning of a person. As seen from the adaptive ability from Lisanne, in which she noticed that it was time to take a break from university and do something else for some time, she was adequately adept to handle the COVID-19 pandemic in her own way. Several other students like Jenna and David tend to find their own hobbies to help them through the pandemic. What both students really helped was the support they had around them and their general social support.

This is especially evident when you take interpersonal resilience as explained by Jamie in the previous chapter, and link this to how students cope with the pandemic. The social support and the overall importance the students put on their social capital shows that they really need the people around them. Of course, where some students like Jenna and David also tend to rely on their intrapersonal resilience, what helped students most was the people they had around them. This could be roommates, friends or family, which in general are the people that make up the social capital.

As is established throughout this thesis, social support is of great importance for students. The students interviewed showed great eagerness in reaching out for contact with people in their social circles, be it online or in person. That is why a lot of students also went on walks, to be able to meet their friends or family. Several students still went to their parents since it was important for them. John, mentioned in the vignette, is a third-year innovation management and science student. He says “I just agreed with my parents that I'll come by and that I'm part of the household”<sup>43</sup>. He is able to do this since he lives in a student house which does not have a lot of students, only four, and they keep distance from each other so you can argue that his main household is at his parents. Other students, like Lianne or her roommates, are less able to visit their parents since they are afraid they will pass the COVID-19 virus to them. Luckily, they have other people who provide them their social support. These are their roommates, their friends, who they meet outside, at home or online.

Students in Utrecht also tend to rely on their student associations based in Utrecht which they really look forward to when there is an event. Sophie, a third year anthropology student, is part of a student organization which focusses on the arts. She is really glad that she joined this association since it provides her with a sense of community which could also be described as *communitas*. Although there is less of notion in the classical sense of a rite de passage, there is a transition taking place, as established earlier. The students in the community, in this case the student association, are going through the same struggles, which the COVID-19 pandemic brings and are therefore in a sort of transitional phase. To acknowledge this is important since that means that there is an end to this phase in which all students will hopefully come out stronger together. After all, that is the goal of social capital; to have a strong system of social bonds.

Concluding, the actions of and conversations with students demonstrate resilience. They are able to bounce back from their tough experiences, as mentioned in the second paragraph, in multiple ways through coping mechanisms and their social support. The interpersonal resilience proves to be important which provides social capital and results from social capital. This helps students with their view on the future which will be discussed next.

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<sup>43</sup> Quote from interview with John, 22-12-2020.

#### §4 What happens after COVID-19?

As established earlier, it is important for students to have the strong social support as they have known it from before the COVID-19 pandemic. That is something they look forward to; to be able to see each other again in a normal setting. This normal setting can be at university but also at nightlife in Utrecht or at bars or restaurants.

When asking about the first thing to do after the COVID-19 pandemic, Jenna, a third year sociology student, answered: “cuddling with my grandpa and grandma, that's for sure. But just go out. Just go out.”<sup>44</sup> With go out she means the nightlife. To just go out with her friends again. But the need to be close to the vulnerable like her grandparents is a priority for more students. Some still do it despite the risk since they do not want to lose what little time they have left. Evelyn, a third year Anthropology student, mentions this and adds: “But as long as I am a little careful in normal days and have no one around me who has Corona, I dare to go.”<sup>45</sup>

Jenna said that partying was a major thing that she wants to do. She is not the only one. Several students mentioned that partying, “like normal” would be the thing that they want to do most. James describes that here:

yeah, just partying or something. Yes, I think so. I worry about that too, though. Like it can get really out of hand of course. But yeah, just, that's really kind of a moment where you don't have to worry about anything. Or at least not anymore at some point. I'm looking forward to that. Maybe then I look forward to it because now whatever you're doing, there's always this kind of pressure of what you have to do and that you have to do it alone. And those are the moments when you just don't have that.<sup>46</sup>

James mentions the most important part of why the students want to party as the first thing: The absence of pressure to always be careful but primarily the absence of worry. Though James argues that people will keep worrying about this for a long time even after the pandemic.

There are a few things that need to happen before partying like normal is possible. The thing students mentioned that needs to happen first are that the vaccinations need to be more widespread

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<sup>44</sup> Quote from interview with Jenna, 02-03-2021.

<sup>45</sup> Quote from interview with Evelyn, 03-03-2021

<sup>46</sup> Quote from interview with James, 18-11-2020

and better regulated. They have faith that this will work but there is still a lingering feeling of languish due to the continuation of the regulations and the not knowing when the end is near. Gijs, who talked earlier about being 13-0 behind in a football match, continues by saying “There's no end ahead of us. We are just hoping that we can go to university in September...”<sup>47</sup>

That is something all students said, to just be able to go to university again. The students are feeling left behind with some groups of the society being allowed to go to school again or work at the office. Gijs, who works in a school continues by saying: “And then I teach those kids and they really don't care. It doesn't matter to them at all. I found that so frustrating. And that is a group that does get priority.”<sup>48</sup> Gijs and other students just really wants to go back to university.

Even though some students are a little cynical about the future since they see no end, they think about the things they want to do and plan for things in the future. This could include a holiday to Iceland, doing a semester in Mexico or planning to go to a festival in the summer. Or as mentioned earlier, partying to forget the all the worries.

Concluding, the COVID-19 pandemic has a tremendous impact on the social lives of senior-year students in Utrecht. The senior-year students mentioned that their current lives are different from what they used to be. They have less contact with their friends or family, they rarely see their fellow students since they are not allowed to go to university and their roommates are getting more important since they provide them with social support. The changing social lives leads to experiences such as mental health issues, and reduction in motivation and concentration primarily due to being at home most of the time due to the isolation urged by the government. They also experience a need to reevaluate the friendships with others due to not being able to meet with all of them. The students need to cope with these mental health issues, reduction in motivation and changing friendships. They have found ways to do this with coping strategies such as, walking outside with friends, picking up old hobbies or finding new ones. They also tend to rely on their social support; their social capital, albeit a decreased one. They tend to show resilience despite all the struggles. This resilience helps them to plan for the future and express how they see the future. The students see this future somewhat cynical since there is no clear end of the road but are hopeful and have found ways to keep themselves hopeful with the coping strategies. They are planning for

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<sup>47</sup> Quote from interview with Gijs, 25-02-2021

<sup>48</sup> Quote from interview with Gijs, 25-02-2021

festivals, are hoping to go out again and tend to plan holidays in the summer of 2021 in hopes that the holidays are able to continue. So, if the vaccinations are progressing nicely the students are able to have that brighter outlook on the future and are hopefully able to go back to university in September and see their friends.

## 6. Conclusion

The spread of the COVID-19 virus has had a tremendous impact on the social lives of everyone, including students in Utrecht for more than a year now. This means that students, who find themselves in a life phase that is known for transitions, are in a new and unique situation in which they need to find ways to adapt. It could be argued that the adaptation to this situation of social change may be harder in times of social distancing policies that have been put into place by the Dutch government. In this thesis we examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its social distancing rules on the social lives of students in Utrecht.

With that we proposed our main question: *How do first-year students and senior-year students in Utrecht experience and deal with the changes in their social lives as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?*

This research has categorized first-year and senior-year students as two different groups. This conclusion will first give a brief summary of the findings for both groups. Next, it will discuss the similarities and differences we have noticed between the groups.

### **First-year students**

For most first-year students the COVID-19 pandemic started when they were in the middle of finishing high school, resulting in them having to close of their life phase of being a high school student in a different way than they had always expected to. The lockdown and social distancing rules made that this year's first-year students missed a lot of events that are normally perceived rituals when ending high school, such as final exams and a gala to celebrate graduation.

Despite missing the rituals to close of their life phase as a high school student, today's first-year students decided to start university anyway. Some first-year students have been lucky enough to have had some classes on campus at the beginning of the academic year, but many have not been this lucky. With the Netherlands being in its second lockdown, all first-year students had online classes at the time of this research. As students believe it is easier to make friends when they meet them offline, only a few first-year students have been able to build strong friendships in their new environments up until this moment. However, friendships are important to students as they provide help in hard times, protection from loneliness and help with the adjustment to new social

## Conclusion

environments. First-year students are also struggling with the social relationships they have with their teachers in times of the lockdown.

Most first-year students still live with their parents, which in combination with online classes and social distancing rules makes it harder for them to meet new people in Utrecht. First-year students thus often have little to no social capital in Utrecht which makes it harder for them to adjust to and find a sense of belonging to the student culture in the city. As a result, many first-year students still rely on their hometown friends as their social network. For those who have moved to Utrecht, roommates often prove to be an important part of their social network in Utrecht. However, no matter whether first-year students have moved to Utrecht or not, they are still missing the social parts of student life.

First-year students are still in a transition from life as a high school student to life as a university student. The fact that first-year students experience no real end to their high school phase and at the same time have not really had a real beginning of their student lives at university got them stuck in the liminal phase in between these phases. This in turn leads to a lack of social identification with their new social environments. Combining this with the fact that most first-year students have little social capital makes it assumable that there is little feeling of community, or *communitas*, among first-year students.

Besides that, first-year students experience what could be labeled a lockdown rut that originates from the fact that everything is online and at home. The lockdown and social distancing rules also make it harder for first-year students to concentrate on and find motivation for their studies. Next to that, most first-year students experience a sense of stagnation and emptiness because they have not been able to do all sorts of things they perceive to be part of student life.

Without having much social capital in their new social environments, first-year students need their personal resilience and adequate coping skills to deal with the current situation. The first-year students that were interviewed have mostly turned to their intrapersonal resilience. Many students have taken up old hobbies, started new ones and try to meet with friends as much as possible in social distancing times. Board members of study associations share that first-year students are overrepresented during online activities because they have not been able to build a social network in Utrecht yet and seek for ways to meet new friends. First-year students also feel the need to focus on the positive side of the situation as they think it will not be helpful to focus on the negative side and think it is okay to have an "off-day" sometimes, which shows the ability to

## Conclusion

accept the situation they find themselves in. Next to this, first-year students find new daily routines by focusing on their studies for now and hoping that the social part of their student life will start in the next academic year.

When thinking about the future, first-year students think it will become much easier for them to make friends once the COVID-19 pandemic is over. Many first-year students plan on moving to Utrecht what they believe to be a good basis for creating a social network in the city and starting the social part of their student life at university. First-year students expect to be spending much less time on their studies and much more on their social lives once social distancing rules become more relaxed. However, at the same time they express that they do not totally know what their student lives will be like after the COVID-19 pandemic as they have never experienced 'normal' student life before, but they cannot wait to find out.

### **Senior-year students**

The lives of senior-year have also changed tremendously. These lives were primarily changed due to the danger the COVID-19 pandemic proposes which urged the government to put regulations in place. The regulations are most damaging for senior-year students in the sense that their social lives are put on hold and just really degrade from what it used to be. Students were only sparingly allowed to visit friends and family which had several effects. This pandemic and its regulations showed the importance of friendships, family and roommates. This therefore shows the importance of social capital. Now that the memberships to the social networks and other social structures have changed and become eroded it has become evident that the social lives of students have changed a lot in the negative sense. This of course has several effects.

Senior-year students experience quite some negative things due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These were most prevalent in the winter and because of the regulations put in place by the government which regulates the social capital of students. Senior-year students not being able to visit their friends or go to university leads to students being at home most of the time. Being at home and not having a clear distinction between work and home leads to them having less motivation and concentration to work. This also increases the amount of 'Corona tiredness' students speak of, which, combined with the decreased social capital and social support, leads to mental health issues reported by some students. Senior-year students have no energy left to deal with all the implications that the COVID-19 pandemic and its regulations bring.



## Conclusion

One may expect students and young people to be resilient. Resilience is conceptualized as the capacity for successful adaptation and positive functioning. From this concept we can argue that students tend to show resilience in the face of the many struggles they face as described in the first two paragraphs. Senior-year students tend to cope with the problems they experience. Students have found ways to still see their friends, have found new hobbies like knitting or rollerblading and found comfort in meeting their friends by walking outside or meeting online. Students showed the importance of these coping techniques and with these coping techniques showed resilience.

Now that we have established these concepts and showed how students show resilience despite all the struggles and changes that they go through it is important to show how they see the future and their lives after the COVID-19 virus and if it will change as compared to before the pandemic.

Senior-year students tend to have a little cynical outlook on the future, even though they show resilience. They have found ways to keep themselves hopeful with their strategies to cope with the situations they find themselves in. They are planning for festivals, are hoping to go out again and tend to plan holidays in the summer of 2021 in hopes that the holidays are able to continue. As long as the vaccinations are progressing and the Dutch government is transparent when regulations are able to be relaxed, students tend to show hope for the future despite being cynical about the relaxations at the moment.

### **The impact of COVID-19 on students' social life in Utrecht**

COVID-19 does have an impact on the social lives of students in Utrecht. For both groups, the fact that they had to stay at home and could not see all of their friends and fellow students lead to a degradation of their social capital. However, social capital is of significant importance to students. As Buote et al. (2007, 687) argue emerging into adulthood is characterized by multiple transitions to new social environments. It is important to develop and maintain friendships and other social contacts in these new environments. Buote et al. (2007) further argue that since friends provide aid in hard times produced by stress and loneliness, friendships are important to establish and to maintain. We have noticed this in our research as well. Both senior-year and first-year students mentioned that they have lost friends and had a harder time to maintain or develop new friendships.

As senior-year students have an already established social network of friends, fellow students and roommates, their social capital has eroded, and the social distancing rules forced these students

## Conclusion

to view friendships through new eyes. Contrarily, first-year students are having a hard time creating a social network in their new social environments. First-year students are mostly struggling to build social networks in their new social environments due to them still living at home and limited opportunities to meet new people or their fellow students.

Furthermore, we see a difference between students that live with their parents and who live with fellow students. Students who live with fellow students in student houses or flats are currently relying on their roommates for their social capital. Within the group that lives with their parents we see a difference between first-year and senior-year students. Because first-year students have not really made friends in their new social environment they tend to rely on hometown friends when they still live at home. Contrarily, senior-year students who were forced to move back home due to the COVID-19 pandemic want to stay in contact with their friends and social network in Utrecht despite not being able to see them in person most of the time. So, they long for their friends and the student life as they have known from before the pandemic. First-year students however long for the student life they had always imagined.

What is characteristic for first-year students is the sense of liminality they experience. This liminality is the notion of being in between two life phases (van Genneep, 2019), which means they have not fully entered the life phase of being a university student yet. Therefore, they are having a hard time identifying with the student life and what it entails. Where senior-year students experience a harsh disruption of their academic and social lives, first-year students are still trying to figure out what that life entails and are therefore likely to be less aware of what they are missing. Due to senior-year students already having experienced what it is like to be a student for at least a year and a half, they have their social capital build up and this degradation of social capital and the feeling of missing things that they used to have leads to mental health issues for some students.

Despite this difference, both groups are experiencing similarities as well. Both experience a lockdown rut which results in them struggling to find motivation and concentration for their studies. Next to the fact that there is not much to do in the day, everything that happens is online and at home. Therefore, there is no clear distinction between 'work' and leisure.

What characterizes the senior-year students is their notion of 'Corona tiredness'. Where first-year students only hinted at tiredness due to COVID-19, senior-year students expressed this explicitly and mentioned being at the end of their ropes. They have labeled this among fellow students as '*Coronamoetheid*' which translates to 'Corona tiredness'.

## Conclusion

Both groups express a certain disorientation of their social lives. According to Sztompka (2000) cultural disorientation is a result of social change and could possibly lead to cultural trauma. Students are unable to do certain things that they define as student culture as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and its regulations. As certain aspects of student life have become problematic here is a notion of cultural disorientation among students. However, it is still too soon to state whether the current situation may be labeled as a cultural trauma.

The experiences students in Utrecht are currently having as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, are experiences that could normally be easier dealt with when students have access to strong, effective and fluid individualized systems of social capital, personal resilience and coping skills. However, the current situation also makes it harder to rely on systems of social capital. Therefore, students need their personal resilience and coping skills more than before. Both groups have found their own ways to keep themselves distracted, found new daily routines, applied positive reappraisal and are able to accept the current situation.

Students showed the importance of these coping techniques and with these coping techniques they showed resilience. Moreover, both groups relied on their intrapersonal resilience and found new daily routines. Senior-year students tend to also rely on their interpersonal resilience, something first-year students are less able to do since they do not have sufficient social networks in their new environments yet.

Whereas first-year students are now mostly focusing on their studies and remain hopeful that the social part of their student life will start in the next academic year, senior-year students had a harder time focusing on their studies. Some decided to take a break from studying, because online classes are not what they want their studies to be like.

Both groups of students feel the need to focus on the positive side of the situation as they think it will not be helpful to focus on the negative side. However, first-year students tend to see the future a little brighter due to the fact that they still have a few years of student life left. Senior-year students tend to be a little more nostalgic because they know what they miss, as mentioned earlier, and are approaching the end of their studies. They are primarily hoping for things to go back to normal in their social lives. Therefore, what both groups have in common is that they long for the COVID-19 pandemic to be over. First-year students however are mostly looking forward to finally live a student life, even though they are not sure what it entails.

## Conclusion

To give a conclusive answer to our main question, what seems to be most important, or what seems to be the biggest impact for students in Utrecht, are the restrictive social distancing policies. These social distancing policies make it harder to meet with people in an offline setting, therefore making it harder as well to make friends or maintain friendships.

It is important now for students to look at the future and hope for a brighter one, which most are already doing. It helps them cope with the situation even though there is no clear end at the tunnel. At least that was the case during our fieldwork. During our fieldwork there was a hard lockdown as can be seen in Appendix 1. However, while processing all this data things started looking brighter. More and more people are getting vaccinated at the moment and the Dutch government is relaxing the lockdown. Therefore, we hope the situation has gotten better for the students that we interviewed during the time where we processed our data and wrote this thesis. This does not mean however that COVID-19 or another influenza virus does not rise again which could trigger new regulations and lockdowns.

In case a new lockdown proves necessary, it is important for students to still have ways to meet up with fellow students and friends in an offline setting. As established in this thesis it is hard for students to obtain and maintain social contacts within their networks leading to a deterioration of their social capital. The students that have been interviewed for this research express the assumption that when they are able to meet up with their social circles on a regular base and in a safe offline setting, a lockdown would be less disruptive to their social lives. Therefore, we urge institutions like Utrecht University and policy makers to examine what the possibilities are to ensure that a next lockdown will not be as harmful for the social lives of students as the one that was enforced during this research.

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## Appendix 1 Timeline of COVID-19 measures in the Netherlands

Overview of COVID-19 measures in the Netherlands in chronological order<sup>49</sup>

27-02-2020	First contamination with the COVID-19 virus detected in the Netherlands.
06-03-2020	First death as a result of the COVID-19 virus in the Netherlands. First COVID-19 measures in the province of Noord-Brabant.
09-03-2020	Request to no longer shake hands and to work from home as much as possible for people who live in the province of Noord-Brabant.
12-03-2020	Request to stay home with mild symptoms, such as a cold and coughing. Request to work from home for the whole of the Netherlands. Prohibition for all gathering with more than 100 people.
15-03-2020	Announcement that all schools and day care for children (except for children with parents with 'vital jobs') will be closed from March 16 <sup>th</sup> . Closing of restaurants, bars and cafés, closing of sport clubs, swimming pools and saunas. Request to keep 1,5 meters of distance from others.
16-03-2020	Worries about the capacity at the Intensive Care. Prime minister Rutte conducts a speech on national TV.
17-03-2020	Cabinet announces economic health to entrepreneurs and freelancers.
19-03-2020	Visiting nursing homes prohibited.
23-03-2020	Prime minister Rutte speaks about 'intelligent lockdown': stay at home as much as possible and keep your distance. Maximum of 3 people visiting at home. Gathering prohibited until June 1, 2020 (instead of April 6, also with fewer than 100 people). Non-medical contact professions are no longer allowed to practice their profession.
24-03-2020	Decision that the central final exams will not be held.
31-03-2020	Measures extended until April 28 <sup>th</sup> .
21-04-2020	Measures extended until May 20 (except for the closing of primary schools), ban of events extended until September 1, opportunities for sports among young people expanded from April 29.
06-05-2020	Primary education, childcare, hairdressers and libraries will open again on 11 May. Working out outside is allowed again.
19-05-2020	Secondary education will open on 2 June; from 1 June terraces, cinemas, restaurants, cafes and cultural institutions with a maximum of 30 people (with reservation). Museums will open again (buy a ticket in advance). Swimming pools are reopening. The use of a face mask in public transports is mandatory.
01-06-2020	Testing available to anyone with symptoms.
15-06-2020	COVID-19-free nursing home open again for visitors.
21-06-2020	Demonstration in The Hague against the government's COVID-19 measures and the announced 'Emergency Act' (the bill for the Temporary Act on COVID-19 measures) by Viruswaanzin.

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/coronavirus-tijdlijn>, accessed 24-06-2021.

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24-06-2020	Saunas, casinos and gyms will open again from July 1. Events can take place again but forced raising of the voice in a group is prohibited. A maximum of 100 people per room with fixed seating and a maximum of 250 people outside (no maximum outside if there are sufficient fixed seats and reservation).
17-08-2020	Everyone can download the COVID-19-app which will be in use all over the Netherlands from September 1.
18-08-2020	Tightening of measures: a maximum of 6 guests at home (excluding children aged 12 or younger), everyone must be given a fixed seat at meetings.
18-09-2020	Announcement of stricter measures for a number of safety regions with regard to restaurants, bars and cafés and unnecessary gatherings of more than 50 people.
22-09-2020	Internet protest via Instagram action by a number of well-known Dutch people, #ikdoenietmeermee, against the government's COVID-19 policy.
28-09-2020	Stricter rules for restaurants, bars and cafés. Sports games from now on without audience and sports canteens are closed. A maximum of three guests at home (excluding children aged 12 or younger). A maximum of 30 people allowed inside and 40 outside (higher maximum outside at transfer locations). Face masks advised but not mandatory in stores. Reservations at museums and other public locations with time slots.
05-10-2020	Urgent advice to wear face masks in secondary schools in places where 1,5 meters of distance is not possible, such as in corridors, auditoriums and practical courses.
13-10-2020	Cabinet presents 'road map COVID-19 measures'.
13-10-2020	Food and beverage outlets open for takeout only. Retail stores close at the latest at 20:00 (excluding food stores). Limited sales of alcoholic beverages. From the age of 18, sports are only allowed individually or in a team with no more than four people. Competitions are not allowed (excl. athletes and children up to 18 years old at their own club). Maximum of 3 guests at home and a maximum 4 people outside from different household. Maximum of 30 people in a room.
03-11-2020	Museums, theatres, sex clubs, casinos, cinemas, amusement parks, animal parks, swimming pools and libraries closed. Saunas and gyms remain open.
17-11-2020	Museums, theaters, swimming pools and amusement parks will open again in sports in group lessons are allowed again. Events remain prohibited. The catering industry remains closed. Restaurants, bars and cafés remain closed. From 1 December, face masks will be mandatory.
01-12-2020	Temporary law 'Measures COVID-19' comes into force. The law replaces the emergency ordinances.
14-12-2020	Announcement of strict lockdown: from December 15 to January 19, a maximum of 2 guests at home and a maximum of 2 people from different households can go outside, schools are closed, working from is the norm, shops are closed with the exception of shops that sell essential goods, such as a food. Museum etc. are closed and contact professions are prohibited

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	(with the exception of medical contact professions). Face masks are mandatory.
14-12-2020	Prime minister Rutte conducts a second speech on national TV.
06-01-2021	First vaccination in the Netherlands.
12-01-2021	The lockdown is extended until 9 February.
21-01-2021	Announcement of significant expansion of the support and recovery package.
22-01-2021	Announcement of the curfew from January 23 <sup>rd</sup> 21:00 until February 10 <sup>th</sup> 2021 04:30 in the morning. Only one guest allowed at home (with the exception for a number of vulnerable groups).
02-02-2021	Lockdown is extended. Schools and daycares open again on February 8 <sup>th</sup> .
15-02-2021	First test event Fieldlab Events, a business congress with 500 participants. There are seven other events with participants/audience to follow, a cabaret show, two football games, an indoors dance event, an indoors concert and a pop festival. The amount of people at that are allowed at the events varies between 500 and 1.500.
23-02-2021	Lockdown and curfew stay in place. From March 1 <sup>st</sup> high schools will open for at least 1 day per week and colleges open for a maximum of 1 day a week. Contact professions (except from sex workers) are allowed again from March 3 <sup>rd</sup> , including hairdressers and masseurs. From March 3 <sup>rd</sup> people under the age of 27 are allowed to practice sports in groups outdoors again. Next to that, shops may have customers again from March 3 <sup>rd</sup> on. However, there is a maximum number of customers.
05-03-2021	Antigen tests will become available as self-tests. Self-tests will become available for employers and for educational institutions. Next to that, it will be possible to buy self-tests at supermarkets and pharmacies. The first self-tests are expected to be available for sales in April.
08-03-2021	From March 16 <sup>th</sup> , children under the age of 12 can go to swimming class again. Everyone is allowed to practice sports outdoors in groups no bigger than 4 people. Next to that, from March 16 <sup>th</sup> shops may receive more customers.
23-03-2021	Infection rates are getting higher, and more and more people are hospitalized. Lockdown stays into force. 'Third wave' is announced. From March 31 <sup>st</sup> , the curfew will start at 22:00 instead of 21:00. The government is considering the use of self-tests at educational institutions. The aim is that universities will open for students one day a week again from April 26 <sup>th</sup> on.

## **Appendix 2 Participant information sheet**

### **Reconsidering student social life**

*The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the social life of students in Utrecht*

We would like to invite you to take part in our research study. Before you decide you need to understand what taking part in the research would imply for you. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Feel free to ask questions if anything you read is not clear or if you would like more information. Also, take the time to decide whether or not you want to take part.

#### **WHO WE ARE AND WHAT THIS STUDY IS ABOUT**

We are Jamie Keurntjes and Timo Keijzer and we are Cultural Anthropology students at the Utrecht University. We are conducting a study to find out if and how the social lives of students in Utrecht have changed since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. We will be doing a comparative study between first year and senior-year students. We think it is important to explore students' experiences in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic as they are generally underrepresented in studies and framed negatively in the media that consider the pandemic. We want to clear this image and show how the pandemic affects students.

#### **WHAT WILL TAKING PART INVOLVE?**

If you take part in this research you will be asked to do an interview with either one of us, or the both of us, so we can find out how your social life has changed since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. If both parties speak Dutch, we prefer to conduct the interviews in Dutch as that will probably be the easiest for both sides. If you prefer speaking English during the interview that is no problem. Since chances are high that the Netherlands will be in lockdown during the period in which we plan to conduct the interviews, they will most likely be conducted online through the platforms like Zoom or Microsoft Teams. We would

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like to record the interviews in order to relisten to what has been said afterwards and the make the process of transcription a little easier. The recording will not be done through Zoom or Microsoft Teams but if you agree to it, we will hold a recording device next to our laptop which will make sure no video recording will take place. This is to prevent privacy problems later on. The topics we will discuss include social life, friends, family, university, living situation, work, and your general feeling about the whole situation. The duration of the participation and the interviews will be 30 minutes to one hour for the interviews. We will be doing fieldwork in a period of 10 weeks from the first week of February to the middle of April, during which we may like to speak to you about the topic again if you agree to it.

### WHY HAVE YOU BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART?

We have selected you for our research since you are a student at the Utrecht University, and we think your thoughts, experiences and opinions about the whole COVID-19 situation are worthy and will help us with our study. We have selected you through our own network or perhaps through a snowball effect where someone else recommended you to us. Thank you for possibly participating!

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### DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART?

Participation is completely voluntary and you have the right to refuse participation and interviews. You can refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and if you want to withdraw from our study or interview you can do that without any consequence whatsoever on any moment. If we have recordings or are currently recording, you can choose to have those deleted.

### WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?

The benefits of participating in this study is that you help us with our thesis and help figure out how the social lives of students have changed. Thinking about the current situation may also clear things up for yourself. Our finished thesis will be completely anonymous and if you like so, we can send you the final product. Participation in this research will always be anonymous and we value your privacy. The possible risks include in your willingness to enclose information that you are comfortable in sharing with us. If you have regrets about the interview or answers that you have given you can always withdraw from the study or this interview. Talking about changes in your social life and the way you experience these could trigger all kinds of feelings, therefore we want you to be able to stop participation at any time you want to. If you do not feel comfortable to answer, that is fine. We do not want you to get upset.

### WILL TAKING PART BE CONFIDENTIAL?

Taking part will be confidential. Your name and appearance will not be recorded, only the interviews through the means of a recording device next to the computer which only records sound. As described earlier, it is highly likely that we will be using Zoom or Microsoft Teams to conduct the interviews and will not be using their recording option. We will be asking if you have any problems with the research, this question still stands after the interview so if you have had any problem with what you have answered you can always withdraw. There is of course a certain amount of non-anonymized data that cannot be anonymized in the sense that voice itself is not anonymous. Therefore, you need to be aware that your voice is recorded. Your name will not be linked to the recording to minimize the non-anonymous data.



#### HOW WILL INFORMATION YOU PROVIDE BE RECORDED, STORED AND PROTECTED?

To keep our promise of keeping the data private and anonymous it is required to have sufficient data management. Our recordings of the interviews will be transferred to the computer right after the interview. This will be transferred to a secure folder. We will both be keeping a folder in our computer with a password so no one will be able to get into that folder. In this folder we will be keeping the interview recordings, the transcribed interviews, the focus group recordings, the transcribed focus group recordings, the data analysis and anything else that contains information that could be traced back to our participants. Our fieldwork notes and jot notes will be kept there as well.

To make sure our documents are safe and not susceptible to loss in case of a computer crash we will be keeping a OneDrive for which only we have the login details. We will be copying the files from the computer to the OneDrive once a week to ensure we have it up to date.

#### **WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY?**

The plans for our research will be solely to submit it for our dissertation. This will be done at the end of June. We will send a copy to you as well once you have participated and wish to receive a copy.

#### WHO SHOULD YOU CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION?

Jamie Keurtjes, Anthropology student and researcher for this thesis

[J.m.g.keurtjes@students.uu.nl](mailto:J.m.g.keurtjes@students.uu.nl)

Timo Keijzer, Anthropology student and researcher for this thesis

[t.m.keijzer@students.uu.nl](mailto:t.m.keijzer@students.uu.nl)

Marie-Louise Glebbeek, Anthropology teacher and supervisor

[m.glebbeek@uu.nl](mailto:m.glebbeek@uu.nl)

THANK YOU!

**Appendix 3 Approval letter from ethical board**

<b>P.O. Box 80140, 3508 TC Utrecht</b>  The Board of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences Utrecht University P.O. Box 80.140 3508 TC Utrecht		<b>Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences</b>  Faculty Support Office Ethics Committee  <b>Visiting Address</b>  Padualaan 14 3584 CH Utrecht
<b>Our Description</b> <b>Telephone</b> <b>E-mail</b> <b>Date</b> <b>Subject</b>	21-0203 030 253 46 33 FETC-fsw@uu.nl 08 February 2021 Ethical approval	

**ETHICAL APPROVAL**

Study: Reconsidering student social life: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the social lives of students in Utrecht

Principal investigator: T.M. Keijzer

Supervisor: Marie-Louise Glebbeek

This student research project does not belong to the regimen of the Dutch Act on Medical Research Involving Human Subjects, and therefore there is no need for approval of a Medical Ethics Committee.

The study is approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences of Utrecht University. The approval is based on the documents send by the researchers as requested in the form of the Ethics committee and filed under number 21-0203. The approval is valid through 16 April 2021. Given the review reference of the Ethics Committee, there are no objections to execution of the proposed research project, as described in the protocol and according to the GDPR It should be noticed that any changes in the research design oblige a renewed review by the Ethics Committee by submitting an amendment

Yours sincerely,

Peter van der Heijden, Ph.D.  
 Chair

## **Appendix 4: Samenvatting in het Nederlands**

Wij zijn Jamie Keurntjes en Timo Keijzer, we doen onze scriptie in opdracht van ons afstudeerproject van Culturele Antropologie en Ontwikkelingssociologie aan de Universiteit Utrecht.

In deze thesis hebben wij onderzocht wat de impact van de COVID-19 pandemie op de sociale levens van studenten in Utrecht is. Wij hebben voor dit onderwerp gekozen aangezien wij zelf studenten zijn en in onze omgeving zagen wat de impact is van de COVID-19 pandemie en de Corona maatregelen. We vinden het belangrijk om in kaart te brengen hoe studenten deze tijd ervaren en hebben ons hierbij gefocust op twee groepen studenten. Eerstejaarsstudenten en studenten in het derde of vierde jaar van hun opleiding. We hebben gekozen voor deze distinctie aangezien we verwachtten dat de impact anders zou zijn voor eerstejaarsstudenten die hun studie zijn begonnen in corona tijd ten opzichte van ouderejaarsstudenten die hun studentenleven al gestart zijn voor de pandemie.

Dit bracht ons naar onze centrale vraag: *Hoe ervaren eerstejaars- en ouderejaarsstudenten in Utrecht de veranderingen in hun sociale leven als gevolg van de COVID-19 pandemie en hoe gaan ze daarmee om?*

We hebben in een periode van 10 weken van februari 2021 tot april 2021 online veldwerk gedaan in Utrecht. Met de nadruk op online veldwerk aangezien ook wij door de maatregelen getroffen waren. Voor de veiligheid van onze participanten en onszelf hebben wij ervoor gekozen om de meeste interviews via Microsoft Teams uit te voeren. Na deze periode zijn wij de data gaan analyseren en zijn we aan de hand van onze data een thesis gaan schrijven. Hieronder volgt kort de conclusie van ons onderzoek.

Eerstejaarsstudenten geven aan dat ze de veranderingen in hun sociale leven lastig vinden. Ze komen van de middelbare school, die ze niet goed hebben kunnen afgesloten en beginnen met een studie waarbij het studentenleven nog even achterwege blijft. Hierdoor leven ze als het ware tussen twee werelden in, iets wat ook liminaliteit genoemd zou kunnen worden. Doordat eerstejaarsstudenten een nog niet volledig studentenleven genieten is het voor hen ook moeilijk zich volledig met deze groep te identificeren. Daarnaast hebben zij door de lockdown nog niet veel adequate vriendschappen en andere sociale contacten kunnen opbouwen in hun nieuwe sociale omgeving. Eerstejaarsstudenten zien vooral het feit dat zij tijdens de lockdown geen onderwijs op

locatie hebben als belangrijkste reden hiervoor. Toch hebben zij ervoor gekozen om zich te storten op de studie. Ze kijken heel erg uit naar het volgend academische jaar omdat dat het moment is waarop zij verwachten hun studentenleven echt te beginnen. Daar staat tegenover dat ze nog niet echt weten wat het studentenleven inhoudt doordat ze dat nog niet volledig hebben meegemaakt.

Ouderejaarsstudenten geven eveneens aan de veranderingen in hun sociale leven als heftig te ervaren. Zij zien hun vrienden minder vaak, hebben weinig tot geen contact met hun medestudenten en missen de dingen die voor hen het studentenleven ‘leuk’ maakten. Dit zijn onder andere uitgaan, je vrienden in kroegen of cafés tegenkomen, op de universiteit studeren en leren en afspreken met vrienden in het algemeen. Ouderejaarsstudenten hebben vooral moeite met het onderhouden van vriendschappen, juist doordat ze elkaar niet fysiek meer zoveel kunnen zien. Ouderejaarsstudenten staan iets negatiever tegenover de corona situatie aangezien zij daadwerkelijk weten wat ze missen en het lastig vinden om met deze veranderingen om te gaan. Dit zorgt er dan ook voor dat zij iets meer mentale problemen ervaren of zich er meer bewust van zijn ten opzichte van eerstejaarsstudenten.

Wat we bij beiden groepen zien is dat ze allebei een beroep doen op hun *resilience*. Hoe zij omgaan met de maatregelen en welke coping technieken zij gebruiken wordt hierbij duidelijk. Beide groepen doen beroep op hun *intrapersonal resilience* waarbij ze nieuwe hobbies of nieuwe dagelijkse routines aan gaan, ze focussen op de positieve aspecten en gaan veel naar buiten. Waar beiden groepen dit doen, maken de ouderejaarsstudenten ook veel gebruik van *interpersonal resilience* waarbij ze hun support uit hun sociale netwerk halen wat de eerstejaarsstudenten nog niet in hun nieuwe sociale omgeving kunnen doen.

Beide groepen kijken uit naar de periode na de pandemie, wat in hun ogen mogelijk wordt gemaakt wanneer vaccinaties volop worden gezet. Ouderejaarsstudenten die kijken heel erg uit naar het weer opnieuw kunnen leven van hun studentenleven van voor de pandemie waarbij eerstejaarsstudenten juist uitkijken naar het creëren van hun eigen studentenleven en het uitvinden van wat dat voor hen betekent.

Wat de grootste impact lijkt te hebben op het sociale leven van studenten in Utrecht, is het feit dat het moeilijk is met leeftijdsgenoten om te gaan in een fysieke setting. Dit komt doordat de coronamaatregelen het moeilijk maken om mensen offline te ontmoeten, waardoor het ook moeilijker wordt om vrienden te maken of vriendschappen te onderhouden. Het is nu belangrijk

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voor de studenten om naar de toekomst te kijken en te hopen op een betere toekomst, wat de meesten nu al doen.