

How Covid-19 Exposed the Entrenchment of Neoliberal Ideals Within Female Friendship

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Abstract

As hook-up culture overtakes dating, the average age at marriage increases, and romantic relationships expand beyond historical expectations of heterosexuality, friendship has become an increasingly central relationship for many college students (Demir, 2010; Holland, 1990). Through an ethnographic study of undergraduate and graduate student friendship networks, I examine how Covid-19 highlights the way in which forms of emotional work within female friendship take on a neoliberal shape as they pervade into student's understandings and aspirations for themselves as self-determined and continually improving individuals (Hochschild, 1983; Gill, 2018). I argue that as market principles encroach into the intimate sphere of personal relationships, requiring the honing of personality traits such as resilience, flexibility, and relentless positivity, friendship becomes both a tool and a barometer of self-development and in turn, self-value among young adult women (Springer et al, 2016).

Introduction

In both popular and scholarly literature, attention has recently shifted

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from romantic relationships to friendship among college students as hook-up culture overtakes dating and romantic relationships expand beyond historical expectations of heterosexuality (Demir, 2010; Holland, 1990). While previous scholarship has shown that friendship is important for ensuring everything from social support and connection to mental health and even academic success, I observed that the relationship can also induce feelings of anxiety, social isolation, and inadequacy when students do not feel they are living up to internalized expectations of a fulfilling social life (Garcia, 2012; Bogle, 2007; McCabe, 2016; Narr, 2017; Mayo Clinic, 2019). The unique nature of freely-chosen friendship as compared to the obligatory ties of family or coworkers allows for expectations within a friendship to be defined independently by the friends. In so doing, friendship requires an inculcation of flexibility and resiliency within the friends themselves in order to negotiate these often amorphous and evolving expectations (Caine, 2009). Through an ethnographic study of undergraduate and graduate student friendship networks, I examine how the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the manner in which female friendships in particular adopt familiar tropes of neoliberal culture as they seep into the deep interiority of students' self-understandings and aspirations for themselves as self-determined individuals, committed to continuous self-improvement (Goffman, 1956; Martinussen, 2020; Rose, 1996)¹.

Neoliberal ideals have been understood as a cornerstone of late 20th century and contemporary socio-economic life. Within a neoliberal framework, the emphasis on a free market and the entrepreneurial spirit of self-invention and self-mastery pervades psychological and social life as the onus is placed on the individual to constantly remake herself as a nimble economic and social agent in times of flux (Harvey, 2005; Gill, 2017). Although one may wish to imagine that such intimate relations as romantic coupledness and friendships lie beyond the reaches of the

¹ Method

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

neoliberal ethos, the ways in which this value complex permeates how young people approach these important relationships is striking. Specifically, female interlocutors describe consciously working to overcome their own anxieties about both the illness and social isolation of the pandemic in order to provide the emotionally attuned and uplifting company that is expected in their female friendships. These forms of conscious self-disciplining entail considerable degrees of affective labor as young women fight to resist their own feelings of anxiety, frustration, anger, and self-critique in favor of becoming fun-loving and reliably upbeat friends. In this way, I argue that the Covid-19 pandemic is currently bringing into sharper relief the affective labor and neoliberal ideologies that permeate so many facets of 21st century life, including not just labor exchanges in the marketplace, but a sphere one might hope and imagine to be immune to its forces: the highly valued world of female friendships (Hochschild, 1983).

Historical and Contemporary Theories of Friendship

In the Classical period in Ancient Greece, Aristotle described virtuous and genuine friendship as that which is constructed between two individuals of high moral standing who engage in the relationship for the sake of the wellbeing of the other rather than for personal pleasure or gain (Aristotle, 340 BC; Helm, 2015). Aristotelian elements of sharing moral values and of caring for others *for the sake of others* emerged as salient themes for the college students I interviewed. Many women described being shocked to learn that their peers prioritized going out to bars and nightclubs even when this jeopardized their being able to see more Covid-19 cautious friends. In these ways, confronting ethical dilemmas and navigating divergent levels of risk-taking in relation to their own health and that of their friends took on a newly central role in student friendships.

While this ethical dynamic of friendship has maintained its relevance from the classical age to the contemporary, one crucial difference must be noted in the modern friendships I observed. For Aristotle in the classical era, the “virtuous” friendship was conceived of as an exclusively male relationship because only men were perceived as possessing the necessary traits of justice, courage, rational decision making, and self-control (Aristotle, 340 BC; Caine, 2009). However, the growth of a reading public and the rise of the woman novelist over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries coincided with both increasingly affective understandings and practices of both male and female friendship into the popular discourse and far greater documentation of female friendship in the public imaginary (Clarke, 2004; Spencer, 1986; Caine, 2009). Jane Austen, for example, emphasized the vast amount of time women spent in one another’s company and the important role of friendship in these women’s lives. This struck a sharp

contrast from previous male-authored literature that often focused on women only in relation to male romantic attention (Perry, 1986; Caine, 2004; Austen, 1815). The salience of female friendship continued even as the romantic tie served as the central plot in most films of early 21st century Hollywood. Productions such as *Stagedoor* (1937) and *The Life of the Party* (1930) depicted female friends as providing certain forms of comfort and advice than men could not (Caine, 2009). Ironically, the very affective dimensions that accompanied greater documentation of female friendship in the eighteenth century may in more recent years be associated with the decline of popular conceptions of male friendship (Way, 2011). The public discussion regarding men's lack of social networks sparked by Saturday Night Live's recent skit, "Man Park," in which women bring their lonely male spouses or boyfriends to socialize with one another, is just one example of this more recent phenomenon (Michaels, 2021).

In the present study, I focus on friendship among female university students because themes of continual self-improvement, flexibility, and image management within the relationship were notably more explicit among the female students I interviewed than among my male interlocutors. Given that female friendships now serve as such a potent locus for self-making in American college culture, I seek to explore how these seemingly benign relationships serve as a site from which to examine how the neoliberal mandate for the continual making and re-making of self unfolds in uniquely gendered ways and the potentially insidious implications of this process (Lu et al, 2021; Alemán, 2010).

Neoliberalism as a Lens to Understand Friendship

Neoliberalism has recently been taken up by feminist scholars as a lens through which to understand gendered techniques of self-development (Gill, 2007; Martinussen & Wetherell, 2019; Kanai, 2017, Winch, 2013). I build on the scholarship by understanding neoliberalism as the broad set of interventions in which the market shapes the practices and ideologies of individual actors by idealizing the continually optimized agile agent in an ever-changing and insecure cultural economy (Harvey, 2005). Specifically, I examine how neoliberal ideals pervade the development of female friendship and the wider implications of this intimate and intensive work. In my interviews with female students about their friendship networks, I observed that women actively worked on improving themselves in order to attract and craft the most fulfilling friendship networks they could. Further, the expectations within these friendships were often ambiguous in the sense that they could vary widely between different female dyads, and they often evolved over time as the personal preferences, schedules, and social orbits of the women changed. Contrast this with more consistent norms and expectations for

reciprocity within parent-child, co-worker, or romantic relationships, and the self-determined and widely ranging nature of friendship is even more crystalized. It was often this flexible nature that made friendship both so appealing to students as a less burdensome relationship than, say, a romantic one, but also what spurred disappointment and even resentment when needs and expectations were not met by friends considered to be close. A clear example of this arose in my interview with a student whom I will call Sabrina, a junior at the Southeastern university. Sabrina described her friendships as providing relief from the pressures of specific expectations she felt within her romantic relationships,

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

As such, she felt that the non-exclusive nature of her friendships made them less burdensome and more pleasurable than her romantic relationships. I was particularly struck by how this nature of friendship often required forms of flexibility and resilience emblematic of a neoliberal sensibility (Burchell, 1993; Springer et al, 2016; Tansel 2017; Gill, 2018).

Women students often described affectively laboring to be easy-going, carefree, and non-judgmental even when they felt hurt, let down, or angry with their friends (Hochschild, 1983). This effort operates on two tracks—on one hand, requiring the development of a seemingly light-hearted demeanor and casual, flexible spirit, and on the other hand, tamping down hurt feelings and expectations. Both require performative labor, one that entails the surface acting of a carefree and therefore attractive friend, hiding genuine feelings of hurt and disappointment (Goffman, 1956). For example, after describing how she enjoyed talking to friends on frequent intervals, one interlocutor who I will call Natalia, an international master’s student at the midwestern university, described the following: “Some of my best friends ... are really really shit at keeping in touch over a distance. So, for example, one of my best friends ... she’s always saying that we’re gonna schedule a call and then it never happens. But I just know that she’s bad at it. I just know that it won’t happen so I’m not *too* mad at her ... It’s so much easier to love your friends and have happy relationships if you don’t expect certain things that you know won’t happen” [45:00]. In this way, Natalia works to adjust her expectations for communication in her friendships, even when they do not meet her own preferences, in order to prevent any tension or resentment on her part in the friendship. In descriptions such as these, women construct friendship as a mode of image management as they work to develop adaptive personality traits that will serve them well in maintaining their appeal as a friend and thus increase the breadth of their

network and the longevity of their friendships.

I argue that as market principles encroach into the intimate sphere of personal relationships, requiring the honing of personality traits such as resilience, flexibility, and relentless positivity, friendship becomes both a tool and a barometer of self-development and in turn, self-value among young adult women (Spring et al, 2016). Evidence of these dual and sometimes paradoxical dimensions appeared in interviews when students described on the one hand, the social affirmation, self-fulfillment, and self-growth they hoped to encounter and sometimes did experience in their friendships and on the other hand, the judgement and self-comparisons they made between their own friendships and their perceptions of the friendships between other individuals in their network. I should note that the students who experienced fulfilling friendships described the relationships as grounding sites of comfort and affirmation as well as formative influences for their desired personal growth. Nevertheless, even students who had “achieved” fulfilling ties often still described *working* to develop these more meaningful friendships in relation to those they perceived around them, in both the online (i.e., social media) and offline spheres. In this sense, friendships and friendship networks deemed “successful” became a form of social capital, and I would argue, emotional capital, that students aspired to possess and contributed to the criteria from which they understood and evaluated themselves (Bourdieu, 1979).

Alison Winch uses the term “gynaeopticon,” to articulate the combined promotion of idealized desirable female friendship on social media pages and the simultaneous internalized policing gaze in which women monitor and compare one another on these very pages (2013). Within a neoliberal landscape, female friendships are desired and sought after but also capable of igniting shame and self-critique if women are not able to accomplish this goal. Women’s surveillance of one another’s social practices (i.e. who they saw, where they went, and how frequently) both in the online and offline spheres of friendship networks was a recurrent and painful theme in my interviews with students. This tension within friendship between the promise of social affirmation, emotional fulfillment, and even self-improvement and the simultaneous igniting of self-critique and fears of social isolation are exacerbated by the neoliberal understanding that friendships are indicative of an individual’s successful efforts to maximize their own self-value. It is from this perspective that friendships deemed worthy and successful reflect well on an individual’s value, appeal, and drive for self-improvement. Alternatively, friendships seen as disappointing reflect poorly on an individual, proving that she needs to work harder on herself to attract and develop a truly fulfilling and robust friendship network. Dangerously, the emotionally nourishing friendships that each of these students both needed and desired became enmeshed within a system in which individuals were singularly

responsible for earning fulfilling friendships through honing their own affective techniques and modes of self-improvement. If they were unsuccessful, therefore, these women believed they had only themselves to blame (Hochschild, 1983; Gill, 2018; Peck, 2008; Freeman, 2014). This shifting of responsibility from broader structural and socio-cultural factors to the individual created the sense among women that, if they could only develop themselves to be flexible, upbeat, easygoing, and resilient *enough*, then they could have the friendships they deeply desired. Importantly, realizing this desire was almost always described as a state of being yet to be attained (Berlant, 2011).

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

Interview subjects narrated the ways in which they expected their friends to be engaged and attentive, but not too attentive so as to overwhelm them. There were certain expectations of solidary, enjoyment and pleasure in one another's company, as well as fun and emotional support within friendships. But in students' summaries of these expectations, they were careful to describe the fine line walked between desiring these qualities from their friends but also not expecting more than the friend was prepared to offer. Natalia employed a combination of flexibility and persistence in order to maintain closeness with her friends from high school or her undergraduate years while not getting disappointment when they failed to reciprocate,

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

Implicit in Natalia's description of how she maintains contentedness in her friendships is the internalization of flexibility and resilience when plans fall through by employing modes of affective labor, controlling her emotions so as not to feel disappointed. She is nimble in working around and embracing the different communication styles of her friends, and she maintains a constructive attitude in framing these experiences of self-adjustment within friendships when talking to me. Her agentic framing of herself as someone who has learned how to extract the most positive aspects of these friendships while refusing to engage in feelings of frustration or disappointment exemplifies her engagement in the neoliberal “mood economy” that Jennifer Silva observes in her

examinations of coming-of-age culture (2013). In Silva's analysis, this "mood economy," or mastery over one's own psychology by minimizing negative feelings, is the key to success, implicitly casting individuals rather than structural inequities as the greatest obstacle to their own accomplishments. Similarly, Natalia constructs herself as singularly responsible for managing her own emotional responses to her friends' behavior so as to focus on the positive and avoid any negative emotional reactions.

This learned ability to control one's emotions to make them conducive and productive for the social relationship, and the framing of these relationships as modes of self-growth (learning to adapt to another's mode of friendship) and self-fulfillment (learning to appreciate what the friend can offer), all echo the internalization of neoliberal values through modes of affective laboring in girl-friendship observed in previous studies (Gill & Kanai, 2018; Hochschild, 1979). Importantly, themes of psychological self-management only appeared in my interviews with female students. This aligns with the findings of previous scholars examining recent self-help and relationship advice books and media texts that meet a specific demand for *women* to erase any vulnerability or neediness (Favaro, 2017; Wood, 2009; Gill, 2016). As Rosalind Gill writes, "If confidence is the new sexy, then insecurity is undoubtedly the new ugly – at least when it presents in women" (2016). Natalia refuses to allow the flakiness of her friends regarding Facetime dates to make her feel insecure in her friendships, preferring instead to accept but not dwell on these differences in communication practices. In this sense, Natalia's self-mastery over her responses to her friendships denotes the neoliberal values bound up in the deep psychological compass of the feminine understanding of how the self *should* be.

By contrast, undergraduate female interlocutors were less capable of the self-management older students like Natalia had mastered. Different communication styles that sometimes resulted in a year passing without a real-time conversation created a strain on one women's best-friendship. As a student whom I will call Bobby, a sophomore at the southern university, recounted this experience with her best friend, she bounced between acceptance of their differences and expressing hurt and frustration that her friend didn't try to accommodate Bobbi's desire for greater contact throughout the year,

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

make a little time. That's too much."

Bobbi was not able to simply accept and adapt to the different communication practices of her friend in the way that Natalia could. Perhaps most interesting is that rather than placing an ultimatum on Zoey to be more communicative, which may not have changed Zoey's behavior and could have strained the relationship more, Bobbi instead found a replacement for the closeness she had with Zoey with her new friend, Abby. Abby would Facetime Bobbi almost every day to update Bobbi on her life and ask Bobbi about what she was doing. Rather than giving up on her friendship with her Jamaican friend, Bobbi shifted her social expectations to a friend she knew would be able to meet them, allowing Bobbi to maintain *all* of her friendships. Among the students I interviewed, this choice to consciously embrace (or tolerate) the need for flexibility and resilience so as to avoid putting too much strain on friendships and risk their dissolution was a uniquely gendered one.

Transforming Suffering into Narratives of Resilience

The forms of emotional labor female students engaged in, embodying particular neoliberal values, were evident in their framing of the difficulties they endured during Covid as productive experiences. Lily, a sophomore at the southern university, described how,

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

Here, Lily's constructive framing of the disappointments and difficulties she had during Covid reflects a trend I noticed throughout my interviews. As many female interlocutors described intense emotional and social struggles, they often sought to frame them in a constructive light. A clear example of this is Lily's description of the frequent occurrence of friends cancelling on her at the last minute after possibly being exposed to Covid as a useful experience because it forced her to get comfortable with being alone, something she had struggled with for a long time before Covid. However, her subsequent phrasing, "I have to *force myself* to be okay with that," expresses the immense emotional labor that goes into embracing moments of social isolation in order to achieve

self-growth. About a year after our interview, Lily published a self-help book about her experiences with social anxiety during Covid-19. In selling her journey of transformation, Lily seeks to harvest from her suffering a productive outcome: publicity and perhaps even profit. In this internalization of “confidence as a technology of self” Lily joins with popular discourses to promote strategies for women to gain social confidence by working on their inner psychological states to transform themselves into the neoliberal ideal of independence and resilience (Gill, 2016; Foucault, 1988). In so doing, these strategies blame individual women for their inability to surmount social or psychological struggles while shaming dependence, vulnerability, and disappointment. Lily’s (quite literal) advertisement of herself as someone who refused to fall into the abyss of unproductive and undesirable disappointment and loneliness and instead become an ideal of stability, resiliency, independence, and confidence, indicates her indoctrination to the worship of the neoliberal self.

Conclusion:

Among the myriad domains in which Covid-19 has strained social relations and the mental health of people all over the world, the reliance upon friendships as both a buffer from isolation and a barometer of self-worth is pronounced among the American university students in this study. In the interviews I conducted, I observed the particular tension the pandemic has highlighted within female friendship between the immense desire for and benefit from these forms of connection intermingled with profound anxieties about whether their friendships lived up to the highly satisfying ones they perceived around them. Affective labor is actively at work as my interlocutors manage their anxiety, loneliness, and social fears in order to avoid becoming off-putting to the few friends they are still able to see in their pandemic pod. This reality of scarcity added pressure to friendships, especially in-person friendships, to be fun, lighthearted, and enjoyable, without being emotionally draining. In these ways, Covid-19 has highlighted the emotional labor women engage in to embody neoliberal ideals within their female friendships. It is important to notice that the echoes of neoliberal values within discussions of friendship have both positive and negative connotations: they can help spur women to seek out more fulfilling friendships, but they can also provide the sense that there is always a better friendship and a better self as a friend out there, if only one can do the psycho-social gymnastics to get there.

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