

Investigating Gender Differences in Life Goals Before and During COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION

Previous studies on **life goals of youth** have found that most youth **prioritize educational and occupational goals** over all other aspirations, and hope to accomplish them as soon as possible (Chang et al., 2006).

Given the **financial and socioemotional strains** imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, we investigated the extent to which educational goals remain the most important life goal when compared to a previous pre-pandemic cohort.

The pandemic's public health risks may have triggered thoughts of mortality among young people. Consistent with **socioemotional selectivity** (Carstensen et al., 1999) and **lifespan control** (i.e., Heckhausen et al., 2001), it follows that the remote learning format and lack of social interaction with others will have **reduced the perceived importance of educational and occupational goals, and subsequently increased the importance of other goals.**

This is because the realization of **the fragility of life**, that **time is limited** (Carstensen et al., 1999), and a **lack of personal control** (Heckhausen et al., 2001) shifts the developmental trajectory of young people's motivations.

OBJECTIVES

To compare the possibility of life goal changes as a result of the pandemic, we **compared two cohorts** from the same pool of participants. One from **before the pandemic** (2009; n = 555) and one from when students **returned to on-campus instruction** (2021; n = 498).

Each participant was asked to list up to **three goals** that they regarded as most important in between then and the next 10 years. These goals were then coded into one of **11 different classifications**, the distributions of which we compared across **genders and time.**

We hypothesized that the pandemic lockdown primed fragility of life and perceived future time would affect the selection of life goals in the following directions: (1) future-oriented, knowledge-seeking goals would decrease, and (2) present-oriented, emotional-focused goals would increase.

Future-oriented, knowledge-seeking goals are as follows:
Educational, Occupational, Autonomy, Health, Materialistic

Whereas present-oriented, emotional-focused goals are:
Pair-Bonding, Self-Actualization, Religious/Altruistic, Leisure, Family, Peer relationship

MATERIALS & METHODS

UCI undergraduate students were surveyed via Qualtrics. They were asked this question:
What are your **most important goals and plans between NOW and TEN YEARS from now?** Please write in **up to three** goals or plans. (If you have no goals, please write “no goals”).

Each goal was assessed as belonging to one of the following 11 categories.

1. Educational

Degrees, academic records, scholarships, etc.
”To graduate from college and receive an undergraduate degree.”

2. Occupational

Employment, career aspirations, raising work conditions, etc.
“Have a stable job that I like.”

3. Pair-bonding

Establishing of or advancing in romantic relationships.
“Find a partner I can rely on.”

4. Self-actualization

Finding happiness and purpose in one's life.
“Live a happy and healthy life.”

5. Religious/Altruistic

Finding, maintaining, or spreading one's faith.
“Develop a spiritual connection.”

6. Leisure

Discovering or deepening one's hobbies, travelling, etc.
“Travel as much as possible.”

7. Autonomy

Establishing financial or residential independence.
”Move out of my parents' home.”

8. Health

Setting or meeting physical and mental health standards.
“Develop and practice healthy habits.”

9. Materialistic

Saving, building, and/or investing one's money.
“Have more than one source of income.”

10. Family

Supporting one's family, or seeking to meet familial expectations.
“Making my parents proud.”

11. Peer relationship

Starting or continuing platonic relationships among peers.
“Make friends and maintain relationships.”

RESULTS

Goal frequencies were compared among participants using a **Chi-square test of independence.**

For female participants, there were **significant changes** in distribution of life goals. Specifically, there was less emphasis on **educational goals,** in favor of **self-actualization, health,** and **family goals.**

Goal	N(2009)	N(2021)	Total	Chi2	p-value
1	352	25	377	46.789	0.000*
2	270	38	308	0.001	1.000
3	154	29	183	3.386	0.723
4	28	14	42	18.824	0.000*
5	18	2	20	0.102	1.000
6	25	8	33	4.676	0.336
7	24	2	26	0.549	1.000
8	13	11	25	26.296	0.000*
9	53	15	68	6.960	0.092
10	24	5	29	0.698	1.000
11	8	7	15	16.939	0.000*
Total	969	156	1125		

For male participants, there were **no significant changes in life goal distribution.**

Goal	N (2009)	N (2021)	Total	Chi2	p-value
1	77	269	346	1.554	1.000
2	68	277	345	0.635	1.000
3	36	132	168	0.080	1.000
4	9	60	69	2.850	1.000
5	2	6	8	0.091	1.000
6	13	54	67	0.079	1.000
7	3	43	46	6.191	0.141
8	3	31	34	3,131	0.845
9	23	122	145	2.888	0.982
10	6	27	33	0.137	1.000
11	1	20	21	3.390	0.722
Total	241	941	1282		

DISCUSSION

Results showed significant differences in life goals before and during COVID for female participants, but not male participants.

Female differences among goal redistribution may reflect effects of online education and pandemic conditions. Specifically, the reduced focus on education may indicate a loss of interest in academics due to virtual classes. The subsequent vacuum in life goals would then have to be filled by other aspirations.

Self-actualization may be desirable due to having to move back in with parents over the pandemic. The pandemic would also magnify health concerns and living away from campus may lead to a longing for peer interaction.

In comparison, male undergraduates showed no significant decrease in educational goals. Without a decrease in educational goals, male undergraduates did not reprioritize to adopt other goals. From where does this stem from? Perhaps it is a matter of emotional intelligence; men are routinely found to be less emotionally intelligent than women, which explains why they might pay less attention to emotional-focused goals (Fischer et al., 2018).

Future studies should delve into the mechanisms by which male participants retained their life goals and how our culture informs what we prioritize in life.

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